

REDDIT NEWS FANDOMS AS DIGITAL NEWS LITERACIES:  
STRUCTURING THE EVALUATION OF INFORMATION SOURCES IN A  
CHALLENGING INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

REDDIT NEWS FANDOMS AS DIGITAL NEWS LITERACIES:  
STRUCTURING THE EVALUATION OF INFORMATION SOURCES IN A  
CHALLENGING INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

presented by Elizabeth O. Bent,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this work to my family. My mom and dad always encouraged me to pursue what was interesting to me and that winding road has led me here. My sister would be mad if I did not mention her (and will be *extra* mad that I mentioned her in this way). My brother will never read this. To Mike for his unending support and “back of the house” management while I spent every waking moment studying and writing. To Sofia and Noble, whose humor, support, barista skills, and data-sorting helped me stay sane, awake, and on-task. Seriously, a part of me is going to miss the competitive scramble to be the first to bring me my *APA Publication Manual* when I would send out an S.o.S. on the family group text. Scottavian. And to Nigel, who was the best dog and study companion.

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An emeritus faculty member once told me that the best way to guarantee that writing your dissertation was a smooth process was to choose your committee members carefully. Select a chair who could coordinate and steer committee feedback constructively, and committee members who would inspire your work moving forward, and the whole process would be much easier. I can say without a doubt that my committee fit all the parameters perfectly. Since our first meeting, Ryan has been a scholarly guiding light for me. He told me at that first meeting that every graduate student comes into the program with different needs and expectations for the program. His mentorship demonstrated his understanding of my needs and how to get me to this point with as little stress, and much more laughter than I thought was possible. Dr. Hinnant taught me that adding structure to your research questions does not make them dry or esoteric – in fact, sometimes you can have an engaging conversation about whether the broken clock is a tool of mass communication. Getting to the point in my studies when I could have the same questions about someone’s work that Dr. Volz did felt like winning a prize. Dr. Diem, your amused support of my theoretical ramblings and combinations and the pictures that go with that thought process for me have made me feel understood and heard. Dr. Petrone, you taught me that critical scholars do not need to fit in a cultural box and opened my eyes to the ways that literacies are enacted in everyday lives and how to recognize those literacies and the systems that impede them. Without each one of you, I would not have made it to this point, and I am eternally grateful for your support and guidance.

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REDDIT NEWS FANDOMS AS DIGITAL NEWS LITERACIES:  
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ABSTRACT

Journalism is in crisis. There is consensus that this crisis is driven by four principal factors – the overcrowded media sphere, the failing funding model of news, declining trust in media, and growing partisanship among news audiences – yet there is little agreement about how to correct the course, but journalism’s relationship to its audience is at the heart of the solution (Nelson, 2021). Digital environments, such as social media site Reddit, offer a unique opportunity to explore the relationship between journalism and its audience as these environments also complicate that relationship. Reddit offers a visible look at the discursive labor of journalists and their audience as they apply their news literacies to work for journalism as critics, boundary makers, and fans. This discourse analysis explores the meaning making work of journalists and news audiences engaging in Ask Me Anything (A.M.A.) discussions on Reddit’s World News board. Findings indicate that the hyperliterate news fans on World News generate surprisingly traditional boundaries around journalism that rely heavily on normative expectations of journalism. This study complicates notions of how cultural capital is gained and expressed online and furthers knowledge and understanding of news fandoms and news literacies in action.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

News has an audience problem in an increasingly confusing mediascape where choices are limitless and routines no longer lock people into specific modes and times for news consumption (Webster, 2014). Historically, copious handwringing and declarations of “institutional crisis” have accompanied changes in communication technology – such as the introduction of the telegraph, telephone, and television (Marvin, 1988). Yet arguably none represent the simultaneous challenge to journalism’s authority, respect, and trustworthiness than that posed by the digital environment (Carlson, 2017). The digital climate challenges the press as an institution within democracy while simultaneously challenging citizens’ abilities to inform themselves and benefit from a watchdog press. While there is broad consensus that the current crisis in journalism is driven by four principal factors – the overcrowded media sphere, the failing funding model of news, declining trust in media, and growing partisanship among news consumers – there is little agreement about how to correct the course (Nelson, 2021). One possible solution is to focus on audience outreach efforts, which simultaneously improve reporters’ understanding of the communities they cover and improve audience understanding of news practices, thereby improving public news literacies. This dissertation will use discourse analysis to explore how social media – specifically Reddit “ask-me-anythings” with reporters – facilitate news literacies among citizens in the digital environment, while bringing journalists closer to their audiences.

Digital structures disrupt the ideals of discursive democracies. Disrupted public spheres face disinformation and the polarization of epistemologies, and journalism is quickly losing public trust (Fink, 2019). Trust is necessary if journalism is to uphold its

end of the social contract suggested by the Commission on the Freedom of the Press in 1947. The Commission recognized two parties in this contract: the journalist and the citizen. The citizen in this normative sense ought to be using the news provided by the journalist to inform their political decisions, such as voting. Under the contract, the press should provide accurate and contextualized accounts of the days' events in responsible ways, and citizens must accurately interpret the information provided to enact the role of informed citizens (The Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). To hold up their end of the contract and enact informed citizenship requires more than cognitive literacy; citizens must develop a critical media literacy grounded in a moral agenda (Silverstone, 2004). Citizens must decide what news sources to trust in an information environment structured by invisible algorithms that do not always work in their (or democracy's) best interests (Horwitz, 2021). Journalists must also be diligent about the news gap between what audiences need and want to know (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013) while carefully walking the line between advertising revenues and audience preferences made visible with digital analytics (Tandoc & Ferrucci, 2017). Ongoing concerns about misinformation continue to erode the tenuous trust citizens have in the press (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Add to this complex and vast information environment increased polarization, and the situation seems untenable.

Something citizens and journalists have often struggled with is how much attention to pay to events that do not seem immediately important to the local reader. After all, proximity is often cited as a core measure of newsworthiness (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). For example, how much attention should the news and citizens pay to a struggle or disaster hundreds of miles away? The Internet has flattened the world in

some respects – making it easier than ever to quickly access information about nearly any subject (Hine, 2015). However, access to information about world events does not guarantee the level of knowledge about (and interest in, and empathy for) geographically distant people. The digital environment creates a more complicated human geography, which opens the possibilities for digital media to both create spaces that did not exist before (for example, for marginalized groups), or to widen previously existing gaps (Jocson, 2018). Therefore, there is an opportunity in digital news discussions to explore how individual citizens navigate the geography of news to become informed about global events.

Faced with a need to be literate about so much information, being a globally informed citizen remains a moral imperative but appears increasingly out-of-reach (Hartley & Pedersen, 2019). It is not surprising that many citizens, especially younger people, have chosen to abandon news altogether (Wadbring & Bergström, 2017). News avoidance remains a troubling symptom of declining trust in the news (Fink, 2019). Encouraging the news habits of young people is a vital part of “future-proofing” journalism (Harrington, 2008) and news producers and scholars must understand that young people’s expectations are shifting the norms, values, and priorities of journalism (Allan, 2012).

It is increasingly evident that youth today seek different forms of news, blending it with entertainment and social media (Edgerly, 2017a). Young people in the U.S. often use social media feeds to aggregate news and information streams (Lee & Tandoc, 2017). However, researchers and news consumers alike question the validity of this strategy because algorithms tend to provide the versions of events most palatable to the individual

rather than favoring neutrality or accuracy (Edgerly, 2015). Citizens need more assistance to sort through the digital news available to them, which can be provided by vibrant and active press criticism acting as a check on the media (Wyatt, 2018). Rigorous press criticism provides checks on news quality and ethics – it is a fifth estate to “watch the watchdogs” (Hayes, 2008). Historically, journalists have rarely welcomed criticism with open arms (Glasser & Craft, 1996). The digital environment has increasingly challenged the relationship among press, citizens, and critics as citizen journalists invaded journalism’s territory.

Many academics, journalists, and critics embraced the breakdown of the journalist-as-gatekeeper model represented by the digitally-driven public and citizen journalism movements of the early 2000s, positioning citizens as “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006). At the same time, journalism reinforced its gates while partially embracing participatory ideals – for example, adding comment sections to online newspapers with moderation or using social media to solicit “man on the street” opinions and information (Vliegthart & Boukes, 2018). Individual journalists, however, frequently found themselves overwhelmed, struggling to keep up, and checked out (Cohen, 2019; Lee & Tandoc, 2017).

### **Rationale for Study**

The digital information environment needs exploration to understand how people deal with misinformation and disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Hine, 2015). Young citizens engaging with news have been among some of the first formally exposed to media literacy education in school – a shift from the concept of “learning to read” and toward the concept of “reading to learn” (Gee, 2015). They have also grown up



in a unique press environment, where most of their news (Edgerly, 2017b) and news criticism (Hayes, 2008) appear simultaneously as entertainment. Indeed, the information environment is increasingly complicated, confusing, and overwhelming.

Press criticism theory emphasizes the value of criticism from outside of the field and the need for criticism to be both actionable *and* acted upon by members of the press (Carey, 1974; Hayes, 2008; Lerner, 2019b; Wyatt, 2007). Still, while we have seen a rise in cynical rhetoric critical of the “mainstream media” (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019), robust press criticism – even from inside the field – is rarely acted upon (Bent et al., 2020). While there has been academic pondering of the value of social media as a venue for audience feedback, the feedback rarely rises to the level of effective criticism because it does not result in change in the industry (Duffy et al., 2018).

The social media site Reddit, as a fan-oriented discussion forum, is not short of discussions criticizing board topics. However, whether this criticism rises to the level of *constructive* criticism has yet to be explored. Additionally, while Reddit has been active since 2005, and 42% of users in 2020 specifically use the site for news (down from 70% in 2018) (Shearer & Matsa, 2018; Shearer & Mitchell, 2021), it remains understudied in journalism. The Reddit-specific activity of hosting “ask me anything” (A.M.A.) conversations allows a unique opportunity to explore the news literacies enacted by both journalists and “Redditors.” By embracing a theory of press criticism that recognizes more potential spaces of actionable press criticism, such as Reddit newsgroups, not only could journalists potentially attract a larger audience, they could also create a symbolic space representing a more accurate picture of society.

## **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this discourse analysis is to explore how young citizens use Reddit newsgroups to make meaning of the news in their lives and in democracy and how that same activity is valuable work for the field of journalism. Specifically, I explore this phenomenon via the practice of “ask me anything” (A.M.A.) conversations between Redditors on r/worldnews and journalists or other professional communicators who host these conversations. How people choose to participate and make meaning of those choices is vital to understanding how and if news and media literacy initiatives accomplish what they ought to (Buckingham, 2003). This project will explore how people using Reddit engage news literacies to make meaning in the digital news environment.

## **Reddit**

Reddit’s tagline as the “front page of the Internet” rings true for good or bad. The site was founded in 2005 by college friends Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian. According to the “About” section of Reddit’s company site, “every day, millions of people around the world post, vote, and comment in communities organized around their interests” (*About: Reddit, Inc. Homepage*, n.d.). The company site also notes that Reddit boasts over 100 thousand active communities, over 50 million unique users each day, and over 50 billion monthly views. The private company began to go public in December of 2021 (Isaac, 2021). Alexa ranks the site as number 21 in global internet engagement (*Reddit.Com Competitive Analysis, Marketing Mix and Traffic*, n.d.).

The site is centered around user-created and -curated discussion boards (“subreddits”) that are based on specific topics ranging from a television show or video

game (e.g., r/borderlands3, r/bridgerton, r/batman\_comics, and so on) to wider topics of interest such as politics or news (e.g., r/todayilearned, r/politics, r/gaming, and so on).

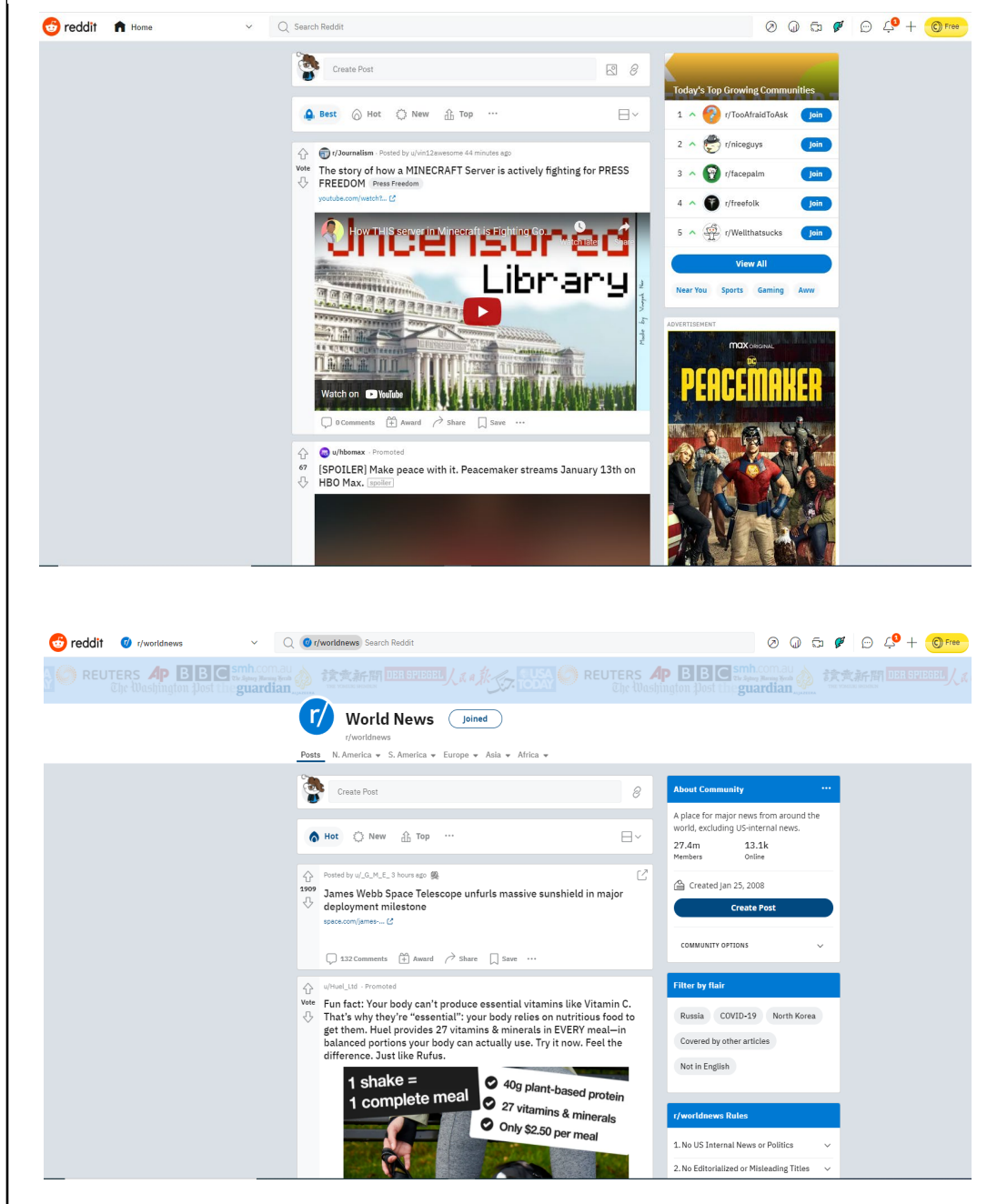
Figure 1 shows an example of the home page of a Reddit user when logging into the site.

Reddit boards rely on user-generated content. Posts are initiated by users who have the option of beginning an original discussion using their own words or linking to or posting images from other sources. Once the discussion is posted, other users respond to the discussion and vote on the content – both the original post and the user comments below.

The most popular discussions get the most visibility on the site – both within the board they originated on and on the “front page” of Reddit. The front page of Reddit is the default for any non-users who go to the site (see Figure 1, top image). However, if you have logged in on a hand-held device you have three options – a default curated home page for the boards you have joined and suggested content from boards the algorithm thinks you will enjoy (Figure 1, bottom image), a tab Reddit labels “news”, or another tab labeled “popular” (Figure 1, both top and bottom).

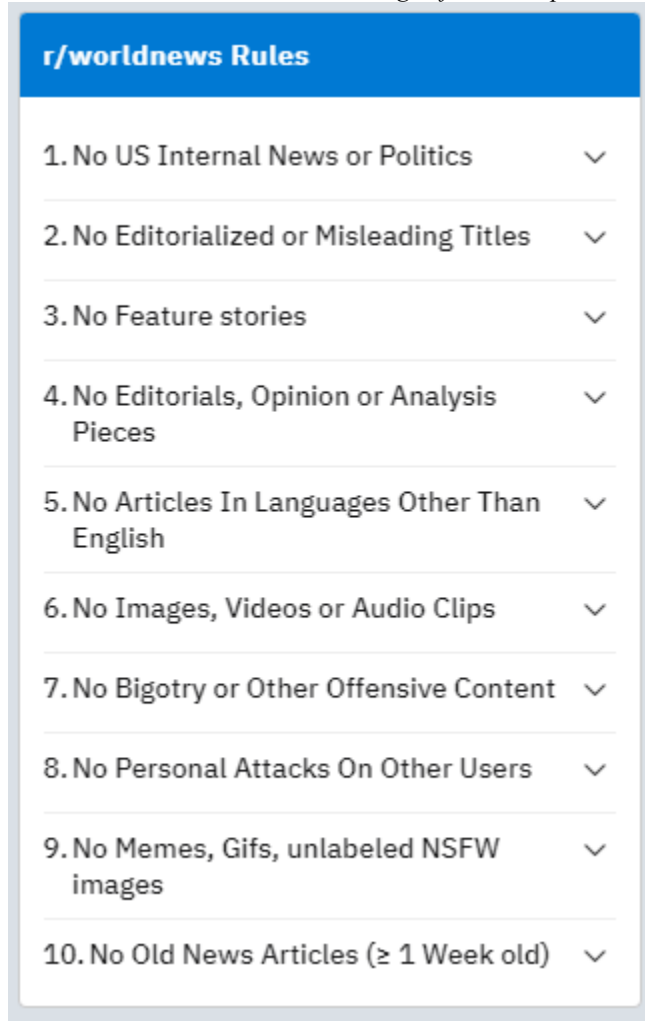
Figure 1

Example of Reddit Home (top) and World News (bottom) Home Pages of Logged in User



**Figure 2**

*World News Rules as Posted on the Home Page of the Group*

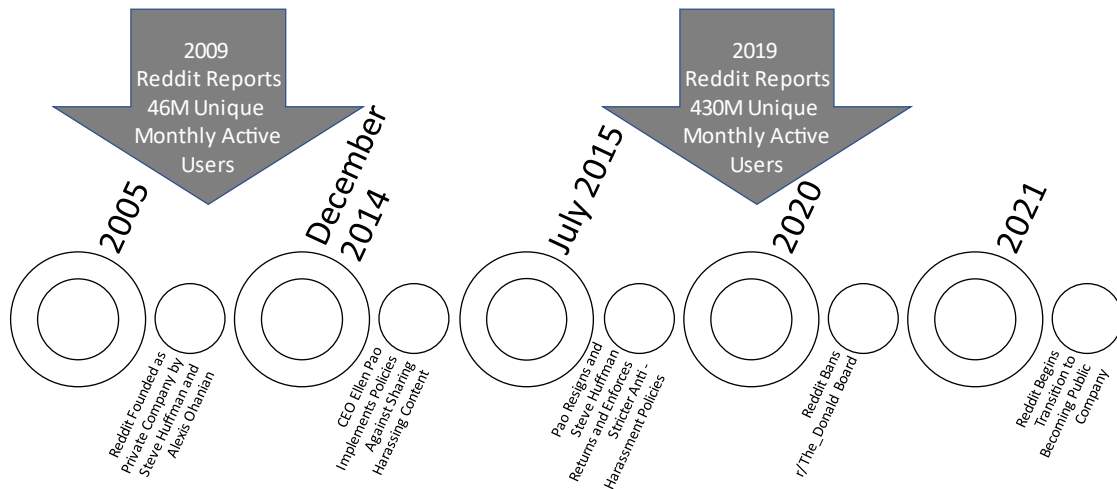


People are using Reddit more now than previously, with 18% of U.S. adults reporting having visited the site in 2021 versus 11% in 2019 (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). In the U.S. it is the sixth most visited site online, behind Google, YouTube, Amazon, Yahoo, and Facebook. Reddit has even gained attention from politicians who make it a point to visit the site as they would geographic locations to meet with supporters (*Top Sites in United States*, n.d.). Though Reddit users represent a relatively small percentage of social media users in the U.S., 42% of Reddit users use the site specifically for news; these users also tend to be male, young (18-29), white, and overwhelmingly Democrat or

Democrat-leaning voters (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). Reddit users and the Reddit community overall represent younger news audiences who are deeply interested in the news and ought to be researched more thoroughly. While Reddit is often cited for implicitly supporting moments when discussions turn into toxic techno-cultures (Massanari, 2017), or for its conservative or conspiratorial content (Maheshwari, 2017), 47% of users identify themselves as liberal (Barthel, 2016). In fact, 79% of Redditors who use the site *specifically* for news identify as Democrat or Democrat-leaning (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021; Walker & Matsa, 2021). The discrepancy between the perception that Reddit harbors conservative conspiracy theorists and the demographics of the site are perhaps related to changes in the site’s structures and rules, which began in 2015. A timeline of these events and demographic shifts for the site is also available in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Timeline of Important Dates and Statistics in Reddit’s History*



In 2014, under the direction of interim CEO Ellen Pao, Reddit became one of the first social network sites to implement policies against sharing harassing content, though Pao was then targeted with an intense harassment campaign herself (Pao, 2015). Pao resigned her post after only eight months, in part due to do the harassment from the Reddit community. Steve Huffman reemerged to take over the mantle of CEO and enforced even stricter policies than Pao, potentially shifting Reddit’s culture – albeit not without the equal potential to harbor toxic masculinity and participatory inequity (Massanari, 2017), or mask racism (Topinka, 2018). By 2018, the site had several teams of employees dedicated to improving the environment of Reddit – the community team, the trust-and-safety team, and the anti-evil team. These were described by users as the “good cop,” “bad cop,” and “Robocop” of Reddit, respectively (Marantz, 2018). This change in culture culminated in the banning of openly toxic ultra-conservative boards on Reddit such as r/The\_Donald in late June 2020 (Peck, 2020).

On Reddit, a combination of written rules, the structural affordances of the site and user practices create the norms for behavior and content expectation (Kennedy et al., 2016). Gatekeeping on Reddit behaves similarly to the mainstream press, with Redditors and moderators alike keeping information flowing and using the site’s structures – such as the voting mechanism – to manage the content and news agenda (Suran & Kilgo, 2017). Volunteer moderators, who use their time on the site to manage individual subreddit communities, play a key role in the development of the sense of community on Reddit by creating specific normative expectations for behavior unique to each subreddit (Seering et al., 2019). However, the ways that end-users interpret moderator behavior and

suggestions are best understood as a process of discursive negotiation and interpretation (Squirrell, 2019).

Although the structure of Reddit is the same from subreddit to subreddit, the way the site's users embrace and discuss topics varies. For example, the subreddit community "Explain Like I'm Five" offers an opportunity to hone scientific communication to a lay audience (Pflugfelder, 2017). Likewise, those who seek health information are more likely to act on the information they find, regardless of whether they find it credible or not. This is a double-edged sword, as acting on "health information" may be a positive thing, the credibility of that information should be more highly qualified to truly benefit the actor (Record et al., 2018). Occasionally, Reddit is even known for producing original news content, able to crowdsource faster than traditional news outlets during the Boston Marathon bombing (Suran & Kilgo, 2017) or explore specified topics more comprehensively, such as the Syrian Civil War (Mitchell & Lim, 2018). Likewise, subreddits can equally represent the best and worst tendencies of the community – simultaneously supplementing journalism with careful deliberation of topics while also fostering digital harassment (Buozis, 2019). Therefore, to understand the meaning-making work of a single Reddit community, one must understand the impact of the shift to digital on the news and citizenship and the structural affordances of the Internet and Reddit.

### ***Ask Me Anything***

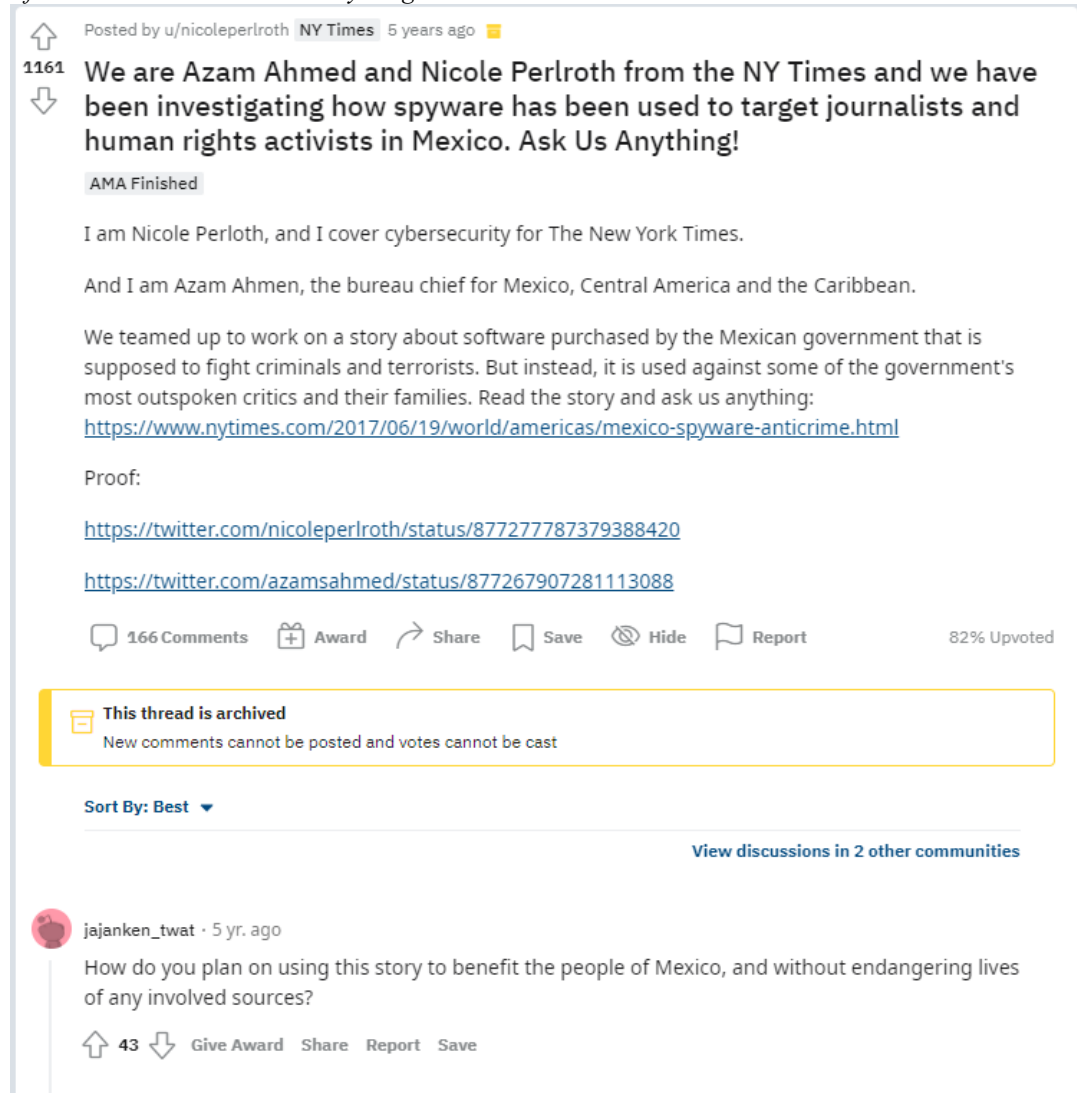
A unique style of conversation that Reddit is known for is called the "Ask Me Anything," or "A.M.A." In an A.M.A. discussion, a person of interest to the community – often a celebrity, politician, or otherwise newsworthy or controversial figure – will open



the post by authenticating their identity, and then state, “Ask me anything.” We can think of an A.M.A. as inviting a guest speaker to your classroom, but the assumption is that person is willing and able to tell honest answers to any question thrown at them by the students. In practice, however, moderators quietly and speedily remove offensive questions before the speaker can see them – an act referred to by moderators as “live moderating” – while the speaker can simply skip past questions they do not wish to answer. Figure 4 is an example of a typical opening to an A.M.A. on World News.

**Figure 4**

*Example of Initial Post on an Ask Me Anything Discussion on Reddit's World News*



The screenshot shows a Reddit post from the user u/nicoleperloth, identified as being from the NY Times, posted 5 years ago. The post title is "We are Azam Ahmed and Nicole Perlroth from the NY Times and we have been investigating how spyware has been used to target journalists and human rights activists in Mexico. Ask Us Anything!". The post is marked as "AMA Finished". The content of the post includes an introduction from Nicole Perlroth and Azam Ahmen, a link to a New York Times article about spyware, and two Twitter links providing "proof" of their work. The post has 166 comments and is 82% upvoted. A yellow banner indicates that the thread is archived and new comments cannot be posted. Below the main post, a comment from user jajanken\_twat asks how the story will be used to benefit Mexico without endangering lives.

Posted by u/nicoleperloth NY Times 5 years ago

1161 **We are Azam Ahmed and Nicole Perlroth from the NY Times and we have been investigating how spyware has been used to target journalists and human rights activists in Mexico. Ask Us Anything!**

AMA Finished

I am Nicole Perlroth, and I cover cybersecurity for The New York Times.

And I am Azam Ahmen, the bureau chief for Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean.

We teamed up to work on a story about software purchased by the Mexican government that is supposed to fight criminals and terrorists. But instead, it is used against some of the government's most outspoken critics and their families. Read the story and ask us anything:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/world/americas/mexico-spyware-anticrime.html>

Proof:

<https://twitter.com/nicoleperloth/status/877277787379388420>

<https://twitter.com/azamsahmed/status/877267907281113088>

166 Comments Award Share Save Hide Report 82% Upvoted

**This thread is archived**  
New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast

Sort By: Best

[View discussions in 2 other communities](#)

jajanken\_twat · 5 yr. ago

How do you plan on using this story to benefit the people of Mexico, and without endangering lives of any involved sources?

43 Give Award Share Report Save

While posts on Reddit (unless removed by moderators, employees, or bots) remain available to view/comment on, there is a time-contingent element with A.M.A.s simply because at some point the person who is being asked anything will log off the discussion. Usually, they will submit a comment in the thread or edit the original post thanking the users and logging off. This does not close the discussion among Reddit users but does stop the A.M.A. portion of the engagement. During the live portion of the A.M.A. discussion, Reddit moderators, and Reddit employees (in the case of high-profile politicians or celebrities) moderate comments and questions live. Celebrity does not always guarantee the most engagement with an A.M.A., however. For example, in 2021 the most upvoted A.M.A. on the site was with a lobster diver who survived being swallowed by a whale, followed by one with Bill Gates (Hutchinson, 2021). There is one board on the site dedicated exclusively to the A.M.A. format (r/IAmA), but A.M.A.s are used on boards throughout Reddit, including r/worldnews, which is the focus of this study.

### ***r/worldnews***

World News is an incredibly popular subreddit with over 27.5 million members, which consistently feeds the front page of the site with posts of international events (*R/World News*, n.d.). Notably, the moderators of the group have a very narrow and specific definition of what constitutes r/worldnews eligible to post. As outlined in their rules world news is *not* U.S. internal or politics, does not have misleading or editorialized titles or content, is not a feature story, is in English, and is not older than one week (*R/World News*, n.d.).

Typically, members will post a link to a news article for other members to discuss and use the headline of the shared article or a brief description of the subject of the article. For example, a post titled “Novak Djokovic has lost his Federal Court fight to stay in Australia” links to a news article with a much longer headline “Novack Djokovic updates: Tennis star ‘extremely disappointed’ to lose his bid to stay in Australia - as it happened” (u/superegz, 2022). Following the general style and structure of Reddit groups, members of World News will make an initial post and then discuss the content below the post. Figure 4 shows a typical post structure on World News.

World News has hosted 49 A.M.A. discussions since 2014. Jonathan Dire (pseudonym), the moderator currently in charge of organizing and running the sessions, has been doing so since 2017. Before he took over as the moderator for A.M.A.s on World News, there had only been two. Jonathan has coordinated all 47 discussions on the board since. Jonathan is a 27-year-old straight, white, male from Scotland who works as a solicitor. Reddit does not keep statistics on moderator demographics. However, Jonathan notes that the group of moderators on World News are particularly diverse for Reddit, with a significant number of them being from outside of the U.S. and near gender parity, which he is particularly proud of. A.M.A.s can be cross-posted to other communities on Reddit to draw in members of other boards who may be interested, but moderators of the board initiating the discussion can disallow cross-posting. Jonathan notes that World News has not had to use this feature on any of their A.M.A.s. Live moderating of the discussion is typical of any subject that could cause controversy on Reddit. Live moderating is when before a comment will be read publicly or seen by the discussants, the moderators of the group must read and approve the comment. Ending the live

discussion does not close the post for comments, however. Therefore, readers of the discussions must be careful to note the timing of discussion posts. For example, one of the most commented on A.M.A.s World News hosted was with Sophie Richardson, the China Director at Human Rights Watch in 2020. The post (now archived) shows 1,370 comments and was cross posted to six other boards on Reddit. The original poster answered almost 400 live moderated questions for about three hours and then logged off the discussion. Over 900 comments were posted after the initial discussion closed. For those scrolling back, this may paint an inaccurate picture of what the live discussion was like for members of World News. This study will proceed with a field of study defined as the 47 A.M.A. discussions that Jonathan has moderated since 2017 on Reddit's World News. I will explore this field to better understand World News members' interpretation of the structures of Reddit that challenge and enhance their news literacies.

## **Preview**

The subsequent chapters explore theories of the news to understand how the digital information environment is complicating that. In Chapter Two, I explain the theoretical framework for the study. The framework combines the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu with Anthony Giddens and considers them in relation to metajournalistic discourses. Specifically, this chapter explores how individuals use their own cultural capital as a base for understanding and communicating information between each other within given contexts to create a sense of ontological security. This framework provides the basis for exploring the meaning-making work of Redditors and journalists on World News A.M.A. discussions.

In Chapter Three, I explore the literature on journalists, publics, and news literacies. Journalists have a complicated relationship with their audiences that has changed drastically over time as the socio-cultural atmosphere for news and technological affordances have changed. This relationship has changed along with our understanding of what it means to be literate, and especially how to be literate in a digital world. The digital world also offers a glimpse at audience and journalist interactions and the discursive labor they do in these interactions.

In Chapter Four, I explore how publics can act as critics, boundary makers, and fans. Audiences do a lot of discursive labor to provide valuable press criticism to improve journalism, facilitate boundary making around the profession, and even fan for the profession of journalism. This work generates meaning and value for journalism and the publics that benefit from it.

Chapter Five details the digital ethnographic approach I employ in this project. High-choice digital environments complicate traditional models of watchdog journalism (Edgerly, 2017a). At once, the Internet's participatory nature inspires a potential co-creation of journalism between citizens and journalists (Rosen, 2006) – although this is complicated and often resisted (Tandoc & Ferrucci, 2017). A digital ethnographic approach is best suited to study the meaning-making work that Reddit users are doing for news literacies, journalistic boundaries, press criticism, and news fandoms. I argue that the work of participants on r/worldnews is valuable not only to citizens but operates as actionable press criticism to help journalists hone their craft and regain their authority by building trust with audiences.

Chapter Six provides detailed findings regarding topic one of the research questions – news literacies. I explore how journalists are surprised by the hyperliteracies of the World News participants and how complicated the relationship is between journalist, audience considering the interference of Internet culture. The hyperliterate World News participants surprise journalists in another way, however, and that is in how tied to legacy journalistic norms they are.

Chapter Seven provides detailed findings regarding topic two of the research questions – the public’s contribution to news as critics, boundary makers, and fans. In this chapter I discuss the specific ways that World News participants demonstrate their fandom for journalists that fit within their carefully constructed boundaries of what journalism is. Journalism by their definition, relies foremost on an ethical grounding in objectivity.

Chapter Eight offers a discussion of the implications of the study and conclusion. The study finds that the unique audience represented by the hyperliterate World News participants defines journalism as a heroic endeavor undertaken by objective reporters who act as watchdogs on behalf of citizens. These news fans define themselves as a cut above the average news audience member and revel in the attention paid to them by journalists they deem worthy of their time, while outright attacking all of those they don’t feel worthy of the moniker.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

To explore news literacies on Reddit, we must begin with a definition of news literacies within this study to contextualize the theoretical framework. Specifically, in this study news literacies are understood to represent a social linguistic literacy of *learning*, *listening*, and *co-creation*. News literacies on Reddit A.M.A.s are built through discursive labor between journalists (as both educators and journalists) and their audience as they interact and collaborate on building the field of journalism. A theoretical framework explaining how the tensions between structure and agency interact in digital spaces is vital to understanding how news literacies as defined are enacted within this space. Specifically, the structuration theories of Anthony Giddens (1984) and Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) provide a framework for such an exploration. The theoretical framework I employ builds on James Webster's (2011) use of structuration to explore audience attention in digital spaces, but incorporates Bourdieu's field theory to add nuance to the ways in which people express their news literacies to others. I argue that cultural capital is interpolated online as a tool for reputation and status building within the context of digital cultures, which *may not* translate into "real world" capital. Because I explore how news literacies work on Reddit, this section provides a review of digital news discourses and concludes with a discussion of how a combination of Giddens' and Bourdieu's concepts can create a theoretical framework for exploring peoples' constructions of their news literate selves on Reddit.

### **Structuration in Digital News Discourses**

Digital structures represent a conundrum for researchers – they are potentially tangible and visible yet are also elusive because of their simultaneously ubiquitous and

proprietary nature. Before the rise of this visual, accessible, digital culture Giddens (1984) argued that society does not exist in an environment independent from human action. Society, he argued, is created by the constant interaction between individuals exerting their agency against the structures negotiated between themselves and others. Discursively, individuals negotiate for resources governed by rules commonly understood as natural or inherent. Everyone, Giddens argued, is searching for a sense of ontological security in an increasingly chaotic modern environment (1990). Ontological security is a sense of order and continuity informing a person's understanding of the world outside of their head as stable and meaningful. The routine negotiation for resources allows people to seek continuity and therefore obtain security (Allan, 2013), but individuals fundamentally disagree on what defines security and truth.

Society is not a structure existing independently of humans to be discovered and studied. Rather, people build through continuously reflexive human interaction – resource negotiation. This dual enaction of structure and agency can be readily viewed in interpersonal communication. However, society becomes more complex as modernity adds in the elements of time and space with advances in communication technologies, such as the growing digital environment. Indeed, historical advances in communication technology have frequently been accompanied by “panics” about how the new technology would revolutionize society (Winston, 1998). In essence, each step society takes toward becoming more modern, increases the complexity of a society built upon discursive rules by improving the ability of discourse to reach more people. The discourses and news literacies of people in digital spaces have become critical as digital communication opens worlds of information *and* disinformation to users (Tandoc et al.,



2020). Giddens' structuration model posits that via discourse, individual people create, enforce, and negotiate rules of conduct within given situations. In digital spaces, especially social media sites such as Reddit, these rules are both formal and codified, and implied through socialization into the digital space.

### ***Rules and Resources: How Individuals Structure Behavior on Reddit***

The social structures created by people can be made visible in the rules that people create and resources they use. On Reddit, each subreddit has codified and written rules for participation on the board, and these rules are enforced by board moderators. However, rules need not be formalized or codified but can operate as a loose framing of social expectations. For example, when a post is not deleted by moderators because it does not break the established rules of conduct, but members of the board may downvote the post – this is one way the community manages itself within the structures of unwritten rules employing the technological affordances of Reddit. Consider, for frame of reference, the words and style one chooses to write in an “anonymous” post on Reddit under a pseudonym, versus an email thread or Slack message with work colleagues. Each situation will have its own rules for decorum based on the context and the individual's particular role within the group.

Resources are likewise contextual and individually dependent upon the specific situation one is in and one's status within that situation – availability and access to resources is negotiated within social contexts. This negotiation and use of resources, however, creates and re-creates social structures as the resources are used, negotiated, and distributed (Giddens, 1990). For example, on Reddit's World News, one individual resource is access to information. Users exchange and discuss news stories. The rules of

the board explicitly disallow posting of news from behind hard paywalls (*R/World News*, n.d.) meaning that if other users cannot easily access the resources you are sharing, then your resources are not welcome. Within the specific context of ask me anything discussions between journalists and Reddit news consumers on World News the structure adjusts from the usual digital flow of conversation on the board to a directed, specific conversation with journalists about specific topics. The structure of the conversation then opens slightly wider to also include discursive negotiation of the journalistic field.

### ***Journalism as a Field: Professional Boundaries and Audience Engagement on Reddit***

Bourdieu's structural conceptions of society align almost directly with Giddens', allowing for a natural combination of the two. Discursive structures conceptually overlap with what Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) described as fields. By exploring class and taste in relation to capital(s), Bourdieu (1984) adds nuance to descriptions of power imbalances in how societies categorize and value resources. Both structures and fields are defined by discursively negotiated boundaries. Bourdieu's fields, however, encompass the *ideological* narratives of the society in which they exist.

The negotiation for capital(s) and an understanding of taste reflects social class (Bourdieu, 1984). Capital – like Giddens' concept of resources – refers to social resources based on one's attainment in society – of primary interest here is cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital represents a person's intellectual accomplishments – for example, earning a college degree is a codification of cultural capital. The resource negotiation of capital is a process of combining individual routines (*doxa*) within the wider structure of situated expectations (*habitus*) (Allan, 2013b). In online news conversations, discussants express this cultural capital to one another via

discursive signals ranging from their choice in user-name to their citation of elite news sources (Bent, Forthcoming).

A field is a microcosm defined by both intrinsic and extrinsic forces in society, with its own rules, norms, and expectations to define its boundaries (Benson, 2006). Each field has unique rules for the way that it values capital (cultural, social, and economic), habitus, and doxa. For the purposes of this study, the most prescient of these concepts and how it behaves within the larger field of journalism are the habitus and doxa. These concepts refer to the individual routines of journalists (habitus) and the wider cultural context in which they navigate and respond (doxa). In this study, I explore how journalists explain their habitus and doxa when interacting directly with audience members on Reddit. As two discursive activities, habitus and doxa are taken up on both the individual and cultural level negotiate the boundaries between what is and is not journalism. This study uses the discursive artifacts produced by journalists – their audience interactions during ask me anything conversations – as a unit of analysis to explore their habitus or audience news literacies – understanding of both what the audience needs and already understands.

As implied by the naming of Giddens' and Bourdieu's terms (i.e., resources, capital), this is a very consumption-centric approach. People are exchanging something of value in each interpersonal exchange, which leads to the definition of social/cultural boundaries and fields. As individuals, we express our capital to each other via what we call taste – taste is frequently defined within economic distinctions of social class. For example, consider taste in food. A taste for steak and potatoes indicates a simplicity associated with lower class – having lower social, cultural, and economic capital.

Likewise, a taste for caviar and champagne indicates a refinement associated with higher class – having more social, cultural, and economic capital. Bourdieu (1984) notes that taste can be acquired or faked, but that one can only last so long pretending to have capital they do not. Taste is frequently demonstrated via discursive displays – through what we say and how we say it to others. In digital spaces, especially social media taste and capital are curated for display to others (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

The tensions and negotiations between agency and structures combine to explore questions of how people are taught to understand their role as citizens and make meaning of the role of news in their life and democracy. Journalism’s normative assumptions have culturally codified into structures – represented by “rules” or “features” of journalism such as objectivity (Schudson, 1978). These normative rules expect citizens to use the news to enact their citizenship (The Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). In exchange, journalism will keep a careful eye on the government and alert citizens when they are in danger from those in power. Similarly, the Internet’s normative structures facilitate “better” communities built on common interests and goals where every voice can be heard “equally” (Rider & Murakami Wood, 2019).

The normative structures of journalism are then imbued into the individual citizen through media consumption. Citizens, both individually and collectively, exert agency to interact with and against these structures discursively creating institutions – or fields – such as journalism (Giddens, 1990). Though there have always been methods of citizen feedback in modern journalism (such as letters to the editor sections), the Internet offers unique structural affordances to embrace the public’s co-creation of news (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). This meaning-making is a quest for ontological security via the

negotiation of capital or resources and is in constant fluctuation in a quest for equilibrium. The structures of the digital information environment and its affordances represent both copious problems and solutions for journalists and their publics. This begs a deeper look at the discursive structures of the press, democracy, and citizens and the news literacies associated with their creation and reification in digital environments.

### ***Digitizing Information Structures***

Technological innovations have increasingly moved the modern western public into a digital environment for entertainment, education, information, and social activities (Hine, 2015). The Internet is so ubiquitous in the U.S. that it is presumed everyone has or *should* have access, and journalists should advocate for that access (Culver, 2014). While it is tempting to consider the digital environment as an answer to inequality of access to public spheres (Dahlgren, 2005), access issues persist along familiar lines as digital divides emerge based on, for instance, socio-economics, geography, and age (Neves et al., 2018). The fast-paced information environment represented by digital communication, additionally, is not without critics concerned about the speed of disinformation (Ruiz et al., 2011) and the overwhelming demand on the attention of individuals with the strained capacity to process it.

Initially, researchers conceptualized digital spaces and digital lives as apart from the “real world” of everyday lives; however, the Internet in many ways has become both a culture and a cultural artifact embedded with everyday lives (Hine, 2015). For example, there is a unique Internet language that exists online— one laughs in person rather than saying “LOL” to the individual they are speaking to. However, as a cultural artifact, the structural affordances of the Internet act as a sort of history-recording tool, keeping data

over time. Reddit is no exception. In addition to the main site, there are archival and collection wikis for each board, and data scraping tools abound to search the site for topics and key words. The Internet exists as both a static thing and moving culture because of the ability of users to walkthrough or scroll back (Møller & Robards, 2019). Digital culture is flowing, yet permanent, readable, researchable, and traceable as the cultural work of individuals becomes even more accessible to others than before (Fuchs, 2012). The tools of mass media are available to all users online, creating new questions of the tensions between agency and structure in a world simultaneously – and easily – surveilled by capitalists, politicians, researchers, and other individual users (Bratich, 2018). Individuals generate their own content – an expression of agency – but do so within structures so ubiquitous that they inspire little incentive to opt-out (Varis, 2016).

**Leaning into the Affordances of Digital Structures.** “Ask audiences what they want, and they’ll tell you vegetables. Watch them quietly, and they’ll mostly eat candy. Audiences are liars, and the media organizations who listen to them without measuring them, are dupes,” wrote Derek Thompson for *The Atlantic*, summarizing the conflict between what news readers think they ought to read and what they read (2014, para. 10). There has been ample scholarly criticism of the impacts of the culture industry broadly (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2016) and the digital environment specifically on society and individuals (Schulzke, 2014), the seminal work of Neil Postman’s (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death* continues to resonate. He warned that advances in communication technology negatively impact literacies, leading to despair, a dissolution of discourse, and degradation of intelligence. However, others have asked why citizens should not and cannot be entertained and informed simultaneously, arguing engaging in politics is a part

of leisure time (van Zoonen, 2005). In fact, digital spaces have made visible the existence of news fandoms – groups of individuals who come together to discuss, analyze, and communally appreciate the news (Gray, 2017). The modern digitization of news has shifted the structures, rules, and resources available to newsrooms and journalists to both lose and attract audience attention online.

Since the 1970s, the U.S. news industry has shifted both philosophically and technologically in phases toward an increasingly market and consumer-oriented news system, shaping the preferences of audiences as journalism struggles to maintain audience attention (Webster, 2014). The “always-on” nature of social media changed expectations of the immediacy of news, expanding reporters’ working hours and environment to all of the time and everywhere (Cohen, 2019). Journalists and scholars have also come to understand the centrality of emotion in media and politics to engage audiences (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). New communication technologies create both opportunities and barriers for journalism, especially how it relates and communicates with its audience and addresses the publics’ (real and perceived) needs (Nelson, 2021).

The march toward innovation gripped researchers and industry professionals in journalism as each pushed for quicker adoption of new technologies to make media employees faster and “better” at their jobs (Witschge, 2012). There was a similar push in education, focused on turning out students who were equipped with the skills the tech industry wanted (Postman, 1996). Blind innovation, however, does not ask enough questions of the structural affordances of technology or the agency of the individuals participating in the adoption of such technologies. In a digital information age, the relationship between journalists and their audience grows increasingly complicated.

Audiences can use spaces such as news publication web sites, and social media sites such as Reddit to view and discuss news online, and news organizations can view and track this behavior in the digital sphere. However, digital tracking of audience behavior does not alleviate the normative functions of journalism in a democracy. Journalists use the affordances of the digital environment to inform their conceptions of who the news is reaching, but not define it completely (Nelson, 2021). The dialectic negotiation between journalist and audience is visible in the news literacies work that both do in Reddit ask me anything discussions on World News. During these discussions, journalists improve news literacies of their audience (solidifying the imagined audience they write for), while publics improve their information and news literacies.

### **Theoretical Model**

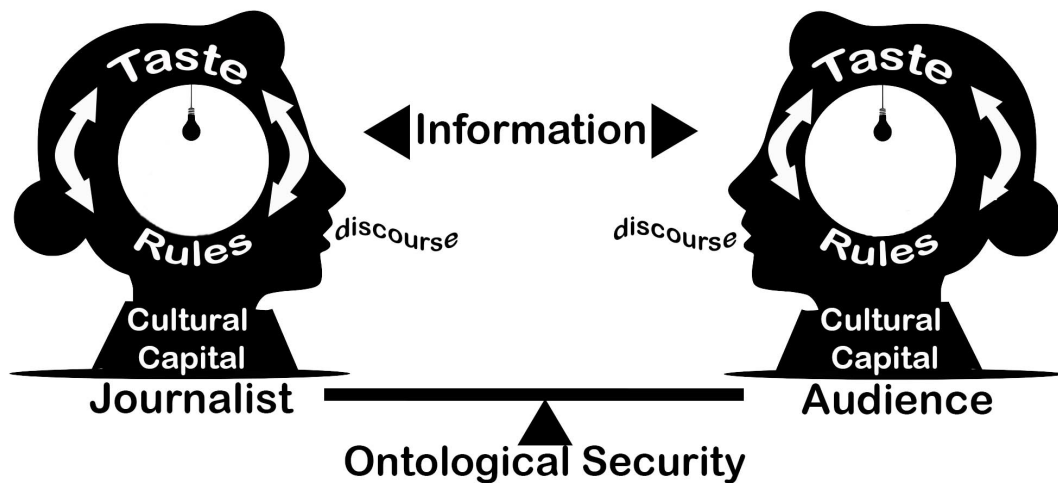
Figure 5 represents the theoretical model of this study. In it, journalists and audiences come together on Reddit in the form of Ask Me Anything conversations on World News. Each brings their individual tastes, informed by their own pre-existing cultural capital to the discussion board and exchange that information through their own personal filters. This exchange of ideas and information is creating and created by the structures (rules) of Reddit, journalism, and its audience. The information they exchange is filtered through both their internal taste (created by their world experiences and capital) and the rules of the interaction. Both the written rules on World News and implied social-cultural structural rules of Reddit and the board. This micro-level exchange journalist to audience is conversational discourse, but through the filters of each participant's individual capital and taste, the discussion creates the structures of institutions and society around them. Thus, through their discursive labor they reinforce and define social



understandings of what a journalist is, what the audience is for journalism, what journalism ought to do, what the audience ought to do and what reality is – as well as what threatens it. They share this information via microlevel discourses that feed the shared ontological security of the larger Discourse of society. These interactions negotiate ontological security – a shared reality in which a journalist is and ought to be something and an audience is and ought to be something else. They share information via discourse and reinforce a shared ontological security.

**Figure 5**

*Theoretical Model of How Journalists and Audiences Make Meaning on World News Ask Me Anything Discussions*



**Summary**

The theories of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu can combine to explore the environment of digital news consumption – particularly the interactions between journalists and their audiences as they co-create news literacies. Giddens argued that individuals struggle for a sense of ontological security by exchanging ideas and information via socio-cultural rules. This exchange is a negotiation of resources, which they negotiate dialectically to create shared understandings of social institutions. Bourdieu described taste as a symbolic representation of individuals’ capital and thereby

their social class. Via individual habitus (routines) and doxa (belief) people form and negotiate shared meanings. These concepts of structuration inform the theoretical model for this project, which explores the specific instance of hour journalists and their audience express news literacies in Reddit World News A.M.A. discussions.

### **Chapter 3: Journalists, Audiences, and News Literacies**

The institution of journalism has a long history of varied content, form, and audience expectations. Along with that history comes varying assumptions about the news literacies of their audiences. Digital news is far from the original party press in the United States, especially how the audience and journalists relate to one another. Despite the digital divide, the move to digital has made both the consumption and production of news more accessible. Audiences have become more visible and vocal (Litt, 2012) and they have dispersed with the ever-increasing number of media choices available to them other than news to occupy their time (Webster, 2014). The change in technology has had broad impacts across other institutions as well, leading to increased calls for improved news literacies to facilitate audience understanding of the information environment (Gee, 2015).

#### **Journalists and their Audiences**

Journalism is an institution possessing an established discourse about its service to democracy; the Internet, by contrast, is a relatively young institution (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). As an institution, though, the Internet has its own narratives and discourses, which dictate what it ought to be – that is, its own normative assumptions. The structure of the Internet is such that it crosses the boundaries of nearly every other field, including journalism (Hine, 2015). The normative ideals of each of these fields do not always align, however, creating institutional tension. For example, there has been much discussion about which institution currently enacts the role of information gatekeeper (Russell, 2019) and whether technology has a positive role to play in education or not (Lacasa et al., 2017; Postman, 1996). One group that grappled with the

relationship between journalists and their audience to encourage more interaction and understanding between the two were those advocating for public journalism in the 1990s.

The discourse around public journalism provided a framework for how journalism envisions and negotiates its role in a democracy in direct connection to citizen audiences (Carey, 1997). This kind of journalism could, in fact, create a greater incentive for press accountability by making sure that a wider swath of voices is heard (Glasser & Craft, 1996). The concept of reciprocal journalism leans into this enthusiasm of enfoldng the audience into the normative boundaries of journalism. Reciprocal journalism encourages the feedback of audiences in digital environments as expected and vital in a digital culture and encourages journalists to engage in this conversation (Lewis et al., 2014). In fact, journalists who engage actively in co-creation of journalism with members of the community in a visible and active way such as live journalism enhance both the stories they create, and the connection of the audience to those stories (Ruotsalainen & Villi, 2018).

One implication of this normative relationship between journalism and its audience is that 20<sup>th</sup> century journalists tended to turn increasingly inward toward professional norms when making news decisions – after all, journalists ought to generate important news and good citizens ought to consume that information (Nelson, 2021). Though scholarship ruminated about the relationship between news, citizens, and democracy, it was not until the social, cultural, and economic disruption of the digital environment that journalism started to – or was, perhaps, forced to – reconsider its audience in earnest. The rise of the digital information environment disrupted this to some extent, regardless of technological advances in tracking of reads, shares, time spent

on articles, etc. the audience for news is always unknowable and therefore imagined (Nelson, 2021).

### *Imagined Audiences*

The “imagined audience” both for scholars and for news professionals remains a slightly abstract concept. The presumption is that this audience is to whom a writer thinks they are speaking (Litt, 2012), however, with the rise of social media technologies conceptions of the imagined audience have grown. Social media allows non-professionals access to mass media technologies via which they can construct their own imagined audiences (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This creates a multiplying effect on the discourse as additional actors create additional performances and imagined audiences.

Primarily, studies of the imagined audience in journalism have focused on how technology has allowed journalists to more explicitly understand who they are speaking to rather than who they are imagining them to be, creating turmoil as journalists alternately wonder how to survive economically and how to serve democracy best (Tandoc & Thomas, 2015). The perceptions of how the audience engages with material online have led to journalists’ increasing adoption of these technologies (Coddington, 2018). McDevitt and Ferrucci (2017) assert that the construction of the imagined audience by journalists is vital to understanding how journalists construct news and justify their practices. Understanding how journalists conceive of the imagined audience speaks to their normative assumptions – what they feel they ought to be doing – and explains some resistance they have to digital audience measurements and audience engagement practices.

What role are citizens – varyingly portrayed as everything from the manipulated masses (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2016) to those “formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006) – to possess in journalism? Journalism in a digital age struggles for the trust and respect of the average citizen (Carlson, 2017). Endless optimism about technological advances has not proven particularly useful because technology does not always provide a way out of crises (Creech & Nadler, 2018; McChesney, 2003; Witschge, 2012). The gap between what information journalists provide and what citizens actually absorb has always existed but may be growing wider (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). The ability of individuals to silo themselves in the digital environment does not facilitate decreasing the gap between audiences and journalists.

Under a presumption that journalists keep an eye on those in power as arbiters of truth (Craft, 2010), the role of the press grew into a monitorial watchdog on behalf of citizens – whether they were listening or not (Christians et al., 2009). Citizens, however, have become disconnected as they become monitorial themselves – keeping an eye on big headlines (Schudson, 2008). Though ideals of a public engaged in news remain afloat, buoyed by the hopes of news websites as the Habermasian vision of the public sphere of civil discourse (Ruiz et al., 2011), journalists themselves remain skeptical of the potential for a citizen involved in news development, even with the structural affordances of digital technology (Lee & Tandoc, 2017; Wolfgang, 2018). The structures of the media environment, however, have gone digital whether journalists like it or not.

### ***Digital Environments and the “Visible” Audience***

Access to technology and therefore information remains a core issue in journalism, with the digital divide making disparities even more evident during the

COVID-19 pandemic (Levin, 2020). Not all people have equal access to the Internet - meaning literal access to high-speed internet and having the digital literacies to understand and use the Internet. Additionally, there is a contentious and continuous discussion of the role of the citizen – or audience – in a democracy and journalism that is increasingly converging with entertainment (van Zoonen, 2005).

Social media platforms offer more than spaces for news sites to manage audience discussion of news topics. Each platform has unique structures and affordances. Twitter, for example, can track how news is used and shared across vast networks (Bruns & Burgess, 2012), as a source of public opinion (McGregor, 2019), a 24-hour source of story ideas (Cohen, 2019), and a site for journalists to manage the marketing of their work (Tandoc & Vos, 2016). Similarly, Facebook offers both a space to share and discuss the news (Bednarek, 2016). However, audience members' sharing is a personal agenda-setting activity, frequently relating more to the sharer's identity. The news topics they choose to share more closely relate to their social reputation for being interested in certain topics (Bright, 2016). There is still some question of the role of social media as distributors of news content. For example, Facebook representatives argued that news content is the same as any other content users share and not in need of additional control or editing, whereas journalists argued that news content needs to be held to a higher standard for truth (Carlson, 2018). Though valuable in some respects, such as sources of information (Bane, 2019), opportunities for reciprocity with audiences (Lewis et al., 2014), or bringing the voices of marginalized populations to the news' attention (Clua et al., 2018), social media generally represents a set of challenges for journalism.

The first challenge social media poses to journalism is the use of algorithms to sort news according to the preferences of the individual consuming that information. Social media companies have created a “social news gap” between audiences and journalism, shifting the agenda-setting abilities to audiences – audiences with an ability to share news or not, and aggregators sorting news according to individual interests (Bright, 2016). Political news is therefore sorted based on political views and preferences, creating news repertoires tied to ingrained political beliefs rather than ontological truth or verifiability (Edgerly, 2015). The sorting of information based on political belief systems becomes increasingly problematic when the digital environment allows for rapid and widespread disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). In fact, the algorithms are programmed to feed negative emotions and encourage division (Horwitz, 2021).

The second challenge social media represents to journalism is the ease and speed with which misinformation spreads using social media. Journalists are increasingly concerned with the rise of misinformation online and question how to conceptualize and execute their roles as watchdogs when the facts they report are under fire (Schapals, 2018). The frequently used (but rarely defined) term “fake news” has become code for politicians displeased with the tone of their coverage but also frequently refers to literal fake news stories (Tandoc et al., 2018). Literal fake news – disinformation – has some agenda-setting power in the mainstream, even if that is frequently expressed as an opportunity to correct those false claims (Vargo et al., 2018).

The digital and social nature of online sharing of news, in fact, gives researchers an opportunity to watch how and why people use the news in their daily lives. For



example, dating back to the late 1940s, Bernard Berelson found he had to talk to newsreaders multiple times before they could fully articulate the ways in which they missed the news in their lives. At first, people stated what they *should* miss, which was the knowledge of the days' events, however, they also missed the routine of news consumption in their day (Berelson, 1949). Indeed, this remains an issue in modern journalism (Thompson, 2014). In fact, Webster (2014) argues that what maintained news audiences for so long was the way news consumption fit into individual daily routines. In a digital news environment, the routines of consumption are changing once again (Revers, 2015). It is easier in the digital environment for individuals to curate their information feeds - tune in or out, choose one type of media over another (Thorson & Wells, 2016), and of course, interact (Lewis et al., 2014).

When audiences share news stories on social media, they do not do so without context and comment, bringing the news itself into a new area of discourse via a kind of “mundane media criticism” (Carlson, 2016a), a form of micro-criticism offering a brief evaluation without an intention to engage in deliberation. People's beliefs about whether they are exposed to false information are predicted by their participation in news discussions, use of social media for political purposes, and exposure to information contrasting their beliefs. However, a dynamic and vocal political figure can disrupt this balance and lead more people to believe they have been exposed to falsehoods (Koc-Michalska et al., 2020), while researchers and journalists have a tendency to pay the most attention to news consumers who engage the “loudest” via comment sections, for example (Craft et al., 2016). Individuals who are not heavy news users are key because less media literate individuals tend to believe in folk theories confirming their individual

ability to “discover” information, making them vulnerable to disinformation online (Toff & Nielsen, 2018). Young people, tending to have higher levels of media literacy, use consumptive news feed curation to navigate the overwhelming amount of information and disinformation they find online (Lee et al., 2019). Still, verification of the quality of the information consumers engage with is not an entirely internal and individual act of cognition but is a social process by which people contextually and socially interpret the quality and validity of news presented to them in social media (Waruwu et al., 2020). Citing remaining questions and uncertainty from the 2016 presidential campaign, however, many Americans report uncertainty about using social media for their news (Shearer & Grieco, 2019). One possible avenue of intervention is to improve the news literacies of audiences, especially in a digital environment.

### **Media Literacies**

There is a long, and complicated scholarly discourse on literacy and literacies that crosses fields and decades. For the purpose of this study, the focus is on two specific fields of literacy – media literacy and the specific subgenre within it of news literacy. Young news consumers – defined as those under the age of 30 – are members of the first generation with a formal media literacy curriculum in schools. This curriculum was developed out of a recognition that literacies in modern worlds develop multimodally and must be taught as such (Buckingham, 2003; Morrell et al., 2013). Broadly defined, media literacy is the ability of citizens to access, understand, and produce information across different modalities (Aufderheide, 1993). It is, perhaps more important than ever for deliberative democracy for “the engaged citizen ... to understand the relationship between personal and social identity, and media as a sense of place, community, and

democracy” (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013, p. 1617). The goals of media literacy align with the ideals of deliberative democracy. Media literacy efforts aim to create a citizen who not only understands the media they consume but is also empowered to be critical of it (Aufderheide, 1992) and ought to be grounded in morality. Silverstone (2004) argued that:

the core of such media literacy should be a moral agenda, always debated, never fixed, but permanently inscribed in public discourse and private practice, a moral discourse which recognizes our responsibility for the other person in a world of great conflict, tragedy, intolerance, and indifference (p. 440).

This sentiment echoes the ideals of deliberative democracy (Christians et al., 2009) and seems increasingly prescient in a media and information environment where citizens increasingly question truth and distrust news (Toff et al., 2020). Media literacy represents a set of core competencies that citizens need in a digital age, including choosing reliable information sources, analyzing messages for bias, creating multimodal content, reflecting on personal conduct, and taking collective social action (Hobbs, 2010).

Media literacy is a “New Literacy” and encourages recognition of the role of everyone as not only a consumer of media but also a producer. Within this “New Literacy,” meaning is culturally, socially, and situationally embedded in such a way that one must have knowledge of the context to appropriately decode the media (Gee, 2015). For example, to be literate in news one must first learn the language of journalism – not just the style of news writing, but the practices, routines, values, and norms of the profession. However, audiences may only have that knowledge based on fictional accounts of journalism (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015) and not from interactions with real

world journalists. The affordances of the digital environment allows increased direct engagement (e.g., discussions on social media or outreach efforts such as the A.M.A. discussions on Reddit) between journalists and audiences (Nelson, 2021). Regardless of how journalists and audiences gain an understanding of one another's culture, practices, and norms it is social linguistic literacies that inform that interaction.

There are three key concerns identified by the MacArthur Foundation for media literacy education considering the participatory nature of the internet. Specifically, these concerns are the participation gap (not everyone has equal access to digital spaces), the transparency problem (invisible or hard-to-see structural influences on media such as algorithms), and the ethics challenge (we do not train all young people to be ethical media producers) (Jenkins et al., 2009). There is also concern that the pace with which communication technology and techniques move is so fast-paced that media literacy education cannot keep up (Kellner, 2010).

Media literacy can be considered a form of critical literacy as it involves a broader understanding of media's relationship to social, cultural, and power structures (Buckingham, 2003). It is vital to remember that the definitions of being "critical" and "literate" are also embedded in cultural and power differentials. The literacy practices of youth of color, for example, often go unrecognized in institutional settings (Kirkland, 2013). Likewise, students can often consider critical to mean that they are judging the class of media – denigrating popular culture in favor of high class or elite culture because to be critical *feels* powerful as one exerts their taste as superior to others (Buckingham, 2003). The power of elite language and literacy measures in institutions such as schools and journalism creates a class division based on literacy, which creates a sense of pride in

distancing oneself from the literacy of elites (boyd, 2018). This will be key to the present study due to the limited perspectives represented by Reddit users. It is important to develop news literacy as a specific type of media literacy because knowledge of politics and current events does not improve young people's judgments of whether a statement is accurate or not, but media literacy education does (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017).

### *News Literacies*

News literacy is a specific form of media literacy focused exclusively on the intersection of citizenship, journalism, and technology with a goal to empower both citizens and journalists in the digital information environment (Mihailidis, 2012). Specifically, news literacy is “knowledge of the personal and social processes by which news is produced, distributed and consumed, and skills that allow users some control over these process” (Tully et al., 2021, p. 5). It has two goals – it must teach citizens how to assess, evaluate, and understand the news, and act as education in appreciation of the news form (Fleming, 2014). Individuals who are news literate, with positive attitudes about the news and journalism, are more likely to participate in civic engagement than others (Hobbs et al., 2013). Like the media literacy umbrella under which it exists, news literacy combines social and critical literacies.

News literacy focuses “less on distinguishing among news sources and more on the ways we get news – mediated by technologies, a host of institutional and organizational forces and our own psychological tools” (Craft, 2016, p. 16). News literacy ought to include education about institutions and structures impacting the content so citizens can fully understand the strengths and weaknesses of the news genre (Ashley, 2016). *Critical* news literacy focuses on teaching citizens how to understand and pick

apart the context of the news and its creation, focusing on asking “how do we know?” (Dvorkin, 2019), which is key to arming citizens with the tools necessary to weed through disinformation (Higdon, 2020). However, there is always going to exist a concern that by teaching young people to be critical, we turn them too quickly to cynicism and the assumption that the news media is lying (boyd, 2018). This concern is amplified by the speed with which information moves online.

Frequently identified as the locus of the spread of misinformation and citizen distrust (Paisana et al., 2020), social media is also a key space for news literacy campaigns to encourage calls to action (Tully et al., 2020). However, it is a false dualism to consider news literacy in terms of digital vs. print or any other such divisions of technology – we need a holistic approach because all of these different modes of news act symbiotically (Frechette, 2016). Multi-modal news content is the norm online, especially, for example with audio, photo, video, and infographics working simultaneously to each create a full contextualized news story. In fact, active local news outlets remain key to engaging citizens in news and media literacy with news producers they trust (Nettlefold, 2019). Still, news literacy initiatives must contend with the digital environment and young people’s digital news habits. Young people, for instance, contribute real-time information to reporters online, which is impacting news routines and norms (Allan, 2012). However, young people – even those who have had media literacy education – tend to express a type of third-person effect, assuming that their peers have had a similar news literacy education and therefore news they share can automatically be trusted (Notley & Dezuanni, 2019; Powers & Koliska, 2016).

News literacies and trust in journalism are inherently connected via the interactive element of news literacy outreach efforts by journalists such as the A.M.A. discussions on Reddit explored here. As such, this project proceeds with the definition of news literacy as a listening literacy – collaborative and co-constructed by discourse between journalists and audiences. Specifically, I use the amended definition of news literacies put forth by Robinson, Jensen, and Davalos, which notes (in part):

The emerging actors responsible for news literacy include not only “regular” citizens such as students, consumers, and teachers, but also journalists, technology companies such as Facebook or Google, and anyone who engages on social media platforms to mass (re-)produce information. Literacies entail the understanding of content production and consumption and insist on pro-active learning and teaching through interactive and collaborative listening on the part of all participants (2021, p. 1230).

News literacies are built through discursive labor between multiple actors working on not only discussions and co-creating information and news events, but also co-creating the institutional definitions of what journalism and its relationship to its audience and democracy is and ought to be.

In sum, news literacy is a category of media literacy. It is a social linguistic literacy emphasizing listening, which focuses on teaching citizens to seek and understand the context and process of the production of the news they consume. It operates from an understanding that citizenship and information sharing, and production overlap between professionals and non-professionals in a digital age. As a critical literacy, news literacy must always cautiously stay between cynicism and criticism – a line that theories of press

criticism have likewise drawn. As young citizens and news consumers, then, Reddit newsgroup users are learning, developing, teaching, using, and expanding, their own news literacies and the literacies of those around them. Specifically, for this study the definition of news literacy is *a critical, social, listening literacy in which journalists and audiences co-create both understandings of the news product and expectations of the field of journalism*. They are deciding what news is, what news ought to be, and the responsibility of citizens in the global news and democratic process.

### **International News**

For most of the history of international news, organizations based in the U.S. relied on reporters embedded in foreign countries to understand, cover, and explain foreign news events to U.S. audiences. Typically referred to as foreign correspondents working in news bureaus a dateline indicating the location at the beginning of the news story (i.e., PARIS -) would indicate to readers that this article was written by a reporter stationed abroad. However, audiences don't always understand the purpose of the dateline, nor do they necessarily care, as noted by *New York Times* executive editor Dean Baquet noted in a live event (*The New York Times*, 2017). The multi-faceted crisis in journalism saw many editors and publishers having to make difficult financial decisions – many at the cost of foreign bureaus. Foreign bureaus have often been the first place for economically struggling news organizations to cut expenses, dramatically reducing the amount of international news events covered by U.S. news organizations (Sambrook, 2010). However, professional foreign correspondents still produce the most thorough reporting from abroad (Dell'Orto, 2016). Even in the best of financial situations, however, international news coverage is not perfect.



Scholars have long noted that coverage of world events is often limited in geographic scope and topic diversity. News covers the world differently – egocentricity dominates world news events as news values favor proximity and a perception of cultural affiliation means journalists assume audiences prefer to hear about “others like them” (Wu, 2019). In fact, although there has been huge shifts socio-culturally, economically, and technologically the news values of editors selecting foreign events for coverage in U.S. newsrooms has barely changed since the late 1980s (Chang et al., 2012). Still, others argue that less coverage of foreign news is the norm in the U.S. and the increasing attention to world events reflects a cultural shift (Allen & Hamilton, 2010). Globalization and the onset of a more digital media environment has done relatively little to impact the scope of international news coverage (Riegert, 2011). However, there has been a significant shift from talking about place to emphasizing space (geographical and cultural) in a digital media environment (Barnhurst, 2016). News values, journalistic routines, and assumptions about audiences lead to a heterogenic world news outlook, which reinforces perceptions of already dominant world power countries remaining most important to the U.S. Issues of the scope and style of coverage of world events is often tied to the ways in which journalists perceive of and cover world events, beginning with what news to cover.

### ***Journalists Covering World News***

Gatekeeping practices are commonly employed by journalists to decide if and how to report on international events. Journalists in national newsrooms tend toward a global view – reporting diverse stories about international events and topics, whereas local journalists report events only with a local angle (Kim, 2002). Overall, however,

international coverage tends to focus heavily on world powers (Wu, 2019). There is even evidence that when it comes to world events, news organizations tend to let other news organizations act as agenda-setters for their own coverage. For example, the correlation between the morning issue of the *New York Times* and evening news on broadcast television indicates that perhaps media outlets are setting international news agendas for each other – in essence, deeming something newsworthy since another organization already deemed it so (Golan, 2006). The work, however, of foreign correspondents is changing with the digital information environment and shifts toward globalization.

Foreign correspondents are a highly specialized and small group of reporters who live abroad in foreign bureaus. They frequently live within the country they cover, although there are some who practice what is commonly called “parachute journalism” when they will fly in during an event and leave. Foreign correspondents face multiple obstacles such as oppression by local governments, lack of cooperation from official sources in-country, and the constant reminder that U.S. audiences do not generally favor their reporting. However, many foreign correspondents feel such a strong calling to the profession – giving voice to the voiceless and bearing witness – they are disheartened, but not silenced by these obstacles (Dell’Orto, 2016). Foreign correspondents employ specialized skills such as being multi-lingual, but also will often use in-country resources such as individuals known as “fixers” who will act as guides and connections (Palmer, 2022). The digital environment is changing the way foreign correspondence works, however, even if the correspondent remains in-country.

Just as the digital news environment gives audiences access to vast amounts of information not previously readily available so too does it give foreign correspondents

access to information and other resources to improve their coverage of world events (Archetti, 2013). One of the oldest and most frequently used resources for the foreign correspondent is even changing. The relationship between in-country fixers and journalists has gone digital, though inequities remain (Palmer, 2022). The digital information environment, however, complicates the relationship between journalist and audience and even the very definition of place and space when geography is often not a limiting factor (Barnhurst, 2016). However, the Internet and digitization has not necessarily improved world news coverage (Wu, 2019). In this mediated information environment foreign correspondents are increasingly more important as educators in the digital information environment (Archetti, 2012). Journalists in general, but foreign correspondents specifically must consider and reconsider the news literacies of audiences when it comes to international events.

### ***Audiences' World News Literacies***

There is a vast scholarly discourse about the inattention and misunderstanding of U.S. publics when it comes to world history, geography, and international events. The public's understanding of world events is a key locus for exploration of news literacy. News literacy, you will recall, is a critical, social, listening literacy in which journalists and audiences co-create meaning from the news and define the field of journalism.

World events often have very different coverage in different countries (Wu, 2019). For example, when compared to Switzerland, U.S. news outlets expose citizens to less hard-hitting world news and citizens are less informed about these events (Iyengar et al., 2009). News gaps persist in world news coverage and the U.S. publics' perceptions of

world events and their importance stays closely associated with the ways in which the news reports on these events.

Still, the perceptions of what audiences need or ought to know versus what they are interested in is persistently different between editors and audiences. The gap between which world events are most newsworthy remains wide between news editors and audiences (Tai & Chang, 2002). Agenda-setting plays a key role in influencing U.S. audiences' opinions of foreign nations. Americans tend to think that countries that get more coverage are more important to the U.S. than those that do not (Wanta et al., 2004). Not just the amount, but the kind of coverage a country generally gets makes a difference for audiences as well – for example, does a country only make it into the news associated with negative topics such as violence? U.S. audiences tend to more readily believe news that reinforces these perceptions (often misperceptions) of what a country is like. When news coverage of world events reinforces U.S. audiences' perceptions of a country (especially those in the Global South), then the audience misunderstanding of the country grows (Perry, 1987). The Reddit A.M.A.s on World News are an opportunity for foreign correspondents to confront and manage the inattentive and ill-informed U.S. audience directly. Accordingly, I pose the following initial research questions:

**RQ1:** How do r/worldnews “ask me anything” discussions reflect journalists’ understanding of publics’ news literacies of international news events?

**RQ2:** How do r/worldnews “ask me anything” discussions reflect publics’ news literacies of world events?

## Summary

The institution of journalism has a troubled relationship with an audience it needs for financial support but also has been tasked with informing. Journalists tend to consider themselves the deliverer of much needed information vegetables for an audience that frustratingly wants only sweets. The imagined audience for journalism (even in the audience's own head) is often at odds with the realities of the digital metrics tracking audience behavior. This is one of many factors complicating the role of journalism in a democracy. As media technologies change and the shift in literacy studies began to focus more on media literacies, one component of which are news literacies. How ought journalism as an institution teach audiences to understand and appreciate news work? News literacies are increasingly important in the digital environment and looking at international news specifically allows for an opportunity to explore how people understand news in a digital environment. International news coverage has often been cited as some of the most important, but frustrating news to cover as audiences have often been disinterested in world events. The Reddit A.M.A.s on World News offer a unique opportunity for journalists covering world events to interact with and educate audiences directly about their work and its value.

## **Chapter 4: Journalism's Publics as Critics, Boundary Makers, and Fans**

Journalism's publics are rarely empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge. Instead, they frequently act as *critics*, *boundary makers*, and even *news fans*. Citizens as news critics act as watchers of the watchdogs, keeping journalists in check. However, journalists struggle with this relationship as the amount of criticism journalism gets is often from a position of misunderstanding, or distrust. In fact, in the digital environment there is often more "criticism" in the form of uncivil and unactionable comments directed at journalists than there are thorough and thoughtful suggestions for improvement. Still, beyond press criticism, the publics' discursive labors often result in drawing boundaries between what is and is not journalism and even grow to create what resembles news fandoms, which are communities of vocal supporters of normatively legacy journalism and specific journalists or news organizations. Many of these news fans are found on Reddit and make their fandom known through the A.M.A. conversations on World News.

### **Press Criticism and the Engaged Citizen**

One way the press has maintained its social contract with the public and democracy is via robust press criticism to check on its processes and report on them to the public. In 1974, James Carey argued that the institution of journalism was lacking a tradition of public, sustained criticism of itself aimed not at specialized audiences in the forms of professional reviews or academia, but within the pages of newspapers (Carey, 1974). Though Carey argued that internal criticism in the form of a representative of the public on staff, such as an ombudsman was not effective enough to self-regulate the press, the disappearance of such positions in the U.S. is alarming for the state of formal press criticism (Ferrucci, 2019).

There are key features of press criticism developed by theorists since Carey, however – most notably Wendy Wyatt in her seminal work on press criticism theory. According to Wyatt’s (2007) work, there are three levels to press criticism, which intersect and overlap – successful press criticism will engage the critical public at the periphery, converse with the press, and engage with the institutional center of journalism itself. A successful critic, Wyatt (2007) argues, will engage at all three levels, however most critics fail to engage the public at the periphery and therefore fail as successful criticism. Press criticism is a dialogic process. It encourages the debate and critical thinking necessary to a discursive democratic process, especially the conversation between audience and press, but it must be careful to avoid cynicism (Wyatt, 2007). In fact, Hayes (2008) adds that effective critics should be constructive adversaries and not destructive enemies, present fact-based arguments, offer critical analysis based on the social contract of the Hutchins Commission, and galvanize public opinion. To be effective at securing the authority of journalism and the relationship of the press to democracy, press criticism must be robust and active, which *seems* possible as more critics emerge in the digital environment (Wyatt, 2018a).

Even when criticism is robust and active, it does not always reach the intended audience or provide the needed check to press authority, especially when critics are journalists themselves with loyalties to the profession, which tend to inspire them away from advocating for the public and toward advocating for the press (Fengler, 2003). Lerner (2021) found that though press criticism has become more critical journalists were not any more likely to act upon that criticism in 2017 than in the 1970s. Additionally, an

active press criticism can throw a wrench into knowledge production processes, and stifle or destabilize important debates (Carlson, 2009).

Press criticism can, and should, arise from multiple avenues, especially considering the structural affordances of a digital age that allow for an immediate audience response to news and specific tracking metrics to measure how audiences interact with news items (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). Digital structures offer affordances to create a two-way dynamic press criticism as conversation, which could inspire a greater trust of journalistic methods (Feighery, 2011). Commentors in online news sites can act as press critics (Craft et al., 2016), although journalists struggle with the legitimacy of comment sections because their content rarely fosters civil discourse (Duffy et al., 2018; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016; Wolfgang, 2018a). The lack of journalistic respect afforded to comment sections could be partially attributed to the lack of types of knowledge represented by those who comment – commenters tend to rely primarily on folk knowledge fortified by commenters’ age and experience rather than scientific or journalistic methods (Bent, Forthcoming). In addition, the audience’s integration into the journalism’s normative space via comment sections was assumed and never realized (Thomas, 2021). Internet users who have learned critical media literacy skills tend to levy press criticism more directly aimed at improving the representation of different people within the news (Kaun, 2014; Nothias & Cheruiyot, 2019). Press criticism ought to come from outside of newsrooms to avoid unintended bias (Wyatt, 2007), especially considering the fluidity of the role of individuals who are simultaneously journalists and concerned citizens (Lerner, 2019).



The digital environment offers peripheral public spheres that may influence the center (Bennett et al., 2018), and social media sites, including Reddit, ought to be evaluated as press criticism (Lerner, 2021). Digital audiences also tend to criticize journalists' use of social media for brand-building, rather than in service to providing transparency – an ideal different than objectivity, which focuses on revealing methodology (Noppari et al., 2014). However, digital spaces do not always inspire transgression from traditional journalistic norms within criticism, though the space may eventually evolve to embrace and inspire such change in the field (Vos et al., 2012). In addition, while journalists find some value in social media critiques from audience members who show an understanding of the journalistic process, they also bristle at the language and distrust audience intentions (Cheruiyot, 2018).

Existing research has focused on the usefulness of criticism to improve journalism (Çatalbaş Ürper & Çevikel, 2016; Heise et al., 2014; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015; Webster, 2014), but there remains little focus on how criticism can improve the usefulness of news to citizens or to criticizing citizens use of the news (Wyatt, 2007). Press criticism done well goes beyond improving journalistic practices. It should assure citizens that the information has been thoroughly vetted and carefully checked. In the same way that citizens can rely on a trusted friend to tell them what the news of the day is, an active press critic is an assurance that the news they share is reliable, trustworthy, and authoritative. Effective press criticism, in fact, offers (above all) transparency to the audience so that they can understand how news is made (Lerner, 2019).

To be effective, critics must also inspire action and change in press behavior. Here criticism is defined more by the activity and response than by the type of person or

activity being done – for example bloggers or comedians can be effective critics (Hayes, 2008; Wyatt, 2007). Digital forms of criticism such as blogs or podcasts offer unique opportunities for journalists to engage in new types of transparency and accountability to audiences (von Krogh & Svensson, 2017). Criticism must be useful, however, to inspire journalists to embrace it and make changes – to be useful, criticism must resonate with the ideological cores of journalism and actionable within the everyday work of journalists (Handley, 2012). There is no guarantee, however, that even when criticism is useful and actionable, that the press will change. For example, outside of extreme circumstances such as the 2000 and 2016 presidential elections, press criticism frequently laments similar issues in routine coverage such as polling problems, but rarely changes actual coverage (Bent et al., 2020).

Increasingly, in the rich, fast-paced digital environment, though there are new actors emerging who claim to be press critics, but not always are. It is complicated for audiences and journalists alike to respond to this “criticism,” which more often than not is skepticism rather than the press criticism defined and discussed above (Tsfati, 2003). For example, far-right media actors level “criticism” of the main-stream media from several points of view, swapping frequently between the perspective of a “true defender of citizens,” a media insider, and a victim – this makes it nearly impossible for journalists to respond adequately to such “criticism” (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

The current cultural moment offers an ideal opportunity to explore alternative press criticism on Reddit as a tactic to combat disinformation. The timing of this project places it after the 2015 changes to the Reddit community (Pao, 2015), while simultaneously in the midst of significant cultural shifts and news events such as the

Black Lives Matter protests, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the contentious 2020 election. I will explore non-institutional digital sources of press criticism that are useful to citizens and journalists. Using discourse analysis, I will review the practices, routines, and norms negotiated by Reddit newsgroup users and moderators as they legitimate and discursively construct what news is, what it means for democracy, and what role news literacies play.

### **Boundaries of Journalism**

Boundary work is one of the core processes engaged in metajournalistic discourse to define practices and norms within the bounds of what journalism is and ought to be (Carlson, 2016b). It “provides both a concept that attunes us to the conditionality of journalism as a social practice, and a framework for investigating how actors compete or align in the pursuit of establishing boundaries” (Carlson, 2019, p. 1). The process of boundary work generally patrols the borders of journalism to mark actions as being inside or outside of the norm and can come from multiple types of actors – for example, satirical news can often check traditional news borders (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016). Journalistic institutions defend the boundaries of journalism using varying defining characteristics such as institutional affiliations and news gathering routines (Carlson & Peifer, 2013; Coddington, 2012). Boundary work takes on three forms with differing primary functions – it contracts to expel bad actors from the field, it expands the boundaries of the field to include more actors, and it maintains the autonomy of journalists within the field (Carlson, 2019, 2019). Journalists and audiences can engage in all three forms of boundary work within digital spaces.

Journalists do a lot of boundary work online via various forms of audience engagement. Comment sections and news discussion forums associated with the news

organization are one location for this kind of boundary work journalists do online with audiences. In these kinds of collaborative boundary work with audience members, the expectations for how journalists ought to patrol the boundaries of journalism and civil discourse about news varies. For example, many audience members who participate in online news forums feel that audience discussions should be self-moderated by the audiences while others think that journalists should have a more active role in controlling the discussion to varying degrees (e.g., expelling only the most egregious of discussants or expelling those who simply stray from the topic at hand) (Wolfgang, 2018b, 2021). Although it may be tempting to consider the boundary work that audience members do to be less valuable for the field of journalism, audiences in fact have sophisticated views of what journalism is (Costera Meijer, 2020; Kananovich & Perreault, 2021).

The digital information environment created concern about the increasingly blurred lines between journalism and other forms of information sharing online. One strategy journalists use to mark the boundary between what they do from other information providers is noting that journalists are specialized sense-makers who provide context and deeper understandings of the news they report (Coddington, 2014; Eldridge II, 2017). Audiences also continue to delineate journalism along legacy normative boundaries – drawing distinctions between journalism (e.g., objectivity) and others (e.g., transparency) (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022). There is a growing body of literature exploring audience conceptions of what news is in the digital environment. For example, actors can “accidentally” perform acts of journalism within the established boundaries of the field (Bishop, 2004). Researchers are exploring a concept they call news-ness, which emphasizes news as a genre separate from the institution of journalism, although

audiences still use legacy journalism concepts and benchmarks such as objectivity (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a, 2020b; Robertson, 2021). As the boundaries of journalism shift via metajournalistic discourse to control who is and who is not a journalist news fandoms evolve to help patrol those borders.

### **News Fandom**

The concept of news fans as a unique fandom community is under-studied. News fans differentiate between different news sites – aligning their expectations and the boundaries of journalism with normative behaviors (Sadri, 2017). Fandoms are communities of individuals who identify as supporters of a particular medium (Gray et al., 2017). Online, fan communities build around topic areas and Reddit is one space for this kind of thematic community building. Because of the inherent emotionality and entertainment associated with fandom, scholars have not often connected news and fan behavior. However, emotions and entertainment are far from disconnected from news (van Zoonen, 2005; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

A news fan, then, is someone who goes beyond consumption of news to “construct fan-like relationships to certain news programs or texts, characters, and journalists” (Gray, 2017, p. 257). Fans of news create and express emotional attachments to both the news as a product and journalists and organizations as creators of that news. Fan sentiment can impact the news. For example, fans of actor Mia Farrow and her reporter son, Ronan, mobilized sentiment and shifted news discourse about Woody Allen in 2014 (Salek, 2016). This study proceeds, then, in the vein of the work of Renee Barnes who calls for considerations of fan-like behavior in news consumption, especially in online spaces (2014). A key location of such audience behavior where journalists,

audiences, and fans combine in the process of creating boundaries around the field of journalism is on the Reddit A.M.A. with journalists on World News. In light of the above, I pose a third research question:

**RQ3:** How do r/worldnews “ask me anything” discussions reflect the value of the public’s contribution to the journalistic field as: (a) Critics; (b) Boundary makers; and (c) Fans?

### **Summary**

In summary, using the theories of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu as a framework, this discourse analysis explores the intersection of news literacies and the field of journalism in the digital environment. I explore the meaning-making work that Reddit World News members undertake to answer questions about whether and how publics sort, qualify, criticize, and use news in direct interactions with journalists and professional communicators. In a digital information environment that is increasingly embedded and embodied in the everyday lives of citizens (Hine, 2015), news literacy initiatives strive to keep up with the habits, language, and technology (Mihailidis, 2012). Publics that actively engage with, curate, and produce news have higher trust in the news they consume (Hobbs, 2016; Jenkins & Perreault, 2016). Reddit offers citizens an opportunity to participate in critique, boundary making, and fandom of news content.

## **Chapter 5: Method**

This study will assess how Reddit World News members make meaning of the news and negotiate their digital news literacies in Ask Me Anything discussions with journalists and other professional communicators. To achieve this, I conducted a discourse analysis. I enhanced the discourse analysis data with an extended observation period of the World News board in general (beyond the A.M.A. discussions), and by interviewing World News moderators to understand the mechanics of their work and how it impacts the text of the discussions. My primary data for analysis are the A.M.A. discussions from the last four years (47 discussions), complemented by in-depth interviews with World News moderators who provided background information not readily visible to discussion participants.

### **Rationale for Method Selection**

This project used qualitative methods to explore the meaning-making work of Reddit World News members. Qualitative methods are most appropriate for this project because they allow for the exploration and understanding of the meaning individuals ascribe to their social situation (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, discourse analysis is most appropriate for exploring the discursive identities embodied by World News members as they engage in the work of “saying, doing, and being” (Gee, 2011, p. 2). Qualitative methods are more useful in this setting than quantitative methods because this project is exploratory in nature – building theory and understanding meaning-making, rather than objectively testing theories or hypotheses that can be measured numerically (Creswell, 2013). Overall, the project’s research aims focused on developing an understanding of

thematic, subjective perspectives of individuals participating in discussions rather than measuring their attitudes or preferences.

Although this research project is not a digital ethnography *per se*, the research design is partially informed by this method. Specifically for its usefulness in exploring the work of individuals and communities online (Kozinets, 2015). Though there is debate still about the nature of the digital environment – i.e., whether it represents something entirely new and separate (Carter, 2005) or is an extension of existing structures (Hine, 2015; Orgad, 2009) – there is consensus that research methods must respond to digital structures (Markham & Baym, 2009). My goal is to understand how subjects make meaning and use (or not) of the Internet in their social spaces (Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2015). A *discourse analysis informed by digital ethnography* is best suited for questions of social and cultural constructions of meaning-making by individuals who participate in a digital environment.

### **Research Design**

Discourse analysis operates on the assumption that subjects make meaning in society via discursive work, i.e., language is not just saying, but also doing and being (Gee, 2011, 2014). Qualitative research is, at its heart, the pursuit of thick description of the ways in which people make meaning of phenomenon in the world, and the Internet can both disrupt and facilitate the search for this deep description because of the sheer scope of data available (Hine, 2015). For this project, I immersed myself as an observer in Reddit World News Ask Me Anything discussions. This immersion in the culture and discourse of World News was prolonged and deep – I observed the board for nearly two years (June 2020 through February of 2022). I also conducted in-depth interviews with



two World News moderators to gain a better understanding of board mechanics not readily visible to me on the public face of the board. I did these semi-ethnographic activities before scrolling back to A.M.A. discussions on World News between June 2017 and November 2021 for discourse analysis – see Table 1 for general information about the discussions included in the sample. Although this study is a discourse analysis, I used a modified digital ethnographic approach to inform my analysis of the meaning making work of the individuals participating in the A.M.A. discussions. Specifically, I walked through as an observer navigating the structural affordances of Reddit, went-along with moderators to understand how they navigate and make meaning, and primarily scrolled back through digital traces of the A.M.A. discussions of World News to understand trends and changes over time (Møller & Robards, 2019).

**Table 1***Reddit World News A.M.A.s included in field of study*

<b>Publication Journalist Works At</b>	<b>Discussion Topic</b>	<b>Year</b>
<i>The New York Times</i>	Spyware	2017
<i>The Washington Post</i>	Russia	2017
<i>The Washington Post</i>	North Korea	2017
Golden Frog (not publication)	Censorship	2017
<i>The Washington Post</i>	North Korean defectors	2017
<i>The Independent</i>	Yemen	2017
Vox Media	State boundaries	2017
International Consortium of Investigative Journalists	Paradise Papers	2017
Inkstone	U.S.-China Relations	2018
<i>The Washington Post</i>	Syria	2018
<i>The Washington Post</i>	Venezuela	2018
<i>The Washington Post</i>	North Korea	2018
<i>TIME magazine</i>	Saudi Arabia	2018
Freelance	FOIA releases	2018
<i>VICE</i>	ISIS in Raqqa	2018
<i>USA Today</i>	Iran	2018
National Public Radio	China	2018
<i>Financial Times</i>	Global economy	2018
International Consortium of Investigative Journalists	Medical devices	2018
<i>VICE</i>	El Chapo	2018
<i>The Washington Post</i>	Iran's imprisonment of journalists	2019
Distributed Denial of Secrets	Leaks	2019
CBC News	Mozambique after Cyclone Ida	2019
Vox Media (Future Perfect)	Uyghurs in China	2019
National Public Radio (Morning Edition and Up First)	U.S. – China Relations	2019
<i>USA Today</i>	Iran	2019
<i>VICE</i>	Uyghurs in China	2019
Bloomberg Opinion	Energy industry	2019
International Consortium of Investigative Journalists	Mass detention and surveillance of minorities in Xinjiang	2019
National Public Radio (Rough Translation)	Ukraine	2019
<i>The New York Times</i>	Russian hack of Ukrainian gas company	2020
Euronews	Brexit	2020
<i>USA Today</i>	COVID-19	2020
Council on Foreign Relations (non-publication)	COVID-19	2020
Doctors Without Borders USA (non-publication)	COVID-19	2020
Freelance	Misinformation	2020
Distributed Denial of Secrets	Blue Leaks	2020
Human Rights Watch (non-publication)	China	2020
Human Rights Watch (non-publication)	Myanmar	2020
United Nations (non-publication)	COVID-19	2021
Reuters	Myanmar	2021
Al Jazeera English Digital	Iran	2021
Reuters	Israel	2021
<i>VICE</i> and Motherboard	Bitcoin in El Salvador	2021
Analyst (non-publication) That Media	War and famine in Tigray, Ethiopia	2021
<i>USA Today</i>	FBI assistance to ruler of Dubai	2021
International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and the Washington Post	Pandora Papers	2021

### ***Walking Through: Reflexivity and Defining the Sample***

Internet researchers must take reflexivity very seriously because of the unique flexibility of the design of digital ethnographic studies and the digital environment (Caliandro, 2018). Prior to engaging in this digital discourse analysis, I deeply explored the study site on a walkthrough (Møller & Robards, 2019). During the walkthrough I preliminarily defined the sample boundaries to anticipate the most useful methods considering the culture of the digital space (Androutsopoulos, 2006). For this study, and because of the limitations of Reddit and World News the study, although originally conceptualized as a digital ethnography shifted methodological focus. Specifically, World News is a very large community with a transient group of participants, it became necessary to rely heavily on discourse analysis as the core method of analysis. It was also not possible, nor necessary to alert the general population of World News subscribers to my presence as an observer. Specifically, while a limited number of moderators (two) were willing to speak and work with me to provide insight and context and my identity and research purpose was fully disclosed to them, I could not gain access to all moderators, despite repeated attempts. Additionally, the moderators would not allow me to post broadly to the group for recruitment of participants from the broader World News user base – such a post would violate the rules of the board content (for reference, please again refer to Figure 2 on page 9). Despite these limitations, I spent nearly two years (June 2020 through February 2022) navigating the discursive rules and culture of World News, learning the expectations just as any other participant in the space would (Hine, 2017).

Walking through World News as a user, allowed me to define the bounds of the sample for discourse analysis by first exploring the structural affordances of Reddit as a site. The structure of Reddit allows for a few affordances, which one must account for before conducting a study of any one user group. First, one must consider the site as a non-user – this is the so-called “front page of the Internet,” which shows a user and algorithmically curated series of Reddit content for the day. I specifically say, “user and algorithmically curated” here to acknowledge that while the content is typically the most “up-voted,” there are restrictions built into the Reddit algorithm to keep particularly hateful or dangerous content, such as white supremacist groups, off the front page.

Second, I must acknowledge that though this discourse analysis will identify a single discussion type on a single Reddit board (Ask Me Anything discussions on World News) as the sample, this is rarely how an individual Reddit user – a Redditor – will view the site. I observed the site extensively to understand the subjects’ local meanings and appropriations (Varis, 2016). A typical individual Redditor will see a continuous feed from all the subreddits they are members of, along with promoted and recommended content. If the user has Reddit installed on a mobile device, they may also opt into notifications from Reddit, which will notify them of content they may be interested in or that is time-sensitive such as an A.M.A. Therefore, I acknowledge that defining the sample as I do is a departure from the natural Reddit environment as users experience it.

The Internet as a location for research and social interaction defies geography and time (Hine, 2009), allowing for rich exploration of discourses over time. The public availability of discourses on sites such as Reddit offers a unique opportunity to explore a sample that is both longitudinal and reflects both discourse and Discourse of cultural

artifacts over time). My primary sample for discourse analysis is, therefore, the subreddit board World News Ask Me Anything discussions from 2017-2021. However, additional context to understand how the cultural artifacts of the A.M.A. discussions may have been partially modified by moderation was necessary, so I also went along with moderators to understand their gatekeeping influence on the discourse I would analyze.

### ***Going Along: In-Depth Interviews with World News Moderators***

Generally, Reddit users will post a “news story” (as defined by the board rules) to World News, and discussion follows via comments. Social media users create figured worlds – culturally constructed frameworks for making meaning and characterizing actions with unique languages, rules, and routines in which “people ‘figure out’ who they are in relation to others through habituated practices” (Kamberelis et al., 2018, p. 1193). Users on Reddit do not have to post comments in the discussion, however, to show digital engagement with the news item. They can also give the post an award – essentially, voting for it – save it, share it, hide it, or report it. Commenting is active on most posts. At any given moment, top posts regularly receive over a thousand comments. The initial page of each subreddit defaults into sorting posts by what is “hot” currently, based on what is getting the most attention via active digital engagement – emphasizing how quickly it is gaining upvotes rather than how many upvotes it has total. However, users can also sort by what is newest or what is top rated – most upvoted or rising.

As an observer, I had notifications set on my phone that alerted me to new and active posts and checked the board regularly – on average three times a day, but I needed a deeper understanding of the way in which the artifacts in my sample – the A.M.A. discussions – were impacted by moderation. Therefore, I conducted in-depth interviews

with World News moderators as key informants. Two moderators were especially active and engaged with me and the World News A.M.A. discussions. In multiple conversations throughout my study – Jonathan Dire and Ransom Thomas (both pseudonyms). Jonathan Dire (the moderator in charge of coordinating the World News A.M.A.s) is a twenty-three-six-old solicitor in the United Kingdom. Ransom Thomas is an aspiring college student in the United States with an interest in international relations. Ransom’s father worked for a former republican president of the U.S. Ransom is one of the youngest moderators recruited to World News – he is currently 23 and has been a moderator for World News since he was approximately 15. My interviews with these two key informants provided a deeper understanding of Redditors’ wider media ideologies and how they relate to the work they are doing on World News (Varis, 2016).

I conducted in-depth interviews via Zoom, followed up with email correspondence as needed, and in the message system of Reddit itself. I recorded all Zoom interviews and transcribed them for multimodal analysis (Kress, 2010) and quick reference. My questions focused on their experiences as moderators, and how that differed and aligned with my experience as an observer. I wanted to understand how the work they do as moderators (invisible to members) guided the member experience and influenced what I looked at as I scrolled back in old discussions. As a multimodal analysis the discourse analysis relied heavily on James Gee’s (2011; 2014) adaptation of the concept of the anthropological theory of the figured world. Gee’s figured world, broadly described, is an internalized normalizer of socio-cultural input. Specifically, it is a narrative structure that individuals construct to codify, categorize, and normalize the world around them. My analysis of the interviews therefore focused on what the

discourses said about the subreddit, especially in relation to journalists and news literacies.

### ***Scrolling Back: Discourse Analysis of Older Posts***

The final and primary phase of the project was scrolling-back – returning to posts prior to when I was an active observer. During this phase, I used the information I gathered from walking through and going along to inform a discourse analysis of the A.M.A. discussions prior when I joined the group but all moderated by Jonathan. One major affordance of the digital environment is the ability of the researcher to keep constant eyes on the research site even when not physically present. The digital environment keeps a record of itself (Bratich, 2018; Kozinets, 2015), always recording and always available to return to for additional analysis.

Because the context of the digital environment is inherently multimodal (Kress, 2010) I considered various types and forms of data for interpretation. Each of these forms of data operated on multiple levels to provide validity and rigor for the discourse analysis by triangulating and confirming each other (Markham & Baym, 2009). The walking through and going along phases of the study informed an in-depth and nuanced discourse analysis of the scrolling-back data.

### ***Coding Procedures***

Broadly speaking, the coding on this project was inductive (Kennedy, 2018). As I absorbed data and information through observations I began the coding process - an iterative process as initial observations informed interview questions (see appendix A). The context provided by my observation and interviews informed my discourse analysis. Researchers are always interlocutors in a communicative process (Bratich, 2018), so

coding of the discourse analysis piece of this project used the tools developed by James Gee (2011; 2014) to analyze the data from the older A.M.A. posts informed by the member participation and in-depth interviews with moderators.

Discourse analysis is the study of communication in the world to say and do things (Gee, 2014). Note here that I use “communication” instead of “language” to reinforce the multimodal nature of online discourse. For example, a meme may be shared between users and will consist of a combination of images and texts. However, as noted in the rules of the World News subreddits – users are not allowed to post images or videos directly, instead these appeared in links from the initial discussion post. Though Gee has developed 28 potential tools for discourse analysis, I implemented 19 for this analysis, several of which I have adjusted slightly in consideration of my theoretical framework and the digital environment. Specifically, I group the tools into two sets for analysis. The first set explores the capital, context, knowledge, and arguments being made in the discussion. The second set looks at the social and cultural work of the group. Table 2 shows the tools as I categorized and used them.



**Table 2**

*Category and Use of James Gee's Toolkit for Discourse Analysis Tools*

<b>Capital, Context, Knowledge, and Argument Tools</b>	<b>Social and Cultural Work Tools</b>
Fill-in-tool	Doing and not just saying tool
Subject tool	Topic and theme tool
Vocabulary tool	The integration tool
Systems and knowledge building tool	The activities building tool
Situated meaning tool	The identities building tool
Why this way and not that way tool	Relationships building tool”
Significance building tool	The politics building tool
The context is reflexive tool	The cohesion tool
Figured world tool	
The big D discourse tool	
The big C conversation tool	

To understand the rules of engagement and language of discourse on World News, I began with what I consider to be a set of capital, context, knowledge, and argument tools. I used the “fill-in tool” (Gee, 2014, p. 18) and the “subject tool” (p. 25) to explore what shared assumptions of knowledge, understanding, and truth World News members have. Using this tool, I began to understand the cultural, social, and academic knowledge that World News members presume of one another and what kind of news they value. Further, I could explore the kind of knowledge they expect of professional communicators engaging in A.M.A. discussions – whether they be journalists or strategic communicators. What are the criteria for entry into the discussion and expected understandings of what kinds of information can and should be shared with each other? This tool connected closely with three other tools employed.

A combination of the “vocabulary tool” (p. 61), “systems and knowledge building tool,” (p. 142), and the “situated meaning tool” (p. 159) helped me to assess what the vocabulary of the group and individual users means in terms of their education level,

class, and social capital and what they expect of others. To further assess social capital and group discursive expectations of knowledge, I used the “why this way and not that way tool” (p. 63) to ask why World News members and professional communicators present information and arguments in one way and not another – what language, information, etc. is valued (or anticipated to be valued) by the group? Using the “significance building tool” (p. 98), I assessed why some posts receive a lot of attention and others do not. Additionally, I explored the quality/type of discussion each receives. For example, a post may generate a lot of short, joke comments but little thorough discussion, whereas another may have extensive deliberation – fewer comments, but longer thoughts and deeper discussion. The final tool in this category is a combination of “the context is reflexive tool” (p. 91) and “figured world tool” (p. 177). This tool looked at the information acquired in the other tools in this category to ask how World News A.M.A. participants are manipulating/creating/shaping the context of the discussion and how does that context create an understanding of the world that expands into a shared figured world. This led to the analysis of the cultural and social work of newsgroup participants.

Understanding the social and cultural work that newsgroup users are doing began first with using Gee’s “doing and not just saying tool” (2014, p. 52) to uncover the individual, group, and cultural work each user is doing. Sometimes, what is excluded is just as important as what is included in a discussion. To explore this, I used a combination of the “topic and theme tool” (p. 74) and “the integration tool” (p. 68) to understand what users choose to talk about or emphasize and what they ignore or downplay. Understanding what topics are important is just the beginning, however. I also

explored what kind of practices and routines the group builds amongst each other using “the activities building tool” (p.104). These practices included significant identity work, both as a group and as individuals. There is a discursive “flavor” for each Reddit board, and individual identity is always curated in online spaces. Thus, I used “the identities building tool” (p.116) and “relationships building tool” (p. 121). The newsgroup has been actively and avidly discussing global politics and power. I used “the politics building tool” (p. 126) to explore newsgroup users’ understanding of citizenship and the good society. Global political news literacies are at the core of understanding the work of World News members in the A.M.A. discussions. In conjunction, I used “the cohesion tool” (p.137) to see how/if/what the group generally agrees on and disagrees on.

The work of each of these tools concluded in an exploration of the work the newsgroup users are doing for the larger cultural moment, especially as it relates to news literacies and the field of journalism. I used “the big D discourse tool” (Gee, 2014, p. 186) to understand what the meaning-making work of World News members says about the relationship between the news and democracy. Additionally, because certain outlets and topics are completely out-of-bounds for the group, I used “the big C conversation tool” (p. 191) to explore overall what World News members’ choose to include and exclude and how that legitimizes news sources, while excluding others. As a group, they have established written rules enforced by the moderators. However, there is still a discursive negotiation when one submits a post that may not be in-line with those written guidelines. I gained a better understanding of the board’s Conversation and what it says about the wider cultural Discourse on news and democracy by understanding the gray area of these negotiations.

### *Ethical Considerations*

There are three significant ethical concerns that are prescient in analyzing digital discourses on social media: informed consent, anonymity, and assuring an accurate reflection of the subjects' voices. The digital environment complicates each of these because the space and discourse are public, yet individuals may expect privacy within the vastness of the internet. The core of informed consent is respect for autonomy – I considered accessibility and sensitivity of the information as well as reach and proximity in online structures (Stern, 2009). For example, participants in human subjects studies frequently sign forms without reading or understanding, so it was my responsibility as the researcher to understand the subjects and protect them (Buchanan, 2009). For example, the difference between public and private exists on a continuum ranging from public, semi-public, or private (Elm, 2009). Though Reddit is a public site and comments are published online for “anyone to find” subjects may have felt as though the site was an insular community in which they could freely share thoughts and opinions they may otherwise keep from those they know in-person. Although I requested explicit informed consent from everyone I interviewed and communicated directly with, I did not request explicit consent of all users whose discourse I viewed and analyzed. I arrived at the decision to not seek informed consent for the general subreddit users after extended observation noting that the commenters on the subreddit were quite transient and changed based on topic, day, and time. In addition, there were several ways in which users could protect their anonymity if they wished. Users can edit a comment, delete a comment entirely, or delete their account at any time. Because of these controls of their own activity and the public accessibility to their thoughts I advocated for subjects' safety and

anonymity if they shared compromising information unwittingly and had not thought to return to the post to delete it or their username. Users completely control the creation of usernames on Reddit and can delete the account entirely, which offers additional methods for Redditors to protect their anonymity on the site.

Anonymity is complicated by the structural affordances of the digital environment. Frequently, individuals may assume a certain level of anonymity because they posted comments and content behind a username that they created rather than their legal name. And while there is a tacit understanding users leave digital footprints, this kind of surveillance is often not on their minds and, therefore, was on mine as the researcher (Bratich, 2018). Anonymity is vital to protecting participants from harm, humiliation, and offense (Elm, 2009). I considered the subjects' definitions and understandings of what was private and what the structural affordances were on Reddit. To protect anonymity, I slightly altered the exact words of direct quotes from Redditors within the findings while maintaining the meaning and voice of the quote because online searches can compromise anonymity if I were to use exact direct quotes (Elm, 2009). I did not, however, extend this anonymity to the journalists who hosted the A.M.A.s. As public figures, hosting public forums in public digital spaces, their identity as journalists and professional associations were key to the context of this analysis. Therefore, I did not anonymize usernames for journalists who had no reasonable expectation of privacy within the context of this sample. Many journalists, however, used general accounts associated with their organization rather than personal Reddit user accounts (e.g., u/nicoleperlroth vs. u/ICIJ).

Maintaining and representing the voice of my subjects was vital to the morality of this study. I was always accountable to my subjects (Bratich, 2018) and therefore included member checks in this project by asking my World News moderator participants to discuss findings with me. Readers should be able to “hear” my subjects in the findings of this study (Lincoln et al., 2018). In the end, I strove to build authentic accounts that transcended the individual (including me) (Hine, 2015).

### ***Trustworthiness***

Qualitative research is valuable for its naturalistic qualities – relying on thick, rich descriptions to explore phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Because the researcher is the research instrument, however, the trustworthiness or reliability of the data in a qualitative study must be validated in multiple ways. For this study, I used multiple tactics to improve the rigor of my study. Specifically, I used triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks to confirm my findings.

Triangulation of findings is embedded within my adapted digital ethnographic approach to this discourse analysis. By walking through, going along, and scrolling back, I triangulated findings in a mobile way (Flick, 2018), as I confirmed findings via triangulating the ways in which I experienced them – as an observer, via in-depth interviews, and via the final discourse analysis of forum posts on the newsgroup.

In addition to triangulation, I used a form of peer debriefing to verify my findings. As a reflexive qualitative researcher, I recognized that I may be too close to some aspects of the research subjects and topics, and I may have missed things because of my own positionality. To compensate for this, I incorporated peer debriefing. I hosted a “mini focus group” via Zoom with several peers – one qualitative researcher with an education

background, one quantitative researcher whose research subject aligns with mine, one researcher whose positionality differs from mine (i.e., they identify as BIPOC, or male, etc.), and one non-researcher who actively participates on Reddit, but not the World News board. Each reviewed a random selection of my coded posts and full findings prior to the focus group discussion. In the group review, we discussed findings and potential problems. The review used Gee's (2014) “frame tool” (p. 44) to review the analysis and make sure I was not missing anything or left questions requiring a return to the data or subjects.

For the final review of the findings and data, I returned to the two World News moderators who acted as key informants to conduct member checks. Member checks are vital to confirm that that subjects’ voices are accurately represented (Lincoln & Denzin, 2018). Like the peer debriefing, I hosted a Zoom discussion with the moderators. I presented the overall findings to them, but not the details of my coding. Overall, I wanted them to note whether they felt the voice of the group was accurately described within the findings. I also took this opportunity to verify that they felt confident that their anonymity was intact.

### ***Limitations***

The Internet is a messy research environment that crosses online and offline offering multiple opportunities to misrepresent one’s authentic self (Postill & Pink, 2012). As with all digital research, there remain questions about the authenticity of individuals' representation of self in the digital environment. This concern is not too different than for all “human subjects” research – that question between what is authentic and what is performative (Hine, 2015). Interviews conducted entirely online, however,

are no more or less contrived than in-person interviews (Crichton & Kinash, 2008).

However, what I can see on the screen was only a part of the story, and while the idea of wholly separate identities is mostly abandoned now, there is a greater context for each individual's experience that they may not have shared with me (Varis, 2016).

Digital spaces are also complicated by invisible structures, which I was especially conscious of and asked my subjects directly about. Indeed, much of my discussions with the moderators was regarding their knowledge and use of these invisible structures. Additionally, social connections between individuals were not identifiable to me, unless explicitly stated within the discourse. Groups and relationships online are not always visible in the public spaces online, so I had to rely on interviewees to know and tell me about those if they were also aware (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). For example, Ransom noted that Jonathan recruited him to be a moderator on World News – without him telling me they had a unique relationship among the dozens of moderators on World News, I would not have known.

In addition to these complications of a discourse analysis of digital conversations, the structure of Reddit and its demographics reflect a limited range of individuals with limited viewpoints. Because of the vastness of the World News subreddit and the sheer volume of discussants on any one post, it was impossible to get an accurate record of who was involved in the conversations. This means that I must rely on general demographic information about Reddit and presume that this was also an accurate reflection of the discussants on World News. Specifically, they tend to be young, white, and male (Shearer & Grieco, 2019) and therefore the study and the findings herein represented that ideological perspective on news literacies and the field of journalism.



## **Researcher's Role**

Reflexivity is key in any qualitative research and begins with a complete understanding of who I am as a person and research instrument in this study and advocate for the meaning-making work my subjects do. Using reflexive situating is a better way to understand and see bigger patterns because I, as the researcher, was also the instrument – power is cultural, and our cultural embeddedness influenced my assumptions (Markham, 2009). To that end, I will describe my positionality as I approached this study.

Most prescient to this study are my relationship to the Internet as a culture and cultural artifact. In my senior year of high school, I was what would later be coined an “early adopter” of technology. Friends and I spent our free school hours and evenings in the computer lab where we would explore online spaces using initial search mechanisms such as Web Crawler. We explored and were fascinated by the structure others had built, and we contributed to it as we actively built our own websites, developed a unique computer-centric language with each other, and literally created digital worlds in text-based games. In fact, it was in one of these text-based games that I later met my future partner. We joke now that we “invented online dating.” Creating relationships, however, was an unintentional use of the technology for me. These sites were coded to co-write fiction interactively, which has social aspects to it, but was not the purpose of the site, i.e., these were not social media designed with the sole purpose of finding friends or partners.

In some respects, then, these initial activities I participated in paved the way for the digital social environment today. My friends and I continued to be early adopters of new digital technology. Moving from social media spaces like bulletin boards to chat

rooms and messenger services and then excitedly hopping onto MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Our games expanded from text-based games into the world of massively multiplayer online role-playing games with animated characters leaving the text in the dust. All of this is essentially to say, “the Internet and I go way back” and, I must admit, the online environment grew tiresome. Around the same time as the second birthday of my oldest child, I began to question the digital footprint I was leaving for not only myself but this other person who was not old enough to have a say in what I shared about her. I began to question and grow irritated with my father’s constant sharing of images and information about each of his children and grandchildren without their consent. This was when I noticed a contrast in the digital media literacy of individuals.

As a parent, I watch my children’s responses to social media – noting their complete disengagement from it. They are both extensive lurkers on sites such as Reddit, TikTok, and Tumblr but leave no visible content footprint – only the invisible trail noted by the algorithms that pay attention to their habits and preferences. They have also developed a certain cynicism about the digital environment, and especially people and information they encounter online. Both have been formally taught media literacy and digital safety in their core schoolwork.

All of this – my connection to the roots of Internet culture and subsequent disconnection with it, becoming a lurker, and raising two lurker children – colored my interactions with my subjects and the interpretation of my data. Though I have essentially become a monitorial digital citizen, I *am* constantly monitoring. I am immersed in the language of the Internet, and my background as an early adopter gives me a unique connection to the roots of that language, which enhanced my analysis. I

remained ever vigilant of myself as a researcher in this study to maintain an appropriate distance from my subjects.

I have to consider closeness and proximity in two contexts – the examined culture of my subjects online and my own everyday life within and outside of that structure (Bengtsson, 2014). For example, immersion in an online environment does not remove me from the physical environment I am currently in. That physical environment was filled with obligations at work or home that were distracting. I believe this connected me more to the experience of the Reddit users I studied. They, too, negotiated similar challenges between space and time.

In some regards, then, I was a bit of a fox in the hen house. I am, indeed, an observer – someone who is regularly on the site, though a self-described lurker. I was “one of them,” a “netizen,” or “digital citizen” and so I negotiated the closeness between my own identity and my subjects. I needed to have enough distance – looking, knowing, and understanding are complicated by how close but separate I was as a researcher (Bratich, 2018).

## **Summary**

The news and audiences have problems that they can turn to each other to help solve. The news needs to attract a new and engaged citizen audience in a complicated media environment (Webster, 2014) and audiences need to be entertained, informed, and have their agency recognized. There are young, engaged, news-hungry citizens right now on Reddit World News who are doing extensive meaning-making work to develop and further conceptions of their news literacies and the field of journalism. I argue that by understanding the work of these Redditors the news can potentially begin to attract a

new, engaged audience, and expand and deepen news coverage. Using a theoretical framework built on the structuration theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens this study explored how Redditors in World News Ask Me Anything discussions engage their news literacies to do valuable discursive labor for journalism.

The digital environment is increasingly ubiquitous (Hine, 2015) and confusion between information, misinformation, and disinformation abounds (Tandoc et al., 2020). A significant proportion of Reddit users – 42% - use the site for news (Shearer & Grieco, 2019). As a site where users not only share news, but discuss it extensively, Reddit has the potential to enact some of the ideals of a deliberative democracy (Christians et al., 2009). Likewise, because of their heavy news use, Redditors represent a group who can tell researchers a great deal about the status – and possibly ways to improve – trust between the press and citizens. News literacy initiatives can likewise benefit from understanding the way that news literacies are enacted by Redditors who fall into an age range of individuals who were first exposed to media literacy curriculum. Thus, this study provides us with an opportunity to re-visit and possibly improve news literacy curriculum in schools. Redditors in World News are also acting as outside voices who offer valuable insight into what the field of journalism is and ought to be doing. This study used discourse analysis to explore how Redditors in World News Ask Me Anything discussions create meaning between journalists and their audiences online.

## Chapter 6: Findings Part 1: News Literacies

The World News ask me anything discussions offered a glimpse into how journalists, perceive the news literacies of their audience and how audiences demonstrate their news literacies. Generally, the journalists who participated in the A.M.A.s with World News expressed shock at the level of understanding participants had about both their area of expertise and the norms and practices of journalism. In fact, there was a distinct difference in the reception of the discussant when the A.M.A. featured journalists versus non-journalists (e.g., strategic communicators, non-communications experts). World News participants responded to non-journalists with extreme skepticism while overly emphasizing their trust in the “objective” work of “good” journalists. This behavior showed a level of news literacy the journalists welcome with pleasant surprise, and an unpleasant surprise for the non-journalists who participated in the A.M.A.s. Still, journalists most often enacted the role of educator in this context – informing and facilitating discussion of events to provide nuance and context for world events. Specifically, this section of findings will answer research questions 1 and 2:

**RQ1:** How do r/worldnews “ask me anything” discussions reflect journalists’ understanding of publics’ news literacies of international news events?

**RQ2:** How do r/worldnews “ask me anything” discussions reflect publics’ news literacies of world events?

### **Surprise! It’s Not the Imagined Audience: Journalists’ Shock and Awe at Audience News Literacies**

Generally, journalists do not anticipate positive receptions when they wade into audience feedback or interactions, which complicates news literacy practices. A news

literacy in which journalists and audiences co-create the news product and the field of journalism cannot exist without journalists who are willing to engage. Journalists' unease is reflected in studies showing journalists just how much audiences do not understand, appreciate, or want to pay for their work (Duffy et al., 2018; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; Wolfgang, 2018a). Journalists participating in World News A.M.A.s consistently expressed surprise at the level of understanding of audience members of both the nuanced cultural circumstances of the foreign correspondents' work, and of the practices and norms of the journalism profession. The behavior of the audiences and journalists on World News A.M.A.s was consistent with and exceeded in some ways the definition of news literacy as a social linguistic listening literacy of co-creation of news events and journalism as a field. Consistently, both journalists and participants deployed strategic flattery to bolster civil discussion. This is not to downplay the invisible hand of the World News moderators who spent hours during the "live" portion of the discussions to omit any questions that are outright attacks or otherwise violate community expectations. In addition, community members voted down any comments or questions that violated community values, but not volatile enough to generate moderator attention. Specifically, within their discursive labor on the World News A.M.A.s, journalists and their audiences engaged in rituals of strategic flattery, moderators invisibly gatekept the discussion, and journalists managed their audience engagement – balancing their own humanity against their professional image.

### ***Strategic Flattery***

Nearly every question and comment from a participant in discussions with journalists from elite organizations such as the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* (or

those engaging in news-ness that aligns with legacy normative assumptions such as objectivity) included some sort of commendation for the work that these reporters do. High praise for objectivity and traditional news norms abounded throughout the discourse. In fact, discussants went to great lengths to deride those who did not conform to journalistic norms and frequently tested journalists' emotionality and bias to decide whether they were worthy of praise.

Flattery ranged from the very simple, and commonly used "thank you for what you do" and "I love your work" to more elaborate praising of the work of journalism in a democracy – especially those fulfilling the watchdog function. For example, in the discussion with International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) who worked on the Paradise Papers, one user (who has since deleted their account) said:

just wanted to say you all are fucking heroes. It's really important that this information gets out there, and I don't [think] many of us can appreciate the sacrifices you make pursuing it. That shit takes brass. Thank you for what you do (u/ICIJ, 2017).

In fact, commenters repeatedly noted how heroic the ICIJ reporters are. Recognizing the scope of the investigations that ICIJ teams do, and the danger posed by their work. This feeling of support for journalistic heroism, however, may have been heightened because shortly before the A.M.A. one of the reporters the ICIJ team was working with had been murdered. Discussants were less likely to refer to journalists as heroes in other discussions. For example, when speaking to a *Washington Post* foreign war correspondent, there was acknowledgement of the literal physical danger this reporter is in, but without heroic attributions.

Participants heaped the same praise on any person they deemed objective and therefore a “good” journalist, regardless of the news outlet they worked for. For example, at the time that *Vox* videographer Johnny Harris hosted an A.M.A. in December 2017 *Vox* was still a relatively young (founded in 2011) and unknown media entity. Despite academic debate over whether documentaries are objective (Cook et al., 2015), participants in the discussion never questioned Harris’s objectivity even while he openly discussed his own struggles with remaining objective in difficult circumstances. For example, he described how learning more about North Korea made his feelings more complicated:

I could no longer condemn everything about NK like I once could. Sympathy and revulsion somehow coexisted in my mind. It was a really good experience for me to have. I hope I was able to convey some of that sentiment in the doc (u/Vox, 2017).

In this discussion, it became evident that users appreciated and expected emotion in objective reporting and did not think that objectivity and emotionality are mutually exclusive. In fact, Redditors responded so positively to Harris’s work (at least in part) *because* of this emotional connection and the contextual nuance it added. Harris, for his part, reinforced this idea – emotion belongs in stories and compels people, but his job is to tell stories that inform, not advocate. For his work, specifically, he noted repeatedly that visual journalism is the art of showing and not telling – carefully skirting any discussion of how an image can be subjective. “But for me, the best video journalism proves what it is saying in every clip. Meaning everything is some kind of visual evidence for the message/story.” (u/Vox, 2017). Clearly, to Harris and the participants in



his discussion, the proof was in the pudding he provided – regardless of the ingredients the chef chose to include or exclude from that pudding.

The flattery was hardly one-sided though. Journalists, recognizing this as an audience outreach opportunity, were careful in what they said to and about their audience – even those not visibly present. Several times journalists had to tread carefully and leave things unsaid while discussants employed a sort of ego-driven othering of “regular audiences” who don’t engage in the kind of high levels of news consumption as them. This elitism spoke to the inherent exclusiveness of fan communities. In this sense, news fans were an elite club of those who truly and deeply understood not just the events of the day, but also who are on a level with the elite journalists themselves – in essence they saw themselves as above the ideal informed citizen because of how much more closely they engaged with the news. Here they were, capable of asking “very good” and “excellent” and “hard” questions as recognized by the reporters who flattered them. In many ways the praise that the journalists gave to the discussants reinforced their elite fandom. The audience ego was hardly the only thing to benefit from these exchanges, however, as several times the journalists nodded toward the discussants’ contributions to not just the discussion, but also to journalism. For example, several times journalists acknowledged a question as something they had not sought to cover in their reporting and ought to in the future or asked the person to reach out privately so they could discuss the topic further. Beyond just the flattery of “very good audience” platitudes, journalists reinforced the commenters’ “A-student” status and acknowledged their potential to contribute to story ideas and be news sources themselves.

On occasion journalists would call out those who contributed special or additional knowledge to the discussion or who gave them story ideas. For example, members of the *New York Times* team investigating the use of spyware by the Mexican government made multiple references to individuals within the discussion on Reddit who contributed cultural or contextual knowledge that they lacked. Azam Ahmed with the *New York Times* notes “As the commenter below says, there is new evidence emerging it has also been used in Panama.” The *Washington Post*’s Russia bureau did something similar, although they do not directly call attention to the person or single them out as particularly helpful or useful. Instead, they noted that the information provided in the discussion was helpful or useful for the discussion. For example, David Phillipoy of the *Washington Post* responded, “Thank you for your insights!” to a Chechen participant who provides some additional context and information about the topic at hand, but does not refer other commenters to this information, nor imply that it is valuable to the discussion. This passive distancing of the information provider from the compliment about the quality of the information was an interesting tactic. It simultaneously acknowledged that the information seemed legitimate – calling them insightful, while distancing itself from a source that the journalist has not vetted and therefore cannot yet confirm – neither confirming nor denying their veracity.

Story ideas via questions posed to journalists abounded in every discussion. While most often the journalist took the opportunity to share with the audience pieces that they have already written that addressed their question – a chance to get improved metrics by sharing clickable links – there were several instances where questions provided new angles or potential stories for journalists to pursue. For example, the *Washington Post*’s

North Korea reporter noted “I will try to address this question in my future reporting. Thanks for the idea!” (u/washingtonpost, 2017b).

One of the most explicit exchanges of flattery occurred in Damaso Reyes’ A.M.A. when she specifically praised the participants on World News as a cut above the average audience member: “If you read this subreddit it is because you’re interested in the world around you. Keep learning, keep exploring and keep challenging yourself” (u/Damaso21, 2020). This praise of the specific people who are on World News leaned fed the egos of World News participants’ vision of their own cultural capital as special and unique. Comments such as Reyes’ praised their awareness and the quality of their input and contributions to the discussion reinforced World News elitism.

### ***Invisible-Visible Gatekeepers: World News Moderators***

The very first step that moderators on World News took as gatekeepers of these discussions was when they organize them. Jonathan Dire – the main moderator who organized the A.M.A.s for World News – described his processes as varying. Sometimes people who wanted to host an A.M.A. would come to him, and other times the moderators would ask him to reach out to someone to host because of community interest in a certain topic. Before anyone was allowed to host an A.M.A. the moderators would vet the person by verifying their credentials and the applicability of the discussion to World News. This process did not stop commenters from occasionally questioning the work of the moderators, however. On several occasions, commenters asked why a specific A.M.A. was being hosted on World News, and whether a host was worthy of the board. This questioning of authority cast doubt upon both the host and the moderators’ judgment. For example, if the topic of the discussion was a U.S.-centric subject, then

commenters would question the applicability to the board. The most extreme case of this behavior was when commenters decided someone was a member of the CIA spreading U.S. propaganda – I discuss this in further detail below. The accusations on this particular post, however, occurred after the live A.M.A. and so was not as heavily moderated as one might expect such a heated debate to be. The mods publicly responded to most queries about applicability within the live portions of A.M.A.s, by explaining their logic. For example, moderator u/Isentropo noted in an A.M.A. with reporters with the *New York Times*:

AMA guests sometimes prefer a smore subreddit-specific AMA. Since users in this sub generally are browsing it with an international focus, it was perhaps a better way to reach an audience that would be interested in the subject matter. Be on the look out for more AMAs down the road. Also, if you have any suggestions that are germane to the subreddit feel free to reach out and let us know!

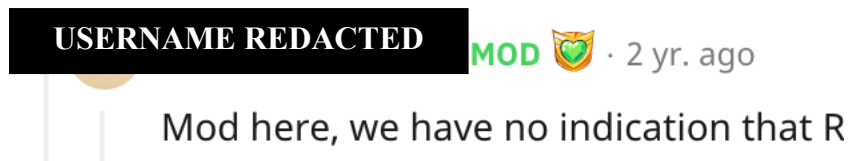
(u/nicoleperloth, 2017)

On occasions where the community was more concerned with the fit or quality of the A.M.A. host, moderators would take a heavier hand with the conversation, but did not delete the comment. Instead, they tried to make the commenter understand their logic in selecting this person and reassured the commenter that the person had been vetted as an authentic and unbiased voice. These moments of explanatory power created an atmosphere of co-creation of expectations for the board, the A.M.A.s, and for journalism in a broader sense. It was an explicit back-and-forth between moderators and community members in which each could explain themselves and come to an agreement about what kind of journalism World News ought to support.

The most visibly moderated (many “deleted by moderator” comments) discussions were ones where the conversation was cross posted to multiple communities who flood the discussion with biased opinions either strongly in favor of or against the government of the country the journalist is primarily speaking about. For example, World News moderator Ransom Thomas noted when we were discussing live moderating that any discussion about China would tend to go bad fast because of cross-posting in other Reddit communities. Oftentimes, the only sign of moderation would be a note on Reddit that says “comment removed by moderator” or bright green shields indicating moderators have entered the conversation (see figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*Example of World News Moderator in “Moderator Mode”*



Occasionally the mods or Reddit itself have deployed an AI moderating bot to remove certain types of content – for example shortened links. However, during the first discussion with freelancer Emma Best in 2017 there was a live discussion about a question posed to Best by a community member. Specifically, World News moderator and organizer of the A.M.A.s on the site Jonathan Dire removed the question from the discussion for being misleading about the content of the news articles the individual linked within their question – specifically as it relates to the definition of news organizations. The original version of the question is not available outside of Dire’s quoting of it “Do you agree with the British courts that media organizations such as

wikileaks are crucial to a functioning free press?” Dire’s objection quibbles with the implication that the British courts are crucial to a functioning free press: “Nowhere in that article does it show the British courts refer to media organisations such as wikileaks as crucial to a functioning free press.” Ultimately, Dire as a moderator on World News – and a British solicitor – objected to the phrasing of this question because of both the misinterpretation of the law and the misinterpretation of the boundaries of journalism because Wikileaks should not be included. This had little to do with the A.M.A. itself and, in fact, Best did not even deem the question worthy of answering. However, the back-and-forth between discussant and moderator remains a strikingly obvious sign of the typically invisible hand of moderators. This interaction was more invisible, in fact, because Dire did not ever choose to put on his green moderator hat.

Another case of visible moderation was during the A.M.A. with a Bloomberg opinion writer. A user explicitly asked why an opinion writer was allowed to host an A.M.A. when opinion pieces themselves are not allowed on the board. Dire did not have a particularly strong response to justify the choice. Although this commenter questioning the validity of the A.M.A. host seemed to be in the minority, this A.M.A. did not get a lot of traction within the board – boasting only 186 comments and 77% upvoting despite a very active and engaged original poster. He responded to nearly every question. This lack of engagement spoke to the silent disapproval of the rest of the board at the hosting of an opinion writer. In fact, the level of quiet approval in the form of upvotes and active comments from the World News community could often speak volumes about how much they valued the host of the A.M.A. as a reporter, as opposed to, say, a commentator. For example, reporters from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)

regularly saw the highest up-votes – above 90%. These discussions rarely attracted the kind of commenter who needed to be moderated heavily, so there was also moderator engagement as they participated in asking questions rather than having to focus on weeding out trolls. ICIJ reporters deftly responded to questions regarding their integrity, routines, and norms as journalists without deploying much cynicism in this audience management exercise.

### ***Managing Humanity vs. Audience Expectations of Journalistic Heroism***

It was clear from the surprise that journalists expressed at the quality of the questions and information that the World News participants have that they headed into these discussions with a certain level of cynicism about their audience – or perhaps about Redditors particularly. Possibly based on bad experiences on other sites, such as the comment sections on their own newspapers (Wolfgang, 2018a) or Twitter (Katwala, 2019), they came into the discussions prepared to defend their work and the boundaries of the profession of journalism. They deployed transparency as a defense mechanism. Many of their answers, which clearly delineated news routines and demonstrated why the commenters should trust the news they report, were in direct response to challenges to the authority of journalists. For example, although this discussion did not get much engagement – inspiring only 99 comments overall (less than half the average number of comments on posts) – NPR’s Gregory Warner demonstrated transparency as defense mechanism and boundary maker. When a commenter asked Warner about how to find reliable news sources Warner responded with a link detailing NPR’s rigorous safeguards and also a story about media literacy initiatives in Ukraine – Ukraine being the topic of

the A.M.A. (u/npr, 2019). Warner cited the rigorous methods of his own organization, implying – but not directly saying – that NPR sets a gold standard for reliable news.

Transparency was not always a defense mechanism, but sometimes was used for other reasons. On occasion, the journalists hosting the A.M.A.s used transparency to signal their humanity by noting things like their tendency to make typos or mistakes, or when speaking very clearly about a mistake they made that they regret. For example, freelance journalist Emma Best noted regrets about leaking private information by mistake:

I regret that my copy of the AKP hack [a hack of emails for the ruling party of Turkey] was so widely amplified when it turned out to contain women’s personal information. ... When the personal information was pointed out, I was happy to have the leaked dataset removed from the Internet Archive (u/NatSecGeek, 2018).

This was a rare case of a journalist not getting immediately defensive, however.

Many journalists who identified as women responded swiftly and decisively to gendered micro-aggressions from discussants. For example, *New York Times* technology reporter Nicole Perlroth had to frequently defend and demonstrate her tech knowledge despite tech being her beat. In standard gendered discourse, several times discussants asked Perlroth specific questions about technology or presumed that the man doing the A.M.A. had superior tech knowledge to her, though this was not his specialty. To his credit, her colleague gave credit where credit was due and deferred to Perlroth for such specialized knowledge. Both had to consistently cite prior journalistic work as proof of expertise worthy of the respect of Reddit. Several explicit incidents of sexism occurred after A.M.A.s were no longer live, which means they escaped moderation. While it was



unlikely that the reporters saw comments such as when a user asked *Vice* news reporter Isobel Yeung if she was single or graphically asked *Time* magazine's Aryn Baker whether her genitals were intact, these comments remained on the post for those who scroll back. The off-topic portions of discussions are not always negative, however, and allowed journalists to play with audiences and further signal their humanity.

On several occasions, even when the community down-voted posts for asking off-topic questions, reporters embraced opportunities to engage in Internet humor. These interactions performed double duty for the reporters by demonstrating both their Internet savvy and their humanity: Journalists are just like regular people! They let their hair down and joke around the water cooler with audiences! On occasion, this tendency to want to casually chat with audiences went a bit too far off-topic making the journalists seem unprofessional because they were too casual. For example, the journalists for the *Washington Post*'s Russia bureau spent far more of their discussion time chatting about alcohol, sports, and music than they did answering hard-hitting questions. This is in stark contrast to the *New York Times* reporters who gave quick one-line answers to off-topic questions on occasion but by far showed more time and thought going into questions regarding the news story they are there to talk about. By far, most reporters tended toward behavior like that of the *New York Times* reporters – occasionally engaging in moments of light-hearted conversation, but by far focusing most of their attention on the meat of the conversation. In fact, the *Washington Post* Russia bureau stood out for their *over-engagement* in off-topic discourse, which reads as a gendered behavior. The all-male A.M.A. hosts for that discussion frequently appeared like a “boys’ club” as they spun tales about their storied careers and favorite hobbies and sports. For example, David

Filipov made several references to being a vocalist in a band and Peter Finn made sure to note his Manchester United fandom.

On several occasions, journalists brought up more ways they are like than unlike their audiences, and audiences praised them as heroes and recognized the extensive work that goes into the service they provide while also doing regular things. Journalists made references to family members being worried about their safety when they are in dangerous situations. For example, Isobel Yeoung of *Vice* noted in her second A.M.A. “My family have got pretty used to me going to conflict areas at this point, but my mum worries herself sick!” (u/VICENews, 2019). Throughout other conversations there were repeated mentions about family members – partners, children, etc. – waiting for journalists to finish A.M.A.s or in need of attention. This emphasis on journalists’ humanity acted as a dual reminder for participants – reporters are humans with feelings; when confronted with criticism, they are also fallible. Discussants rarely took journalists off the pedestal they had placed them on when reminded about their humanity. Instead, they seemed to place them even higher – heroes who managed to balance family and personal lives while still taking great risks to provide information to citizens.

### **Journalists as Listening Teachers, Detectives, and Misinformation Stop-Gaps**

Journalists engaging in audience discussions such as the A.M.A. discussions on World News are often acted as educators – digging deep to explain more of the nuance and background to the stories they report. This role enactment aligned with the news literacy definition with journalists as listening teachers, working with audiences. On multiple occasions journalists went so far as to assign homework to discussion participants and welcomed questions asking them to explain deeper context of the

subjects they have already covered or may cover in the future. On the surface, this was ultimately the purpose of the A.M.A.s – educate audiences more fully about the story you covered, but in some cases perhaps to the surprise of the journalists they branched into education about how to get a job in journalism. For example, freelancer Damaso Reyes repeatedly told commenters how to avoid misinformation, and even dove into how to begin having difficult conversations with people who believe in conspiracy theories. *Vox* videographer Johnny Harris answered multiple questions about how to get a job like his and how much of the work he does, versus other people (i.e., “do you edit?”, “do you animate?”). Journalists often also pivoted this role to include a laser focus on battling specific moments of misinformation and gently correcting misperceptions either about the profession, country, or event. For example, the *Washington Post*’s Peter Finn responds simply to a question regarding Donald Trump’s tax records (off-topic and slightly sensational) with “Simple answer: The IRS would appear to have very secure systems and probably have walled them off at this point.” (u/washingtonpost, 2017a). The opportunity to educate went beyond the subject of the story and into the realm of educating about the institutional norms and routines of journalistic practice or into the broader cultural or historical narratives of the countries journalists covered.

Overall, reporters covering international events were mostly educating about cultural and historical context. In this subject area, the international population of Reddit allowed for quite a bit of confirmation and contribution of expertise and experiences from the community at large and participants in the discussion. It truly turned it into a class discussion where the reporters and participants were building a knowledge artifact for anyone hoping to learn more about the context of world events. Nicole Perloth of the

*New York Times*, for example, assigned pre-reading to participants in the A.M.A.s she did. Participants even went so far as to apologize for misunderstanding or missing information in the assigned articles or failing to have done the reading. Pretty much the entire 2020 A.M.A. with photojournalist and self-described media literacy expert Damaso Reyes, was one moment of teaching after another. This would make sense, as Reyes' noted media literacy as the subject of the discussion. Most of the questions were from news consumers wanting to know more about how to improve their media diet. Reyes walked a careful line between praising the audience for their news literacy efforts and directing them away from Reddit itself. She noted at one point in the conversation that Reddit (or any other aggregator) is not a great way to find reliable news yet ended the conversation with praise for Redditors' interest in the world. These teacherly A.M.A.s were quite different from those of the *Washington Post*, which had a distinctly more "reader outreach" style to them. The *Washington Post*, in fact, was noted as being particularly "good" at creating content on Reddit – implying a deeper understanding of the Reddit grammar, but perhaps less intentions to educate. However, the *Washington Post* certainly appeared to be teaching other news organizations "how to Reddit" rather than teaching their readers how to consume news. This, however, was not true of all the *Washington Post* reporters, as Anna Fifield took more of a teacherly approach to her posts, even returning after the live portion to make sure she had answered everyone thoroughly.

On many occasions, journalists were given the opportunity to debunk misinformation and disinformation. Generally, journalists were walking a fine line trying not to alienate any audience members, but also wanted to correct misunderstandings or

misinformation. To do so, they primarily used two rhetorical strategies, asking the person how they came upon that information or providing contradictory information from reliable sources (typically their own news organization). If they went with the first strategy – such as when *New York Times*’ reporter Nicole Perloff linked to her own articles covering tech conspiracies – the original poster of the misinformation was rarely able to provide reliable sources for their information, and most often did not engage in the subsequent conversation. This is often when the community would step in and begin to downvote the original comment. Although the journalist would attempt to engage the person, the community recognized the attempt to derail the conversation and respond by downvoting the post to suppress it within the conversation although it did not violate board rules. For example, when a commenter asked Inkstone’s Juliana Liu about U.S. specific issues around Occupy Wallstreet and Black Lives Matter when she was there to talk about U.S.-China relations, the post was voted down by the community for being off-topic and inflammatory. Using the second strategy, the journalist benefits by getting more of an audience for news articles on their site. There were also several times when commenters would try to bait journalists into discussing sensational claims – for example, Donald Trump’s tax returns. Journalists recognized questions regarding such topics as baiting for sensationalism and chose not to engage. The bluntest that any of the journalists got regarding misinformation is when freelancer Emma Best responded to a commenter (who has since deleted their comment) with a simple “QAnon is a hoax. Pizzagate is a hoax” (u/NatSecGeek, 2019). The A.M.A. discussions offered multiple clear opportunities for journalists to engage in more mitigation of misinformation, but

often they did not take the opportunity. This demonstrated a weariness and wariness of this kind of conversation.

Journalists also educated participants about journalistic norms and routines. Here, it is important to note that while Redditors asked all participants questions probing their adherence to journalistic norms – particularly objectivity – they expected different levels of emotionality and transparency depending on the age of the news outlet. A.M.A. hosts from *Vice*, *Vox*, and freelance reporters, for example, were given leverage to talk about emotions and subjectivity in a performative transparency. Johnny Harris from *Vox* described his experience with North Koreans as eye opening for him. “Sympathy and revulsion somehow coexisted in my mind. It was a really good experience for me to have. I hope I was able to convey some of that sentiment in the doc” (u/Vox, 2017). Harris, as a documentarian working for a younger news outlet, could lean into this kind of emotional transparency regarding his work. This was not something that discussants approved of or expected from the *Washington Post* or *New York Times*, and certainly not from the most upvoted ICIJ reporters.

Reporters from legacy outlets spent their time in the discussion confirming the trustworthiness of their reporting and discussing how they avoided bias and state oppression. For example, the journalists at the Russia bureau of the *Washington Post* talked about vetting stories through their legal department to make sure that they could defend the articles legally but noted that even if the legal department flagged a story as risky, they would still publish it if it met their standards and was deemed important enough. Showing their standards-based processes was repeated throughout the A.M.A.s. Journalists repeatedly showed how and why their work was trustworthy. The routines

were also what freelancer Damaso Reyes made multiple references to in her discussion about media literacy. Reyes emphasized how adherence to norms and routines were what made good journalism. As investigative journalists, the ICIJ reporters represented the highest of journalistic standards to participants on World News. The only other group to get such high rankings and upvotes was a group of freelance investigative reporters who do similar work to ICIJ, just on a different scale.

This group “Distributed Denial of Secrets” spoke to World News participants twice – once about filing FOIAs and once about a data set they published that got them banned from Twitter and their servers seized. In the second conversation with World News, this group consistently fed the World News fans’ preferences for investigative reporters as the journalists’ journalist. For example, when pressed by one user (who is downvoted by the community) about the impacts of their published data sets, u/netlorax responds with “We publish. Violence is a social problem, and information is a social resource. We believe the remedy to social violence is more and better information, in the public domain.” (u/netlorax, 2020). Anything less than this gold standard in legacy, hard-hitting journalistic standards was open to mockery and trolling from the community.

Like students with a substitute teacher, Redditors would take any opportunity to harass non-journalists hosting A.M.A.s on World News. Typically, if the person hosting the A.M.A. was doing so on behalf of a trusted organization without a motive for profit (such as Doctors Without Borders or the United Nations), then they would avoid the harassment. However, if the discussants got a hint that the hosts of the A.M.A. had “suspicious” motives – profit or propaganda – then commenters would pummel them with attacks until the person left the discussion. In the most dramatic example, an A.M.A.

hosted by individuals who own VPN companies deteriorated to the point where one commenter accused the hosts of behaving like toddlers: “Stop throwing [a] tantrum... Also your partner’s response shows that you are just upset and want everyone to do what you want” (u/Sunday\_Yokubaitis, 2017). This demonstrated a situation where the student becomes the master, so to speak. It was an opportunity for the participants on World News to show that their news literacies are, in fact, hyper news literacies.

### **Hyper News Literacies of Reddit News Fans**

The news fans on Reddit consistently pressed the journalists to recognize that they were not like the *usual* news audience. Specifically, by *enacting* the definition of news literacy as a critical, social, listening literacy in which journalists and audiences co-create the news product and the journalistic field the audiences on Reddit World News exceeded journalists’ expectations for audiences. Users on Reddit reacted strongly to praise from the journalists and sought to align themselves with journalists against a third imagined audience of “most news viewers” or “those who watch broadcast news” versus the imagined superior news reader they represented. World News audiences were like the “straight A” students of news who would gladly do the extra credit to maintain that perfect grade point average and would apologize profusely if they feel they have not met the expectations of the journalist-as-educator. These *hyper* news literate World News participants demonstrated not only that they are informed citizens, but that they understand the nuances of the journalistic world.

Although they frequently asked questions about journalistic routines and norms, it was obvious via their conspicuous and competitive demonstrations of their literacies that World News participants were very educated about the nuances of journalistic routines



and norms. For example, they put investigative reporters on a pedestal, while harassing any reporters who were deemed to have a whiff of bias to their ownership or routines. This was evident in the multiple attempts by Redditors to encourage *Washington Post* reporters to talk about Jeff Bezos' influence on the newsroom. Journalists for the *Washington Post* participated multiple times and were quite active on Reddit in general. However, that would not give the *Post* a "pass." Participants would frequently call out the paper for perceived unavoidable bias because of the *Post's* ownership. For example, one commenter asked if the Russia bureau of the Post had lost financial support since Jeffrey Bezos purchased the *Post* – this commenter did not get an answer. Jeff Bezos seemed to be a fan favorite, in fact. Commenters also asked Nicole Perlroth of the *New York Times* about Bezos – asking if she had broken the news about the Russians hacking him – she also declined to answer. Considering the heroes and scoundrels tropes for journalists in popular culture (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015), the World News participants certainly considered investigative journalists heroes. All other journalists are put on a respectable level (80% upvotes), but certainly not the heroic level that investigative reporters are (90% upvotes). In the style of the Internet, and Reddit specifically, these hyper news literacies would do participants no good if they did not get credit for how clever and literate they are, and so they must be conspicuous (exceptionally clever to get Internet credit) and competitive (argue with the other netizens until you win).

### **Earnest or Humorous: When Internet (Reddit) Culture Complicates Understanding**

The grammar (or style) of communicating on the Internet generally, and Reddit specifically, tends to be heavy on the side of humor, sarcasm, and cynicism (McCulloch, 2019). This grammar can complicate the understanding between journalists and

participants in World News discussions, however. This was especially true when participants were trying to use humor to “win Internet points” with their fellow participants and get upvotes and therefore Reddit karma (reputation). Often, the journalists would feed into these kinds of light-hearted questions if they perceived that it would not completely derail the conversation. This was not so successful in the discussion with reporters for the *Washington Post*’s Russia bureau when they got derailed into a side conversation about unique Russian propaganda products, such as Putin branded t-shirts and cologne. In perhaps one of the oddest incidents of Redditors trying to ask a funny question, which the journalist dealt with swiftly and cleverly, occurred when Tamer El-Ghobashy of the *Washington Post* answered a question about Internet porn by simply noting how slow the Internet speeds were in Iran. This non-answer received over 20 upvotes (significant for conversations where individual comments rarely got upvotes into the double digits). It is of note, however, that rarely would the community downvote light-hearted off-topic questions unless those questions appeared in conversations with reporters who they deemed as heroes – namely, investigative reporters. For example, journalists would frequently entertain questions about things such as their favorite snacks, movies, or games. When these types of questions appeared in conversations with ICIJ Paradise Papers reporters, however, while reporters quickly responded with amusement, the community downvoted those questions as a waste of the valuable time of the respected journalists. This practice of downvoting any perceived waste of journalists’ time did double duty in meaning making. It signaled both the value the community had for the journalists’ time and energy in answering questions and scolded commenters

asking “silly” questions as not meeting the community standards for how they should behave in the presence of good journalists.

## Summary

Overall, journalists seemed surprised by the levels of news literacies of the audiences participating on World News A.M.A.s. Journalists engaged their audiences in ritualized strategic flattery, exchanged in a way to reify the normative values of legacy journalism such as objectivity. The journalists and audiences stood firmly behind an ideal image of the investigative reporter as the watchdog for democracy, watching out for citizens even when citizens don't care about the news they uncover. Moderators as invisible gatekeepers decided who was allowed to host an A.M.A. and then curated the discussions by both actively participating (submitting their own questions) and by deleting inappropriate questions before they reached the hosts. These conversations between journalists and their audience acted as an audience management strategy. Journalists were at once able to connect human-to-human and have fun with their audience, but also engaged them in critical educational moments about both the routines of journalism and their areas of expertise. The participants on these boards showed hyper news literacies with heightened knowledge of both the news and its context, but also about journalistic norms and routines. World News participants were highly aware of world events and journalistic norms showing the cultural capital of an educated and elite class of individuals who thrived on knowing more than their perceived peers. Their hyper news literacies made them a unique population to explore the boundaries of the news field.

## Chapter 7: Findings Part 2: The Public's Contribution to News

Participants in the World News A.M.A. discussion drew distinct boundaries around what they consider journalism and what they do not – heavily favoring those employed by elite institutions and those who expressed traditional notions of objectivity. Participants put journalists who work at elite institutions such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* on a pedestal but were willing to open those boundaries to other news outlets if the journalists espoused legacy ideals of objectivity. Interactions with non-journalists or journalists who the community did not deem as objective enough ranged from suspicious to conspiratorial. Redditors became boundary makers and investigators diving into discussants' previous and current work, comparing it to others and measuring it against their ideals of an objective reporter.

**RQ3:** How do r/worldnews “ask me anything” discussions reflect the value of the public's contribution to the journalistic field as: (a) Critics; (b) Boundary makers; and (c) Fans?

### **Suspicion and Conspiracy Theories Meet the Strategic Communicator**

World News moderator Ransom Thomas noted one of the most outstanding instances of the community turning on an A.M.A. host as the A.M.A. with Sophie Richardson, the China Director at Human Rights Watch. This discussion stood out as particularly harsh when compared to a subsequent A.M.A. with colleague, Brad Adams, which attracted hardly any negative attention. A few elements may have made Richardson's A.M.A. negative. First, she was not a journalist and was therefore not shielded by normative values of objectivity. Her colleague worked with and through

Reuters News' official Reddit account to host their A.M.A., which loaned journalistic credit to the other discussion. Although commenters did make a point to ask why the colleague spoke to them via Reuters news instead of a username associated with their organization, implying subterfuge. The colleague declined to answer this question about their posting preferences. Second, she was a woman – in fact this was the only time that slurs are used in any of the A.M.A.s and they were specifically gendered slurs. Third, she was discussing China – a subject that, as noted earlier, attracted wide attention and controversy during *any* A.M.A. For example, Inkstone reporter Juliana Liu's China discussion drew suspicion, though it was not nearly as volatile as Richardson's. China discussions needed constant moderation and were widely cross posted to other communities. Many of the comments described the attacks and downvotes as Chinese sock puppets (e.g., "Wow a thread taken over by the CCP!") mobilized to counteract any negative press and push conspiracy theories about Richardson – primarily that she was a member of the CIA spreading U.S. propaganda. Ransom Thomas felt that the people from Human Rights Watch were to blame for their own woes in the community. He said, "We've had Human Rights Watch on a couple of times and they've convinced a huge portion of our user base that they're CIA plants." Despite the vitriol aimed at her sex, the primary focus of the negativity was a suspicion of a conspiracy that Richardson was spreading U.S. propaganda or outright acting as a CIA operative. Notably, Richardson's A.M.A. has 1,362 comments and a 76% upvote rating. Her comment thanking everyone for the A.M.A. and praising the group has been downvoted. Adams' subsequent A.M.A. about Myanmar, by contrast, has only 242 comments and is 88% upvoted.

Most journalists avoided this kind of suspicion and harassment, although notably Aryn Baker with *Time*'s Africa bureau was voted down quite harshly for having opinions on women driving that the community perceived as vague. In the conversation, it became quickly “obvious” to commenters on World News that Baker either did not want to discuss the nuance of the gender power dynamics in Saudi Arabia or did not understand them – either way the discussants on World News quickly turned against Baker and began voting posts down. For example, commenters noted when Baker avoided answering in-depth questions, or questions about gender, or avoided questions about sexuality. In general, journalists (or others that the discussants deem worthy) would end with around 80% or more upvotes. Notably, Baker ended the discussion with only a 68% upvote.

The favor of the group was not exclusive to those with traditionally reporter roles, however, if they engaged the norms of journalism to an extent that satisfied the community. For example, Emma Best and her colleagues at Distributed Denial of Secrets – data journalists who published data without analysis – when tested by the community, aligned themselves with legacy journalistic norms. When asked about whether they would publish information that does not align with their personal beliefs or political alignment, Best responded, “I’d release it, though I might want to put it through extra verification or do everything I can to put it in context” and “My personal beliefs tend to be irrelevant, which is how I think it should be” (u/NatSecGeek, 2018). Similarly, Best’s colleague – only known by their username “u/netlorax” noted:

We operate for the public good. We believe only the public can decide for itself what to do with the data. We believe the need for a public archive of data that

other, non-public actors, currently control, which is about the public, and which the public needs access to. (u/netlorax, 2020)

The community of commenters on World News drew distinct boundaries around the field of journalism, which were nuanced and quite welcoming of different modes of journalism – including investigative, photographers, and documentarians within the boundaries – but which focused primarily on an ethos of journalism as a public service. Legitimate journalists provided truthful information using unbiased methods and while they were humans with emotions and faults, they were also professionals who overcome those faults through rigorous routines and strident norms. Redditors consistently emphasized the connection between journalistic legitimacy and ethical grounding in providing true and unbiased information.

### ***Boundaries, Legitimacy, and the Value of Some Information Providers***

Overall, the most upvoted discussion from the sample was from the Pandora Papers reporters who reported on how looted relics from Cambodia made their way to museums around the world. The A.M.A. had a 96% upvote. In this discussion many of the questions veered off the specific topic, into more general fan questions for the ICIJ reporters. For example, one commenter asked if the reporters lived in fear, followed by an immediate comment that the reporters are “real heroes.” The reporters responded to this question with a very detailed explanation about the impacts of their reporting on the lives and safety of the reporters who participate. In another section of this discussion they cited several instances of impacts of their reporting, but noted “the bigger, more systemic changes tend to take more time and, to be entirely honest, are a lot less ‘sexy’ in news terms” (u/ICIJ, 2021). The nod to news values being both a positive and negative spoke



to the ways in which journalists and audiences on World News A.M.A.s drew careful lines around what was within the boundaries of journalism and what was outside. Journalistic norms were not perfect. Sometimes, news values meant that “we” lose site of the impact of the story once the newness of the story has worn off and it was less interesting. Repeatedly throughout the conversations, journalists encouraged citizens to act and repeated that they as journalists should not go beyond reporting:

We don’t prescribe actions that should be taken, nor organize a response to our reporting. It is up to the citizens, activists – and the government – to curate a response and do something with the information we are trying to present (u/azamsahmed in u/nicoleperlroth, 2017).

The sentiment of journalists as passive conveyers of information mingled surprisingly uncomplicatedly with audience perceptions of the role of journalists as gatekeepers and agenda-setters. Commenters leaned into their fandom and hyper news literacies to display an ease, understanding, and respect for the work of journalists who met the standards and expectations of high-quality journalism.

### **Journalism Fans: Audience Reception and Bias**

The journalistic fans of Reddit leaned heavily into the hero journalist trope (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015), over-emphasizing the legitimacy of legacy news ethos such as objectivity and investigative reporting: “The people should not be afraid of their government. The government should be afraid of their people” (u/netlorax, 2020). News fans connected with an ideal of journalism as a power of the people, giving voice to the voiceless and shedding light in the dark. At times, it was as if the news fans defined journalism by the catchphrases of the two biggest legacy U.S. newspapers – the

*Washington Post*'s "democracy dies in darkness" and the *New York Times*' "all the news that's fit to print" – although they certainly leaned more heavily into the emotionality and gravitas associated with the *Post*.

Even though news behind a paywall – as many elite publications are (Myllylahti, 2019) – was not shareable on the board, the more elite the news organization, the more respect the commenters gave to the reporters from that organization. For example, reporters from the *New York Times* inspired almost no pushback from commenters and only sporadic light-hearted or off-topic questions. The closest that any commenters got to questioning the verisimilitude of the reporters from the *Times* was when they doubted Nicole Perloth's Internet knowledge, which seemed more related to gender than journalistic credentials. The *Times* reporters came in with immediate clout from their professional affiliation. However, independent reporters, and reporters from organizations such as *Vox* and the ICIJ and even freelancers also earned this level of trust and gravitas. Nearly every other reporter and their organization faced some sort of criticism for not meeting fan expectations for the field of journalism.

### **LOL-Criticism**

Although there is copious scholarly debating about what is and is not valid press criticism, it is easy to see why journalists feel negatively about the quality of "press criticism" they receive on social media on any given day. On any given A.M.A. there was a flood of negativity and quips about the journalist, their work, but primarily the organization they work for. It was very important to note that *not even one* of these criticisms fit within the scholarly definition of press criticism (Wyatt, 2018). They were not constructive. They were not actionable. They were not even specific. In many cases,

these criticisms seemed to be entirely for the purpose of getting upvotes for being clever or funny. “Fishing for upvotes” was a practice that World News moderator Jonathan Dire mentioned the moderators worry about derailing conversations on the board. “People definitely make comments just ‘cause they know it’s going to get upvotes,” Dire said. I call these forms of “criticism” LOL-Criticism. LOL-Criticism is a form of sarcastic internet quip, the purpose of which is to engage a comedic internet ethos and win support online, but not act as a genuine criticism of the thing the person is criticizing. It is entirely performative in nature. Users engage in LOL-Criticism for the benefit of their ego, seeking laughs and support from others online rather than institutional or cultural change.

The criticisms did not appear to have the effect of either garnering massive amounts of upvotes for the individual or of derailing the conversations. Typically, the conversation moved quickly around and past the minor useless critiques. The most pervasive version of these quips was attacks on Jeff Bezos. The reporters ignored every one of these quips and questions – not taking any bait or acknowledging this as a legitimate questioning of their journalistic autonomy. The one time any potential criticism was taken seriously was when *New York Times* reporters agreed with a commenter who wished the *Times* had more of an official presence on Reddit. Although, to be fair, this was a bit less about the criticism of the commenter and more a nod of respect between news organizations as the *Washington Post*’s official account also weighed in.

Even though the vast majority of all these kinds of criticisms were not actionable and reporters did not respond actively on the board to seeing them, they likely saw them and they likely took a toll on the reporters’ mindsets. The kind of unactionable, yet

constant flow of critical quips was reminiscent of the “fetid swamp” of comment sections on newspapers (Wolfgang, 2018a). It presented an opportunity for future research into the general cultural perception of journalistic organizations as “sleazy” akin to cultural tropes about lawyers, dentists, or car salesman because it seemed less directed at the journalists and more at the organization they worked for.

### **Summary**

The meaning-making work of commenters and journalists on Reddit World News A.M.A. discussions created nuanced yet clear boundaries and journalists as individuals who committed acts of journalism, while holding specific ethical standards. The field of journalism was not bounded or created by the legacy publications, nor was real journalism their exclusive purview. “Real journalism” was investigative and embedded within cultural contexts. Journalism’s sole ethos was to objectively inform – not to decide or dictate how citizens, governments, and activists should respond to the information it provided. This view of journalism reinforced the fan’s belief in journalists as heroes, while allowing them the leverage to omit anyone from that category of heroic journalist that they deemed unworthy – either based on ethical standards or the type of work they did. The “criticism” heaved at journalists on the A.M.A.s did not, in any way, meet the scholarly definition of press criticism. Nonetheless, the sheer quantity and even the uselessness in and of itself created an atmosphere where even when surrounded by fans, journalists wrestled with noisy non-believers.

## Chapter 8: Discussion

The work of each individual participant – journalist, commenter, moderator – all unique to their individual experiences and capitals come together in the World News A.M.A. discussions to negotiate unique understandings of what journalism is and does. These individualized cultural-information repertoires turn the cultural capital of the individual into a lens through which they interact online. It feeds their internalized literacies in connection with the grammar and social rules of journalism, Reddit, and, more specifically, World News. As individuals interact in the A.M.A. discussions, their dialectical work creates boundaries about what the group believes to be journalism. The dialectical work that participants do in the World News A.M.A.s tell us more about how audiences and journalists relate – specifically, it tells us more about their literacies, the boundaries, critics, and fans of journalism.

### Summary of Major Findings

The audiences on Reddit World News believe they are not just news literate, they are *exemplary*. Their intense study and fandom of news creates firm boundaries for what is and is not journalism: Journalism is investigative. Journalism is objective. Journalism is ethical. Journalism is made by humans, who are emotional and fallible. Journalism is multi-modal – photography, videography, digital, paper, data. Journalism is free from propaganda, financial influence, and activism. Journalism is free from government interference or influence. Journalism may or may not be transparent, but transparency does not supersede or replace objectivity. A lack of transparency can make non-journalists more suspicious to World News commenters, but journalists need not be transparent. In fact, transparency is only pursued when the news organization the

journalist works for is not within the bounds of legacy journalism or their style of journalism leaves some question. For example, Johnny Harris, a documentary film maker working for *Vox Media* answered repeated questions about his work methods and *Distributed Denial of Secrets* repeatedly explained their methods to differentiate between their journalistic labor and the non-journalistic labor of WikiLeaks. These journalists repeatedly noted that WikiLeaks publishes information with bias – specifically for the benefit of their own organization, whereas they carefully check and vet the information and release it only when there is demonstrated public good. On several occasions, Emma Best, one of the reporters in *Distributed Denial of Secrets* who participated in two A.M.A.s with World News, noted that she specifically has several data sets that she has not identified as having a public interest and so she has not disclosed them.

However, the work of these hyper news literate news fans and the journalists who reach out to them via A.M.A.s does not rise to the scholarly definition of press criticism. It is neither substantive nor actionable. There is no way for journalists to respond proactively to critical comments such as “LOL VICE news.” The disconnection between the unactionable LOL-Criticism offered by the group and their elite definition of what journalism is and ought to be is perhaps a feature of fandoms itself – positive about the positives, but less likely to ever find fault in that thing which they fan. As such, this casual criticism within the fandom represents an interesting phenomenon for future research about the general perceptions of quality journalism and has some impact on the boundary work done on World News. Together, the individual contributions of journalists and hyper news literate fans combine to create boundaries around digital journalism that are at once more nuanced and entirely centered around what one believes

(and to a lesser extent does) rather than for whom one works. Their definition of journalism as being so very in-line with legacy presumptions contradicts nearly all assumptions about audiences in a digital environment and particularly the younger audiences represented on Reddit. Their extreme news fandom speaks to a very traditionalist version of journalism that warrants more research.

Journalists' surprise at meeting the specific audience of World News – hyper news literate, informed, engaged, news fans – demonstrates what a unique group of individuals participate in this group. The individuals on World News seem to have a unique kind of elite cultural capital – one that makes them the kind of person who is interested in world news, technology, and journalistic norms. While they may be traditionally educated, they do not seem to display that kind of knowledge to one another. For example, even when engaged in a discussion about law with another user, Jonathan Dire never once mentioned that he is a lawyer. His real-world cultural capital did not need to enter the conversation, only his digital world cultural capital and news literacies.

### **Implications**

The relationship between journalists and their audiences has changed over time as media technologies, economic, and social structures shifted. One thing that has remained constant, however, is that journalist rarely know who their actual audience is (Nelson, 2021). Often journalists operated more on institutional ideals – such as objectivity (Schudson, 2001) or the suggested social contract between journalism and its audience wherein the audience ought to be informed and the news provided ought to be truthful (The Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). When the news changed to a digital form, however, audience activity could be digitally traced and audiences could

comment back to the news immediately and repeatedly rather than writing and submitting a letter to the editor (Duffy et al., 2018). A vast majority of the scholarship exploring this kind of interaction between journalists and their audience online has shown negative interactions where journalists are overwhelmed with negativity and feel this kind of social interaction distracts from their primary purpose as journalists – gathering and reporting news (e.g., Thomas, 2021; Wolfgang, 2018a, 2021). Within this context of presumed audience negativity and lack of understanding it seems as though it will forever be challenging to convince journalists that listening to their audiences is valuable or rewarding. How, then, can journalists and audiences work together to build news literacy as a listening literacy which co-constructs the news and the field of journalism? However, the Reddit A.M.A.s on World News appeared to be a primarily positive news literacy building experience for journalists who found a hyper news literate audience of news fans who enthusiastically supported legacy journalistic norms with a laser focus on objectivity, even in a chaotic digital environment.

The hyper news literacies of the Reddit World News commenters supports the effectiveness of the ideas of media literacies education, which emphasizes the creation of informed citizens who consider news and information sources critically (Hobbs, 2010). The hyper news literate Reddit World News participants deploy a type of news literacy that is tailored to the rules and culture of the environment in which they interact (Gee, 2015) and is at once a social practice and a listening literacy shared between journalists and audiences (Robinson et al., 2021). However, the Reddit World News A.M.A.s also show clear signs aligning with two the three main concerns of the MacArthur Foundation regarding media literacies, while showing that World News A.M.A.s did not demonstrate



issues with the third concern (H. Jenkins et al., 2009). First, the population of Reddit and World News are both narrow groups of individuals who signal a certain level of *elite* knowledge – technical, news, and world. So, while they show a high level of news literacy, especially understanding of events, their context, and the professional routines of journalism, there are many who do not participate on World News who lost to the participation gap. The participation gap is especially prescient considering the general demographics of Reddit users, which lean white, male, and educated (Shearer & Grieco, 2019). The participation gap becomes enormous when considering the large and diverse sector of news audiences who do not participate on Reddit. Second, while I discussed the invisible work of the moderators and was able to gain insight into what they do – and commenters on World News frequently did the same publicly – none of us, not even the moderators, understand the full breadth of the invisible structures on Reddit that only Reddit employees know. This inability to understand the extent of the structures is what the MacArthur Foundation calls the “transparency gap.” The third issue the MacArthur Foundation notes is the ethics challenge. The intense focus of Redditors on journalism ethics – particularly their understanding of “objectivity”- shows that these participants have a narrow frame of journalistic normativity and expect their information providers to also be so. Additionally, the news literacies of the Redditors participating in the A.M.A.s with journalists were specifically tied to news on world events and their interactions were primarily with foreign correspondents.

Although many journalists can cover world events from a distance in the digital environment (Archetti, 2013), most scholars and journalists contend that the tried and true method of on-the-ground reporting is best (Dell’Orto, 2016). Most of the journalists

who participated in World News A.M.A.s did their reporting with boots-on-the-ground. It was not, however, the location of the reporters that gave them authority in these discussions. Instead, Redditors focused on their subject matter expertise and on what each of the journalists described as their role in society – i.e., what their normative function in a democracy is. Specifically, in terms of news literacies of world events, the participants on World News A.M.A.s showed a higher level of knowledge and engagement with world events than scholarship has previously shown for audiences (Iyengar et al., 2009). The unique group of individuals participating on World News A.M.A.s with journalists also do a specialized form of boundary and fan work for journalism, although they did not offer formal press criticism.

The boundary work of journalists and commenters participating in World News A.M.A.s drew a distinctively normative line around what journalism is regardless of the actor's professional affiliations or mode of reporting. In terms of boundary work creating journalism as a social practice (Carlson, 2016b), the participants on Reddit created boundaries around the ways in which individuals spoke about their work rather than making assumptions about their work based on their employer. The social level at which they built these boundaries aligns with a very sophisticated view of what journalism is and ought to be and shows that this audience has a more nuanced view of the boundaries of journalism than prior research might have suggested. For example, institutional affiliations may be less important to some audiences than routines and normative grounding. The differences seen in the Reddit World News commenters may be because they represent an understudied group – news fans.

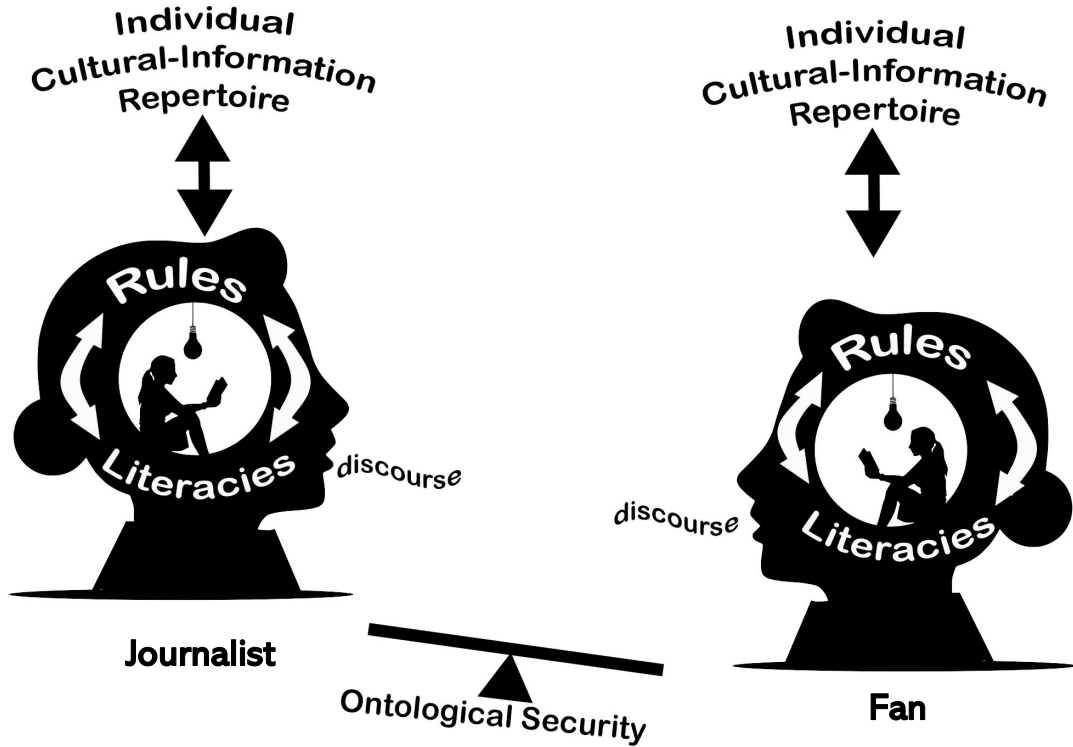
As more information and culture moves into the digital arena, more communities build around fandoms are visible. News fans are emotionally attached to the news and their conceptions of the heroic journalist (Gray, 2017). I argue that fandom is the explanatory factor for both the hyper news literacies expressed by the Reddit commenters and their elitist emphasis on journalistic norms as the defining boundary maker between journalists and non-journalists.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

Figure 7 represents the revised theoretical model, showing how the news literacies of journalists and audiences work on Reddit World News A.M.A.s. Within this revised model, the ontological security scales are tipped in favor of the journalist – this is because they are the keeper of the information, but also because the fans defer to their expertise. Even when journalists and audiences disagree – if the journalist is deemed within the boundaries of the field of journalism – then the community defers to the journalist’s version of the truth. Everyone – journalist, moderator, commenter – comes into the conversation not with a base of cultural capital created by education and upbringing, but with a constantly in motion cultural-informational repertoire. This repertoire is fed by the constant information load in the digital environment. It is constantly growing and in motion. The A.M.A. discussions themselves add capital to the individual’s repertoire, which they call upon later.

**Figure 7**

*Theoretical Model Modified - Showing How Individual Cultural-Information Repertoires and Situational Rules Shift the Structuration of the Interaction on Reddit World News Ask Me Anything Discussions*



Digital cultural-information repertoires feed into the person’s internal figured world and are filtered through the person’s news literacies as well as the rules of the engagement as dictated by the structures of Reddit, A.M.A.s, and the World News boards. These rules dictating the cultural norms of Reddit are also a key part of the news literacies that individuals engage along with their news literacies about journalistic norms and routines. This different version of cultural capital – one gained through interacting online and gaining digital news literacies grounded in culture – needs further exploration. We can consider this a version of “street smarts” for the digital age – coming up with a way to measure and track this media literacy may have more explanatory power than education level or age when considering issues of misinformation and news literacies.

Cultural-information repertoires builds on the work of scholars researching digital media repertoires, and perceptions of news and news-ness (e.g., Edgerly, 2015, 2017b; Edgerly & Vraga, 2020b). However, it also suggests consideration of two new phenomena visible within the Reddit A.M.A.s on World News – rules of digital news literacies and techno-based cultural capital.

**Rules of Digital News Literacies.** Anthony Giddens’ concept of social rules used to negotiate for resources interact with James Gee’s conceptions of grammars (situated vocabularies) interacts online in a wider space for digital news literacies. Reddit’s rules – both the explicit rules written for each board and enforced by moderators and the unwritten rules of engagement the community members just “know” about being online and on Reddit engage with the conspicuous displays of cultural capital people do online. Specifically, people engage these rules of Internet communication styles as ways of showing how clever and literate they are within the given context – in this case they show their news literacies regarding news and world events. This capital is sometimes, but not always tied to traditional forms of cultural capital such as educational attainment. In fact, the Redditors on World News almost exclusively ignored traditional signals of cultural capital, such as education, and instead tested journalists’ ethical groundings.

**Techno-Based Cultural Capital.** The way that the A.M.A. discussions – and both journalistic participants and Redditors – define the kind of cultural capital that they respect suggests that there may be a new way of defining cultural capital in digital environments. Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of capital(s) and class relied on the rules of a pre-digital era. Prior research often presumes that those rules still exist in the digital age – and many still do. This vision of capital sees it built from traditional institutions such as

education, however, this study suggests that there is perhaps a new type of capital that people exchange in digital spaces. It seems that in digital environments one must also have a certain amount of tech-based cultural capital. This capital relies on a sort of “Internet knowledge” that is gained through digital world experiences and information.

**Why objectivity?** Objectivity seems to be the core of what participants in World News A.M.A.s seek from heroic journalists. While the community on World News seems to tacitly agree that objectivity is important to journalism – employing it means the news is made better – there is no agreement of what objectivity means. In fact, journalism scholarship has been chasing the definition of objectivity for as long as the concept has existed (Schudson, 1978). Objectivity is a troubling “mega concept,” a conceptual conglomerate” that can only be defined in reference to other, related concepts (McLeod & Pan, 2004, p. 17). Such interpretive variability inevitably leads to miscommunication and confusion (Thomas, 2019; Vos, 2017). In fact, because all the Redditors and journalists seemed to tacitly agree that objectivity was good, but not ever define what objectivity is, it is all the more amazing that they seemed to agree that it represented a journalistic gold standard.

I would suggest there are three possible explanations for this seeming agreement on the concept of objectivity within the group. First, it is important to recall that Reddit is a site built of fan communities and therefore, it is safe to assume that Redditors consume a lot of varied popular cultural media. Therefore, it would stand to reason that Redditors’ conceptions of journalists rely heavily on fictional journalists whose actions (heroic or not) feed into the conceptualization of journalist in society. A heroic journalist in fiction is an objective, often investigative, defender of the people, and seeker of truth (Ehrlich &

Saltzman, 2015). Second, and relatedly, I would suggest that objectivity is such a widely used word associated with journalists that it represents a go-to concept when anyone is trying to describe what a journalist does and how it is of value to society. In this way, objectivity becomes a folk theory of what journalism is based on popular beliefs (Nielsen, 2016). The final possible explanation for this emphasis on the objectivity norm is perhaps a feature of the population of Reddit. It is possible that because Reddit skews white, male, and educated that this group identifies strongly with a legacy conception of objectivity.

### ***Methodological Implications***

I originally designed this project as a digital ethnography. The change in method after the observation stage, however, leads to questions implicit in the adaptation of a method originally designed for in-person research to a digital environment. Specifically, there remain troubles with defining a digital community. Subreddits are often a large, ever-changing group of individuals who all participate to varying degrees. For example, in the case of Reddit World News there are over 28.7 million members of the subreddit, but one does not need to be a member of the board to participate in board discussions. In fact, given the structures of Reddit, the only difference between a member of a board and a non-member is how the site filters information upon login in the default feed. The structures of Reddit therefore give the appearance of working in a community (defined as a subreddit's members), but because the borders of each subreddit community are so porous and members transient, it would have to be determined subreddit by subreddit whether the board represents a community.

When considering multiple social media sites, none, apart from Facebook's group function lend themselves to building community reminiscent of non-digital spaces. A network analysis might reveal interconnections of individual users by associations – other individuals, shared interests, hashtags, etc. - but these associations may not form a community with shared values. Often, in digital ethnography these associations are used to define the parameters of the field in which the researcher works (Hine, 2017), but a field defined in this way does not necessarily reflect a “community”. In fact, in online spaces one can dip in and out of a discourse so easily and can have a range of impacts within the discourse from nothing to everything. This constant movement in and out of a digital discourse also means that even if researchers do not presume a “community,” the population under study is never knowable – only the discursive artifacts they leave behind – if they don't delete it.

### ***Practical Implications***

News fandoms and Reddit more generally represent an underexplored and untapped style of news consumer. In a digital age, when media consumption is changing and expanding, the news needs to respond to new audiences. Beginning with news fans can help journalism to understand where it connects and disconnects from society. Exploring more thoroughly the information repertoires of audiences may tell us more about who the person is and what they are looking for, which will allow news to reach bigger audiences. Much like any other fandom, news fandom can act as a buoy for the news industry to regain some of its trust and authority.

There are several ways that journalism as an institution can meaningfully engage this type of news fan. First, journalists can continue to participate in discussions such as



Reddit A.M.A.s. These kinds of activities require very little time (averaging around two hours) considering the level of meaningful engagement they get with a very interested audience. However, the format can be modified and repeated on different platforms. Reddit itself, for example, now offers live audio A.M.A.s. Commenters submit typed questions to a reddit moderator who reviews and then asks those questions live of a reporter. The caveat to any kind of live question and answer format's success, however, appears to be the moderation. However, ultimately, the openness of journalists to participating in such an audience engagement activity begins with journalism schools teaching journalism students about audiences.

Too often, journalism studies programs ignore the relationship between the journalist and their audience. Curricula tend to focus on normative and skills courses that train journalists to do what they do how they do it, but not how to check in and make sure they are reaching the people they ought to be reaching. Journalism programs would benefit from more emphasis on and practice with audiences. Whether this takes the form of moderating discussions, practicing presenting news to non-majors, or courses focused exclusively on understanding and serving their audiences – journalism students could benefit from more emphasis on understanding their audiences.

### **Limitations**

The main limitation to this study is that none of the journalists who participated in the A.M.A.s were willing to speak to me about their feelings about the process. As such, I had to take what they said and conduct a discourse analysis of only what they were willing to publicly disclose to the community during their discussions. The research would benefit from deeper insight into journalists' feelings about the A.M.A. process and

audience interaction. Talking with journalists who participated in these discussions remains a potential area for future research.

Additionally, I was only successful at getting two moderators at World News to speak with me on a regular basis. While I was able to participate fully as a member of the board – reading, posting, and commenting – I was not able to understand a nuanced version of the experience of moderators as I only spoke to two moderators. While both moderators were very active and engaged moderators, my knowledge of moderating on World News and the A.M.A. discussions were exclusively from their limited point-of-view, and it is unclear what I may have missed by not having additional moderators’ perspectives.

The population and structures of Reddit also represent a limitation to the study. Demographics of Reddit skew young, white, and male (Shearer & Grieco, 2019). Although it is not known (and unknowable) the specific demographics of the individuals participating in World News A.M.A.s, it is safe to assume that they are reflective of the demographics of Reddit as a whole – therefore white and male. This inherently limits the point-of-view of the news literacy of the users in this study to that of young white men. Although Reddit offers a novel site for this kind of news literacy work, the perspective of these kinds of participants has been studied numerous times. For journalism to gain a wider audience, it (and research about it) must reach beyond this “white male core” and explore what diverse news consumers think about and want from the field of journalism. This is a very important and very large area for future research.

Finally, as with any social media study, I cannot know what I do not know about the digital structures and their completely invisible hand. For example, the moderators

were often surprised to find that certain posts or comments had been auto deleted or archived by Reddit without their knowledge. As I did not have any sources inside of Reddit, I lacked the inside knowledge of how and why the invisible structures of the site may be subtly manipulating the discussions.

### **Directions for Future Research**

There are three major areas for potential future work. The first is that researchers should look more into the cultural information repertoires of news audiences. Within the digital environment cultural capital based on information, entertainment, and pop culture literacies may offer more avenues for explanations of why and how misinformation attracts audiences rather than formal cultural capital such as educational attainment. The second is that researchers need to explore news fandom communities more thoroughly. Consumption, pop culture, informational elitism, emotion, and news blend in news fandoms in a unique way that could mean there are untapped audiences for news. The final implication is that audience engagement online reaches an extremely niche audience of hyperliterate news fans – and minor critics – but does not reach the unengaged. Journalism needs to find a way, perhaps via more research on news fans to engage wider audiences.

Future research should further explore and try to measure the cultural-informational repertoires of participants in the digital space. It is possible that this newer type of cultural capital may have some explanatory power in cases of misinformation and disinformation. An enhanced understanding of these repertoires and how they interact with news literacies would greatly news media literacy educational initiatives. It seems that audiences – specifically hyperliterate news fans – are certainly getting the message

of news literacy education. They have carefully crafted definitions of what good journalism is and what it is not and how to find it.

These hyperliterate news fans provide an additional avenue for further research. Their behaviors and understandings of what news is, operated as boundary makers online and the A.M.A. discussions with them function as news literacy events that need further scholarly attention. In addition, the opposing faction – those who lob unhelpful criticisms also need further inquiry. What is the relationship between news fans and hecklers? How do journalists feel about hecklers, especially when their heckles accumulate? Has the profession of journalism grown into a professional punchline like lawyers?

Another avenue for potential future research is to see if this research can use the work of news fans to pivot into reach untapped audiences. Can we use what we have learned about news fandoms to move news avoiders closer to fandoms to possibly come to a “happy middle” news consumer?

## **Conclusion**

The meaning-making and news literacies work that journalists and audiences do on Reddit’s World News A.M.A. discussions create nuanced boundaries around what hyperliterate news fans consider the field of news. They use an unusual form of digitally street-smart cultural capital formed from years of digital news literacies education (both formal and informal). They share a common understanding of the digital environment – particularly Reddit – as a space to exchange and legitimize information and create a common understanding of “good journalism.” This definition of good journalism includes multiple forms and routines and skill sets, but at its core its fans most ardently define and defend it as an objective reporting of the events of the day – nothing more.

Fans acknowledge the humanity and fallibility of journalists but hold them to a higher moral standard – they are to publish facts and let others decide what to do with them. They can encourage action but dare not decide what form that action should take beyond broad strokes such as “work with your government.” Scholars must stop turning their noses up at the idea of aggregators and embrace the community built around some digital environments such as Reddit. The Reddit World News community may be unable or unwilling to pay for news, but as fans they devour it, they discuss it, and they seek it out, but stop short of criticizing it. They are truly, in some ways, the ideal imagined audience that journalism has always hoped was out there – engaged, informed, and willing to learn more.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol**

**Note:** These questions represent a scaffolding. I fully anticipate some questions will not be necessary for all participants, and that I will need to add or substitute questions based on where the interviewee takes the conversation.

#### **Section A. Background Information**

##### ***Individual Demographics***

Tell me about yourself outside of Reddit – only answer what you are comfortable answering.

- a. How old are you?
- b. What is your gender identity?
- c. What is your sexual orientation?
- d. How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
- e. What is your highest earned degree?
- f. What is your employment status?
  - i. If employed, what is your current work? How long have you done this?
  - ii. If you are a student, what is your current major or area of study? What year of school are you in?

##### ***Reddit Background***

1. Tell me about your discovery of Reddit in general.
2. How long have you been a moderator/member of r/news?

3. What drew you to this subreddit? (and to volunteer as a moderator)
4. How do you use the news and the subreddit?
5. How have you seen r/news change since you joined?
6. How have you seen the news change since you joined?

## **Section B. Research Questions**

### ***Journalism and Democracy***

1. How would you describe the state of democracy in the U.S.?
2. How would you describe the state of the news media in the U.S.?
3. How do you think news supports or challenges democracy in the U.S.?
4. In an ideal world and situation, what should news do for you as a citizen?
5. In reality, what does news do for you as a citizen?
6. Why do you think there are differences between the ideal and the reality of news and democracy?

### ***Trust in News***

1. How would you describe how much you trust the news media in general?
  - a. Are some sources more trustworthy than others?
2. If you come across a news source that is new to you, how do you know whether or not to trust it?
3. Describe to me some ways to know whether a news source or story is trustworthy.

### ***Age***

1. Generally, do you think you consume more or less news than other people your age?
  - a. Why do you think that is?

2. How would you describe (demographically) the “typical” news consumer? Why do you think that?
  - a. How are you different? Why do you think that?
3. Do you think the other people on r/news are more like you or more like the “typical” news consumer? Why do you think that?
4. Who do you think news is for?
5. How old do you think you have to be to make change in your community?
6. Do you feel like you can make a change about something that you care about? How would you do that?
7. How do you feel the news represents your point of view?
8. How do you think young people in general are represented in the news?
9. How do you think young people find news? What kind of sources do they use?

### ***Media Literacies***

1. What are the most important topics to you on r/news? Why?
2. Let’s talk about specific world/news events ...
  - a. Brexit
  - b. The Trump presidency
  - c. George Floyd
  - d. Protests – Hong Kong, global warming, BLM
  - e. The Trump impeachments
  - f. COVID-19
  - g. Capitol riot
3. How do you use the news?

4. How do you think citizens use news?
5. How do you find the news?
6. How do you think most citizens find news?
7. What kind of factors prevent people from accessing news?
8. Compared to other people how do you think yourself and the other r/news users understand news?
9. How would you describe your understanding of the process of writing a news story?
10. Do you think everyone understands and defines news the same way?
11. Do you think everyone has the ability to understand and define news in the same way?
12. How do you think r/news participants select what news stories to share?
13. What do you see as the key differences between really good journalism and really bad journalism?
  - a. How do you think others perceive those differences?
14. Whose responsibility is it, do you think, to help people understand what is going on in their community/country? Whose responsibility should it be?

### ***Press Criticism***

1. How would you define/describe press criticism?
2. What do you think the difference is between good press criticism and bad press criticism?
3. Who do you think is qualified to be a press critic?
4. What do you think the value of press criticism is?
5. What do you think press criticism should do?

6. How do you think press criticism impacts citizens' understandings of news?
7. How do you think news professionals feel about press criticism?
8. How do you think citizens feel about press criticism?
9. Do you think r/news is a form of press criticism?
10. How do you think journalism should respond to criticism?

### **Section C. Wrap-Up Questions**

1. Overall, how do you feel about everything we've talked about?
2. Is there anything I didn't ask you about that we should talk about?
3. Is there someone else you think I should talk to about this?

## **Appendix B**

### **Participant Recruitment Message**

Hi MODERATOR USERNAME, I am both a Redditor and researcher working on a project about r/BOARDNAME – exploring how Reddit facilitates critical news literacy for Redditors. Specifically, my real name is Elizabeth Bent, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri’s School of Journalism. I am sending you this message because I am interested in speaking with you as a moderator of r/BOARDNAME.

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to participate, this study will involve having at least two in-depth interviews with me – each lasting at least an hour. We could have these conversations via the medium of your choice, although I would prefer phone or teleconference. If this sounds like something you would be interested in discussing with me and participating in, please feel free to also respond to this message, or email me at [benteo@missouri.edu](mailto:benteo@missouri.edu).

Hi, JOURNALIST NAME, I'm a researcher working on a project about r/Worldnews' AMAs. Specifically, I'm interested in how they facilitate news literacies. My real name is Elizabeth Bent, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri, School of Journalism. I'm wondering if you would be available to speak with me about your experience as a journalist who hosted an AMA with r/worldnews. We can chat here on Reddit, or if you prefer other formats my email is [benteo@missouri.edu](mailto:benteo@missouri.edu).

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

#### CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Project Title: *Reddit Newsgroups as Press Criticism and Digital Literacy: Structuring evaluation of news sources in a challenging information ecosystem*

Principal Investigator/Researcher: *Elizabeth Bent (doctoral candidate), Ryan J. Thomas (dissertation committee chair)*

IRB Reference Number: 323054

You are being invited to take part in a research project. You must be 18 years of age or older. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time. The purpose of this research project is to explore how Reddit facilitates critical news literacy among citizens in the digital environment. You are being asked to participate in two one-hour in-depth interviews. Your participation should last up to two hours. The information you provide will be kept confidential and only the research team will have access.

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri researcher at (573) 882-0095 or [benteo@missouri.edu](mailto:benteo@missouri.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or [muresearchirb@missouri.edu](mailto:muresearchirb@missouri.edu). The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you want to talk privately about any concerns or issues



related to your participation, you may contact the Research Participant Advocacy at 888-280-5002 (a free call) or email [muresearchrpa@missouri.edu](mailto:muresearchrpa@missouri.edu).

You can ask the researcher to provide you with a copy of this consent for your records, or you can save a copy of this consent if it has already been provided to you. We appreciate your consideration to participate in this study.

## Vita

Elizabeth Bent earned her doctorate in media sociology from the University of Missouri School of Journalism. She received her bachelor's in journalism and her master's in applied sociology from the University of Missouri. Her research targets improving critical media literacy. Specifically, she is interested in the ways people use news information in their daily and political lives – particularly in digital environments. She wants to understand what connects and divides the perceptions of journalism among stakeholders such as politicians, educators, and journalists. She wants to fix the disconnections to improve communication and understanding between citizens and experts. Her research has been recognized for excellence in the Media Ethics and Visual Communication divisions of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. You can find her work in the *Journal of Media Ethics* and *Rural Sociology*.