DEMOCRACY BEYOND HARD NEWS:
CULTURAL JOURNALISM AND THE HUMANISTIC ROLE

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JEREMIAH FUZY

Dr. Ryan J. Thomas, Dissertation Supervisor
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined
the dissertation entitled

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presented by Jeremiah Fuzy,
a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,
and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

__________________________________________
Dr. Ryan J. Thomas

__________________________________________
Dr. Brett G. Johnson

__________________________________________
Dr. Amanda Hinnant

__________________________________________
Dr. Yong Volz

__________________________________________
Dr. Robert N. Johnson
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DEMOCRACY BEYOND HARD NEWS: CULTURAL JOURNALISM AND THE HUMANISTIC ROLE

Jeremiah Fuzy

Dr. Ryan J. Thomas, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

This project makes the case that a new humanistic role should exist alongside the previously established monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative journalistic roles outlined by Christians et al. (2009). Normative theory typically concerns itself with “hard” news when addressing the relationship between journalism and democracy, but through the application of Deweyan political philosophy it becomes possible to see how purportedly “soft” news, such as cultural journalism, also performs an important normative role. This blind spot can be partially traced to the complicated history between journalism studies and the humanities, resulting in the current landscape where cultural journalism is largely absent from scholarship within journalism ethics. Through analyzing both industry metacoverage and public-facing metajournalistic discourse it is clear that there is something important already regularly occurring within cultural journalism (such as literary journalism or arts criticism) that previous normative frameworks have failed to capture. The humanistic role is important to democracy in a similar manner to that of informal civic groups that help citizens learn how to form identities and nurture empathy for one another. Humanistic journalism may only be indirectly related to politics, but it serves to illuminate possibilities for how to live the good life within a particular community. Journalism’s humanistic role contains unique motivations, norms, and practices that demonstrate why some “soft” news is not beyond democracy but vital to it.
Chapter 1: Introduction

On December 2, 2021, top editorial staff at the Internet’s longest-running popular culture website The A.V. Club were “invited” by the site’s corporate owners G/O Media to work at their Los Angeles, California office. The invitation was actually an ultimatum: move without a cost-of-living adjustment from the Midwest, where The A.V. Club had been a sister publication of popular satire site The Onion since 1993, or lose your job (Channick, 2022). Every journalist declined this offer, but not before several of their positions were advertised online as open – prior to any of them notifying the company of their decisions (Lee, 2022). This incident was preceded by management informing two longtime A.V. Club employees who already worked in the Los Angeles offices that they must reapply for positions within the company. One opted for severance; the other reapplied and was rejected. This brutal “reorganization” of unionized writers by G/O Media, which also owns sites like Jezebel, The Root, and Deadspin, is familiar in an era where news organizations are facing the collapse of funding from advertising revenue and are forced to turn to holding companies or hedge funds (Hitt, 2021). And while the impacts of this crisis have been felt across journalism, cultural journalists in particular have often experienced the brunt of it (Gottlieb, 2017). Emily St. James, senior critic-at-large for Vox, argues that the increasing newsroom emphasis on political journalism in the wake of the 2016 election resulted in the dismissal of culture writers at a variety of outlets such as Buzzfeed, LA Weekly, Upworthy, Complex, Gothamist, and GQ (St. James, 2018). Additionally, some institutions that once provided a platform for influential culture writing have ceased to exist altogether. One such example is The Village Voice, the first
alternative newsweekly in the United States, which shuttered in 2018 after 63 years of publishing (Pager & Peiser, 2018).

Within journalism studies, there is a swath of journalistic writing that is generally set aside in discussions of normative theory. This is primarily because within the subfield of journalism ethics, normative theory tends to be limited to, and by, the relationship between journalism and democracy. Therefore, “hard” news like political reporting takes center stage (Reinemann et al., 2012). Within this context, various forms of “soft” cultural journalism have been “denigrated, relativized, and reduced in value alongside aspirations for something better” (Zelizer, 2011, p. 9). This project aims to explore exactly what we miss when this narrow approach is the prevailing viewpoint. While the relationship between journalism and democracy certainly remains important, what exactly is meant by “democracy” needs to be broadened. When this happens, we can see that journalism performs an important normative role through what is traditionally thought of as “soft” news: the humanistic role.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to contextualize, define, and operationalize a hitherto unexplored journalistic role that is relevant to normative theory in journalism studies. Simply put, there is something important already regularly occurring within the realm of “soft” news that current normative frameworks fail to capture. As we will see later in the project, many cultural journalists articulate that they purposefully take a humanistic approach to their work and it is meant to have an impact on the public realm, but this reality has thus far not been fully recognized within journalism scholarship. Advocating for the importance of this humanistic role does not mean I am striving towards an overly
optimistic, utopian ideal. Journalism operating within the humanistic role has not solved, and will not solve, all our current problems. However, I intend to demonstrate why this new role deserves theoretical standing alongside other previously established roles as well as why continuing to undervalue humanistic journalism will cause harm to both democracy and our understanding of it.

Journalism has long been recognized as a social practice that encourages participation in community and lends moral coherence to relations between people (Borden, 2010). While the relationship between journalism and politics receives an outsized amount of attention, it is vital that we look at democracy as both a political and a social framework, an instrument of government and a shared culture (Carey, 2000a).

Some scholars have been moving in this direction. Zelizer (2004), for example, has dedicated much of her career to advocating that journalism scholars adopt the interdisciplinary approach embodies by the field of cultural studies. Thomas (2019a) has argued that theorizing exclusively about the relationship between journalism and democracy constitutes a theoretical blind spot that has left much journalism (and connections across varieties of “journalisms”) under-theorized. Hanitzsch and Vos (2018), meanwhile, have advocated for examining the roles of journalism in everyday life outside of the political realm (though this has mostly been a limited exploration into needs gratified through commercial consumption). I argue that it is only through adopting a humanistic lens that journalism studies generally, and journalism ethics particularly, can correct the currently distorted understanding of journalism’s relationship to democracy.
Rationale for Study

This project seeks to help us fully understand how journalism does (and should) operate in the “post-truth” era. The current scholarly attempts to address this through examining hard news tools like fact-checking, while an important component of reporting, does little to engage with important meta-narratives that drive how people interpret the world around them (Walter et al., 2020). As Thomas (2019b) argues, “we ought not substitute reporting – and particularly political reporting – as a synecdoche for journalism writ large but rather as one component of a much more pluralistic field that also encompasses, for example, commentary and criticism” (p. 5). This is vitally important to recognize since the cultural authority that renders journalism as a legitimate source of knowledge has become a source of political contention. This means that the “shared communal knowledge” that journalism was once thought to produce has splintered (Carlson, 2018, p. 1879). Journalists today are increasingly not only the producers of discourse but its object (Carlson, 2018). This is occurring in an atmosphere where the conventional approach to journalism practice often ignores emotional components of news in favor of rationalist interpretations (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016). Many forms of cultural journalism, far from the “puff pieces” and tabloidization that are often the subject of caricature, have the potential to teach readers something important about themselves and their communities.

The humanities teach us that there is a difference between “capital ‘T’ Truth” and truth. This is relevant as we shift from a time where a fundamental problem in the public sphere was, in satirist Stephen Colbert’s terms, “truthiness,” or the preference for a belief in something that feels true even if not supported by facts, toward a “Trumpiness” where
that feeling of truth no longer matters at all and the preference is primarily for an “emotional megaphone” that channels rage (Weber, 2016). This phenomenon is something that traditional political journalism has struggled to properly cover, in part because it broadens what is considered political. During the Donald Trump presidency, Kayla Chadwick’s (2017) *Huffington Post* article “I Don’t Know How To Explain To You That You Should Care About Other People” was widely shared on social media. Possessing the subtitle “Our disagreement is not merely political, but a fundamental divide on what it means to live in a society,” the piece serves as a prime illustration of the divide between explanation and empathy, between a journalism that monitors the world and a journalism that humanizes the world. It represents a longing for a broader understanding of democracy than is currently adopted by most theorizing about journalism ethics and invites a glimpse of a humanistic journalism that, like other roles, is not confined to a single beat. When we focus on the link between humanism and journalism, it becomes clear that in the absence of a new normative role, we will have an incomplete understanding of significant topics like race in America, the #MeToo movement, and QAnon. Journalism’s relationship to the humanities is not somehow “beyond” journalism and democracy but, rather, fundamental to it.

**Preview**

Chapter 2 begins with an exploration into the relationship between journalism ethics and political philosophy, specifically through the works of John Dewey and his successors. It is then important to examine journalism’s democratic roles through the history of normative theory beginning in the 20th century and take a deeper look at one of the most prominent frameworks in the field of journalism ethics: the monitorial,
facilitative, collaborative, and radical roles outlined by Christians et al. (2009). After all, Starck (2001) describes Christians as a scholar “who probably has done more than anyone else to encourage the teaching and study of ethics from a media perspective” (p. 134). Then, we turn to recent developments in defining and advocating for the importance of cultural journalism within mass communication studies as well as the historical relationship in journalism studies between the humanities and the social sciences. This literature review culminates with an argument for why metajournalistic discourse surrounding cultural journalism is the best location for extracting the normative outlines of this humanistic role.

Chapter 3 explains the use of metajournalistic discourse analysis as the research method in this study. This method was chosen because it reveals the unique motivations, norms, and practices that amount to a new journalistic role. The theoretical guide to this research was grounded in the three interpretive processes outlined by Carlson (2016): defining norms and social practices, creating the boundaries of acceptable practices, and legitimizing journalism as a form of knowledge. The data for this project came from two sources that offered journalism about cultural journalism: the Discourses on Journalism database for industry metacoverage and the top journalism outlets for public-facing metajournalistic discourse. This was then analyzed by looking for discursive themes relevant to normative theory. Strategies such as data triangulation, theory triangulation and disciplinary triangulation were adopted to ensure a trustworthy interpretation. This chapter concludes by examining how my role as a researcher was influenced by my academic background in both the humanities and the social sciences as well as my time working professionally as a religion journalist.
The findings of the research are explored throughout Chapter 4. Organized by the research questions, this chapter is divided into exploring what the metajournalistic discourse has to say about the motivations, norms, and practices of cultural journalism that amount to the outlines of a new humanistic role. The primary motivations revolved around exploring truths about what it means to be human and refuting common misconceptions about what humanistic journalism seeks to accomplish. The fundamental normative ideal present throughout the discourse was empathy, guided by the orienting principles of insight and subjectivity. And the practices of humanistic journalism revolved around guiding individuals to better understand themselves and the communities they live in as well as promoting interpretive dialogue between journalists and readers. Each of these findings point toward a new humanistic role for journalism that deserves a place alongside other previously established journalistic roles within normative theory.

Finally, Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the findings and draws conclusions regarding the theoretical and practical implications of this project. It opens by demonstrating how journalism operating within the humanistic role does not fit into any of the other journalistic roles outlined within journalism studies scholarship. It stands apart with its own unique normative framework that still has the flexibility to overlap with other roles and cannot be reduced to one particular journalistic beat. We then turn to how the humanistic role is important to democracy in a way similar to that of informal civic groups that help citizens learn how to form identities and have mutual respect for one another. Humanistic journalism may only be indirectly related to politics, but it serves to illuminate possibilities for how to live the good life within a given political community. This chapter closes with discussions of future research possibilities and
conclusions regarding the importance of recognizing the humanistic role within journalism scholarship and practice.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

To provide a foundation for a potential new normative journalistic role, it is necessary to tap into the multidisciplinary nature of journalism studies. This means both looking at how normative theory and understandings of democracy have functioned within media ethics but also drawing upon media sociology and media history for context. It also means looking beyond the journalism studies field into political philosophy.

**Journalism, Dewey, and Political Philosophy**

The fact that John Dewey was often referred to throughout his lifetime as “America’s Philosopher” provides an indication of his position atop the list of important thinkers in the modern era. Part of what distinguishes him from his twentieth century contemporaries such as Martin Heidegger or Ludwig Wittgenstein is the breadth of his work. Dewey made important contributions to fields such as ethics, political philosophy, logic, philosophy of religion, metaphysics, psychology, sociology, aesthetics, and others (Hickman, 1998). His writings still serve as prominent influences in recent scholarship on education, feminism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism (Stroud, 2011). Dewey is perhaps best known for his work within a school of thought known as pragmatism. This is a critique of the Darwinian worldview that, in Dewey’s thinking, overly abstracts philosophical concepts from the actual conditions of everyday life. Reconnecting philosophy to these experiences means that we should avoid dualisms such as reason/emotion or self/society. For Dewey, human thinking is best understood not as a
purely rational endeavor but instead as a phenomenon situated firmly within culture and should therefore be evaluated on a situational and pragmatic basis (Hildebrand, 2021).

Dewey’s philosophy has served as the basis for many journalists and scholars to advocate for turning mass media and mass communications into public media and public communications that are of, by, and for the general public (Stuhr, 1998). His conception of democracy has been the topic of extensive scholarship, perhaps most notably in the context of the “public journalism” movement of the 1990s. This movement challenged the prevailing individualism rooted in Enlightenment liberalism and instead used communitarian ethics to advocate for citizen input in journalism through facilitated dialogue as well as a refocusing of reporting on solutions instead of sensationalizing problems (Allan, 2010; Bybee, 1999; Coleman, 1997, 2000; Glasser, 1999; Gunaratne, 1998; Heikkilä & Kunelius, 1996; Jansen, 2009; Rakow, 2018; Schudson, 2008a). This scholarship has – perhaps inadvertently – positioned Dewey’s understanding of democracy squarely within the “hard” news framework through reframing how political journalism should monitor those in power and facilitate dialogue in the public political sphere.

Dewey’s philosophy also became a major talking point within journalism studies in the 1980s and 1990s with scholarship surrounding the Lippmann-Dewey “debate.” Much of its popularity centered around the cultural theorist James Carey and his thoughts on the interchange between Dewey and the journalist and public intellectual Walter Lippmann in the 1920s regarding the place of journalism in democratic culture (Schudson, 2008a). Though the two never actually debated each other, their stances on democracy became a talking point for many late 20th century scholars. Such a “debate”
has become part of scholarly lore, but the degree to which the views of Lippmann and Dewey were “opposed” to each other has routinely been over-stated (Allan, 2010; Bybee, 1999; Jansen, 2009; Rakow, 2018). For example, Carey framed Lippman as directing mass communication research toward the quantitative social sciences and his elitist view of democracy whereas Dewey represented the humanistic voice of the public. However, while Lippman certainly rooted his views in social psychology, he did not disagree with Dewey that the primary role of the press was to carry on the conversation of our culture for everyday citizens.

This emphasis on everyday communities of interaction shared by Lippman and Dewey is of particular interest to this project. The role that Lippman outlines for experts to advise policy makers appears to have been misinterpreted by Carey and does not represent anti-democratic tendencies but, rather, is an attempt to correct for the power of interest group lobbyists (Schudson, 2008a). Lippmann (1922) likened the press to a searchlight beam that “moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision,” but it is not possible for people to accomplish “the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions. [Rather, individuals require] a steady light of their own” (p. 229). For Lippmann, this light represented a “system of intelligence: based on social science” (Allan, 2010, p. 66). But this steady light metaphor works even better when reformulated to represent journalism imparting humanist ideals, which often happens outside the “hard” news role. No citizen can be omnicompetent and know everything about the world they inhabit, but it is possible to conceptualize norms like tolerance and empathy, stemming from humanistic journalism, serving as this steady light for everyday citizens.
In this way, the Deweyan conception of culture and community as something that also exists beyond the traditionally understood confines of the political realm serves as a much-needed addition to how journalism studies has made use of political philosophy in the past.

**Debates in Contemporary Deweyan Philosophy**

Anderson (2009) has been one of the most prominent philosophers working to build upon Dewey’s work. One of the ways she has gone about this is by asserting that voting, the primary mode of democratic participation for many citizens, holds more than just instrumental value. She begins this line of reasoning through a comparison to consumer culture. Shopping is widely understood to be much more than acquiring desired goods – it constitutes an enjoyable activity. It can be said that this non-instrumental value is dependent on shopping’s instrumental value. Anderson believes the same thing can be said of voting and democratic participation practices in general. Democracy would not make sense unless it reached the ends it was designed to achieve. But participating in the democratic process can also be a fulfilling activity that should be best understood as a way of life.

For Anderson, this non-instrumental value of democratic participation shows us that justice is not merely measured through the utilitarian consequences of democracy. If it were, a dictator could choose the same outcome as would be democratically desired and that would constitute a “just” regime. Instead, democracy is best understood as properly just through the process of citizens actively choosing to participate in democracy. This process generates sympathy for other citizens, allows them to exercise autonomy, and serves as form of learning in a manner that results in what John Stuart
Mill describes as “higher pleasures.” Similarly, Dewey makes this case through an analogy to learning. The act of learning cannot be reduced to accumulation of knowledge, just as democracy cannot be reduced to a mode of governance. Democracy is also about how interacting with others through shared, everyday experiences changes how we view the world. The results of democracy, just like learning, do not represent all that is accomplished through the entire democratic process itself. To borrow from a cliché, it is not just the destination that matters, but the democratic journey, too.

Anderson’s conception of democracy admittedly represents a somewhat controversial position. The notion that democracy is a way of life represents not only a challenge to libertarian individualism but could also be seen as a move away from Rawlsian liberal neutrality about conceptions of the good. But Anderson (2009) recognizes that we are fundamentally social creatures and that there is something intrinsically humane about democracy. This does not mean that other forms of governance are necessarily bad, only that democracy uniquely taps into a fundamental aspect of what makes us human. The language of democracy is not neutral – it can hold together our interactions and discussions in the public sphere together even when we espouse other seemingly irreconcilable beliefs.

Likewise, Arneson (2009) represents a prominent line of critique aimed at contemporary Deweyan philosophers: democratic instrumentalism. This instrumentalist view embraces the notion that democracy is not valuable in and of itself, but its value is instead derived from being a means to enacting specific policies. Arneson asserts that there should be no underlying moral right to a say in democratic decision-making. The position that there is a moral right to a say in democratic decisions relies on a view of
democracy that claims it is intrinsically just as a political system. This, for Arneson, will mean that these foundational qualities have the potential to outweigh deficiencies in producing good consequences. There might be several innate weaknesses of democracy, such as rational voter ignorance or uneven distribution of political intelligence, that do not amount to a full-fledged argument against democracy as a political system. However, these examples strike Arneson as important lessons that serve to underline why it can indeed be dangerous to uncouple understandings of democracy from a consequentialist framework that centers just results.

Another prominent critic of Dewey has been Talisse (2011), who makes the case that Deweyan democracy is oppressive. Specifically, he draws on Rawlsian concerns about reasonable pluralism, or the notion that a diversity of tolerant worldviews that embrace democracy is essential. Talisse points out that Dewey rejects the separation between politics and personal morals that is present in most forms of liberalism today. Instead, Dewey sees politics and morality as continuous. For Talisse, it is the fact that Dewey’s democracy represents a community in the Rawlsian sense that makes it fail, as it represents only one version of a possible democratic community when there actually need to be several forms of communities, some of which will want to keep a strict private/public divide. Talisse sees Deweyan democracy as a kind of “civic totalism” with a strong conception of human flourishing that uses the coercive power of the state based on premises that he argues can be reasonably rejected.

Ralston (2008) responds convincingly to these criticisms from Talisse by arguing that he mistakes Deweyan democracy for a “thick,” exclusionary theory of democracy when it is in fact “thin,” inclusive, and compatible with reasonable pluralism. Instead of a
core set of democratic norms and laws embraced for a variety of different reasons (a Rawlsian overlapping consensus, which is more substantive than Talisse acknowledges), Dewey’s principle of growth centers on attempts by individuals and groups to cultivate experiences that create opportunities for further improvement. This is not a narrowly conceived view of the good or a strong sense of civic virtue. It is open-ended and compatible with a diversity of views regarding what the good life entails. This does not mean that everyone needs to be a philosopher, only that citizens should, from time to time, critically reflect on their beliefs and actions. Dewey’s experimentalism (self-government can possibly fail) and fallibilism (non-absolutism on liberty) are functional commitments that are necessary to solve democratic problems, not values attached to a specific comprehensive worldview or burdensome prior restraints.

**Dewey Beyond the Political Sphere**

It is specifically Dewey’s understanding of democracy *beyond the political process* that I argue should gain more prominence within the field of journalism ethics. Dewey holds an expansive view of democracy that is not limited to the public political domain. Democracy, for him, is a way of life. It involves personal character and finding purpose in relationships with others, regardless of one’s particular worldview. This necessarily means that “public” and “private” are fluid categories. This is not utopian, but goes against instrumentalist conceptions of democracy that focus on institutional frameworks (Asen, 2003). If journalism ethics scholars were to better utilize this view of democracy within a “soft” news framework, it would then be possible to move beyond the current narrow focus on “hard” news when exploring the relationship between journalism and democracy.
It is necessary, I argue, to understand Dewey’s views of art to comprehend his philosophical writings overall. Dewey believed that humans become uncivil when they are divided into sects that do not communicate with each other. But good art – and, I would add, good culture writing – has the potential to generate mutual understanding. Before effective political debate can occur, we must hear and be receptive to one other’s stories and experiences. Art has the unique potential to make this happen through aesthetic imaginative experiences. Alexander (1998) writes that “through… images of beauty we may be able briefly to enter the aesthetics of other cultures’ worlds. We may become open at least to the possibility of their experience, of their way of meaning” (p. 18, emphasis in original). And Dewey’s “epistemology of the ear” can help us learn to listen to the stories of others before we open our mouths. For this reason, Dewey’s philosophy of democracy comes down to a pluralist social intelligence (Gouinlock, 1999). In Dewey’s framing, the public knows “where the shoe pinches” and therefore communal knowledge is created through various situated perspectives (McAfee, 2004, p. 139). It is easy to see how this understanding of subjectivity would pose a challenge for the objectivity paradigm present in much of “hard” news reporting.

Outside of the above-mentioned public journalism movement, the field of journalism ethics has generally ascribed to a rather narrow view of democracy that should be broadened through a broader understanding of political philosophy – particularly, through the work of Dewey. This approach would also serve to correct for the often-blinkered focus that journalism ethics has on the individual level that misses crucial institutional-level considerations relating to journalism in society (Allen & Hindman, 2014). If journalism ethicists borrow Anderson’s understandings of Deweyan democracy
and apply them beyond “hard” news, this will allow for a much clearer picture of the role journalism plays in a democracy. If a new humanistic role is to be added to normative frameworks, it will need the tools of political philosophy to succeed. But the realm where citizens test their democratic ideals, particularly multiculturalism, is not only the Rawlsian public political sphere but also the everyday realm where non-news journalism plays a key interpretive role in various communities. There is a fluidity between these realms that a clear public/private, hard news/soft news bifurcation does not capture.

**Democracy and Journalistic Roles**

Normative theory within the field of journalism ethics primarily, but not exclusively, concerns itself with journalism’s relationship to democracy. It is best understood as “the reasoned explanation of how public discourse should be carried on in order for a community or nation to work out solutions to its problems” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 65). Norms, likewise, can be broadly defined as “the rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain social behavior without the force of laws” (Cialdini & Trost, 1998, p. 152). Conversations about how this relates to journalism are often traced back to the Commission on Freedom of the Press, commonly referred to as the Hutchins Commission after its chairman Robert Hutchins, then president of the University of Chicago. This panel of intellectuals convened in the 1940s with the goal of compiling a report outlining how journalism should ideally operate in the United States. The idea and funding for such a commission came from *Time* and *Life* publisher Henry Luce, who recruited such notable members as Archibald MacLeish, Arthur Schlesinger, Harold Lasswell, and Reinhold Niebuhr (Christians et al., 2009). The founding of this commission came during World War II, which made many
scholars and journalists nervous about advocating for strong government support of the press. However, this reluctance was often in direct tension with negative effects stemming from the growing commercialization of journalism that had resulted in powerful private monopolies (Pickard, 2010).

The resulting 1947 report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, led to the formulation of “social responsibility theory,” which continues to inform normative theory today. Social responsibility theory was developed in *Four Theories of the Press*, a book published by the communication scholars Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm nearly a decade after the commission’s report was released. Their book outlines four normative models of the press: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet-Communist (Siebert et al., 1956). While much about these models has sustained heavy criticism (see, e.g., Christians et al., 2009; Nerone, 1995; Waisbord, 2013), they have served as the bedrock for many influential normative theories. This has been followed by several additional attempts at new models from scholars who have proposed elitist, discourse, communitarian, liberal pluralism, republican, complex, developmental, postmodern, and other normative theories of journalism (see, e.g., Allen & Hindman, 2014; Baker, 2008; Benson, 2008; Strömbäck, 2005).

Before exploring specific normative frameworks, it is first useful to examine how the field of journalism ethics has thus far understood journalism’s relationship to democracy. Deliberative democracy, which centers the role of discursive participation in political decision-making, is perhaps the dominant paradigm in the field, but many prominent figures and terms important to democratic theory are almost entirely absent from the journalism studies literature. This includes the lack of citing contemporary
thinkers like David Estlund or Thomas Christiano as well as missing influential ideas such as counter-democracy, complex democracy, and monitory democracy (Karppinen, 2013). Beyond this, democratic theory has been somewhat marginalized within journalism ethics scholarship because the field is generally overly focused on the level of the individual journalist and their ethical decision-making processes to the detriment of studying broader political and social systems. Even previous attempts to directly connect journalism ethics with cultural journalism, such as Powers’ (2009) examination of the ethics of rock criticism, focus almost exclusively on the actions of individual cultural journalists. This has made the field in general ill-equipped to tackle normative questions at the societal level (Allen & Hindman, 2014).

There have been various attempts to correct for these issues between journalism studies and democratic theory. One promising trend has been to center contract theory as the best way to understand journalism’s place within democracy. Contract theory broadly deals with the ways citizens with conflicting interests can act toward mutual benefits (Kymlicka, 2002). It makes sense to conceptualize contract theory “not primarily as an agreement, actual or hypothetical, but as a device for teasing out the implications of certain moral premises concerning people’s moral equality” (Kymlicka, 2002, p. 61). This helps to illuminate the tension between positive, republican rights and negative, liberal rights. It also implies that journalism is not the only party that must live up to its obligations and that citizens have an obligation to react to the information they receive in democratic ways (Sjøvaag, 2010). This line of thinking also helps counter the impulse to fall back on democratic realism, or the attempt to avoid “abstract forms of counter-factual idealism,” as advocated for by Nielsen (2017, p. 1252). It is always important to eschew
utopian thinking untethered from practical solutions, but “realism” conceived in this manner can be a cudgel that serves to maintain the status quo while simultaneously sidelining much of democratic theory that is seen to not possess “practical implications.”

These debates surrounding normative theories of journalism often revolve specifically around roles. A role can be defined as “activities that have to be performed by some person or unit in order to ensure the proper working of the system as a whole” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 29). A role, then, carries with it normative significance – unlike other, related, terms such as function. Journalism’s roles involve socially negotiated expectations and studying them is the best way to understand journalism’s identity and its place in society (Hanitzsch, 2017). These roles exist as a discursive framework of meaning that is subject to “(re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation” (Hanitzsch, 2017, p. 1). Roles correspond to ideas of what journalism ought to do, what it wants to do, what it thinks it does, and, finally, what it actually does (Hanitzsch, 2019). These ideas surrounding what journalism should be serve as professional resources that allow us to understand what journalism is (Eide, 2017a). Roles are best understood as historically constructed (Vos, 2017) and context-dependent (Mellado et al., 2017), helping us understand journalism’s place in public life (Ryfe, 2017). Often, there is a significant gap between role conception and role performance (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Tandoc et al., 2013). This gap between ideals and practice has the potential to lead to a withdrawal of commitment from working journalists (Pihl-Thingvad, 2015).
The Democracy Paradigm

The degree to which journalism studies relies on democracy has become a point of contention in the field. James Carey (2000a) wrote that “journalism and democracy are names for the same thing,” meaning that it is impossible to separate journalism from democracy and democracy from journalism. This stance deserves criticism for being bound to a particular time (the mid-20th century), and a particular place (the United States of America). It has therefore harmed the study of journalism outside the West and outside democracies (Josephi, 2013). When journalism is practiced in non-democratic societies, it is still necessary to analyze journalistic practices and norms (Josephi, 2020). Ironically, equating journalism and democracy has resulted in undemocratic scholarship, in the sense that journalism related to democratic theory has been privileged over all others (Zelizer, 2013). For example, populism’s complicated relationship to journalism shows us how making democracy and journalism synonymous does not help us understand the press in many Latin American countries (Waisbord, 2013).

While it is possible to have journalism without democracy, the press does provide several services that help maintain democratic systems such as information, investigation, analysis, social empathy, public forum, and mobilization. Journalism operating within democratic political systems should also actively promote democracy since it provides journalism with the conditions to flourish (Schudson, 2008b). There is a core of democratic values in any media system, even in restrictive media environments (George, 2013). After all, discourse sanctioned by the state does not always serve as an accurate representation of a society’s culture and values. Allowing for diversity around a democratic core results in “common ground that is broad enough to include a diversity of
norms and practices, but not to the extent of excusing those that perpetuate the domination of power over truth” (George, 2013, p. 490). This recognition allows for a balance to be struck between a Western-centered approach and relativism and will further promote the globalization of journalism studies. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on outlining how humanistic journalism currently operates within democracies, but like other roles it is certainly present in modified or constrained form within non-democratic countries. For example, the monitory role within some Latin American countries might allow the press to report the scores of sporting events and the weather but might have a restricted ability to directly monitor government actions (Waisbord, 2013).

**Role Typologies in Journalism Studies**

There are several important journalistic roles that warrant brief discussion for this project. The study of role conceptions first emerged outside of normative theory through surveys of professional journalists (Hinnant et al., 2016). These empirical studies began when Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1972) identified two categories of journalist: neutral and participant. The neutral journalist represented a detached observer anchored by objectivity while the participant journalist represented advocacy or watchdog reporting anchored in subjectivity. This was followed by Culbertson (1983), who outlined three distinct journalistic roles: traditional, interpretative, and activist. This basic framework was then built upon by Weaver and Wilhoit (1986), who described three slightly different roles that journalists inhabit: interpretive (marked by values such as hard news analysis, discussion, and investigation), adversarial (challenging both business and government), and disseminator (marked by speedy information delivery, verified content, focusing on a wide audience, and providing entertainment/relaxation). They later
added a fourth role labeled “populist mobilizer,” which came out of the civic journalism movement and centered around developing intellectual interests, setting the political agenda, serving as an outlet for people to express their views, motivating people to get involved in the democratic process, and pointing to possible solutions (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996).

The primary normative framework used in this project comes from *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies*. In this book, Clifford G. Christians and coauthors Theodore L. Glasser, Denis McQuail, Kaarle Nordenstreng, and Robert A. White use The Hutchins Commission and *Four Theories of the Press* as the foundation for launching an argument for their proposed journalism roles. They define normative theories of journalism as prescriptive rules of ethics that seek consensus about what roles and responsibilities the press should have in a democratic society (Christians et al., 2009). There are four journalistic roles outlined in this book: monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative. These roles, like the field of journalism ethics broadly, are largely concerned with “hard” news journalism. This form of journalism informs citizens about the world, holds power to account, facilitates dialogue in the public sphere, occasionally collaborates with the government, and advocates for specific political issues (Christians et al., 2009). “Soft” news, such as cultural journalism, is nowhere in this accounting and is largely deemed irrelevant to these conversations about journalism and democracy.

**The Monitorial Role.**

The monitorial role outlined in *Normative Theories* is a modified version of Lasswell’s “surveillance” theory (Christians et al., 2009). It can be defined as “an
organized scanning of the real world of people, conditions, and events, and of potentially relevant sources of information” (Christians et al., 2009, p.140). This role is the most common among the four because it covers a wide range of journalism from routine weather reports and sports scores to investigative journalism, which serves as an accountability watchdog over powerful people and institutions. The monitorial role has been built upon by scholars such as Hanitzsch and Vos (2016) who attempt to divide this role into an “informational-instructive” function representing the conveyance of observations and a “critical-monitorial” function representing the active “watchdog” role. Similarly, Craft and Vos (2018) use the monitorial role as a basis for analyzing how journalistic “listening” functioned during the 2016 presidential election.

**The Facilitative Role.**

The facilitative role is derived from the philosophy of deliberative democracy and includes “the process of negotiation over the social, political, and cultural agenda” (Christians et al., 2009, p.159). Journalism operating in this role serves as a public forum for citizens and organizations can voice their views on how government should be run and how policy decisions are made. Most notably, this includes the gatekeeper understanding of journalism where the fourth estate decides which public conversations deserve to be centered (Christians et al., 2009). The facilitative role has been used by scholars such as Culver (2014) who explores the social responsibilities of community newspapers, Hinnant et al. (2016) who examine how health journalists construct their professional identities, and Karppinen (2018) who interrogates questions surrounding journalism’s relationship to pluralism and diversity.
The Radical Role.

The radical role includes activism from partisan outlets who do not abide by traditional journalistic norms such as objectivity. Journalism within this role is primarily interested in dismantling structures of power (Christians et al., 2009). This means it pushes back against the status quo and “seeks to help minorities articulate an alternative set of goals that represent the needs and just moral claims of all, especially the marginalized, the poor, and the dispossessed” (Christians et al., 2009, p.179). This journalism attempts to alter public opinion and mobilize citizens to act. The radical role has been further explored by scholars such as Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) who relabel it “advocative-radical” and include subcategories like adversary, advocate, and missionary roles. Wolfgang et al. (2019) make use of this role to analyze how political reporters understand democracy. Finally, Vos and Thomas (2019) use the radical role while seeking to reconceptualize journalism’s gatekeeping role.

The Collaborative Role.

Finally, the collaborative role is the least common of these press roles because it sets journalistic autonomy to the side to partner with the government (Christians et al., 2009). This does not invalidate an independent press in other realms but includes special agreements such as withholding military troop locations, amplifying alerts from law enforcement, notifying the public about food and product recalls, and broadcasting warnings about natural disasters. This role has been more visible than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic as journalistic organizations collaborate with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to pass health information about vaccines and mandated masking policies along to the public. Scholars have used the collaborative role to explore
topics such as the norms surrounding media coordinators (Tandoc & Peters, 2015) and the role of journalism during transitions to democracy (el Issawi & Cammaerts, 2016). The collaborative role and the other three previously explored roles can be compared side-by-side in Table 1 below.

*Table 1. The Four Roles for the News Media (Adapted from Christians et al., 2009)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Monitorial</th>
<th>Facilitative</th>
<th>Radical</th>
<th>Collaborative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motive</strong></td>
<td>Observe and document routine and unexpected events, check power</td>
<td>Convene a conversation about public issues</td>
<td>Critically scrutinize systemic power, offer alternatives to status quo</td>
<td>Advance aims of an outside institution (such as the state, a business, or a nonprofit group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal</strong></td>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>Deliberation</td>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>Allegiance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orienting principle(s)</strong></td>
<td>Accuracy; Transparency</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Dissent</td>
<td>Synergy; Strategic communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Journalism provides</strong></td>
<td>A watchdog that provides an ongoing check on power</td>
<td>A forum for debate and conversation</td>
<td>Criticism of existing power structures</td>
<td>A megaphone to advance an outside institution’s agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Casts the journalist as</strong></td>
<td>A neutral observer, shining a spotlight on society’s problems</td>
<td>A manager of discourse; acting as a moderator rather than a participant</td>
<td>A critic, demanding structural reform</td>
<td>An intermediary, providing a platform for outside institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example(s)</strong></td>
<td>Watchdog and investigative reporting</td>
<td>The public journalism movement</td>
<td>The advocacy press; The minority press</td>
<td>Public relations; Public health reporting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Normative Theory Beyond Hard News**

A strong contribution to normative theory tends to be broad enough to allow for additional theoretical work but specific enough to sort real-world phenomena. The scholarship accomplished by Christians et al. (2009) accomplishes exactly this. However, like the other previously outlined normative frameworks, it neglects any role for journalism that operates outside the “hard” news paradigm. While I am not the first person to point out that this is a problem (see, e.g., Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Kristensen, 2019; Thomas 2019a, 2019b), scholars who advocate for analyzing this form of journalism have thus far avoided linking “soft” news to democracy within normative theory. It is true that in prioritizing journalism’s contributions to political life, the field has generally ignored the ways journalism operates in the realm of everyday life (Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2020). But even this framing creates an unhelpful dichotomy between the public and the private. The democracy paradigm in journalism studies does not need to simply be “moved beyond.” In this instance, it needs to be *expanded*. When we do this, it is possible to see the humanistic role journalism plays through several aspects of so-called “soft” journalism.

Much of the realm of everyday life is, in broad terms, relevant to democracy. While it makes sense for the field of journalism ethics to anchor normative theory in democratic culture to avoid moral relativism, the prevailing understanding of democracy in the field is currently far too narrow. This helps explain why something like humanistic journalism is missing in current formulations of normative theory within journalism ethics even though it does not fit into any of the previously established role categories outlined by Christians et al. (2009). It should be noted that this phenomenon is not unique
to journalism ethics, as many media law scholars have pointed out how often that field has downplayed the significance of artistic expression to First Amendment issues in favor of free speech political challenges (Hamilton, 1996; Mach, 1997; Nahmod, 1987; Redish, 1982; Tushnet, 2012; White, 1996). However, Schudson (2008b) has directly paved the way for a more humanistic line of thinking in journalism studies by identifying social empathy derived from “soft” news as one of the seven things journalism can do for democracy (the others being informing, investigating, analyzing, facilitating a public forum, mobilizing, and advocating for democracy). A humanistic role, much like the humanities in academia, is not something that should be thought of as beyond democracy. In fact, I cannot imagine a functioning democracy without it.

**The Cultural Journalism Connection**

According to Kristensen (2019), cultural journalism is “a specialized type of professional journalism that covers and debates the broad field of arts and culture” (p. 1). This can mean culture as a narrow aesthetic expression or culture as an entire way of life. Put in the simplest terms, cultural journalism is journalism about culture. Raymond Williams (1976) defines culture as first “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development,” second as “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group or humanity in general,” and third as “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (p. 80). Cultural journalism, then, serves as an umbrella term referring to how the press covers these three definitional components. The subject of cultural journalism began to receive increased attention around the time journalism studies was developing into a distinct discipline, but only in recent years has it become a distinct field of research of its own (Kristensen, 2019).
One reason that cultural journalism has struggled to gain traction stems from the fact that cultural journalism has suffered from a lack of terminological consensus, with some scholars opting for broader terms like “lifestyle journalism” (Fürsich, 2012; Hanusch, 2012, 2017), narrower terms like “arts journalism” (Chong, 2017; Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Sarrimo, 2017), or focusing on smaller subsections of cultural journalism such as food, fashion, or music journalism (Bradford, 2014; Turner & Orange, 2013). Cultural journalism can also range quite broadly from celebrity gossip to journalism about race and ethnicity, meaning that topics have the potential to overlap with other journalistic beats. Interestingly, cultural journalism is also more heavily studied in contexts that have a looser relationship with the objectivity norm (Kristensen, 2019).

The role of cultural journalism is inconsistent with the monitorial role as outlined by Christians et al. (2009). Journalists operating within a cultural journalism framework are typically “inclined to educate the audience, tell stories, and promote tolerance” (Kristensen, 2019, p. 5). Cultural journalism is also incompatible with the facilitative role because cultural journalists are not neutral moderators of public conversations. They discuss cultural issues critically and serve not only the consumer but the cultural citizen.

Trends in contemporary journalism share some connections with cultural journalism, such as an increased emphasis on the norms of interpretation, emotionality, and subjectivity. These trends are occurring just as cultural journalism is experiencing increased professionalization, meaning that those operating within this framework are increasingly trained reporters and not writers educated in the humanities (Kristensen, 2019). Cultural journalism is not a particularly prestigious journalistic location and since
cultural journalists mostly come from journalism schools, they are also looked over by
the cultural domain and are therefore “doubly dominated” (Hovden & Knapskog, 2015,
p. 792). Journalism as an institution is generally more interested in “hard” news and the
arts world often views cultural journalists as existing in a foreign world of journalism
apart from their own.

Cultural journalists around the world are overwhelmingly female, well educated,
and often possess more job instability than their journalistic peers (Hovden & Kristensen,
2021). Kristensen and From (2015b) introduce a typology of four culture critics operating
within cultural journalism: the intellectual cultural critic coming from academia or an
aesthetic tradition, the professional cultural journalist operating within the logic of a
media professional, the media taste arbiter who operates from practical experience
producing cultural artifacts, and the everyday amateur expert who operates with the
authority of a layperson. These categories illuminate the ways cultural journalists can
both overlap and contrast with roles from previously established normative frameworks.

Arts Journalism

One subset of cultural journalist is the arts journalist. This group is best defined as
journalists who work in the criticism and coverage of theater, music, dance, and other art
forms (Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). They are generally considered to exist in the
realm of “high arts” since most journalists who cover popular culture go by different
labels, though they can certainly still can be critics. Arts journalists see one of their roles
as communicating the transformative nature of the arts and operate as “moral saviors”
who aim to guide the public toward a more fulfilled existence (Harries & Wahl-
Jorgensen, 2007). This indicates a purposeful journalistic role and not a byproduct that
could be designated a function, demonstrating a clear link between prevailing norms and values important to a healthy democratic culture. This does not negate the fact that there is sometimes an uneasy collaborative relationship and tension between arts public relations and arts journalism (Strahan, 2011). But this similar conflict of interests is often also present in other beats, such as political reporting.

**Literary Journalism**

Another important form of cultural journalism is literary journalism. Like the term cultural journalism, literary journalism is also itself an umbrella term and can also be called creative nonfiction, long-form journalism, narrative journalism, or slow journalism (Keeble, 2018). It is a distinct and important genre that goes beyond simply blending the techniques of fiction and newswriting, possessing the potential to disrupt cultural assumptions through the transformation of experiences into aesthetics (Hartsock, 2016). Imagination plays an ethical role within literary journalism, acting as a moral exercise that actively connects the reader to the subject and minimizes the gap between them (Morton, 2018). The prominence of literary journalism within news organizations today can be traced back to the *Washington Post*'s Style section, which adopted techniques used by New Journalists\(^1\) in the 1960s (Schmidt, 2017). This eventually resulted in the academic field of literary journalism and the creation of the journal *Literary Journalism Studies*, representing a significant milestone in the study of “soft” journalism within journalism studies (Xiaohui & Gabrial, 2018).

\(^1\) The New Journalists emerged in the 1960s and included writers such as Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, and Joan Didion who utilized a highly personal and subjective style in order to interpret social trends for magazines like *Esquire*, *Harper’s*, and *New York* (Schmidt, 2017).
**Lifestyle Journalism**

The broad category “lifestyle journalism” also deserves a brief mention because it overlaps with several of the preceding types of cultural journalism. Lifestyle journalism is best defined as “the journalistic coverage of the expressive values and practices that help create and signify a specific identity within the realm of consumption and everyday life” (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2013, p. 947). Hanusch (2019) also identifies four key roles it can play: service provider, life coach, community advocate, and inspiring entertainer. These roles indicate that lifestyle journalism cannot be reduced to fulfilling a commercial or practical service alone, since its other roles involve purposefully seeking to engage readers on levels of self-reflection and engaging with what it means to be part of a community.

**Service Journalism**

It is also necessary to interrogate the category known as service journalism. Service journalists are often thought to cater toward their audience as individual consumers rather than as public citizens. It has come to represent “news you can use” and consumer consciousness as journalism experiences a participatory turn (Eide, 2017b, p. 199). However, it can also inspire collective action, bringing together neighbors to work together for their community and even coalesce social movements. This “subpolitics,” as Eide (2017b) identifies it, has the potential to help address the problems of everyday life and is very much connected to the public sphere and journalism’s relationship to democracy (p. 200).
Cultural Journalism Within Democracy

When we examine cultural journalism in all its forms, it becomes clear that it often addresses readers as citizens. Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) describe “soft” news such as cultural journalism and service journalism as “beyond democracy.” Though they admit that political life and everyday life are interrelated in practice, this formulation positions the two domains as analytically exclusive. But this narrow view of democracy flattens what cultural journalism has to offer its citizens. It might not be as directly political as “hard” news, but it is difficult to conceptualize a full rendering of democratic culture in its absence. Journalism often performs a role similar to that of the humanities in academia. This is not “cancelled out” just because some cultural journalism merges with individualistic service journalism to promote what clothes to buy or which movie to watch. This is one of the reasons I do not agree with From and Kristensen (2018), who categorize cultural journalism as a subfield of service journalism. Cultural journalism does not fundamentally seek to guide practical choices. It is a complex category of journalism that can include a broad range of topics from the analysis of film tropes to the cultural impact of fast food and it deserves to be studied beyond the confines of media sociology.

Disciplinary Blinders

An examination of the history of journalism studies helps to further contextualize why a humanistic role for journalism has thus far remained unexplored. The blind spots and timid examinations of journalism beyond “hard” news can be directly linked to how journalism has been studied in academia. Parks (2020), channeling James Carey, argues that while journalism studies “might have taken refuge and developed in the social
sciences, in part because of disrespect and snobbery from the humanities, it is in fact those humanities fields – history, philosophy, art, and literature – that constitute journalism’s true home” (p. 1232). Although Carey (2000b) lobbied for the humanistic study of journalism throughout his career, he wrote that the humanities saw journalism as low culture different from the ancient noble academic crafts – the difference between high and popular culture. The field has a complex history that cannot be reduced to a singular disciplinary home and still serves as an active point of contention among scholars today attempting to steer the future of journalism studies toward research that is quantitative, qualitative, or a mix of the two. This section elaborates on these debates and explores how it relates to this project.

The teaching of journalism began around 1900 in humanities departments at American universities. What began primarily in English departments focusing on writing evolved into the study of the ways journalism intersects with ethics, history, and law. Tensions also arose between the trade school journalism camp that emphasizes practice and the academic studies journalism camp that emphasizes theory (Zelizer, 2004). But in fighting for journalism’s acceptance in the academy, many scholars in the United States decided to tie it to the new and emerging social sciences – particularly the behavioral sciences of sociology and psychology – and that is primarily where it finds a methodological home today (Folkerts, 2014). The detailed history of this differs slightly in Europe, but in the United States:

The alternative path for journalism’s study, by which it might have been structurally located in humanities or literature programs, thereby harkening back to the early days of journalism education when journalists presented themselves
as bohemians with a “nose” for news, did not receive sustained attention in the
academy once the social sciences arrived on the scene (Zelizer, 2004, p. 20).
The combination of general disrespect from the humanities and the attention that was
rewarded to a new and emerging style of academic research created ripe conditions for
journalism studies to claim a home in the social sciences.

The history of the related field of mass communication studies differs slightly
from journalism specifically but is also important to understand for this project. The first
systematic work on mass communication was born out of John Dewey’s humanistic
endeavors at the University of Chicago. His work was subsequently furthered by a group
of philosophers and sociologists to develop what is known today as symbolic
interactionism. But the emphasis on positivism within the field eventually took hold and
shaped the field into what we recognize today. This more identifiable form came about in
the aftermath of World War Two as something slightly different than previous relatively
new departments of journalism or speech. During this period, mass communication
studies found a home primarily in journalism departments in part because speech
departments were often located in liberal arts units and possessed connections to classical
rhetoric; consequently, they were not in need of the legitimacy that journalism studies
was seeking. Eventually, some speech departments did welcome mass communication
studies, but this has not been universal. Since science lends a credibility to a new field
and midcentury advancements in technology foregrounded the idea that humans could be
understood as advanced machines, studying communication effects became the lodestar
(Carey, 1979).
The notion that journalism should be studied in the university was not simply about seeking knowledge. State press associations were some of the first to lobby for the creation of journalism schools out of the desire for increased professionalization (Carey, 2000b). The highly influential Joseph Pulitzer and his peers also lobbied for this out of the desire “to have a workforce that is moral, orderly, habitual, and conservative” instead of unruly socialists seeking to unionize the newsroom (Carey, 2000b, p. 16). The fit between journalism and academia has always been uneasy. Scholars of journalism are spread out around journalism, communication, media studies, and speech departments, and so on, creating a fractured academic universe that can sometimes make it difficult to provide a comprehensive understanding of journalism (Zelizer, 2004). Today, departments of journalism and mass communication have gone from the fringes of the university to the center, with undergraduate enrollment in communication-related programs among the highest of any major. This has generally been students specializing in advertising, public relations, or organizational communication (Carey, 2000b).

Journalism, the original subject, is now but a modest part of the whole. This led Carey (2000b) to argue that “embedding journalism in communications did enormous damage to the craft and ultimately to democratic politics” (p. 21). Journalism is much more than a functional signaling system but represents “an imaginative construction of the social” that has intrinsic value to the public and private lives of citizens (p. 21).

Attempts to Categorize Disciplinary History

Journalism studies cannot be understood as static or monolithic, so it is important to briefly examine how scholars have attempted to categorize the history of the field. This ranges from attempts to understand the entire discipline to attempts to map specific
subdisciplines such as journalism ethics. Each of these scholarly attempts breaks up the field into separate time periods and identifies a foundational paradigm that represents this section of scholarly history. Some of these attempts build upon one another while others offer a contrasting view of the complex history of journalism studies.

How to best understand the broad history of journalism research remains an unsettled question among scholars. Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2009) make an argument for four distinct periods: a normative focus on what ought to be (beginning in the mid-19th century), an empirical focus on using experiments and surveys (beginning in the 1940s), a sociological focus on culture (1970s-1980s), and a global-comparative focus on collaboration and non-Western countries (current). Decades after the emergence of online platforms and social media, much of the scholarship about journalism is still contending with the “unfinished digital media revolution” (Nielsen, 2016, p. 61). Carlson et al. (2018) point out that journalism studies, a term which has only been in use for about two decades, has struggled with critically distancing from its subject while simultaneously shaping how future journalists are educated. They identify six core commitments that serve to distinguish journalism studies within the much broader field of communication: contextual sensitivity (understanding texts as part of a particular time and place), holistic relationality (situating journalism within interactive systems), comparative inclination (delineating commonalities and differences), normative awareness (examining assumptions), embedded communicative power (recognizing the importance of social organization), and methodological pluralism (operating as question-driven rather than methods-first).
The history of the journalism ethics subdiscipline has its own specific but related categories. Christians (2000) identifies three separate periods in the history of journalism ethics: the 1890s, the 1920s, and the 1980s to present. The 1890s represents the commercialization and professionalization of journalism while the 1920s represents the flowering of academic study and the concept of social responsibility before objectivity became dominant. And finally, the 1980s to the present represents the global stage period kicked off by the controversial UNESCO “MacBride Report,” which made bold recommendations to solve for market-driven mass media and telecommunications industry interests (see Joye, 2019). Christians (1977) also discusses the still relevant battle between objectivity, which he sees as prominent but vacuous, and social responsibility, which he sees as noble but underdeveloped. Ferré (2020) argues that there are actually four periods of media ethics history with slightly different time frames: the Progressive Era (1890s), professionalism (1920s), social responsibility (after 1947), and global humanitarianism (since the 1970s). This formulation adds an important focus on the beginning of journalism ethics and press criticism in the 1890s to the prior categories outlined by Christians (2000).

**Reshaping the Study of Journalism**

Several scholars have written specifically about the direction media ethics scholarship should take in light of these histories. Johannesen (2001) and Allen and Hindman (2014) argue that media ethics must look at both the individual moral issues in journalism and the social ethics that connect moral philosophy to political philosophy because many journalism schools (and much journalism ethics scholarship) emphasize the former at the expense of the latter. Starck (2001) points toward the gap between
practical and theoretical in media ethics and shows that while classroom materials have seen some progress, scholarship in the field remains underdeveloped. He argues it is also important to explore journalism ethics across different cultures while avoiding relativism. Wilkins (2018) argues that media ethics has something to contribute to philosophy more broadly through the “notion of truth as iterative and context-dependent within community” (p. 20).

One of the broadest divisions within journalism studies is between quantitative social science research methods and qualitative social science research methods, although the two are not mutually exclusive. There have been longstanding arguments on the quantitative side of the field about whether the focus on media effects actually tells us something useful (see, e.g., DeFleur, 1998; Lang, 2013; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). Hermann (2017) suggests that the divide between journalism studies and journalism practice can be mended through qualitative social scientific tools that resemble journalism such as ethnography. And finally, Joseph and Boczkowski (2012) have taken a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach to argue that media ethics necessarily needs to be supplemented with media sociology if it is to successfully cope with the changing and evolving media environment.

Understandings of democracy have been in the background of journalism studies but have been understated due to the field’s ongoing quest for scientific legitimacy (Schudson, 2008a). Mass communication’s bias toward communication effects and quantitative, positivist social sciences has blinded many scholars to the humanistic side of journalism. Political journalism is often thought of as “the real journalism” while forms like cultural journalism have been viewed as mere commercial entertainment (Kristensen
& From, 2015a). As Thomas (2019a) writes, “it may not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that much of what constitutes journalism studies is in fact reporting or hard news studies, due to the conflation of ‘journalism’ with ‘hard news reporting’ as though the former were wholly constituted by the latter” (p. 368, emphasis in original). If scholars within journalism ethics, and the broader field of journalism studies, choose to purposefully reflect on their historical roots and integrate these understandings into their current work, this social science blind spot can be corrected. Otherwise, we are doomed to always miss crucial aspects regarding the relationship between journalism and democracy. Especially for scholars who use normative theory to better illuminate how discourse should be carried out in various social contexts, it is important to look at how the boundaries and meanings surrounding cultural journalism are developed.

**Metajournalistic Discourse**

Metajournalistic discourse analysis is a branch of discourse analysis that comes out of metadiscourse. Kopple (2002) refers to metadiscourse as “discourse about discourse” (p. 93). Hyland (2019) writes that it represents “a writer’s or speaker’s attempts to guide a receiver’s perception of a text” (p. 3). This means fundamentally understanding communication as something beyond the mere exchange of information. He argues while metadiscourse has been difficult to define it can best be understood as an umbrella term aimed at describing “self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community” (p. 43). This involves three key principles which assert that metadiscourse is distinct from propositions, refers
to writer-reader interactions, and is only concerned with relations internal to the discourse (Hyland, 2019).

D’Angelo & Consonni (2020) argue that it was at the end of the 1970s when the “interactional turn” of language analysis kicked off the first of three waves of metadiscourse. This first wave understood metadiscourse to go beyond referential information and pertain to discourse in its full spectrum of social meanings. The second wave focused on analytical frameworks that allowed for comparison and systemic categorization of metadiscursive texts. Finally, the third wave refers to a “reflexive turn” that reintegrates a metatextual component that was lost in the initial “interactional turn” and centers epistemic creativity and the very formation of language into discourse analysis.

*Metajournalistic discourse*, then, has been called “journalism about journalism” (Ferrucci, 2018). Carlson (2016) argues that a theory of metajournalistic discourse is necessary to explain how meanings surrounding journalism are developed. Metajournalistic discourse is the site where “various actors inside and outside of journalism compete to construct, reiterate, and even challenge the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practices” (p. 349). Carlson also defines metajournalistic discourse as “public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception” (p. 350). Journalism does not rely on professional credentials like other professions (more on that below), so it relies on negotiated cultural authority that is variable and contextual rather than static or universalized. Metajournalistic discourse matters, then, because it connects journalism’s cultural meanings to its social practices. It is both pragmatic and empirical (describing what
journalism is) and normative (articulating what journalism should be). Metajournalistic discourse also helpfully demonstrates why we should not look solely at news practices when analyzing the cultural authority of journalism. Sometimes journalists can go from producing media discourse to becoming its object. It is even necessary to look beyond journalists themselves, which metajournalistic discourse does by looking at internal and external social actors (Carlson, 2016).

Carlson (2016) has built a theory of metajournalistic discourse through connecting three components that comprise the terrain of metajournalistic discourse – actors, sites/audiences, and topics – to the outcomes theorized through three interpretive processes of definition making/control, boundary work, and legitimation. The actor component refers to the fact that discourse about journalism comes from both journalists and non-journalists such as government officials, historians, and entertainers. This happens in several locations, from letters to the editor to the comments below news stories to social media. The sites/audiences component refers to the fact that journalistic spaces often include writing from non-journalistic actors as well as the reality that journalists sometimes speak outside traditional news contexts. The third component, topics, can best be understood through reactive metajournalistic discourse and generative metajournalistic discourse. Reactive refers to emergent, acute incidents, like a scandal, surrounding controversies involving individual journalists or news organizations themselves. Generative refers to a wider conversation about journalism that occurs at a more macro level, such as predictions about the future of journalism (Carlson, 2016).

These connect to the previously mentioned interpretive processes because metajournalistic discourse connects public writing about journalism to how journalism is
created, thought about, and experienced. This is achieved first through definition making, creating a shared discursive universe of designated, specific meanings for news concepts and symbols. Secondly, boundary setting in metajournalistic discourse determines acceptable topics, appropriate actors, and which normative commitments should be attached to journalistic practices. Finally, metajournalistic discourse concerns legitimization. Since journalism is a social practice, its reception is contingent upon a shared belief that as a form of knowledge, it is legitimate. This cannot be achieved through news content alone but comes from repetition of forms and conventions as well as public explanations of why journalism deserves authority. Thus, the study of journalistic roles and metajournalistic discourse are complementary (Carlson, 2016).

James Carey (1974) discusses how another form of metajournalistic discourse – press criticism – does not have a sustained tradition in the United States. He argues that criticism and democracy are inseparable. Once the world evolved into a place with no fixed and absolute truths, knowledge came from individuals examining evidence for themselves. A location for criticism that would allow individuals to adjust and complete their observations became necessary. Journalism as the source for information must be criticized just as any government should. The press does not turn upon itself the scrutiny that it affords other institutions. But those who regularly attack the press do not count as true critics. Criticism is a sign of vigor and importance, not failure. Professionalism, according to Carey, has caused journalistic institutions to become remote from their communities. However, a critical community can mediate between an institution and a community. Press criticism is at its core a criticism of language, and so taking this discourse seriously is important. He argues that though journalism is not often conceived
of as a literary act, it is. It can be thought of as industrial art, a mass-produced commodity arrived at through techniques such as the 5Ws lede and inverted pyramid that order the world into a comprehensible or baffling whole (Carey, 1974).

**Research Questions**

To examine the boundaries of humanistic journalism, this study analyzes metadiscourse around cultural journalism. This discourse analysis allows for a glimpse into what this type of journalism is and what it strives to be, which can be directly connected to the formation of a new role. Successfully outlining a new role requires cultural journalism to have a unique position on why it exists (motivations), what it wants to do and thinks it does (norms), and what journalists working within it accomplish (practices). With this and all the previous academic literature in mind, I pose the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the motivations that the metajournalistic discourse suggests for cultural journalism?

**RQ2:** What are the norms that the metajournalistic discourse suggests for cultural journalism?

**RQ3:** What are the practices that the metajournalistic discourse suggests for cultural journalism?

This investigation into the motivations, norms, and practices of cultural journalism will illuminate the contours of what a humanistic role looks like. Once we can understand this, it is possible to analyze how the new role stands in relation to preexisting normative theory within journalism studies.
Chapter 3: Method

The essential problem this project aims to address is that the role that much of cultural journalism plays has been largely excluded from normative theory and journalistic role discussions within journalism ethics. Resolving this blind spot involves examining how those within cultural journalism define what cultural journalism does and should accomplish as well as how this relates to broader discussions of journalism and democracy. For this reason, the project is fundamentally interested in clearly defining the normative role that metajournalistic discourse journalism suggests for cultural journalism. The aim is to determine how this role fits into previously existing normative theory. This allows us to determine why it is important to study cultural journalism within the realm of journalism ethics and build upon the excellent work that media sociologists have done so far. This will also serve to more broadly demonstrate that “soft” news should be included in discussions of journalism and democracy. This chapter examines how metajournalistic discourse analysis surrounding cultural journalism is the best methodological approach to answering the research questions.

Methodological Rationale

This project uses metajournalistic discourse analysis as its qualitative research method. This method was chosen because it allows for a deep dive into the broad institutional discourse that reflects the theoretical boundaries of cultural journalism and allow for the analysis of any unique motivations, norms, and practices that could amount to a new journalistic role (Carlson, 2016). Aitamurto & Varma (2018) provide a roadmap for how this can be accomplished through their work using metajournalistic discourse to
outline a new constructive role for solutions journalism. Analyzing discourse surrounding cultural journalism was specifically chosen as the best manner to extract this normative framework because cultural journalism is the closest beat to the humanities within journalism. It is important to note that not all cultural journalism is expected to operate within a new role since beats and roles never fully align. The idea is that once a new role is extracted through analyzing metajournalistic discourse about cultural journalism, it can be then applied to other journalistic forms across different beats from religion journalism to war reporting.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

This research uses an interpretivist approach as a theoretical guide. Metajournalistic discourse analysis is fundamentally grounded in three interpretive processes: defining norms and social practices, creating the boundaries of acceptable practices, and legitimizing journalism as a form of knowledge (Carlson, 2016). Journalists exist not only in a profession but also as part of an interpretive community united by shared meaning through collective interpretations of notable events (Zelizer, 2010). Journalists occupy a double temporal position, or “double-time,” when they interpret an event as it unfolds and as it is retold. Journalists use discourse about journalism to generate meaning as they are both subject and object of reporting. The *local mode* of interpretation, attending events to report on them, is the most common form of journalism. But the *durational mode* of interpretation, positioning past events on a continuum as recollectors or historians, is how much of metajournalistic discourse operates. Journalists, and those operating outside journalism, use these conversations to generate meaning about journalism. The saying “journalism is the first draft of history”
implies that journalists yield their interpretive power after time has passed but the
durational mode indicates that this is not the case (Zelizer, 1993). This discourse also
does “double duty” by providing meaning for journalists as a community and defining the
standards of proper journalism for the public (Berkowitz, 2000). This all serves to
underscore the importance of analyzing journalistic discourse that seeks to interpret the
meanings of journalism.

Data Collection

This project examines articles on the topic of cultural journalism found using the
Discourses on Journalism (DoJo) database developed by Hekademeia with funding from
the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism and
from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. This
database is an archive of journalism trade publications such as Poynter, NiemanLab, and
Columbia Journalism Review (CJR) that provide what I will refer to as “industry
metacoverage.” To capture more public-facing metajournalistic discourse, I supplemented
the DoJo articles with articles about culture writing from the top newspapers, magazines,
and online news sites that generate cultural journalism in the United States. These sites
were determined by Pew Research Center’s 2021 State of the News Media project, which
contains a list of the top journalism outlets determined by measurement data from
ComScore. Their criteria included websites with at least 10 million average monthly
unique digital visitors that publish original content about current events affecting public
life, are not entirely focused on advice, recipes, or raw data, and are not primarily based
on user-generated or aggregated content (such as Reddit or Wikipedia) or branded content
(such as MLSsoccer.com or NBA.com). As Table 2 demonstrates below, this allowed for
a range of legacy outlets such as *The New Yorker* and *Washington Post* to newer organizations such as *Vox* and *Buzzfeed*. Some websites were eliminated from consideration because they do not engage in cultural journalism, such as *Bloomberg*, *CNBC*, or *Business Insider*. The final list was paired down to 18 outlets and the articles used for discourse analysis were found using each individual website’s search function. The timeframe for both searches ranged from the 2008 recession until 2021, reflecting a period of mass layoffs and technological shifts that forced the culture beat to publicly, repeatedly defend its existence. This reality is reflected in the cluster of articles published during or immediately after the recession that can be seen in Table 3. This was followed by a similar concentration of articles that coincided with the polarizing politics of the Trump era where journalism about cultural journalism likely engaged in proactive humanistic discourse to meet the moment. Search terms for both databases included multiple variations on culture, lifestyle, service, literary, and arts paired with variations of journalism, writing, criticism, and beat. Results were sifted to eliminate any articles that were not relevant to this study because they merely mentioned a search term but were about another topic altogether.
Table 2. Summary of Publications and Articles About Cultural Journalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of metajournalism</th>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Number of articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Industry metacoverage</td>
<td>Columbia Journalism Review</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MediaShift</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NiemanLab</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online Journalism Review</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poynter</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Subtotal: 32</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public-facing metajournalistic discourse</td>
<td>BBC²</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Buzzfeed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ESPN</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Esquire</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forbes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Hollywood Reporter</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Los Angeles Times</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New York Magazine</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The New York Times</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The New Yorker</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NPR</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slate</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Atlantic</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vox</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Washington Post</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Wall Street Journal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Subtotal: 69</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total: 101</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² The BBC has a large enough American audience to meet the criteria outlined by Pew Research Center, which positions it as a top news outlet in the United States.
Table 3. Number of Metajournalistic Discourse Articles Per Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication Year</th>
<th>Number of Industry Metacoverage Articles</th>
<th>Number of Public-facing Metajournalism Articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

Analysis of the articles followed an adapted model of metajournalistic discourse classification outlined by Aitamurto & Varma (2018) to look for discursive themes relevant to normative theory. This involves an eight-part analytical framework that includes the following components: (1) the definition of cultural journalism and any of its subsets, (2) motivations for cultural journalism, (3) cultural journalism’s relationship with the individual and/or society, (4) methods for engaging in cultural journalism as journalism practice, (5) cultural journalism’s challenges within journalism practice, (6) cultural journalism’s relationship with other forms of journalism, (7) cultural journalism and journalistic norms, and (8) cultural journalism and normative journalistic roles. These aspects were chosen because they provide rich connections to the research questions with component 2 dealing directly with motivations (RQ1), components 1, 3, and 6–8 focusing on norms (RQ2), and components 4 and 5 addressing practices (RQ3). This framework was used to categorize relevant metadiscourse during the first round of coding while
subsequent rounds were dedicated to connecting these results to role theory and the ways in which humanistic journalism is different from previously defined normative frameworks.

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure that my interpretations of this data are closely linked to the evidence, my primary check on qualitative validity was triangulation. I engaged in data triangulation through analyzing articles derived from a variety of quality sources, both industry centered and public facing. The articles I analyzed also span many years, so interpretations were not limited to one specific incident or short-term trend. I also engaged in theory triangulation, constantly comparing the previously outlined normative theories with my own developing theoretical framework. And the final triangulation strategy I engaged in was disciplinary triangulation, drawing from multiple fields such as sociology, philosophy, and history. Additionally, the dissertation process afforded me the opportunity to engage in regular peer debriefing with my advisor and dissertation committee. And the final strategy I employed for increasing scholarly credibility is explaining and clarifying my biases, which I accomplish through the following section.

**Researcher’s Role**

My unique academic background in both the humanities and social sciences informed how I interpreted the data. My undergraduate degree is in both political science, primarily falling under the quantitative social sciences, and philosophy/religious studies, primarily falling under the humanities. My master’s degree is in religious ethics, firmly rooted in the humanities and regularly engaging in textual/discourse analysis from the perspective of that field. And my time at in this doctoral program has trained me how to
be a qualitative social scientist and how this often overlaps with the research tools used in the humanities. Though I never worked professionally as a cultural journalist, I have worked as a religion journalist, regularly engaging in journalism that I would consider to be within what I am calling the humanistic role. And in my personal life I consume a great amount of pop culture journalism and television/film criticism. It is likely the disconnect between this hobby and my professional studies in journalism ethics that led me to this dissertation topic.

Summary

This project is ultimately an attempt to put the social scientific approach of journalism ethics in stronger dialogue with the humanities. The broader disconnect between the two has resulted in a specific problem: a privileging of “hard” news over “soft” news. Though forms of journalism such as political news and investigative reporting are certainly vital to a functioning democratic society, it does not follow that all “soft” news such as cultural journalism is then beyond democracy. It should become clear after a close discourse analysis of journalism about cultural journalism that there is a new humanistic role that deserves a place alongside other previously established journalistic roles in normative theories. Beyond theoretical significance, this project also has practical implications regarding what type of journalist is understood to be crucial to newsrooms since cultural journalists are regularly some of the first beat reporters to face the threat of layoffs.

The prior literature on this issue begins in the realm of political philosophy, where the works of John Dewey help us to move beyond understandings of democracy that are only useful for the study of “hard” news. The realm of everyday life is not as private and
disconnected from the public political sphere as it is often thought to be. An examination of the literature on roles within journalism studies shows us how normative theory is anchored in democratic culture to varying degrees but also illuminates just how narrow the prevailing understandings of democracy can be. If this democracy paradigm is expanded, there has been an abundance of interesting work by media sociologists on cultural journalism and its various subsets that should be built upon. The blind spots we face here are not an accident but the result of the disciplinary histories of both journalism studies and mass communication studies – each finding a home within the social sciences as they struggled for academic legitimacy. But a humanistic impulse has been with these disciplines from their inception, and if we revitalize this strand, it is possible to apply the tool of metajournalistic discourse analysis to unearth a new journalistic role.

Finally, this project was rigorous in applying metajournalistic discourse analysis to quality data to further qualitative research within normative theory. Metajournalistic discourse is the prime location to examine how the boundaries of cultural journalism are defined for journalists and the public as well as any accompanying motivations, norms, and practices that could warrant a new journalistic role. Though this role would not then be limited to cultural journalism, this beat is the closest parallel to the humanities that journalism has and is therefore the best form to interrogate. Using both the DoJo database and the top newspapers and online sites to find journalism about cultural journalism provides rich discourse that was analyzed through examining definitions, motivations, relationship to mobilization, practice, challenges, relationship to other forms, norms, and roles. This systematized analysis allowed for coding and thematic categorization of the discourse in order to clearly connect it to a theoretical normative framework.
Chapter 4: Findings

The fundamental purpose of this study is to outline a new humanistic role for journalism through philosophical argument complemented by close examination of journalism about cultural journalism. This chapter focuses on the latter of these. Through metajournalistic discourse analysis, the unique motivations, norms, and practices of this new role were brought into sharp relief. The main motivating themes centered around exploring truths about what it means to be human and clearing up misconceptions surrounding what humanistic journalism seeks to accomplish. The discourse also centered empathy as the primary normative ideal for humanistic journalism and suggested the orienting principles of insight and subjectivity. And finally, the practices of humanistic journalism were grounded in helping us to better understand ourselves and our communities as well as engaging in active interpretation that promotes dialogue between the journalists and readers as well as among readers themselves.

RQ1: The Motivations of Cultural Journalism

The metajournalistic discourse suggests that humanistic journalism is motivated by exploring and revealing truths about what it means to be human and correcting common misconceptions about the goals of cultural journalism.

Revealing Truths About What It Means to Be Human

Through analyzing cultural artifacts such as films, television, or music, the industry metacoverage made the case that cultural journalists set out to explore the significance of art and examine the corresponding implications this has for truths about what it means to be human. This is because, as Steven Winn, arts and culture critic for the
San Francisco Chronicle, wrote in a 2016 Poynter article, “people truly want to engage with ideas and ways of synthesizing their arts experience and their lives.” This motivation is perhaps best captured through a quote from a 2018 Columbia Journalism Review (CJR) article titled “The Culture Beat is Changing Under Trump. Should It?” which opens with the paragraph:

The best culture writers move beyond a piece of art or entertainment to examine larger trends – the power of Michelle Obama’s image, the fetishization of the “cool girl,” the oversexualization of the black male body. They use a cultural moment – an awards ceremony, a new Netflix miniseries, an album release – to discuss what it really means to be human.

This demonstrates motivations that are separate form any other previously defined journalistic role. This is particularly different from the observation and documentation motivations within the monitorial role, which is where much of journalism operating within the humanistic role may have previously been misassigned.

The public-facing metajournalistic discourse confirmed the motivation to explore different conceptions of what it means to be human. For example, a 2020 ESPN piece on how their writer, Soraya McDonald, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for criticism included her thoughts on the role of culture writing: “For so many outlets, criticism is a luxury, one that gets scratched from budgets in difficult times. But it is a necessity. Good criticism isn’t just about art. It illuminates the way we think about the world. It is a search for truth, a celebration of beauty, and an art form in and of itself.” This notion that criticism could be art itself was reiterated in multiple pieces, most notably in a 2016 article in The New Yorker by Hua Hsu titled “The Critic Who Convinced Me That Criticism Could Be
Art.” This stance positions cultural journalism as something that not only unpacks artistic expression but may actually represent artistic expression in and of itself. This certainly captures something that does not fit into any of the previously established normative roles of journalism.

Correcting for Common Misconceptions

In outlining the motivations of this humanistic role, the industry metacoverage also sought to correct for common misconceptions about cultural journalism, in part differentiating the genre from “service journalism” due to its role in meaning-making. While service journalism can certainly be meaningful, its goals are fundamentally practical. For example, in a lengthy report from CJR titled “Toward a Constructive Technology Criticism,” Clive Thompson, a writer for The New York Times Magazine and Wired, is quoted explaining why he is not merely a gadget reviewer:

The difference is a reviewer is trying to stay current and is interested in telling you whether or not something is worth your money. If something is a terrible game, they will say, “This is a terrible thing to play.” A critic is someone who is interested in the meaning of games [emphasis added] and so it doesn’t matter whether or not the game is any good. I would frequently write about terrible games because they did something that was interesting.

It has been common within some journalism studies literature on roles to flatten most of cultural journalism to entertainment consumption or utilitarian service journalism (see, e.g., Hanitzsch & Voss, 2016) but quotes like this demonstrate that there is something more humanistic here worth recognizing. Cultural journalism was framed throughout the industry metacoverage as driven by a desire to explore social contexts with the goal of
revealing what certain creative works can tell us regarding truths about what it means to be human.

In fact, there were numerous instances in the industry metacoverage of pushing back against rote positivity, hegemonic monoculture, and corporate marketing interests. The best example of this came from a 2020 CJR article titled “Music Criticism in the Time of Stans” and Haters.” The piece documented several instances of professional critics being targeted for harassment from fans after a musical artist publicly responded to a negative review:

Discussions of artistic merit are pushed toward a binary choice: love it or hate it.

“Either you’re a stan or you’re a hater,” says Lindsay Zoladz, a music critic. In reality, “most of our responses to music fall in some grey area in between.”

…Music writers, says [Rawiya] Kameir, are considered by the public to be an extension of an artist’s publicity machine. “There’s a fundamental problem with toxic positivity, wherein anything that isn’t hyperbolical praise is considered malicious or hateful,” she says. Fans, [Laura] Snapes notes, “are happy if they agree with us, but if they don’t, they’re the first people to be like, ‘Music criticism? What? This is a job?’” That sentiment can be weaponized by the music industry. “These multinational corporations have basically convinced fans that they’re fighting for the little guy,” says Snapes, “when actually they’re just defending the ultimate corporate interests.”

3 Merriam-Webster defines “stan” as often disparaging slang that refers to “an extremely or excessively enthusiastic and devoted fan.” The term originated in a 2000 song by the rapper Eminem and was given new life by fans of Korean pop music who organized to rally behind Black Lives Matter two decades later (Rosenblatt, 2020).
This argument positions online fandom, not cultural journalists, as the true corporate public relations arm and makes the case that the openly adversarial relationship between artist or fan and critic often stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of what cultural criticism should do. This discursive framing again points toward the motivations of cultural journalism as detached from a collaborative role serving corporate objectives or consumerist goals that would limit it to the personal realm and instead points us toward something deeper concerning how people collectively make meaning out of art.

The public-facing metajournalistic discourse also regularly pushed back against misconceptions about the role of cultural journalism in similar ways. A 2013 New York Times article by Bob Garfield titled “Banning the Negative Book Review” was one of the many articles that confronted the decision by BuzzFeed to cease publishing negative book reviews. Garfield pushed back against the notion that literary criticism only exists to serve as positive publicity for books, writing that it “is a genre unto itself, its value residing not in the appraisal of the book so much as the context, scholarship and thematic exploration offered by the critic.” Similarly, a 2017 article in The New Yorker by Alex Ross called “The Fate of the Critic in the Clickbait Age” quotes Virgil Thomson’s definition of culture criticism that positions it as “the only antidote we have to paid publicity.” These formulations clearly make the case that cultural journalism cannot be reduced to a form of service journalism that tells us what to purchase as a consumer. Rather, the metadiscourse surrounding cultural journalism positions it as promoting dialogue and nuanced interpretation, deconstructing the circumstances that led to the production of artistic works, evaluating its merits, and challenging the boundaries between high and low culture. This represents an uneasy relationship with
commercialism that, when operating correctly, can often be outright hostile to corporate interests and consumer culture.

A prime example of this can be found in a 2019 *New York Times* piece about the importance of hiring culture critics from marginalized communities perhaps best sums up why cultural journalism should be important to normative theory:

Think of cultural criticism as a public utility, civic infrastructure that needs to be valued not based just on its monetary impact but also on its capacity to expand the collective conversation at a time when it is dangerously contracting. Arts writing fosters an engaged citizenry that participates in the making of its own story.

It is precisely this connection to how we interact with others in the public realm that is at the foundation of why a new humanistic role is necessary. Humanistic journalism cannot be reduced to private consumer choices when it clearly engages its readers as citizens. This framing even directly positions cultural criticism as “civic infrastructure,” a sentiment that was echoed throughout the metadiscourse which consistently made the case that cultural journalism is an essential component of maintaining healthy communities at any scale. For this reason, our understanding of the relationship between journalism and democracy will continue to be incomplete unless the humanistic role is adopted to exist alongside the other previously defined journalistic roles.

**RQ2: The Norms of Cultural Journalism**

Humanistic journalism was found to contain a unique set of norms ranging from the overarching ideal of *empathy* to the use of *insight* and *subjectivity* as orienting principles.
Empathy

Empathy best represents the humanistic role’s ideal because it is rooted in the capacity to be informed about and sensitive to the experience of others. No single individual has the capacity in their interpersonal interactions to encounter the variety of experiences opened up to them through humanistic journalism. An industry metacoverage article in *CJR* about *New York Magazine*s women’s culture vertical, The Cut, even explicitly identifies empathy as the site’s defining ideology. For example, this profoundly influenced coverage of and participation in the #MeToo movement. Empathy can also manifest itself as an emphasis on understanding racial diversity, as was evident in an article in *NiemanLab* about Code Switch, a *National Public Radio* podcast about race and culture, that covers topics like the deeper meaning behind the Broadway musical “Hamilton” or the myth of the colorblind millennial. In this conversation with its creators, it became clear that cultural journalism served as a space that forces mainstream outlets “to explore race in America beyond the tragic moments like the shooting of Tamir Rice in Cleveland, or presidential candidates’ thoughts on immigration.” This specifically reflects the norm of empathy through centering an exploration of the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others instead of focusing on reporting out events that fall within the news cycle.

The public-facing metajournalistic discourse also centered empathy as cultural journalism’s primary ideal. Many of these discussions also centered around cultural presentations of marginalized communities and journalistic diversity. A 2019 *New York Times* article by Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Chi-hui Yang called “The Dominance of the
White Male Critic” made the case for why an empathetic approach to cultural journalism was important:

Culture is a battleground where some narratives win and others lose. Whether we believe someone should be locked in a cage or not is shaped by the stories we absorb about one another, and whether they’re disrupted or not. At a time when inequality and white supremacy are soaring, collective opinion is born at monuments, museums, screens, and stages – well before it’s confirmed at the ballot box.

This demonstrates how a humanistic journalism can provide the context for the actions of everyday citizens in the public sphere and how it is connected to, but still separate from, politics as it is traditionally defined.

*Insight*

Insight was present throughout the industry metacoverage as a principle that orients humanistic journalism. Insight was invoked to describe the depth and wisdom that humanistic journalism can provide. This often meant that beats other than culture, such as politics or science, need the humanistic role to fully understand aspects of many important issues under their purview. For example, a 2016 *CJR* article on the technology beat discussed how that coverage needed to include elements of cultural criticism in order to be good journalism:

In the best cases, criticism offers the opportunity for context setting, and for asking questions beyond the tick-tock of technical development and into the how’s and why’s of a larger cultural shift. Criticism leaves room for interpretation, analysis, assessment, and more systematic inquiry. Popular
criticism seeks to question established and unexamined knowledge – the assumptions and positions taken for granted. As author and contributor for The New York Times Virginia Heffernan reflects, criticism should “‘familiarize the unfamiliar’ and ‘de-familiarize the familiar.’” In other words, the critic articulates why we like the things we like, why we don’t like others, and poses possible explanations of what these artifacts say about our culture. While hesitant to describe his work as criticism, associate editor Robinson Meyer acknowledges some of the features of criticism The Atlantic Tech aims for: “We aspire to be essayistic; we aspire to be constellational in our thinking, and we aspire to be incisive and insightful. Those are all traits of criticism. A lot of our work also is about naming things that don’t have a name yet.” Criticism, in the context of technology, seeks to make meaning out of technological change.

Here we can see that insight, like empathy, also sometimes represents humanistic journalism’s separation from the churn of the news cycle, which was often framed as producing only surface-level understanding of current events. This means that humanistic journalism serves to provide crucial background context for the current events that are documented through journalism’s monitorial role.

The public-facing metajournalistic discourse revealed an emphasis on insight that was similar to the industry metacoverage. Insight was directly addressed in a 2021 Vox article by Carlos Aguilar titled “Who Gets To Be a Critic?” where he wrote that “A critic’s job is to assess a work of creativity, both its form and its relationship to the larger culture, with insight.” This represents the presence of insight as a principle that orients journalists operating within the humanistic role through compelling them to seek a deeper
understanding of whatever they are covering that goes beyond mere accurate documentation. Aguilar’s point here is also that being a critic affords journalists the power to lead conversations about the significance of art, and it is therefore crucial that cultural journalists reflect everyone in society who is impacted by that work. Amanda Petrusich took a slightly different approach to insight in her 2016 article in *The New Yorker* titled “The Music Critic in the Age of the Insta-Release” where she wrote:

Good art often takes time to make, and it often takes time to understand, too. It doesn’t feel unreasonable to suggest that perhaps the very first thing a person should do when faced with some nascent creation is not frantically and qualitatively assess its value. Imagine being tasked with writing an insightful, definitive obituary for a person you once fidgeted beside for two hours and forty-five minutes on a midday flight from Tampa to Chicago. This positions insight as something that orients humanistic journalism to move at a much slower pace than what monitorial journalism would typically allow. The public-facing metajournalistic discourse on this notion ranged from arguing that cultural journalism should be more disconnected from the news cycle to insisting that it should purposefully look back at cultural works from long ago in order to illuminate what they have to say about our current moment. This, again, underscores the notion that humanistic journalism provides something valuable for everyday citizens that the monitorial role does not.

*Subjectivity*

Subjectivity also served as an orienting principle for the humanistic role throughout the industry metacoverage through promoting a kind of intellectual pluralism. Since the digital age has resulted in dramatic shifts in journalism’s cultural gatekeeping
(Vos & Thomas, 2019), these journalists have used their complicated authority to answer the relativistic question “Who’s to say?” with “We are all to say.” Cultural critics were not merely writing about their opinions or “hot takes” but strived to demonstrate to readers and listeners that complex contexts and identities shape how we each experience the world differently. But this orienting principle of subjectivity also poses a potential problem for cultural journalism. As Chris Ip wrote in a 2015 *CJR* article titled “What is the Role of the Digital-Age Arts Critic?”, the “inherent subjectiveness of music, film, and literature encourages anyone with a blog or Twitter handle to play critic, drowning out once-authoritative voices. A nuanced essay lacks the sheer quantified certainty of Rotten Tomatoes – which may itself be supplanted by Netflix recommendation algorithms.” This demonstrates why, in order to serve as truly humanistic journalism, culture writing must pair subjectivity with the principle of insight and the ideal of empathy in order to explore and reveal truths about what it means to be human.

A prime example of subjectivity within the public-facing metajournalistic discourse was found in a 2012 article in *The Atlantic* that quoted Alfred Kazin’s “The Useful Critic” arguing that criticism is a branch of literature not of science. Like any other form of literary expression, criticism can satisfy nothing but our sense of imaginative truth; its judgments operate only within our inner sense, and depend on our taste and culture. Critical statements are not binding on everyone, as are proofs of scientific truth. This literary subjectivity offers a vivid, personalized version of truth that stands in contrast to the detached objective and universal laws of science. This does not make criticism arbitrary, but rather centered in passionate humanism. The principles of insight
and subjectivity were also part of many articles that directly addressed how cultural journalism is partially about teaching readers to be cultural critics themselves. A *New York Times* series called “The Learning Network” included a 2015 article detailing how “a review is very different from reporting: Your subjective experience and your reactions – intellectual, emotional, visceral – are a big part of it.” This has a rather direct parallel to how the humanities are generally taught in academia, as a set of intellectual frameworks that are built upon critical thinking and aim to further understand and interpret the human experience through evaluating meaning, truth, and values.

**RQ3: The Practices of Cultural Journalism**

Throughout the metajournalistic discourse, it was clear that humanistic journalism as it is practiced provides us with a better *understanding of ourselves and connection to other people* in our local, national, and international communities and promotes *interpretive dialogue*.

*Understanding of Ourselves and Connection to Other People*

The practice of understanding of ourselves and connection to other people is best illustrated within the industry metacoverage through a 2017 *CJR* article about the disappearance of arts critics at newspapers where the author writes that:

Old Crow and Broadway maverick Lin-Manuel Miranda, novelist Donna Tartt and filmmaker Adam McKay change culture in seismic shifts. They are the culmination of a drive that begins with 16-year-old kids playing all-ages punk shows in basements and first timers reciting verses at weekly poetry slams...

Following these individuals’ stories and success connects us to our communities and our humanity.
Since this emphasis on the role connection plays in humanistic journalism was a strong through line in the metajournalistic discourse, the inverse was also explored: a lack of humanistic journalism feeds disconnection. Specifically, a 2017 *CJR* article about covering right-wing extremism within internet culture points out that people turn to conspiracy theories because they “don’t understand why the media images they are constantly seeing have nothing to do with their lives, people feel disconnected, and people feel like they don’t have any power.” Humanistic journalism functions, in part, to offer explanations of the human condition and how others navigate questions of ultimate meaning.

The public-facing metajournalistic discourse also underscored this drive for self-understanding and connection to others. The best example of this can be found in Emily St. James’ 2018 *Vox* article titled “Why Cultural Criticism Matters”:

Cultural criticism is *important* – vitally so. Sure, it’s how I earn a paycheck, but long before I got into this line of work, great cultural journalism gave me other ways of looking at and understanding the world, which is core to journalism’s mission statement. We need cultural criticism not just to tell us which movies to go see and which ones to avoid, but to tell us things we already knew but didn’t know how to express. If reporting can explain the world to us, cultural criticism can explain *us* to us [emphasis in original].

Here, again, we get an argument for why cultural journalism is different than reporting but still fulfills a crucial role in society. Cultural journalism, operating within the humanistic role, tells us something important about who we are and how we relate to other people. Cultural artifacts, ranging from high culture to popular culture, reflect how
we see the world. And journalists who unpack the meaning behind these artifacts (whether that is food, video games, or pop music, etc.) are constantly guiding how we understand ourselves and our relationship to the communities we are part of – independent of the quality of the art.

**Interpretative Dialogue**

Another practice found within the industry metacoverage about cultural journalism is best described as interpretative dialogue. This form of dialogue is different from the public conversation that serves as the foundation of journalism’s facilitative role. While the facilitative role provides a forum for debate and conversation, the journalist is not an active participant in that dialogue. Within the humanistic role, conversations are both between readers/listeners and between those individuals and the journalist. The journalist is not a neutral facilitating moderator but an interpreter who deconstructs and evaluates cultural artifacts, identities, and events. This can be seen in a 2016 *Poynter* article about recaps (articles that describe a particular cultural event/artifact, such as a television episode, with additional analysis and evaluation) where the writer states that:

Alison and I have become actors in the Recap Culture. We will consume the recaps of others on movies, television shows, award shows, sporting events, serial documentaries and even recurring news events. But we don’t think of ourselves as passive. We want to read and watch, but we also want to talk, talk, talk. That good talk – let’s call it conversation – can be inspired by expert writers and critics who know how to produce recaps for a variety of media platforms.
On multiple occasions, the metaphor used to describe this humanistic function was not a town hall, which would situate it squarely within the facilitative role, but a *book club* in which there is a hierarchy, but everyone (including the leader) is a subjective participant. The goal of a book club is generally to form a small community to discuss how literature contains meaning that resonates with our lived experiences. In a journalistic space, the “cultural conversation” is meant to be intelligent and passionate and serve to both foster community and connect participants to humanistic inquiry through nurturing curiosity.

The public-facing metajournalistic discourse also touched on this practice of interpretive dialogue. This stance was regularly illuminated when pointing out the difference between fandom or publicity and arts criticism. For example, a 2013 article in *The New Yorker* by Maria Bustillos titled “Much Ado About Niceness” argued that “if we accept that the making of meaning is a collaborative process between artist and audience, then the value of honest criticism becomes immediately apparent. Dialogue is what counts: praise or blame are similarly irrelevant.” There was also a new element present in the public-facing metajournalistic discourse: dialogue between cultural journalists themselves. For example, *The Hollywood Reporter*’s articles centered around conversations between two or more cultural journalists about topics ranging from art tied to sexual misconduct to how critics should think about art that is about art itself. These articles consisted of a back-and-forth discussion between journalists written as if the reader were present for a panel or an informal conversation about important cultural issues. For example, one 2017 article about separating art from the artist included this exchange:
Tim Goodman: Though the era of accountability is new, history has many examples of great art created by flawed, often awful, sometimes criminal people. In recent years, just off the top of my head: Roman Polanski, Bill Cosby, Woody Allen, Michael Jackson, and Mel Gibson. Are we at a tipping point in terms of how we write about these people and others who are yet to be named?

Inkoo Kang: It’s a good question and one that’s been a long time coming… The separation of an artwork from its artist sounds like a mighty interesting concept for those who are able to do it. But for much of the audience, I’d imagine, it’s a persistent distraction – a voice that you can’t shut up, reminding the viewer not only what an actor or writer or director might have done, but what the viewer might have suffered too… Allen’s recent projects, [Gibson in] *Daddy’s Home 2* and Louis CK’s *Louie* exemplify writer Rebecca Traister’s post-Weinstein observation that we live in a world where abusers have helped shaped the narratives we tell about our world. If many of these artists keep insisting on their lack of guilt, at what point does art bleed into propaganda?

Tim Goodman: I agree that now is maybe not the ideal time to consider the age-old conundrum of how to love the art but loathe the artist. That’s an intellectual pursuit whereas we’re in the middle of a powerful and emotional societal change; it’s not white hot or red hot, it’s molten – people are (rightly) pissed off. In the short term, the simplest (and yes, of course, it’s the easiest) suggestion is to let people decide how they want to feel and honor it… As critics, our views should
be allowed to change over time as well. We are sitting down to write on shifting ground… When it comes to artists who have offended, history shows that it’s less that people forgive and forget and more that they just forget because the despicable acts were long ago. The forgetting allows, by default, some form of forgiveness or, probably more accurately, less intense caring [emphasis in original].

The intimacy of this conversational approach to cultural journalism seems somewhat similar to the relationship that some roundtable podcasts create with listeners. It invites the reader to pull up a chair at this table and experience a dialogue that offers multiple viewpoints about important issues regarding how culture should operate within our lives. This emphasis on interpretive dialogue suggests that the humanistic role serves to directly connect us to the works of art that are commenting on the cultural issues we face together as a society.

**Summary**

The unique motivations, norms, and practices of cultural journalism point directly toward a new humanistic role. There were some interesting differences between the trade publications and the public-facing journalism, such as the tendency of the news outlets to focus on reactive discourse (such as an incident where journalists were laid off or an outlet closed) while the trade publications focused overwhelmingly on generative discourse (such as the future of publicly funded journalism). Often, the public facing journalism about cultural journalism was found in the opinion section, which makes sense given the nature of drawing boundaries in metajournalistic discourse. Occasionally,
a brief description of the role of cultural journalism was found when a cultural journalist died and an obituary was published honoring them. The number of public-facing articles was concentrated in some newer online only publications and large legacy print publications that have a large pool of journalists to draw from. The websites of the major television news networks ABC, CBS, and NBC, as well as newswire services such as the Associated Press and Reuters did not produce any meaningful journalism about cultural journalism in written form. This is not necessarily surprising, but it does possibly indicate an institutionally narrow view of journalism that focuses almost exclusively on reporting hard news and leaves humanistic journalism to magazines, large legacy newspapers, and online-only publications.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study has been to outline the existence of a previously unexplored role that contains a unique set of motivations, norms, and practices that ultimately serve to sustain a healthy democracy. The findings here indicate that the humanistic role deserves to exist alongside the monitorial, facilitative, collaborative, and radical roles previously outlined by Christians et al. (2009). This serves to correct for the blind spot created when the major discussions about normative theory within journalism studies set aside “soft” news while exploring journalism’s relationship to democracy. Despite renewed attention to cultural journalism from media sociologists, the history of journalism ethics’ close relationship to the social sciences has hindered our ability to examine journalism beyond “hard” news. However, with some help from the realm of political philosophy, specifically the works of John Dewey, we can see how a broadened definition of democracy that goes beyond the political process can help journalism scholars with this problem. When this occurs, we can see that there is something regularly occurring in the everyday realm of “soft” news that previous normative frameworks have failed to grapple with. This is of particular importance for the current polarized political moment where a journalism that humanizes the world should not be seen as beyond democracy and instead be understood as fundamental to its success.

Summary of Major Findings

This project found that the humanistic role as it is expressed in the metajournalistic discourse surrounding cultural journalism contains unique motivations. These motivations centered around exploring and revealing truths about what it means to
be human. This came about through cultural journalists working to extract meaning from cultural artifacts such as food, music, or films and relating the implications of this experience to the reader. Some writers even argued that cultural journalism could be an art form itself. The discourse also sought to clear up common misconceptions about cultural journalism, such as the fact that it cannot be reduced to the practical goals of service journalism and is certainly not based around corporate public relations. Unpacking the meaning behind art and culture is independent of whether it can be recommended for consumption or not. And humanistic journalism also serves to galvanize everyday citizens to participate in their own cultural narratives.

The metajournalistic discourse also revealed distinctive norms present within the humanistic role. The keystone of these norms is empathy – actively learning about and being attentive to the experiences of other people. This was described as an important site to gain empathy because cultural journalism has the capacity to introduce us to more experiences and identities than we could ever experience interpersonally. And this was framed as especially important for marginalized communities who deem it necessary to share their stories outside the realm of political journalism. Empathy was found to be aided by the orienting principles of insight and subjectivity. Insight represented the wisdom and depth that humanistic journalism could provide a variety of journalistic beats beyond culture. This was also used as an explanation for why it is important that humanistic journalism is often somewhat disconnected from the news cycle, allowing it to provide necessary background context to the other journalistic roles. Subjectivity was invoked to represent intellectual pluralism and to teach readers how to organize their
visceral responses to cultural encounters. This means that part of humanistic journalism is teaching readers how to be interpretive cultural critics themselves.

The practices of cultural journalism described throughout the metadiscourse also revealed what makes humanistic journalism distinguishable from other previously established normative roles. These practices center around providing readers with a better understanding of themselves and linking them to others in their communities. Several writers made the case that without this practice in place, readers can often become disconnected from journalism altogether. This then impacts all journalistic roles both at the local level and the national level. This connection is successfully achieved through a form of dialogue that operates differently than what is found in the facilitative role.

Within the humanistic role, any combination of journalists and readers are engaged in interpretive dialogue with no neutral moderator present. Multiple subjective viewpoints are offered by everyone involved in an attempt to better understand the ways culture intersects with our lives and the issues we collectively face.

**Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this study indicate that there is something unique occurring within cultural journalism and that its motivations, norms, and practices cannot be folded into any previously defined role. As Table 4 indicates, humanistic journalism is distinct from the monitorial, facilitative, collaborative, and radical roles outlined by Christians et al. (2009). Humanistic journalism’s fundamental motive is to explore and reveal truths about what it means to be human through *empathy, insight,* and *subjectivity.* This does not fit into the monitorial role’s motivation document, inform, and serve as a watchdog to power through objectivity, accuracy, and transparency. The humanistic role could conceivably fit
into the facilitative role’s motivation to convene a conversation about public issues through deliberation, except that the journalist operating within the facilitative role explicitly acts as a neutral moderator and not a participant. This is not at all how deliberation works within the humanistic role where the journalist serves is directly involved as a subjective participant in the cultural conversation. The collaborative role deals primarily with public relations, which falls outside journalism, as well as public safety notifications such as severe weather alerts or public health reporting. The notion that cultural journalism was a form of public relations was one of the primary misconceptions the metajournalistic discourse sought to rectify. Humanistic journalism is regularly positioned against corporate interests and consumer culture. And finally, the radical role’s motivation to scrutinize systemic power through solidarity and dissent does not align with the goals of humanistic journalism either. Though a radical journalist can be described as a “critic,” this is centered in demanding structural reform that upsets the status quo. A cultural critic operating within the humanistic role has a different mission to deconstruct and evaluate cultural artifacts, identities, and events.
Table 4. The Humanistic Role Alongside the Roles Outlined by Christians et al. (2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Monitorial</th>
<th>Facilitative</th>
<th>Radical</th>
<th>Collaborative</th>
<th>Humanistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motive</td>
<td>Observe and document routine and unexpected events, check power</td>
<td>Convene a conversation about public issues</td>
<td>Critically scrutinize systemic power, offer alternatives to status quo</td>
<td>Advance aims of an outside institution (such as the state, a business, or a nonprofit group)</td>
<td>Explore and reveal truths about what it means to be human</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Principle(s)</td>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>Deliberation</td>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>Allegiance</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accuracy; Transparency</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Dissent</td>
<td>Synergy; Strategic communication</td>
<td>Insight, Subjectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism Provides</td>
<td>A watchdog that provides an ongoing check on power</td>
<td>A forum for debate and conversation</td>
<td>Criticism of existing power structures</td>
<td>A megaphone to advance an outside institution’s agenda</td>
<td>A better understanding of and connection to self/others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casts the journalist as</td>
<td>A neutral observer, shining a spotlight on society’s problems</td>
<td>A manager of discourse; acting as a moderator rather than a participant</td>
<td>A critic, demanding structural reform</td>
<td>An intermediary, providing a platform for outside institution</td>
<td>Interpreter; deconstructs and evaluates cultural artifacts, identities, and events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example(s)</td>
<td>Watchdog and investigative reporting</td>
<td>The public journalism movement</td>
<td>The advocacy press; The minority press</td>
<td>Public relations; Public health reporting</td>
<td>Arts criticism, Literary journalism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the metajournalistic discourse surrounding cultural journalism is not nearly as ubiquitous as the deluge of metajournalistic discourse surrounding a topic such as political journalism, there is still plenty of substance within these findings that allows us to see the contours of a distinct humanistic role. Though the monitorial, facilitative, collaborative, radical, and humanistic roles each point to a specific set of motivations,
norms, and practices it is important to emphasize that due to the complex nature of journalism practice they routinely overlap with one another. And it is also the case that no one role is ever going to directly correspond to a single journalistic beat. For example, science journalism can and does operate in any of these five roles. Similarly, not all cultural journalism falls within the humanistic role just as not all journalism within the humanistic role is cultural journalism. For example, a story about how much money various summer blockbuster movies made would generally fall under the monitorial role while a piece of war reporting might fall within the humanistic role but not represent a work of cultural journalism.

The humanistic role earning a place alongside the other four roles serves to strengthen both the normative framework of Christians et al. (2009) and role theory more broadly. It fortifies the work of Christians et al. (2009) specifically because it takes pressure off the overstuffed monitorial role. This role already contains a broad continuum of journalism from the passive observation and transmission of information all the way to the active and critical investigations that expose the transgressions of powerful people and institutions. To also attempt to include the motivations, norms, and practices of humanistic journalism within this framework only serves to stretch the boundaries of the monitorial role so far that it becomes a diluted, miscellaneous category. This would be a shame because it may well be the most important of all the roles – the vital Fourth Estate – and deserves to have a clear and concise definition. It is also a positive trend in role scholarship that “soft” news is finally receiving some attention, but this will require treating this type of journalism with the same level of seriousness that “hard” news engenders. Something like cultural journalism is not merely a remainder that can be
placed as an afterthought somewhere within role frameworks designed around “hard” news reporting. We must move beyond binaries like hard/soft, citizen/consumer, and political/everyday life that flatten the reality of how people navigate their world through journalism. This project represents an important step in that direction, but much more work is to be done to ensure that role theory accurately reflects our complicated journalistic reality.

It is also important to note that the norms of some roles can result in negative outcomes if they are adopted by other roles. For example, I see some of monitorial journalism’s issues with “bothsidesism” as stemming from an incorrect application of subjectivity. “Bothsides” journalism represents an attempt to perform journalistic objectivity by presenting two opposing sides of a political debate as equally valid regardless of countervailing evidence (Lalami, 2019). This form of monitorial journalism frames impartiality as balance, tends to narrow the range of acceptable voices that can be heard commenting on public issues, and centers the conflict between political parties instead of providing thorough context for the subject of the reporting (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017). Journalism operating in this mode often leaves readers confused and unable to identify the source of problems, resulting in a distain for politics that creates space for and rewards bad faith actors who present solutions in black-and-white terms (Overholser, 2019). Despite the “bothsides” journalist hemming to the objectivity norm, the idea that there are always two sides of equal value and truth to every political story, especially when untethered from the humanistic role’s empathy and insight, can lead to an unhealthy form of subjectivity that quickly devolves into moral relativism. It poses a problem for democracy when the standard for what is right or true is left entirely up to individuals or
groups instead of stemming from ideals and orienting principles rooted in democratic thought.

The metajournalistic discourse further suggests that a Deweyan understanding of democracy captures much of why “soft” journalism is relevant to normative theory. Democratic theory within journalism studies should be about much more than how journalism influences voting behavior and legislation. As Dewey wrote, “democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life, [but] the idea of community life itself” (1927, p. 328). This means that democracy goes beyond governance to encompass the ways citizens make sense of their everyday lives, and humanistic journalism is one of the ways people can cultivate meaning from these experiences. Just as Anderson (2009) describes informal civic groups as teaching citizens how to interact and have mutual respect for one another, the humanistic role plays a similar democratic function. This is similar to the “informal public sphere” concept from Jürgen Habermas (1996) where the goal of this subset of the public realm is to increase knowledge rather than to make specific political decisions. Anderson (1991) also invokes John Stuart Mill’s “experiments in living” to describe how we investigate alternative conceptions of the good life. I see here a parallel here to how humanistic journalism unpacks some of these experiments that we are not directly engaged in but, rather, experience through art and culture and apply to our individual or communal sense of fulfillment and moral development. Humanistic journalism explores ways of living that are indirectly related to politics but are nevertheless key to living the good life within a democratic community.

This project also serves to expose the weaknesses inherent within the individual-level approach that has hitherto been dominant within journalism ethics research.
Focusing on questions of personal journalistic morality and how ethical dilemmas should be approached within the newsroom is important, but there are still major gaps in our knowledge of how journalism does and should operate at an institutional level. My work has been inspired by scholars such as Allen and Hindman (2014), and Thomas (2019a, 2019b) who have all consistently argued that the field should draw more from political philosophy. This project contributes to this broader project through applying Dewey’s political philosophy to a new realm: cultural journalism. In doing so, I hope that a broadened understanding of democracy might inspire more work in this area. And I also intend for this scholarship to ultimately strengthen the important normative theory scholarship of Clifford Christians, who has long championed the institutional approach and shown just how important political philosophy can be to journalism studies throughout his distinguished career.

Perhaps the best way to conclude this section is through briefly examining some examples of journalism that best embodies the humanistic role. I believe the famous 1946 piece by John Hersey in *The New Yorker* titled “Hiroshima” demonstrates precisely what humanistic journalism can accomplish. The exemplary piece explores in how six different survivors of the atomic bombing experienced its leadup and horrific aftermath. It is fundamentally motivated to explore and reveal some dark truths about what it means to be human. It is centered in a deep sense of empathy for the survivors, puts the reader directly into their perspective, and takes the time to delve thoroughly into reflecting on an event outside the trappings of political journalism. It provides a glimpse of what it was like to be an average Japanese citizen on that day and connects us to a culture different from our own as well as our own sense of right and wrong. Hersey deconstructs the event
using the storytelling tools of literary fiction and the reporting tools of news journalism. Not only does this piece of journalism align with the motivations, norms, and practices of humanistic journalism outlined in this project, but I do not see how it could fit into the monitorial, facilitative, radical, or collaborative roles without stretching their definitions so broad that they are no longer useful to normative theory. Thus, we need the humanistic role to capture the unique ways this category of journalism operates and the value it adds to democracy.

Further examples of journalism operating within the humanistic role can be found in a wide range of everyday journalism from podcasts to online writing. The most prominent examples from the podcast realm likely come from This American Life. If we look specifically at some of their episodes such as Pursuit of Happiness, Gardens of Branching Paths, Good Grief!, and The Ghost in the Machine, each explores different ways we as humans make meaning and try (or fail) to connect with larger communities. These podcasts span from ruminations on suffering, loss, and grieving to stories about how people move past regret and live a fulfilling life. This is not just different in form and topics from “Hiroshima” it is also distinct from common online essays operating within the humanistic role. One such example can be found in a 2021 piece from Air Mail by Bill Adair titled “Loving Lies – Stephen Glass, the most notorious fraud in journalism, decided he would live by one simple rule: Always tell the truth. Then he broke that rule.” It serves as a meditation on how a man famous for journalistic malpractice decided to better himself by never lying, even about small things, until his wife began to suffer from early onset Alzheimer’s at age 46. She requested that he pretend everything was normal in order for her to live as happily as she could for her few remaining years. The essay is
rooted in a deep sense of empathy for Glass and transitions him in the reader’s mind from someone we might look down upon to someone we feel deeply for. Each of these examples showcases the breadth and the importance of journalism operating within the humanistic role that is ripe for future scholarly analysis.

**Directions for Future Research**

Journalism studies scholars could build upon these findings in a variety of specific ways. One future path could be examining what humanistic journalism looks like in non-democratic contexts. Though humanistic journalism fosters some of the qualities necessary for a flourishing democracy, it is certainly present in countries that are not democracies. Additionally, the abundance of scholarship about solutions or constructive journalism could tackle how the humanistic role intersects with this new form of journalism since it lacks the culture sections that are present in traditional newspapers but still seeks to engage in community-centered journalism in a humanistic manner. The metajournalistic discourse also suggested that the Trump era changed cultural journalism to focus more on politics, which would be interesting to investigate the implications of this trend in future research. One of the surprising aspects of the metajournalistic discourse was just how many discussions centered around technology criticism. Future research could explore how this fits into cultural journalism and the humanistic role alongside more traditional categories like arts criticism and literary journalism. Now that the humanistic role has been outlined, future research could apply this framework to exemplars of humanistic journalism to further solidify its importance, explore how it is embodied in non-metajournalism practice, and examine how its reach extends beyond cultural journalism.
Future studies could also work to broadly expand the sites where metajournalistic discourse is typically located. A number of scholars have been working in this direction through examining metajournalistic discourse in places beyond trade publications and popular news organizations such as amicus briefs (Johnson et al., 2021) and popular culture (Ferrucci, 2018). This approach could certainly apply to metajournalistic discourse analysis surrounding the humanistic role in a variety of unique sites outside the formal journalistic realm such as social media or podcasts.

**Conclusion**

This project represents an attempt to expand upon Michael Schudson’s notion that one of journalism’s key contributions to democracy is the promotion of social empathy. On this topic he wrote that “journalism can tell people about others in their society and their world so that they can come to appreciate the viewpoints and lives of other people, especially those less advantaged than themselves” (Schudson, 2017, p. 97). This is vital to a pluralistic democracy and represents something that traditional reporting cannot singularly accomplish. Humanistic journalism has the potential to create collective yearnings for change or foster curiosity about the world and those in it. There is something worth paying attention to about how the imaginative experiences stemming from humanistic journalism have the potential to creating new ethical possibilities in readers. And this is related to the notion that journalism can sometimes even serve as a form art itself when it operates in a highly literary mode. Humanistic journalism serves as the bridge that connects us to powerful works of art through offering perspectives and interpretations that differ from our own perspectives and interpretations, which in turn helps to influence how we understand ourselves.
While there is a Pulitzer Prize for criticism, journalism operating within the humanistic role is broadly undervalued. This was clear from much of the metajournalistic discourse that discussed the massive layoffs that cultural journalists have faced in recent years. One 2017 article by Jed Gottlieb in *CJR* titled “Curtains Fall on Arts Critics at Newspapers” included a quote that stuck with me:

Papers aren’t trimming fat, they’re amputating limbs. While departments have seen round after round of layoffs and buyouts, arts staffers see their jobs targeted first. It’s not that the book critic goes before the city hall reporter. It’s that the book critic goes before the guy who covers high school hockey. The trend echoes the value judgements public schools have made where math classes and the football team stay but the drama club and jazz band don’t.

I see this as the practical outcome of what happens when both the journalistic profession and journalism scholars focus the vast majority of their attention on reporting. To use a metaphor, scholars have been paying attention to the branches and ignoring the roots. Humanistic journalism provides crucial background context to current events, which serves to aid the goals of the monitorial, facilitative, and radical roles. This is why the metajournalistic discourse suggested that a lack of humanistic journalism feeds disconnection.

James Carey tried to bring some of this humanistic understanding into other parts of journalism studies when he wrote that “the ordinary events of everyday lives – things which in their meaning and consequence are far from ordinary and insignificant for the audience – have no place in daily journalism” and without this “‘felt quality’ of life” the relationship between journalism and readers is strained because “the newspaper reports a
world which increasingly does not connect with the life of its audience in the most fundamental sense that the audience experiences life” (1974, p. 249). I believe humanistic journalism is the key to fostering this connection. It allows people to see a complicated and nuanced version of the world, which is then useful when they enter a political realm of conspiracy theories and black and white us vs. them mentalities. The relationship between culture and politics is complicated as we can see through the prevalence of terms like “culture wars,” “cancel culture,” and “identity politics.” But the wildly successful “1619 Project,” a New York Times project that sought to reframe the founding of the United States by centering the consequences of slavery, understands the power of a humanistic approach through including numerous works of fiction and poetry alongside the “hard” news. Humanistic journalism not only offers us perspectives different from our own but also teaches us how to be interpreters too.

The film critic Roger Ebert once wrote that movies were “empathy machines” that allow us windows into lives we would not otherwise know (Tallerico, 2018). Perhaps it is not just the object of culture journalism but the norms, principles, and practices of the writing that unpacks the meaning behind that object that can amount to an empathy machine as well. After all, Walter Williams’ Journalists Creed closes with the line “I believe that the journalism which succeeds best... is a journalism of humanity, of and for today’s world.”
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Jeremiah Fuzy currently serves as the Voices Editor at *Word&Way*, a publication aimed at mainline Protestant Christians that covers the intersection of religion, politics, and culture in Missouri and beyond. He hopes to continue his passion for journalism through a career working as a professional editor outside of the academic realm.

Before earning his doctorate at the Missouri School of Journalism, Fuzy worked as the religion editor at *RealClearPolitics*. His vertical, *RealClearReligion*, served as a comprehensive resource for news, analysis, and commentary exploring the role of religion in public life. This included the variety of religious traditions in the United States and the broad spectrum of ideologies that exist within each of those faiths. Since religion shapes countless aspects of our lived experience, RCR covered its influence not just in the political realm but in areas such as film, music, architecture, sports, food, technology, business, education, and law.

In 2011, Fuzy received his bachelor’s degree from Drury University in religion/philosophy and politics/government. He subsequently received his master’s degree in 2015 from the University of Chicago where he studied religious ethics.