

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS:
ROLE PERCEPTIONS OF LONG-FORM AND
COMMENTARY MAGAZINE JOURNALISTS
IN THE CURRENT STATE OF U.S. DEMOCRACY

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by
VALERIE C. NAVA
Dr. Amanda Hinnant, Thesis Supervisor

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

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presented by Valerie C. Nava,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

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

Dr. Amanda Hinnant

Dr. Joy Jenkins

Dr. Ryan Thomas

DEDICATION

To my parents. I could not have reached this point without your unconditional love and support.

To my sister. Thank you for lending an ear and being so patient with me when I most needed it.

To my aunt, and my grandmothers. I hope you are proud of me, from wherever you are. Thank
you for your care and nurture until the very end.

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I will always cherish. I leave grad school not only with a degree but with the friend group I
always longed for, and

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adventure.

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ABSTRACT

In a landscape where concerns over the state of U.S. democracy have risen, it's important to explore the perspectives of journalists tasked with the production of coverage in which democracy is a key theme and justification. This thesis asks how do these journalists perceive themselves, their outlets, and their genre, especially in the face of an upcoming election, where their performance will help dictate the results. Through qualitative, in-depth interviews with 11 journalists, this thesis examines the role perceptions of long-form and commentary magazine journalists in said context. This study used Weaver and colleagues (2007) role conceptions model and Schudson's (2008) functions of journalism in a democracy to analyze how long-form and commentary magazine journalists see themselves. Journalists prioritized bringing depth and added value to complex issues through their reporting; identified themselves with the interpretive, contextualists and argumentative roles, and with the information and analysis functions of journalism.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In recent years, concerns over the legitimacy of U.S. democracy have risen. Polling organizations and news media reports have manifested public anxiety over America's democracy being under threat or at risk of failing (Corasaniti, et al., 2022; Leonhardt, 2022; NPR/Ipsos, 2022). Journalists, analysts, and scholars repeatedly highlight the happenings of January 6, 2021, when former President Trump encouraged his supporters to protest the results of the 2020 presidential election after he refused to accept his defeat and claimed that the electoral process was fraudulent, putting the credibility of the process at risk (Leonhardt, 2022; Ramachandran, 2022; Repucci, 2022).

Although fears of U.S. democracy being at risk did not start or end with the Trump presidency (Repucci, 2022), other scholars affirm that an increased concern over the issue was uncommon before the former president's rise to power (Galston & Kamarck, 2022). Factors that also influence fears about American democracy being under threat are increased political polarization and recent Republican legislation to restrict voting access and gerrymandering, a political term that refers to manipulating the boundaries of electoral districts to produce a desired effect on election results (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022).

Furthermore, surveys have shown that America's trust in major institutions has been in decline, including the media industry as a whole (Pew Research, 2022; Gallup, 2021). In the case of news media specifically, Pew Research (2022) reported that four main factors have contributed to this loss of trust, and other researchers and scholarly literature have also attested to the veracity of these factors:

- 1) Media business models that place profits before upholding journalism's purpose to inform with accuracy, fairness, balance, and transparency (Wahl Jorgensen et al., 2016);
- 2) increasing political polarization (Ognyanova et al., 2019);
- 3) the use of social media platforms to consume news; and
- 4) misinformation, which can be proliferated by social media platforms (Grinberg et al., 2019).

Despite this, researchers, scholars, and journalists themselves uphold that the institution of the press assumes important roles and serves certain functions in any democracy (Schudson, 2008; Schudson, 2019; Pickard, 2020; Lewis, 2020). These roles and functions call journalists of all forms of media to be watchdogs that hold officials accountable; provide true; fair, transparent information; and give a voice to the communities they serve, as well as provide analysis and an element of social empathy in their reports or stories. These functions will be discussed further in the literature review.

According to scholars, the analysis of role perceptions in journalism helps explain, among a variety of phenomena, how journalists work, the principles that guide their attitudes, and that these perceptions depend a lot on the personal capital of the individual as well as the journalistic capital of the media enterprise they work for (Meyen & Riesmeyer, 2012). The concept of role perceptions refers to the ways that media practitioners reflect and attach meaning to their work, to "justify and emphasize the importance of their work to themselves and others" (Vos & Hanitzsch, 2017, p. 115).

Therefore, journalistic role perceptions are closely related to journalism's democratic functions, since this is how journalists, as democratic actors themselves, understand their contributions to a democratic society. Researchers have evaluated and analyzed the significance

of journalistic roles from journalists' perspectives. These journalists categorize their work in a variety of outlets and journalistic genres, such as peace journalism (Prager & Hameleers, 2021); opinion journalism (Kelling & Thomas, 2018); health journalism (Hinnant, Jenkins & Subramanian, 2015), environmental journalism (Tandon & Takashi, 2013), and data journalism (Boyles & Meyer, 2016).

Additionally, scholarly literature and research on magazines, and magazine journalists and their role perceptions is lacking compared to other media practitioners and outlets (Holmes, 2008; Johnson, 2007), despite the significance of these publications' longstanding ability to serve as mirrors, reflecting society to itself and portraying the social reality of their time (Mott, 1930; Abrahamson, 2007; Jenkins, 2019).

In particular, the role of long-form and commentary magazine journalism is significant to research because of its importance in political discourse. A historical example that can illustrate this idea dates to colonial America when publications such as *Pennsylvania Magazine* and the pamphlet *Common Sense* were in circulation. The prose and arguments of political activist and editor Thomas Paine catalyzed patriotic action in the era of the American Revolution, influencing and inspiring Patriot conventions to intensify their efforts and declare independence from Great Britain (Henretta, Edwards & Self, 2011).

This thesis intends to add to the existing literature about the role perceptions of journalists in a democratic society and to the scholarly literature around magazine research. Given the current state of U.S. democracy, the significance of journalists' role perceptions, and the minimal literature available about the roles of long-form and commentary magazine journalists and editors, it was important to explore and examine how these media practitioners at said publications perceive their roles in this context.

The following chapter contains a review of the existing literature on these topics, first focusing on the role that magazines have played in U.S. society throughout history and their various classifications, emphasizing long-form and commentary magazines, which will be the main focus of this study. Subsequently, this chapter will review the scholarly and journalistic literature on the evolving role of the American press in the current state of U.S. democracy. Lastly, this section will assess academic research around journalistic role perceptions and address the lack of existing scholarly literature about magazines and magazine writers and editors. Chapter Three indicates the methodology used in this study, as well as the sampling and coding used to analyze the findings. This study used semi-structured, in-depth interviews because open ended questions allowed for participants to express thoughts and ideas that were further probed and explored in more detail. The sample was purposive because participants fitted a specific criterion; they were all journalists for long-form and commentary magazine who mostly produce news content related to politics and public policy. The procedure used to code and analyze the findings included matching journalists answers to role conception models in the literature review, as well as journalistic functions according to Schudson (2008).

Chapter Four lays out the findings obtained in the interviews. The findings are divided by research question, which were answered by compiling what participants expressed in the interviews and dividing this into categories of roles, functions and overarching themes that were salient in the process of coding and analysis. Further on, this section lays out the ways journalists in the sample assessed the state of the journalism industry in the U.S. preceding the 2024 election, showing concerns for the decimation of local journalism, audiences, and methods journalists implement to cover electoral processes in the country that were deemed as a disservice to audiences, such as the horse race model.

Finally, Chapter Five will offer an analysis of the findings, putting them into context with the theoretical framework laid out in the literature review regarding role perceptions and journalistic functions in a democracy. This section further considers long-form and commentary magazine journalists showing concern for the decline of local journalism. The practical and theoretical implications are detailed, as well as recommendations for future research. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the findings of this study and reflects on the overall purpose of long-form and commentary magazines in society.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of magazines in American society

Through the years, scholars have agreed that magazines reflect the social reality of their time (Abrahamson, 2007; Jenkins, 2019; Mott, 1930). Mott (1930) stated that an investigation into the history of American magazines shows that their importance rests on the services of providing high-quality democratic literature, playing an important part in the economics of literature, and most importantly, furnishing an invaluable contemporaneous history of their times. Despite being written approximately 90 years ago, Mott's statements hold up to this day.

For many years, magazines have echoed popular ideologies and represented and interpreted the men and women in their culture and time. They have also been considered “the most dialogic of all journalistic media” (Kitch, 2005, p. 9), for their conversational tone and language journalists and writers use in their pieces; meaning that writers and editors keep a vision of their audience in mind when crafting content for this medium. Abrahamson (2007) coined the term *magazine exceptionalism*, proposing that magazines differentiate themselves from newspapers, broadcasting, or online media for their unique and powerful role as a product of their social and cultural moment and a catalyst for social change. For this, magazines are considered drivers of trends and change (Jenkins, 2019).

Through the decades, there have been notable examples of this phenomenon, going back to the pre-Civil War era in the U.S, when *Godey's Lady's Book* began circulating, becoming what some consider to be the most influential American publication of the nineteenth century. The publication served 150,000 subscribers by 1860, the largest circulation of any magazine of that period (Blakemore, 2017, Rose, 1995). Not only did *Godey's Lady's Book* influence what women wore at the time, but editor Sarah Hale used the platform to promote and advocate for

issues related to women, such as education, employment, and the integration of women into the workforce (O'Connor, 2014), reflecting relevant issues at the time and starting conversations about how women's roles in society were changing. Similarly, the *Saturday Evening Post* was one of the most influential magazines between 1899 and 1937 under the leadership of editor George Horace Lorimer (Darrach, 2011). Lorimer was acknowledged as an ambitious editor who wanted to "create a publication that would speak to the entire country" (*Saturday Evening Post*, n.d. para. 49). Beyond this, Lorimer's goal was to reflect the country back to itself, turning *The Post* into "the first magazine the entire nation had in common" (*Saturday Evening Post*, n.d. para. 52). Likewise, the popular and iconic covers of *The Post's* illustrator Norman Rockwell represented an ideal of what Americans thought to be the perfect life: "Children fishing, playing, at the doctor's office, getting a soda, and walking the streets enjoying the summer all connected to the sensibilities of the time" (*Saturday Evening Post*, n.d. para. 84).

Another relevant example of magazine exceptionalism dates to 1940 with the creation of *Seventeen*. "As a rule, its worldview was notably chaste, very prescriptive, and unremittingly virginal. As one observer once noted, it was the perfect magazine for a mother of a teenage girl" (Abrahamson, 2007 p. 668). Jenkins (2019) adds a more contemporary example from a study conducted by Spiker (2003) about how consumer magazines captured emotions of terror and sorrow, and pride and hope in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11. "Magazine covers, particularly controversial ones, can also spur conversations among journalists and readers, reflecting perspectives about social norms, ethics, and the roles and functions of journalism" (Jenkins, 2019, p. 7).

Often, magazine journalism is labeled as "softer" or "less serious" than other types of journalism (Le Masurier & Johnke, 2014). "Soft" journalism has been "denigrated, relativized,

and reduced in value alongside aspirations for something better” (Zelizer, 2011, p. 9). The distinction between hard news and soft news is that the latter keeps human interest at the heart of the story, dealing with the lives of human beings and concerning interesting matters (Tuchman, 1973). These and other categories of news such as developing, continuing, and spot news were put in place to facilitate routinization and “reduce the variability of the raw material of news” (Tuchman, 1973, p. 129), making news events easier to manage and cover by news organizations. Despite this, magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *GQ* have recently received the honor of winning Pulitzer Prizes for feature writing and critiquing. Notably, magazines only became eligible for the Pulitzer Prize in 2016, a further relegation of the form to journalistic margins. News magazines as described by Jenkins (2019) such as *Time*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic*, are a key genre among U.S. consumer magazines as these provide long-form pieces, investigative reporting, commentary, and feature writing to wider audiences, especially on the state of U.S. democracy.

With the rise of digital media, long-form magazines have stood the test of time by reinventing themselves and their business models while retaining their readers and ability to maintain their high standards (Jenkins, 2019). The long-form designation refers to articles of more than 2,000 words that are published either in print or on journalistic outlets’ digital websites (Van Krieken, 2019). Long-form journalism has also been identified as narrative or literary journalism since it evokes story-telling techniques that originated in fiction writing. Storytelling has been “long acknowledged” (Van Krieken, 2019 p. 1) as journalism. Van Krieken (2019) illustrates this idea by highlighting the rise of news texts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Then, she points at the “revival” of literary journalism in the 1960s and 1970s, when the label of “new journalism” was born, along with some of the greatest exponents of the genre,

such as Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, and Truman Capote, to name a few. On the narrative nature of the long-form genre, Van Krieken (2019) noted: “Storytelling techniques are used to answer the *how* and *why* questions rather than the *what* question. This implies that the topicality and newsworthiness of the central event are less relevant than the potential of this event to move the audience by revealing the essence of human experience.” (Van Krieken, 2019 p. 2). Therefore, long-form articles focus on the nuances and lived experiences of the individuals or subjects, instead of revolving around a “hard news” event, also offering an analytical element to the overall piece.

One of the most recognized techniques of long-form journalism is the use of extended periods of time spent with sources and situations to create an immersive experience for the reader, which highlights one of the main criticisms of the genre and recurrent debates around it: lack of objectivity. The perception is that because of the use of storytelling techniques, close observation, immersion, or stylistic choices such as the use of first-person narration (Tulloch 2014), the journalist is not as detached and distanced as the objectivity norm dictates. The nature of the reporting becomes intimate and “highly subjective” (Van, Krieken, 2019, p. 3). It’s worth noting that although studies have been conducted on the critical reception of narrative journalistic genres, studies on how audiences perceive them are lacking (Van Krieken & Sanders, 2021). Nevertheless, long-form journalism that incorporates these techniques has been widely accepted by audiences and used by journalists, offering the opportunities to maximize content in magazines’ or newspapers’ online sites with multimedia elements to accompany the written article to make its consumption an even more immersive experience (Van Krieken, 2019).

On the other hand, commentary journalism is also a genre that is characteristic of magazines that dedicate their pages to political coverage and public policy issues. Scholars define commentary as a traditional genre that belongs to the branches of interpretative or opinion-based journalism (Morlandstø and Mathisen, 2017). Mcnair (2000) described commentary journalism as “the interpretative moment of news production” (p. 61); when the reporter goes beyond informing just the facts and being an observer but also provides an analysis of news events. Specifically on political commentary, Nord, Enli & Stúr (2015) state that it can be found in the news context, but it appears most often in the section of opinion in newspapers, on television programming or on magazine shows dedicated to the genre, and online. They also address that commentary holds similarities to “news and views” (p. 88), editorials, and debate articles in the sense that they focus both on current events and in expressing opinions, although they make the distinction that political commentators express opinions and analyze news events or personalities without disclosing their political or ideological affiliations. “Political commentators do evaluate parties or candidates, but rarely with an explicit ideological intention to change public opinion in a certain political direction” (Nord, Enli & Stúr, 2015 p. 88).

Djerf-Pierre and Weibull (2008) state that these interpretations are a longstanding tradition in political journalism and “one of the oldest forms of mediated discourse” (p. 211). Most concerns over the rise of the genre focus on the displacement of fact-based journalism and reporting, as well as on commentators assuming a role as cynical experts on the public sphere, lacking analytical depth or upholding the elites’ perspectives (Morlandstø and Mathisen, 2022). Nord, Enli & Stúr (2015) also state that findings of content analyses of statements made by political commentators on television “encourage extreme opinions, shortcuts and entertainment value. This has fostered a debate on whether such political commentators actually represent and

serve the public, or in fact, mislead or distort public opinion” (p. 90). Nevertheless, scholars agree that commentary, as it pertains to political journalism, takes on an important role in democratic countries; and that analyzing political news events and providing comments has been recognized as a professional function of journalists and a complement to objective reporting (Nord, Enli & Stúr, 2015) with the societal purpose and mission of facilitating public debate and encouraging public participation (Morlandstø and Mathisen, 2017, 2022).

Having explained the characteristics of the long-form and commentary genres, this study considers the typification of long-form and commentary magazines as weekly or monthly publications that dedicate their pages to offer in-depth, journalistic pieces of more than 2,000 words that explore topics related to the human experience instead of solely hard news events, while also publishing commentary pieces with more length than opinion columns in newspapers, a distinctive characteristic to highlight. These commentary pieces also provide reported analysis that is original and narrative-driven, taking topics within the public sphere and providing an in-depth reflection on those topics. The character of that work contributes to the character of the organization, which reflects the editorial element of the magazine commentary.

Because of these types of magazine’s position in the media ecosystem, which is one of prominence, they are important and interesting to research because they can serve as contributors and drivers of ideas within the public sphere, which at the same time can aid the progress of a democratic society as this contributes to the exchange of ideas. Also, by offering in-depth news analysis, magazines of this type can aid citizens in decision-making. They are designed to devote more resources, such as time and money, to conduct more in-depth reporting and analysis on a topic, which serves the public good.

The criteria for exclusion and inclusion of participants will be further clarified in the methods section.

The role of journalism in a democratic society

The relationship between journalism and democracy has been a centuries-long conversation characteristic of Western societies, in which academics have maintained democracy as an ideal closely related to the ultimate purpose of journalism (Zelizer, 2012). “Since the early days of the American republic, journalism has been thought to foster the conditions necessary for democracy to thrive” (Zelizer, 2012, p. 465). Therefore, scholars and practitioners agree that the role of journalism in a democracy is longstanding. This role calls journalists of all forms and genres to be watchdogs that hold officials accountable through the presentation of news and deeply researched information; by providing true, fair, and transparent information; and giving a voice to the communities they serve (Lewis, 2020; Saldaña & Mourão, 2018; Schudson 2008; Pickard, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016). Scholarly conversations have also focused on what function does media play in democratic societies. Schudson (2008) states that “the function of media in a democracy is that the people rule and they will rule more adequately if they are well informed by the press about public affairs” (p. 5). James Carey (1996) stated that journalism is usefully understood as another name for democracy. He also made the distinction between communication and journalism, highlighting the social and historical significance of a profession that “requires the institutions of democratic life either in fact or in aspiration” (para. 27). To illustrate this idea, Carey (1996) painted the example of the old Soviet Union, noting that there was communication but no journalism, as there was no democracy. Schudson differs, stating that this belief takes journalism’s virtues a step too far. He states that while democracy and

journalism are not the same, their relationship is symbiotic; journalism does not produce democracy where it does not exist, but it can help democracies thrive (Schudson, 2008).

Additionally, Schudson (2008) elaborates on the functions of journalism by providing a list of six functions that journalism has assumed in democratic societies: information; investigation; analysis and interpretation of news events, social empathy; public forum, and mobilization.

- 1) Information refers to the educational function of journalism. By providing information to about politicians, their fellow citizens, and public events, the public will be equipped to discern and make choices in a democratic environment (Schudson, 2008).
- 2) Investigation refers to the watchdog role of journalism in uncovering wrongdoings, going beyond the function of just informing. With thorough and deep reporting on governmental bodies and public officials, the public “should be well informed of just what these people do while in office and how well they live up to their legal obligations, campaign promises, and public avowals” (Schudson, 2008, p. 15).
- 3) Analysis refers to dissecting news events to make them more comprehensible for readers. Schudson (2008) also calls it explanatory and highlights the importance of investing resources in public investigation and analysis, as well as showing more interest in this practice since it’s highly valuable in a democratic society.
- 4) With social empathy, Schudson (2008) refers to those times when journalists, through their work, “encourage empathy and understanding in the audience” (p. 19), by reflecting diverse lifestyles within the public sphere, which serves a democratic function because the audience has the opportunity to learn about their fellow citizens through the journalism they consume.

- 5) Public forum refers to the ways journalism can provide channels for the public to participate and have their voices reflected in media outlets. Schudson (2008) makes reference to letters to the editors and op-ed pages in newspapers, and opinion shows on television and radio. He also notes that the public forum function of journalism has been opened with the rise of technology and the Internet, offering more opportunities for social interaction and the exchange of ideas.
- 6) With the mobilizing function of journalism Schudson (2008), refers to journalism that provides opportunities and direction for citizens with certain ideas or beliefs to act or advocate toward such beliefs. Journalism in the service of mobilization should advise people on what to do with the information they have been provided with (Schudson, 2008).

Schudson (2008) adds a final function that journalism should be serving, which is publicizing representative democracy. He suggests that with this function in mind, U.S. journalists should be encouraged to cover public institutions with more care. This means they should highlight the functions of accountability that one institution or branch of government has over another (horizontal accountability) more than the way the public can hold institutions accountable through democratic processes (vertical accountability).

Therefore, journalists may operate within these six or seven functions to encourage a more democratic environment by going beyond providing information and thorough investigation but also dissecting it for the public and fostering public forum, assuming their mobilization power and encouraging social empathy in citizens.

There also seems to be an agreement among scholars on the obstacles that the American press faces in fulfilling these roles and functions, such as a decline in readership, lack of

resources, and an increasingly market-driven landscape, which undermines the resources of journalists to scrutinize political elites and expose wrongdoings and the prioritization of profit over democratic imperatives (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016). Additionally, Schudson (2019) states that one of the failures of the American press is its self-centeredness and arrogance, which describes press corps that implicitly presume themselves to be smarter than their audiences. Other scholars add to this list of wrongdoings a lack of engagement with audiences and the privileged position of American news media to connect advertisers to audiences (Lewis, 2020; Abdenour, McIntyre & Dahmen 2021).

The role of magazines in U.S. democracy

A vigorous search of the literature did not disclose many studies that have focused on the roles of U.S. magazine editors and journalists, specifically those who work at long-form and commentary magazines, or how they perceive their roles in a democratic society. Meyen and Riesmeyer (2012) did include and interview magazine journalists and editors for their study, although their research did not focus solely on these types of publications. In the interviews, these journalists and editors labeled themselves as promoters, traders, artists, lobbyists, detectives, and service providers. As a leading scholar on the topic of magazines, Jenkins (2016) also conducted a study on how city and magazine editors navigate their public and private interests and the implications of these negotiations to their journalistic identity. This study added to the literature on how magazine staff members perceive and balance their role as servers and the public market functions of their discipline. Jenkins (2019) also conducted a study analyzing how staff members at a city magazine discursively constructed their journalistic identities and reflected on organizational influences, the mission of the publication and their perceptions of their audience. Both of Jenkins' studies added to the existing literature about city and regional

magazines. However, other scholars agree that overall, there is a lack of scholarly literature and research specifically about magazines, compared to other journalistic media (Holmes, 2008; Johnson, 2007).

Although magazine research is on the rise, it has not dominated journalism and mass media scholarship. Some of the reasons for this lack of literature and research might be due to the difficulty of studying magazines compared to studying newspapers (Holmes, 2008), and the breadth and depth of the field itself. “Because there are so many magazines, it is difficult for us to focus and to create typologies that we can all agree on and build upon” (Johnson, 2007 p. 4). Another factor to consider is the difficulty of academics accessing information about circulation, distribution, advertising, or editorial research that is proprietarily available only to members and employees of magazine publishers (Johnson, 2007).

Role perceptions

Grobgeld et al (2016) define role perceptions as “a range of viewpoints, attitudes, understandings, approaches, or expectations that are related to the status and the position of a group of people within an organization” (p. 79). The study of role perceptions can be attached to Shoemaker and Reese’s (2014) hierarchy of influences, which is divided into five levels of influence that can impact news content. These influences go from a macro to a micro level, starting with social systems, social institutions, organizations, professional routines, and the individual in charge of producing the news. The ways that journalists perceive their professional roles can serve as an individual-level variable to analyze how news content is produced but also serve as indicators of their professional values and the ways they approach their jobs (Dahmen et al., 2018). However, the idea of role conceptions can also be attached to other levels of the hierarchy, such as organizations or social institutions, when taking into account that journalists

operate in a larger cultural or societal context that may limit their autonomy and independent decision-making in the newsroom. (Mellado, Hellmueller & Weaver, 2017). As such, this study will aim to not only discover and analyze the journalists' role conceptions but also the roles of the media outlets they work for in a larger social context.

As one of the most cited models of role conceptions, Weaver et al. (2007) asserted that journalists attach certain roles to themselves in four specific categories: disseminator, which falls in line with the normative perspective of the journalist as an objective and detached actor in the process of news making; interpreter, which analyzes news events for the public; adversary, which takes an argumentative approach in covering institutions in the news, and populist mobilizer, which puts the serving of communities at the forefront and advocates for solutions in their coverage. (Dahmen et al., 2018). McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour (2016) built on Weaver's 2007 study on role conceptions, adding the functions of the contextualist; the intellectual; the interpretive/disseminator; and the advocate/entertainer. They found that the roles of contextualist and interpretive/disseminator were the most valued by daily print journalists (McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour, 2016). Vos & Hanitzch (2018) also proposed a model with 18 different journalistic roles within six journalistic functions in the political context. These roles and functions are graphically represented in a wheel divided into six pieces, where three roles lie within each function. These include advocative-radical (advocate, adversary, missionary), analytical-deliberative (analyst, access provider, mobilizer), critical-monitorial (monitor, detective, watchdog), collaborative-facilitative (mouthpiece, collaborator, facilitator), developmental-educative (mediator, educator, change agent), and informational-instructive (curator, disseminator, storyteller).

Thomas and Kelling (2018) stated that the benefits of journalists having a clear idea of their roles are significant, as this allows them to uphold their journalistic culture and perform their work with coherence and meaning. Abdenour, McIntyre, and Dahmen (2021) stated it's important to explore the perceptions of journalists' roles because these personal views are correlated with the trust of the public. Hinnant, Jenkins, and Subramanian (2015) also asserted that "understanding how journalists define their roles and responsibilities can inform our awareness of how news is gathered and presented" (p. 763). It could also be argued that journalists' certainty and confidence in knowing their roles in a democratic society can clarify and consequently facilitate the practice of journalism and meet the audience's needs. Also, role perceptions can be useful in predicting how journalists interpret ethical matters relating to their daily functions (Dahmen et al., 2018).

Researchers have conducted an array of studies on the perceptions/conceptions of journalists and editors on their roles. There is scholarly literature available about journalists' role perceptions, from how journalists perceive their roles in everyday life (Hanusch, 2019) to how adversarial and disseminator roles of journalism predicted trust from audiences (Abdenour, McIntyre and Dahmen, 2021). Abdenour, MacIntyre and Dahmen (2021) used contextual journalism in their study to approach the duty that reporters have to cover negative events and a method of covering the news that could contribute to more positive audience perceptions. These contextual roles were labeled as peace, solutions, constructive journalism, and restorative narrative (Abdenour, McIntyre, and Dahmen, 2021). Contextual journalism is a term the researchers coined in a previous study (2016) about professional role perceptions that refers to "socially responsible stories that go beyond the immediacy of everyday news" (Dahmen et al., 2018). The findings of Abdenour, McIntyre and Dahmen's study (2021) indicated that contextual

journalism was not linked to audiences' trust in the media. The researchers highlighted the contrast between audience and journalists' expectations of what good journalism is, and added that this difference could be a significant factor in the overall issue of lack of trust.

Other research has also focused on the role perspectives of editors and staff members working at particular types of magazines in countries around the world, focusing on the practices and functions of their specific publications, and how they serve their audiences and face different types of challenges (Jenkins, 2019).

Usher (2009) analyzed how journalists at the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans understood the role of the newspaper and their own during the recovery stage after Hurricane Katrina. She discovered that journalists perceived their roles as objective recorders of facts, history, and information, while also labeling themselves as advocates. Although these roles can be perceived as opposite, the journalists in Usher's study assumed them because of the situations of hardship they were reporting on and living through.

“The post-Katrina *TP* underscores how the role of a journalist can change when a community is under threat, turning from objective recorder of fact to involved participant. In situations like the one facing New Orleans, it may be that an even more direct form of advocacy reporting is necessary” (Usher, 2009, p. 227).

Studies have also been conducted about how journalists from various journalistic genres perceive their role in a democracy and explore how they define the developing limitations in their profession (Boyles & Meyer, 2016). This specific study suggested that journalists found value in producing stories that promoted civic engagement and tapped into the audience's curiosity by making data more conversational.

There is also international literature available on journalists' perceptions across the world, specifically those who report on cultural issues (Hoyden & Kristensen, 2018), about aspects of their profession, such as the journalistic norm of objectivity from the perspective of Danish journalists (Skovsgaard et al., 2013), typologies of role perceptions in German journalists (Meyen & Riesmeyer, 2012) and how journalists perceive their roles in the middle of conflict (Prager & Hameleers, 2021).

Analyzing and studying these role perceptions also helps understand how journalists work and the principles that guide their attitudes, and also allows researchers and audiences to understand that these perceptions depend a lot on the personal capital of the individual, as well as the journalistic capital of the media enterprise they work for (Meyen & Riesmeyer, 2012).

To clarify, studies on both "conceptions" and "perceptions" of journalistic roles are reviewed and interpreted equally and interchangeably in the present literature, due to the varying terminology that currently exists in the academic field dedicated to this field of research (Vos & Hanitzsch, 2017). "Researchers refer to a wide range of concepts to denote roles of journalists as 'press functions,' 'media roles,' 'role perceptions,' 'role conceptions,' or 'journalistic paradigms'" (Vos & Hanitzsch, 2017, p. 117). This thesis uses the term "role perceptions" to represent this conceptual thread. It's pertinent to clarify that while this study reviews various models to study role conceptions, the researcher will use Weaver and colleagues' (2007) role perceptions model in the data analysis stage of the study, as well as Schudson's (2008) six or seven functions journalists have assumed in democratic societies. It's also worth noting that the study of journalistic role conceptions is done from a more evaluative level. There is still much opportunity in the current media research landscape to develop approaches that focus more on practice rather than rhetoric (Mellado, Hellmueller & Weaver, 2017), meaning studies that

capture or test the relations between journalistic role conceptions and role performance.

Nevertheless, Mellado, Hellmueller & Weaver (2017) state that the study of role conceptions has been “a crucial piece for the study of professionalism within the journalistic field” (Mellado, Hellmueller & Weaver, 2017 p. 36). As such, I hope that this study will serve as a starting point for potentially developing a framework in the future that would use the role conceptions of long-form and commentary magazine workers and juxtapose and compare them with their journalistic performance.

Boundary work

When touching on role conceptions, it’s also pertinent to bring up boundary work, which is a concept linked to metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016), where media practitioners negotiate, delineate and navigate tensions involving their work, roles or normative obligations. In a space where journalists are allowed to reflect on their role perceptions, those conversations can also allow them to push back or distance themselves from other practitioners or even certain roles, or to reflect on what is “acceptable” for them to do or not do, depending on how they interpret their work (Perreault, Stanfield & Luttman, 2019).

There is a wide current of research focusing on this phenomenon. Studies have focused on how journalists draw boundaries between their role and other types of journalists, such as Winch’s study on how journalists distinguish between news and entertainment (1997) and how political and lifestyle journalists reinforce their boundaries in context of their journalistic beats (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022). On a similar note, Bishop’s study (1999) focused on analyzing photojournalists boundaries in the context of covering the untimely death of Princess Diana and how they distanced themselves and their profession from paparazzi and freelance photographers at the time. A particular study that conceptually drew from both boundary work and role

conception theories was Perreault, Stanfield and Lutman's study (2019), which analyzed how U.S. political journalists constructed their roles and how they engaged in boundary work, in relation to the White House Correspondents' Dinner. This was in the context of a 2018 speech delivered by comedian Michelle Wolf at said dinner, who was critical of news outlets who covered Trump and saw increased profits from their coverage at the time. Perreault, Stanfield and Lutman (2019) analyzed how journalists reflected on attending such events, while juxtaposed with considerations on their credibility and work.

After reviewing the literature on the roles of journalism in a democratic society, the current state of Americans' trust in news media and of U.S. democracy itself, as well as the role that magazines play in society and the lack of scholarly literature around these publications, it's apparent that there is a gap in the literature to be addressed by the following research questions:

RQ1: What role do editors and writers at long-form and commentary magazines perceive their magazines uphold in the current state of U.S. democracy?

RQ2: How do editors and writers at long-form and commentary magazines perceive their own roles and functions in the current state of U.S. democracy?

RQ3: What do editors and writers at long-form and commentary magazines think will be the roles of this genre in U.S. democracy through the 2024 election and afterwards?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

To discover and understand how editors and journalists at long-form news and commentary magazines perceive their roles in the current state of U.S. democracy, this study used semi-structured, in-depth interviews. A qualitative approach was relevant and pertinent to this study since its primary goal was to understand the ways these media practitioners perceive, elaborate on, and make sense of their roles in a democratic society. As John J. Pauly (1991) stated, one of the goals of the qualitative researcher is to “render plausible the terms by which groups explain themselves to the world and to clarify the role that mass communication plays in such explanations” (p.7). Correspondingly, interviews were a suitable qualitative method to carry out this study as they allowed for an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of social actors, in this case, journalists, through anecdotes, stories, examples and explanations, as well as “gathering information about things and processes that can’t be observed by other methods” (Taylor and Lindlof, 2017 p. 173).

To elicit these data, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted. These types of interviews were the most suitable for this study as they allowed for more flexibility in formulating the interview questions and while conducting the interviews themselves; as Blee and Taylor (2002) stated, “the interviewer is allowed more flexibility to digress and to probe based on interactions during the interview” (p. 92). This method has been successfully used in studies that aim to disseminate how journalists make sense of their roles in a variety of settings, from journalists’ role perceptions in the face of conflict (Prager & Hameleers, 2018) to how journalists conceive their roles amidst challenges of coverage, such as when newsworthy events include groups that exacerbate hate speech in the United States (Perreault, Johnson & Klein, 2020).

Studies outside of the United States have also been conducted on this topic, such as Schapals' qualitative study (2018) about how Australian and British journalists perceive their roles in an era of "alternative facts" or "fake news." Schapals (2018) conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 11 journalists, asking open-ended questions to explore specific actions and the reasoning behind them. "In retrospective, the semi-structured nature of the interviews was deemed advantageous, as they allowed "for a much freer exchange between interviewer and interviewee" (Schapals, 2018, p. 980).

Participants

For this particular research, the participants were mostly writers at long-form news and commentary magazines. Only one editor was included in the sample due to recruiting constraints. Despite this, it was still pertinent to reach out to editors to understand how these media practitioners understand and make sense of their roles in the current state of U.S. democracy. On one hand, writers interact with different types of sources and situations continuously while reporting. Because of the nature of these publications, writers working at long-form and commentary magazines spend extended periods with their sources, immersing themselves in situations and gathering information on the field (Van Krieken, 2019), as well as crafting and writing the stories that will be published online and on the print publication. On the other hand, editors are recognized as the more experienced staff in the media outlet. They are problem solvers and leaders, they shape the content of a publication through assignments and also manage staff and establish guidelines for publishing, editing, and writing copy as required (Filak, 2020), with some of them also dedicating time to the writing of pieces, as was the case of the editor who participated in the study. All this by also thinking about the overall mission of the publication.

As mentioned previously in the literature review (p. 10) this study exclusively focused on writers and editors working at long-form and commentary magazines since they fulfill the criteria of this study: the magazines periodically publish their articles, which are of more than 2,000 words long and go beyond just reporting hard news events or daily stories; they also provide analysis, spend extended periods of time with the sources they are reporting about, and use literary styles of narration. Given these definitions of writers' and editors' main duties, it was reasonable to argue that in the process of making information available to the public, editors and writers hold a symbiotic relationship with each other, from the first stages of assigning a story to its writing, completion, and publication. This criteria for the selection of participants also gave me access to a varying range of experience in years and skills, as well as different points of view in the practice of written journalism. This study specifically focused on writers that are part of the staff or routinely contribute to mainstream long-form and commentary magazines in the U.S., whose main journalistic work focuses on politics or public policy topics that intersect with political issues, democracy or electoral processes, as well as the editors that work on and manage these types of stories. Magazines like *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic* were the ones targeted due to their influence and prestige in the country's media landscape. One indicator of this is the fact that all of them have been homes to skilled reporters and editors who have been recognized for their journalistic work through the years with prestigious awards such as the Pulitzer Prize and the National Magazine Award. It's also worth noting the longevity of these publications and their ability to stay afloat and adapt to changes amid the digital era, some going back to the mid-19th century.

As these publications are renowned and possess large platforms, it's also reasonable to argue that writers and editors at these magazines are held to considerably high standards in their

responsibilities to provide fair, accurate, and high-quality information to their audiences, which made the inquiry of role perceptions more relevant and valuable. Also, as was previously discussed (p. 3), scholarly literature on magazines is currently lacking, therefore this study intended to contribute to the scholarly literature on magazines and magazine journalists and editors using these renowned publications as a starting point, with the expectation that this topic of study will continue to grow in the wider mass communication research sphere with other types of magazines and journalism genres.

Sampling

The sampling of this study was purposive snowball (Yin, 1994). It was purposive because participants were recruited if they met a certain criteria. In this case was that they had to work or contribute for one of the long-form and commentary magazines mentioned above, they had to do reporting, writing and/or editing of articles that touched on politics, public policy or topics that intersected with the broader theme of democracy or branches of government in the U.S., such as law or economics/finance, due to the topic of this study. The sampling was also snowball because a handful of participants were recruited due to referrals from other journalists that agreed to participate in the study.

After getting approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the beginning of June, I began to review each of the magazines targeted for this study to draft a list of potential participants that would be suitable to include in the study, between June and July. Before starting the recruitment process, I made sure to pilot the interview with an experienced journalist that was not part of the sample. I began sending out recruitment emails at the beginning of August, and conducted the pilot interview a couple of days after this to leave a window of time open for participants to reply to the recruiting email. Some journalists had their email addresses available

on their magazine's website, their social media profile or their personal website. In the cases where this information was unavailable, I used the Leadership Media database, which contains sources for contacts at major news organizations around the country. In one case, one of the journalists interviewed directed me to two other potential participants that also agreed to be interviewed. Overall, I sent out a total of 45 recruitment emails to potential participants. All participants were offered an incentive to participate in the study, which was a donation of up to \$30 to any journalism or press freedom organization of their preference. This was also offered as a token of appreciation for their time and willingness to help me with my study. In the end, only one journalist agreed to take me up on the offer, and the costs of this donation were covered by the G. Thomas Duffy Fund in Journalism. Twenty-seven of the recruitment emails went unanswered despite sending a couple of follow-up emails. Seven other journalists declined to be interviewed due to time constraints. One potential participant, an editor, agreed to be interviewed but failed to follow through after I followed up once more to confirm, and another one replied saying they would "think about it," but never came around to agreeing to be interviewed after I followed-up with him.

Ultimately, 11 journalists were interviewed for this study: seven staff writers, three contributing writers and one editor. These participants had varying amounts of experience, ranging from 5 to 43 years, and mostly reported about political or public policy issues that intersect with the theme of democracy in the U.S. A handful of them had a background in other disciplines, such as law, political theory and history. Despite trying to make the sample as diverse and inclusive as possible, the majority of the participants in the sample were male and white, with five participants being female and white. The implications of these sample characteristics will be further discussed in the discussion section. To protect their privacy and

ensure a more candid and open interview, all journalists interviewed for this study were offered complete confidentiality, which meant that no names or personally identifiable information of theirs would appear in the study. The magazines they work at or contribute for will also not be disclosed in the findings section; they were referred to as Magazines A, B, C and D. This denomination was given to the publications randomly and is not reflective of the order in which they may be referred to in the literature review and methods section.

I originally planned to include a range of five to seven journalists and five to seven editors to conduct 10 to 14 interviews in total. I also had originally intended to include magazine commentators specifically to also explore the role of the magazines when it came to publishing commentary. This was ultimately not possible because of lack of availability on the part of these journalists. Despite this, some of the journalists included in the sample had some expertise and also fulfilled the role of commentary writers in their outlets. Therefore, the topic of commentary came up from time to time, was explored in the interviews and will be touched upon further in the findings section. Past research conducted on journalistic role perception has included a varying range of interviews and sample sizes. The largest went from more than 2,000 (Skovsgaard et al., 2013) to 500 interviews (Meyen & Riesmeyer, 2011) in the span of several years and teams conducting research. On the other hand, research studies with smaller sample sizes range from 11 (Schapal, 2018), to 16 (Prager & Hameleers, 2018) or 17 (Hinnant, Jenkins and Subramanian, 2015).

Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggest that although there are no official guidelines for the right sampling size in qualitative research, saturation can be reached by analyzing six to 12 interviews and could be reached sooner depending on how homogeneous or similar the participants are from each other. Indeed, after the fourth interview, I began to notice a trend of

themes emerging from the gathered data that kept coming up in the subsequent interviews, given that the sample was fairly homogenous. Once some of these themes were initially identified by a preliminary review of the interview, besides following the interview protocol, I also focused on triangulating some of these emerging themes with other interviewees to ensure that saturation was reached.

Interview procedure

Interviews with participants were conducted by phone and Zoom video conference. I preferred and aimed to schedule and conduct the interviews on Zoom since this allowed for an exchange most similar to what an in-person interview would have been, being able to observe facial expressions, reactions and inflections when participants answered questions, since this can also be used as valuable data. Although, four participants agreed to speak only by phone. Each participant received a consent form at the moment the interview was scheduled. It contained more details about the process, and it disclosed that the interview would be recorded. Still, before beginning the recording, I asked for verbal consent from each participant.

The interviews ranged from 25 minutes to one hour of duration, with a mean of 40 minutes. Although initially, the proposal for this study had stated that all interviews would last 45 minutes to an hour, there was a time constraint due to the availability of some participants. As stated before, I piloted the interview protocol with an experienced journalist who was not part of the sample prior to conducting the interviews to improve on clarity and ensure a successful interview. This journalist advised me to keep the questions to the point and as concise as possible in case that the participants would only be available for a maximum of 30 minutes due to the nature of their work at elite long-form magazines.

While most journalists agreed to participate for up to a full hour, four of them were only available for no more than 30 minutes. Despite this, I tried to go as in-depth as possible in each of the interviews, and to probe as much as time allowed. I also did not take any notes during my conversations with the journalists to provide them my undivided attention and to listen carefully to what they were saying so I could make follow up questions that allowed me to explore deeper themes in their answers. Right after each interview, I took short notes from the most memorable moments, “things to remember” or initial impressions from the conversation. This also allowed me to slightly tweak the interview protocol, adding questions that would allow for triangulation and adjusting questions as appropriate. Interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai, a real-time recorder and transcription service. In total, all interview transcripts resulted in 100 single-spaced pages. I then re-listened to the recordings while reading the transcripts to clean and correct any errors from the initial transcription to ensure clarity and to also be more immersed in the data.

Analysis

I began the analysis with a preliminary soak of the data gathered, in which I read the notes I wrote during each of the interviews and reviewed each transcript line by line. I finished conducting all interviews the week of September 23rd, which allowed me to begin the coding process at the beginning of October. I analyzed the data by implementing a modified grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which categories, themes, and concepts were developed through “an ongoing process of comparing units of data with each other” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 250). This is also labeled as the constant comparative method, with codes continually emerging and changing throughout the data collection and analysis process. To do this, I carefully read each line of the transcripts and assigned codes, which in this case were role perceptions as described by Weaver and colleagues (2007); journalistic functions as described by

Schudson (2008); descriptive adjectives or phrases that participants repeatedly used to refer to their work or the work of the magazines. I did this by using the comment function on Google Docs. I also used this function to write more elaborated ideas and thoughts about what the journalists interviewed said, which also assisted me in writing the findings section. This was my method of writing short memos, taking notes about, for example, an underlying feeling or tone that the journalist being interviewed was evoking with what they were saying, such as cynicism, uselessness, or pride, or if a word or phrase a participant said was the exact same or very similar to what an individual or multiple participants also said.

After doing this, I did a round of focused coding with the assistance of Atlas.ti, a qualitative coding software, where I inserted the codes that came up in the round of line-by-line coding and applied it to larger amounts of data. This also helped to see which themes were repeated throughout interviews and were in fact saturated, although some themes that were not as repeated as others were still touched upon in the findings section because I considered them theoretically relevant to highlight and further analyze.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The interviews with participants revealed the various ways in which long-form magazine journalists perceive and make sense of their own roles and duties as media practitioners in the U.S. and also within their own magazines, as well as the role of the outlets they work at, and what role they believe the genre of their magazines will take in the foreseeable future, using the 2024 presidential election as a time reference.

These journalists reflected about the past in the context of how the American journalism industry has performed when covering political or democratic processes in the country and used the duration of their journalistic careers as a time reference to talk about their outlook on the current state of U.S. democracy, while also considering their perception of audiences in this context. Participants pointed out that long-form and commentary magazines mostly tend to be of general interest, touching on broader topics such as politics, policy, economy, foreign affairs, climate, social justice issues, and branches of entertainment such as music, literature, movies, food, etc. Due to the nature of this study, the interviews focused on the role of long-form magazines in informing the public about politics, policy, and issues intersecting with democracy.

RQ1: What role do writers at long-form and commentary magazines perceive their magazines uphold in the current state of U.S. democracy?

To answer this RQ, long-form and commentary magazine journalists were asked a series of questions with the purpose of discovering how they generally perceived their own magazines and their role, to then find out how they contextualize their magazine's role in the current state of U.S. democracy. This was accomplished by also asking what were their perceptions about the current political landscape. These questions also aimed to explore factors, characteristics or

values that are important for these journalists that a magazine in this specific genre should accomplish to fulfill their role successfully.

Providing depth and context. Magazine journalists emphasized that the main role of the long-form and commentary magazine currently and throughout history, has been to bring depth and context to complex issues, as well as to serve an explanatory function for readers. In a world where the news cycle moves faster than ever due to the rise of social media and digital news sources, long-form and commentary magazines are available for readers to provide deeper context to daily news stories, more background and nuanced understanding of issues. Participant 4 said he believed that what long-form and commentary magazines should do, and can do at their best, is give people a sense of context in a country where there is “so much hard news,” when it’s not always easy to put those into context. Therefore, long-form and commentary magazines give readers background, historical information and the ability to process the news as more than just facts, helps them understand why a certain news event matters, why they need to pay attention, and what they can do about it.

Participant 6 referred to the large amounts of news content as “the bigger picture getting lost in the headlines” due to audiences consuming news content at faster paces on social media, most times not going beyond reading a headline. Participant 5 mentioned that the role of providing depth is important for these outlets to fulfill because “it’s really easy to get things wrong, especially first draft wrong,” since news events continuously evolve and develop. Therefore, spending extended periods of time on producing a long-form piece and devoting more words to it, allows different ideas to be explored and facts to be unraveled without the constraint of a tight deadline and high turnover that other outlets, like daily newspapers, have.

Journalists highlighted that these magazines' role is also to educate audiences. Participant 7 mentioned that the ultimate goal of a long-form magazine that provides depth and context to the daily news, was to have an educated public that understands issues that permeate the country. It can, for example, provide context so citizens understand what various politicians represent for their parties, or for the country, or what's happening more broadly in the world. He added that audiences should ideally come away from reading those stories smarter and more informed than when they began reading. Journalists also pointed out that these magazines also serve the function of illuminating, revealing broader truths, covering topics that might be overlooked by the daily news cycle, and fostering or expanding currently existing conversations. Participants also highlighted that the content in their magazines is produced under rigorous standards and that it relies on facts and reality. Participant 3 said the role of the long-form and commentary magazine was to provide citizens with "robust, reality-based journalism." As such, journalists prioritized providing depth and context as one of the most important roles that a long-form and commentary magazine serves.

Using narrative as a driving force for stories. One thing that participant's answers had in common when describing the type of journalism characteristic of their magazines, was narrative as an indispensable element to tell stories with topics that might be abstract or difficult to understand. Therefore, one of the goals of magazines is to put flesh on the bones of the actual news, policies, events, tragedies and conflicts. As Participant 9 explains:

Long form magazine journalism permits a lengthier, more detailed, ideally more nuanced, and analytical view in many cases of who the human beings are, who are, you know, at various points in the power structure when it comes to the events that are shaping the world and the democracy. (Participant 9)

Similarly, Participant 7 said that a story is considered a magazine story if it has a narrative embedded in the issue he wants to illuminate and bring to life, by also providing writing pieces of the highest quality. Participant 11 added that magazine stories focus on bringing a human, three-dimensional narrative where journalists can get inside the subject's heads and hearts in a way that daily news coverage is unable to do. She also said these narratives can be accompanied by photo essays as well, which can serve as effective storytelling devices, and that other printed media products, such as newspapers, don't have the space to prioritize as much as the printed version of magazines do.

Acknowledging influence. Journalists also recognized the position of the magazine in the broader U.S. journalism landscape, the amount of influence they hold and the impact they can make. Participant 4 said that his outlet is well positioned to make arguments about issues around democracy in the U.S. and set the tone. He mentioned that Magazine B approaches their role as “something that transcends party” and that allows an editorial space to people from different political leanings. At the same time, he also said upholding democratic ideals through their written pieces “forms part of their DNA,” referring to the reputation the magazine has formed for themselves as one of the publications with the most longevity in the U.S. journalism industry.

Journalists also recognized, in a more tacit way, the power their publications have to set the agenda, or bring attention to issues that otherwise would be unexplored, by saying that another role these magazines fulfill is fostering conversations. Participant 11 that the publication she works for (Magazine D) has such an impact that they can “put something on the cover and change the conversation about an issue.” This quote evidences how this participant is conscious

of the influence that, in this case, Magazine D can exert in U.S. society by prioritizing a certain story in the cover of the publication and switch how an issue is perceived by audiences.

Given how traditional media outlets have been trying to keep pace to the changes brought by the digital age, and the ways that audiences have changed their media consuming habits due to this reason, it's worth noting that these journalists did not mention any types of decline in their power to set the agenda in the wider journalism landscape. It could be argued that this is because these specific outlets, despite of being traditional, do have a strong presence in social media, and therefore, decisions taken by the editorial staff of these publications still matter and make an impact in wider audiences and the broader journalism industry.

Keeping quality in mind. A factor that participants constantly highlighted that set long-form and commentary magazines apart from other media outlets is higher quality standards they abide by. For them, this meant more rigorous and robust reporting; a higher number of sources consulted to write a piece than what a newspaper would have; distinctive writing styles, and outstanding use of literary resources to develop the narratives for news stories. Participants who have done journalistic work for other media outlets besides long-form magazines stated that the editorial and fact-checking standards are considerably higher than any other outlet they have worked for in the past. Participants expressed this with a sense of pride but also recognizing that being able to keep high quality standards is a privilege in a context where other media outlets are suffering from lack of economic resources and that have had to compromise quality standards at times due to this reason. Participant 3, an editor for Magazine B, said this about how her individual role connects to the overarching goal and mission of her magazine:

How does what I'm doing on each of my daily tasks support the end goal of (Magazine B)? The first thing is that in all of them, I'm pushing us to have the highest quality

journalism we can have. So, whether that means focusing on the accuracy; pressing the writer to dig into something that's under reported and we need to be focused on; or whether it's just doing my basic round of edits to make the piece more readable, to cut it a little, to make it less lengthy, to get the writer to get to the point faster. All of these things have the same goal of pushing us to an endpoint of better, higher quality journalism. (Participant 3).

As an editor, Participant 3 stated that she highly prioritizes standards of quality in various ways, with the goal of offering the audiences high quality news content. Similarly, Participant 6, a reporter for Magazine A believed that her and her peers' responsibilities within the magazine was to make the magazine "the best it can be," by making every story accurate, detailed, revelatory, illuminating and fascinating.

These journalists' beliefs on this topic point at how high quality is an overarching goal of their long-form magazine and is embedded in their editorial identity and instilled as a value to prioritize in the staff, arguably to both provide a worthy product to the reader but also to maintain their position, reputation and credibility as leading sources of information in the country while also setting the bar for other outlets to follow.

Value added. In addition, participants also placed importance on bringing new context or "value added" to pieces and used this characteristic as a measurement of quality, meaning that ideally, long-form and commentary magazines should offer distinct angles or viewpoints that haven't been brought up or said before by any other outlet. For example, Participant 6 pointed out how Magazine A "won't publish a story where we don't feel like we're offering something new and really providing a unique point of view and unique story and narrative no one else has." Similarly, Participant 2 said that he even considered a long-form and commentary magazine's

ability of bringing new context to news events or issues as a journalistic value within itself, placing it next to accuracy and fairness, because in this line of journalism, it makes written pieces more meaningful. “For me, it’s value added. Don’t everybody say the same shit over and over again. I think that’s actually an important value,” he said. As these quotes described, journalists prioritized bringing something new and unique to the news content they produce and used this factor to characterize a piece of journalism as high-quality, therefore, if the piece doesn’t bring anything new to the wider conversation about an issue, whether it is an argument or an angle, then it will not be considered as valuable as others that succeed at this. This was evidenced during Participant 4’s interview, when he criticized another long-form and commentary magazine’s coverage of political news content during the Trump presidency and labeled it as “unreadable,” because in his view, their pieces not adding anything new to the conversation on news events or issues.

It was often just really boring and really predictable. And it wasn’t necessarily even that I disagreed with the things they were saying. It was just that there was so little new, they weren’t bringing new context. They weren’t making new arguments that were bringing new things in. (Participant 4)

It could be then argued that one of the factors that make a long-form and commentary magazine of this size remain influential in the current journalism landscape is their ability to maintain a strong, unique and distinct editorial voice throughout their coverage, and the failure of achieving this goal could translate in a loss of worth in the publication itself.

The state of U.S. democracy in long-form journalists’ perception. After these initial viewpoints about the role of the magazine in general, participants answered questions related to their perception of the current state of U.S. democracy. In almost every case, prior to responding,

journalists ironically laughed at the question of how they would describe the state of U.S. democracy at this moment in time, and labeled it as more unstable, dysfunctional, endangered, embattled, fraught, or precarious than any moment they have been alive, or since they have practiced journalism. They all gave different reasons as to why they perceived the state of U.S. democracy and there was a wide consensus among them, stating reasons such as the riots of January 6, 2021; pointing out gerrymandering and reduction of voting rights in certain states; partisanship issues specifically with Trump and other personalities in the Republican party “not being interested in upholding democratic ideals;” the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*; legislation in conservative states against members of the LGBTQ+ community; lack of trust in institutions, and increasing polarization.

On this topic, there was only one outlier who said she believed that U.S. democracy was strong and still functioning despite some valid criticisms, also citing the January 6th insurrection. Another participant expressed concern over the state of U.S. democracy but slightly differed from the rest of participants who showed concerns for the reasons stated above. This participant stated that he did not believe what his colleagues say about “completely losing democracy or tipping into fascism,” and described these claims as overwrought, exaggerated and that these “thicken” unhealthy levels of anxiety among Americans. Nevertheless, he cited increasing polarization as a more worrisome reason to believe that U.S. democracy is in a delicate state, as well as long standing problems with the U.S. system, using as an example the Senate structure of two senators per state and described it as highly undemocratic. Still, participants’ concerns about U.S. democracy were in line with what the literature review laid out regarding this topic. In this context, a salient theme in the exploration of RQ1 in the interviews, was the role of long-form and commentary magazines of conveying to audiences what is at stake, especially in a moment

where U.S. democracy is considered weakened, implying that there is a sense of urgency, or risk when reporting and informing audiences on these issues.

RQ2: How do writers at long-form and commentary magazines perceive their own roles and functions in the current state of U.S. democracy?

In this section of the interviews, long-form and commentary magazine journalists were asked questions with the purpose of exploring what is the work that they do for these publications, what do they think about their work and how they make sense of their role and journalistic functions in the current political landscape. These questions also aimed at exploring how these journalists conceived their duties in this context. During these conversations, participants explicitly and tacitly placed more importance on some journalistic functions over others. On one hand, when journalists spoke about what they thought their role and function was, some of the things they said intersected with what they thought about the role of their magazines, such as bringing depth and context to issues and dedicating time to issues that might be overlooked by journalists at daily newspapers. On the other hand, many of the journalists said their job was to figure out and report the truth accurately, some of them making it clear that they report the truth “as they see it,” bringing an interpretive element to the work they do that is characteristic of magazine journalism, as well as finding unexplored angles or holes of the broader conversation regarding various issues that have not been touched.

Interpretive role and analysis function. Journalists highlighted their role in keeping people informed so they can make informed decisions, but they went beyond this and mentioned that they also find that their long-form work has been about finding nuance, helping people understand complex issues or enhance their understanding about those. These journalists

expressed that while reporting on the news and providing context and analysis, they are simultaneously trying to make sense of the world and conveying that to readers.

I like to think of my job as giving people a way to think about the news. I don't want to tell them what the news is, and I don't want to tell them what to think about the news, but I want to guide them through a way to think about it. I want to give people a way to think about democracy and think about little developments, whether that's something that Trump says or filing in a case for something other Republicans says, or the Republican debate or something about Democrats. Give them a way to think about that and understand what that means in a broader sweep of the election season. The challenges to American democracy and to American history, and if I can help people see it in that way, you know, it's a good day. (Participant 4)

It's relevant to highlight how this participant's idea of his role and the way he makes sense of it slightly deviates from the premise of the agenda setting theory by McCombs and Shaw (1972) of journalists not telling the audience what to think, but what to think about. In this case, Participant 4 gives this saying a small twist by stating that with added context, arguments and analysis, he wants to provide the magazine's audience a *way* to think about the news, which can also be considered as another characteristic of the interpretive function of long-form and commentary magazine journalists. Some participants talked about this role as taking the reader by the hand, somewhat serving as a "tour guide" for news events, especially when they are complex or abstract. While they are trying to make sense of the news themselves through their analysis, they are taking the reader on that journey. They also felt responsible to dissect issues that can be difficult to understand for audiences. A phrase that repeatedly came up throughout the interviews was "making it easy," especially from journalists whose job is to report and write

about legal issues. Participant 1 said his goal was to help people understand and have a candid voice in his pieces while explaining how complex legal proceedings and questions are resolved, including as much nuance as possible while also making the piece lively, interesting and engaging. Participant 11 also said that her responsibility with regard to democracy is to make clear to people what is at stake and why they should care about the law or technicalities of how the government operates, regardless of how complex the topic might be.

Considerations on commentary. While touching on the interpretive element of long-form and commentary magazine content, some journalists discussed the role that commentary can take in their work. One of the things I wanted to discover and make sense of with this study was to figure out the role of commentary in these magazines and if opinion and commentary were considered the same. Journalists had some difficulty distinguishing between the two, some of them gave convoluted answers, and one of them, Participant 8, stated he had never given any thought about if there were any differences between commentary and opinion. Although, Participant 8 and 9 added that long-form reported pieces can also include commentary because these have a distinct point of view but also provide the reader with information. Participant 8 highlighted that this ability to provide reported commentary speaks to the resources of news organizations like these magazines to do “serious work,” referring to pieces he deemed as high quality for including thorough reporting and that avoid just providing an opinion about an issue without a solid factual base. He also pointed out how this becomes even more relevant when both local and national media outlets are currently shrinking, where opinion pieces are being “cranked out” one after another, without much research. Overall, most participants in this study did not shy away from the fact that long-form magazine pieces have a clear perspective or point of view from the writer.

Participant 9 said that her role at her magazine was to be a reporter and a columnist, and in many situations, “both at the same time.” She acknowledged that although she is not the only person who does that in the magazine, and certainly not the only magazine that does this or that encourages their writers to have a point of view in their pieces, she described it as unusual because of the line that journalists, or the norms of journalism, have traditionally drawn between subjectivity and objectivity. She illustrated this with an example of a feature piece she wrote about a prolific politician in the U.S.

I think that the notion that you can suck opinions out of longer-form writing is wrong. I don't think you can. And that doesn't mean that those longer forms are the same thing as opinion columns. You have profiles, you have reported features about something where the driving force of the narrative is the event or the subject (...) where it's very clear I am directly doing analysis in the midst of also having done the interviews with him, reporting on his books, reporting on his rallies, talking to other people about him, all the hallmarks of a long-form reported feature. But what I'm also making very clear is what I think about him. (Participant 9)

Nevertheless, it's important to emphasize that while long-form magazines have some leeway to allow clear perspectives and point of view from the journalists in their written pieces, this doesn't necessarily mean that all journalism pieces should do this. Some participants still highlighted that there was a value for news content that prioritizes reporting “just the facts.” Participant 4 said he sees the value in having news wire services available like the Associated Press, although he also believes it's important that there are other news outlets that put those facts into context, like his magazine. This was followed by him admitting he felt glad that he

does not have to work in a place where he is not allowed to make an argument in a written piece of content, because that is how he intrinsically has come to conceive his work.

Similarly, Participant 8 stated that journalists should commit to “sticking to the facts and being accurate.” In that section of the interview, he was referring to newspaper journalists. This participant then shared an example of a previous editor who worked at a prominent national newspaper long before Participant 8 was a staff member in it, who was critical of news stories where the reporter’s opinion seeped through or “tilted the scales,” especially if it was a breaking news story, as this editor believed that the reader deserved “one good swing at the facts” before reading any analysis or interpretation from the journalist. This particular section of the findings where long-form and commentary magazine journalists compared and drew contrasts between what they do or are allowed to do because of their specific position in the journalism landscape, versus what other journalists should or shouldn’t do, calls back to the boundary work literature. This will be further analyzed and expanded upon in the discussion section.

Social empathy function. Journalists pointed out that bringing opposite viewpoints to their pieces is important to them and to the overarching goal of some of the magazines they work for. In this sense, some magazines and journalists prioritized this role more than others, but it was a frequent and persistent theme throughout the interviews. For these journalists, an argumentative long-form piece can also serve the purpose of educating and bringing voices to the forefront that might not otherwise be heard (or read) by the magazines’ audiences. Although these journalists brought broader audience concerns to the forefront in the interviews (which will be further discussed and explored further in RQ3), with the exception of one participant, magazine journalists in the sample did not describe their readership or subscribers in much detail. They did point out in different points of the interview that for example, in the case of

Magazine B, that their readership is one that cares about issues relating to democracy, but most of the participants said that their magazine offers high quality content that more audiences should seek out. Most participants did not offer insights into which type of people tend to seek out this type of content at higher rates. This could be interpreted as magazine journalists believing that their content is not limited or intended for a specific type of audience and that anyone could access this genre of journalism.

Nevertheless, only Participant 10, who contributes to Magazine C, mentioned that more often than not, the type of readership of these magazines tends to be, as he described, “cosmopolitan,” and that these long-form and commentary magazines attract highly educated audiences that tend to lean left to center in the political spectrum. As such, this journalist said that by shedding light on viewpoints that might not necessarily align with most readers’ political leaning, he also hopes to bridge gaps and provide a healing effect to a society that has been deemed as dangerously polarized in recent years. Participant 5 highlighted that in order to do this, and to do it successfully, the topic of resources also needs to be considered due to the time that it takes to earn the trust of sources and to tell stories that touch deeper on their experiences, especially when it comes to stories touching on stories of people who don’t align with center-of-left political views. She illustrated this with an example of an assignment where she had to go to a polling place in the middle of the 2022 primary elections and had to interview a candidate of the Republican Party as long-form journalists for a magazine that is considered liberal by conservative Americans:

It was a pretty conservative place. And there was this guy that I wanted to talk to. I said, can I talk to you? And his friend standing next to him asked me where I was from. I told him, and he said to his friend ‘well, you know, she’s from the liberal media.’ I said

‘you’re absolutely right, I am from the liberal media, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to talk to you or that I won’t quote you correctly, or that I will make fun of you. I want to hear what you have to say, why are you here? Why are you running? What do you want to accomplish?.’ I think that the goal is to not try to make assumptions before you have the information and before you’ve explored your subject. I think that can get you much farther than just walking in the door and thinking ‘this guy is a jerk or I think his politics are stupid,’ or whatever you might think, because it doesn’t help anybody. (Participant 5)

Similarly, Participant 10 stated that although his pieces tend to be less argued, with a less clear point of view, and more reported, he sees his job as trying to bridge divides that have formed in society due to political polarization and help the two sides understand each other, show the humanity on both sides and that issues might be more nuanced than they appear to be, “even if it’s going to ruffle some feathers or bring me a lot of backlash from the magazine’s usual readership,” he said.

Journalistic duties and normative considerations. Long-form and commentary magazine journalists had a normative view of their duties in a democratic society. Journalists were directly asked what they thought were the specific duties they had to uphold as long-form and commentary magazine journalists in the current state of U.S. democracy, and the first thing that came out of most participant’s mouths after informing people, was telling the truth. They also used words such as accuracy and fairness, and phrases such as “being reliable with facts.” Participant 8 described it as “the fundamentals,” although he also added to this list “recognizing the great variety of voices that make up American democracy.” The nature of this specific question put participants in a position of looking at themselves normatively since it asked

directly about their duties, which are responsibilities and obligations they are required to execute by journalistic standards. The implications of these journalists normatively making sense of their duties will be further expanded upon in the discussion section.

Sense of pride. While journalists made sense of their own work in a broader context, they also reflected about their work within the organizations they work for. Throughout interviews, long-form magazine journalists expressed a considerable sense of pride in their magazines. This was evident by the ways in which they described them, whether it was by plainly stating that their magazine was the very best or outshines the rest of the existing magazines in the country, using phrases like “Magazine A is at the top of their game” or “there’s no one I’d rather read than the political writers at Magazine A, they’re just the smartest;” or “what makes Magazine C unique is that the writing is incredible, let’s just start there.” Journalists also stated that their magazine had the best editors or factchecker teams in the industry, that they publish the best articles, or have won multiple national and prestigious awards.

What makes (Magazine A) unique is their long-form features, they’re award winning pieces that can take half a year’s worth of work on part of writers and editors, and it shows when you hold a copy of Magazine A in your hands. You are getting an authoritative magazine article by an authoritative writer and editor. (Participant 1)

Due to the way he describes the action of holding the print edition in his hands and feeling a sense of authority emanating from it, it could be argued that Participant 1 idealizes his magazine as a definitive editorial product above the rest of existing publications.

Sense of responsibility. At the same time, journalists also acknowledged the pressure that comes with being part of a renowned national outlet, and that resources (time and money)

are a significant part of fulfilling the overarching goal of their magazines. One of the participants went as far as describing this role and goal of going deeper into the issues as a luxury that long-form magazines have, which sets them apart from other types of media outlets. In a couple of cases, the journalists interviewed reflected more deeply on their own roles and work within their magazines, expressing a sense of duty and responsibility not only to readers but to the magazine itself. In one case, Participant 11 was conscious about her role in using the resources of the magazine to fulfill her work as she acknowledged that other print media outlets in the U.S. are struggling economically. She explained that because of the complicated nature of the stories she reports on, which are largely about legal issues involving the Supreme Court and their role in U.S. politics and democracy, they tend to not be the most popular in terms of views or clicks, as opposed to other types of stories that appear in her magazine that draw more attention.

I am not the person who ever gets to profile Taylor Swift or anyone you'd ever heard of (in that sense). And so, it can be hard to get people to really engage with (my) stories. They're rarely the stories that get the most traffic for us. And so I feel a particular responsibility because if I'm gonna hold the magazine's resources into something that is like, not the sexiest thing, I want to do my very best to make clear why people should care about this, and try to help them feel like they're learning something about something that matters to how the government, and the country operates, if that makes sense.

(Participant 11)

Similarly, Participant 4 expressed he has a duty to readers *and* the magazine, going as far as stating that he continuously tries to find ways to do “the kind of journalism that people have always wanted from Magazine B,” which he described as one that provides intellectual shareability and reliability about facts to their audience. This particular perception is telling of

how journalists can think of their job in idealistic ways and place that in the context of the outlet they work for. In the case of Participant 4, there is a distinct and almost romanticized perception of how he sees his work within the magazine. As long as his pieces resemble what Magazine B has published for years, he considers part of his role and responsibilities within the magazine partly fulfilled. This also speaks to the sense of identity that outlets such as magazines can instill in their writers and how that can influence the finished product.

This section focused on explaining how journalists identified themselves with the roles of interpreter and the functions of analysis and social empathy and how they conceived a sense of pride in the positionally and quality of their magazines, as well as the ways they negotiated their responsibility to audiences and their publications.

RQ3: What do writers at long-form and commentary magazines think will be the roles of this genre in U.S. democracy through the 2024 election and afterwards?

After exploring how journalists perceived the role of their magazines and their individual roles and functions within the context of the current state of U.S. democracy, the last section of the interview aimed to discover how journalists perceived the impact that their magazines and their long-form work will have on the foreseeable future, using the upcoming 2024 election as a timeframe.

Participants' answers about how they perceived the role of their magazine and the long-form genre in the first sections of the interviews were decisive (for RQ1 and RQ2), with some of them stating that bringing depth; context; "added value" to issues, and high quality content to audiences is a goal that has remained throughout these publications' history. Therefore, it was valuable to explore this research question by relying on the journalists' ability to contextualize the moment in which they will have to report on an upcoming election process, by taking into

account other factors that can affect or influence how that coverage is done. Through this part of the conversation, journalists highlighted numerous concerns for the current state of the journalism industry in the U.S., and the ways in which electoral and democratic processes get covered by the press from the beginning and through the campaign, until the winner of an election is announced. Journalists also expressed concerns about the news consuming behavior of audiences and how audience's perception of journalists affect the ways that media outlets choose to cover politics in the country. These themes will be laid out and explored throughout this section, and further analyzed in the discussion section.

The decline of local journalism. Participants showed significant concern to what they described as the decimation of local journalism and local media outlets. This theme was present throughout all the interviews, with the exception of one outlier who agreed that although there have been budget cuts that affect local coverage of communities, the industry “still has an incredibly strong, talented and smart group of reporters who are dedicated to reporting the truth.” It's worth noting that this participant was the one who also believed that despite valid concerns, the current state of U.S. democracy is strong. Still, most participants did not consider the U.S. journalism industry as properly equipped to effectively cover the 2024 election, primarily because of the lack of local journalism. Journalists highlighted a variety of issues that stem from this issue, such as the way it affects audiences' informational needs to fulfill their civic responsibilities in a democratic society; how it increases levels of polarization, and the spread of misinformation through social media and low-quality news sources. In terms of covering local and state government, the decline of local journalism signifies a significant loss and a problem to democracy and the role of journalism in a democratic society from an accountability perspective, which participants highlighted. As local outlets disappear, local and state governmental

institutions run the risk of going uncovered, resulting in public officials and institutions not being held accountable.

According to participant 9 “there is not a broad engagement and awareness of the kinds of electoral realities and consequences unfolding all across the country, at school boards; City Councils or state legislative offices that actually have shaped our policies at this point.”

Similarly, Participant 10 stated that a consequence of the erosion of local journalism is that it has become increasingly difficult for members of a community to know who their local elected officials are, which then impairs their civic duty to participate in elections and to responsibly exercise their right to vote, translating into citizens only voting mainly based on party affiliation. Participants widely agreed that another consequence of the decline of local journalism is that it makes for a more divided society. Participant 10 stated that his biggest worry regarding the journalism industry is the plight of local journalism and cited this as a reason why U.S. politics have gotten so polarized. He pointed at the fact that audiences get their opinions formed by media outlets, and in the past, communities used to get more of their information from their local newspapers or local TV stations, which tended to be less inflammatory than highly polarized, ideological, often incendiary and less reliable outlets such as Fox News, or social media.

Participant 5 agreed:

The fact that so much of local journalism has disappeared, means that people are getting information from God knows where, you know, they’re getting it from Tik Tok and they’re getting it from Twitter, they’re getting it from Facebook, they’re getting it from Rachel Maddow, they’re getting it from Tucker Carlson. They’re getting it from sort of the 30,000 feet above than they actually live in, where the issues are much different than they are up at 30,000 feet. (Participant 5)

In the last section of her quote, Participant 5 referred to how audiences fulfill their informational needs by seeking out national media outlets, which at times can provide some local coverage but that still doesn't fill up local outlets' gaps because of their detachment from the community. Participants acknowledged that no matter how well intentioned or how much they wanted to fill these gaps, it's not possible to do it effectively because communities need beat reporters who are present day in and day out. Participant 10 said he does see his long-form pieces as playing some role in that regard as he tries to report on things that happen in places that have very little local coverage anymore. Although, he recognized this doesn't fully fill the void that the decline of local journalism is leaving because in most cases, it's a "one-off story" and fails to give communities the regular local coverage they need. Participant 4 also highlighted how national media outlets, including long-form and commentary magazines can be "parasitic" by picking up good coverage from local outlets and building on it, making lengthier pieces that offer depth or added context. But as local journalism continues to struggle, he said there is not much opportunity even left for national outlets to continue to pick up said local stories. On this, Participant 9 added that more often than not, local media outlets were the ones who broke the stories that became of national importance.

These stories, crucial stories, happen on a local level that have first of all, local impact, which is important, but also broader impact, and when you do not have a corps of journalists or funding for them to be able to do those jobs, you lose a crucial view of democracy itself and its inhabitants. (Participant 9)

Participant 10 also recognized that journalists from national outlets often fail in even trying to help to fill out the voids of the lack of local coverage and instead of going to less covered territory. Instead, he said, "we end up often chasing too much of the same story and that

traps us in our bubble, not just in terms of what we're choosing but also our perspective," meaning that at times, national journalists run the risk of getting the story wrong when it comes to covering local communities. Similarly, Participant 4 stated that journalists at national outlets tend to have relatively comfortable white-collar jobs, admitting that most times they even are "late to the story," and have a hard time reporting on situations that happen at local communities in a way that doesn't seem so distant and detached. This acknowledgement hints at a dichotomy in long-form and commentary magazine journalists' perception of their roles, which will be further explored in the discussion section.

At the same time, participants highlighted the effects that the decline of local journalism has in the journalism industry itself, stating the fact that many journalists at long-form magazines, including themselves, began their careers at local publications that equipped them with the training and skills to cover the informational needs of communities by attending City council meetings, covering state and local elections or school board meetings, despite a handful of them admitting that the coverage at their local newspapers was not of the highest quality due to fulfilling corporate interests and increase profits.

I worked at a local newspaper as my first job, and while it was an incredibly valuable experience, it was a terrible newspaper. I think newspapers are often very caught up in corporate interests and not doing especially creative coverage. That said, it is of course negative to have much less coverage of local government. And I think it means that there's some real holes in terms of people's understanding of how cities and states work. (Participant 11)

Despite her opinion of local journalism being of bad quality, Participant 11 recognized that local journalism is still an essential part of a functioning democratic society. Participant 10

stated that another consequence of this is that journalism has gotten clustered in places like New York and D.C., when in the past, they used to be spread out much more around the country. This in turn, proliferates the issue of news deserts and uncovered territory by journalists, while also narrowing the perspective of journalists' coverage. Participant 7 highlighted how this issue affects trust in institutions and media outlets. Since local outlets are in decline, they are less visible to audiences, and in turn, national outlets become a distant body, not only in geographical terms but also conceptual.

If you're just an average citizen, it's really easy to like, hate *The New York Times* and question it and think it's telling you lies. It's a lot trickier to hate your local newspaper where you know, you probably know one of the reporters because their kid goes to your kid's school and you just... it's just closer to you and you sort of have more connections to it, which ultimately produces some trust. (Participant 7)

Faults in political coverage. On numerous occasions, participants reflected on the past two elections to assess the performance of the journalism industry in this regard. Firstly, they expressed themselves negatively and with guilt with regard to the 2016 election, acknowledging mistakes that the press committed when covering Donald Trump as a candidate. For example, Participant 11 said "we screwed up really badly in 2016." On this specific election, Participant 8 added that in his view, one failure of media outlets in 2016 when leading up to the election was not talking enough to voters to understand the reasons of Donald Trump's popularity, which he says it's why his victory came as a surprise for reporters. That being said, Participant 11 revealed that she worries more about television than print outlets when it comes to covering Trump as a politician, which is a theme that was prevalent throughout the interviews. Participants placed a

lot of the blame for poor quality political news content on cable news networks and the tension between ratings and responsible coverage.

I think a lot of it is a cable news problem. In 2016 you saw, especially with CNN, the recognition that just Trump... people tuned in to watch Trump and so they would carry his rallies and they would let him phone in for interviews and (do) things that they didn't do for the other politicians. (Participant 7)

Similarly, Participant 11 added "the 2020 election was better... it wasn't perfect, but at least CNN wasn't broadcasting his rallies as if they were sporting events." At the same time, journalists acknowledged that a controversial political figure such as Trump guarantees views, clicks and high ratings, even when it comes to long-form and commentary magazine coverage. Participant 1, who reports on legal issues for Magazine A, recognized that these types of stories can be dense and difficult to get through for the general public, but cited the Trump indictments as something that "people are going to read in large numbers regardless," as opposed to other issues that don't involve him or any other "flashy" political figure.

They don't have the kind of features like Trump. That automatically gives you a little bit of a boost in terms of like, people clicking and reading your article. You have to do work to try to draw people into that. Make it a little entertaining. (Participant 1)

Participant 11 also acknowledged that keeping Trump in the headlines is profitable for news outlets because of his ability of making people tune in to listen to what he says and also being an entertaining politician for audiences.

I mean, you know, he's very good for business. It's a problem, like, people tune him in. He's extremely entertaining in his own way. He's a very, very good politician. He's right when he says that everybody's numbers went up and that, you know, he's beneficial to

the media. He is totally correct about that. And that is a real challenge for us.

(Participant 11)

With regard to the 2020 election, Participant 6 and 8 described it as a “stress test” for democracy and in terms of how media outlets reported the truth, due to Donald Trump’s refusal to accept the 2020 election results and his false claims of election fraud. A prevalent theme throughout interviews was how journalists acknowledged that they have not figured out how to cover Trump as a politician, and the main issue participants highlighted was the consideration of covering a person of interest who constantly lies to the public and to media outlets. Although, Participant 7 also recognized that outlets choosing to not cover him is “naive” and not an effective solution because of Trump’s current position as a leading politician in the Republican party.

Optics. Participants negotiated the dilemma of responsibly covering Trump as a politician with the reality that he brings audiences and profit, which in turns benefit the news outlet. But they also noted the implications of “calling out Trump’s lies” with how the general audience perceives the news outlet, which Participant 11 said, “hold it against us when they think we are being biased” when the current political situation forces journalists into what can be seen as a partisan stance. Journalists stated that media outlets critically consider *how* to cover a politician like Trump because of the fear of being perceived as biased. Participants considered this dilemma as an obstacle to providing quality coverage, and something that makes being a journalist more difficult. Participant 4 said it’s hard to cover democracy issues without “sounding like you are anti-Trump, since he does so many anti-democracy things,” but also pointed how “the press” is determined to appear objective and are at times reluctant to uncover Trump’s lies explicitly because they don’t want to seem like “merely Democratic Party mouthpieces.”

Similarly, Participant 5 said she feels media outlets can be too generous and not critical enough because of the fear of being tarred and feathered as biased. Participant 2 went as far as saying that every outlet he has worked for has continuously negotiated this dilemma.

Everywhere I worked at has been afraid of Republican complaints because they don't want to look like pansy liberals, and they like taking on Democrats because it makes them look independent. And all that is a problem. It's really hard. (Participant 2)

Participant 11 said it will be hard to cover Donald Trump as a candidate in the upcoming election because "he deserves to be covered in a non-partisan way," but also acknowledged that he constantly lies and "is a threat to democracy." This in turn results in a dilemma for journalists who by duty are forced to either dismantle his lies and "call him out," or pretend that he is a normal politician, which participants acknowledged that he is not.

On the question of whether argumentative pieces could fulfill a role in dismantling lies told by a politician, Participant 8 argued that it's not commentary to correct someone or call them out when they lie, but it instead is good, fact-based journalism. "It's not 'oh, I think he's an idiot because he's lying.' No, it's that actually, climate change is real according to the consensus of scientists. That's not commentary, that's a reporter's job, and that has a role that is exponentially more necessary than it was years ago." Despite of the fear of audiences perceptions, this participant's answer was decisive and recognized that uncovering blatant lies holds more importance than media outlets being seen as taking sides or viewpoints that could be considered as "liberal."

Horse race coverage and the need for more policy stories. Journalists agreed that another shortcoming in covering elections is how media outlets focus too much on the polls and how politicians are perceived by the public instead of focusing on policy. When asked how they

believed the coverage of the 2024 election will look like, most participants agreed that this will be a style of reporting that will likely remain, although a handful of participants added that there was some value to horse race coverage. Participant 7 said that although he is not keen on horse race journalism necessarily, he thinks that the criticisms of it can be overwrought, while Participant 4 thought this type of coverage still matters in a presidential election because audiences want to know who is up or down and why, and that this also aids in understanding demographics. He added that the problem comes when there is a saturation of this style of journalism and “the fact that a lot of it is bad.” Participant 4 believed that horserace stories can inform deeper issue stories and point audiences toward more nuance, but they don’t necessarily do that. This in turn becomes problematic for the informational needs of audiences. On this, participant 8 added:

There are a few things more annoying than horse race coverage of political campaigns, that don’t get to the issues, that are all on the surface, all about messaging, image, and personality. And these are important, people want to be comfortable with their leaders, of course. People want to know where they came from. They want to know their backgrounds. They want to know what hobbies or what quirks they have, that’s fine, but to cover only who’s up and who’s down is a great disservice. (Participant 8)

In this quote, Participant 8 refers to the disservice and the failure of media outlets in prioritizing horse race coverage instead of informing audiences of what should matter to them when the time comes of casting a vote for a candidate. For example, Participant 5 stated with exasperation that she lost count of how many pieces she has seen about Joe Biden’s age. “Ok, we get it, he’s old, maybe he shouldn’t run. That’s a story but it’s not THE story.” Participant 4 and Participant 8 also stated that something that was evident through the 2020 election was how most

audiences don't know how elections work on a mechanical level, therefore, on top of focusing more on policy, news content could also go beyond that and focus on explaining this side of the electoral process.

These things are a black box to them. And the result is you see people spinning wild conspiracy theories and showing up on boards of elections with guns and threatening election workers and all these things, because they just don't get what's going on there. And I think that's kind of true. I think, like most journalists, they don't necessarily know those things. (Participant 4)

In addition, Participant 9 also pointed at how the journalism industry in the U.S. needs people to do writing, editing and choosing of stories to understand that covering elections is “not a game.” Similar to what participant 10 and Participant 4 stated about journalists being detached and in a bubble, Participant 9 said that journalists who do this type of coverage are often distant from the effects of what the results of an election could mean to the wider population, and those who cover the “real-life consequences” are mostly long-form journalists.

Audience concerns. At the same time, journalists also voiced their perceptions about their readership, most times criticizing general audiences' news consuming habits and the lack of importance they give to what journalists considered high quality news pieces. Participants repeatedly used the analogy of journalists feeding audiences vegetables or spinach, or news stories feeling like homework to audiences when they focus on policy issues using democracy as an underlying theme. They also pointed at how a problem arises when audiences need deeper pieces of news content that touch on policy like the ones that long-form and commentary magazine journalists do, but don't want to consume them or actively seek them out.

Specifically, Participant 2 conveyed some cynicism about audiences, stating that he doesn't think "anybody really cares about substance." In his opinion, readers no longer care about accuracy, fairness or values that journalists prioritize when reporting and that "they are just looking for stuff they can use to confirm their views, rather than looking to actually learn something about the world." Likewise, Participant 4 said regarding the prioritization of horse race coverage, that one problem is the reader. Although the country as a whole would benefit by journalists choosing to cover more policy stories instead of the horse race type of stories, he said he is unsure that readers always recognize that. "You can put vegetables in front of a baby, but you can't make the baby eat it, and I feel that way about readership." Participant 4 also recognized that audiences "not caring" about policy stories should not mean that outlets should stop producing them at high rates, but the current economic model of journalism in the U.S. complicates that duty.

A particular issue with long-form journalism, which focuses on people and the effects of policy, according to Participant 9, is that there is not a lot of leadership in media outlets who assign stories about policy itself and that focused on the explanatory role of long-form pieces because editors know that these types of stories don't draw audiences. Despite this, participants stated that a current conversation happening in long-form and commentary magazines has been about how to produce news stories that touch on essential issues for audiences to know, but at the same time that audiences actually want to consume. For example, Participant 8, a contributor for Magazine C highlighted that internally, staff in the magazine is keeping the conversation and concerns about democracy as one priority, as well as how to communicate that to audiences in ways that fill holes in the overarching conversation, that bring something new, that makes sense to them and that they care about it enough to read it all.

While participants agreed that there is still high-quality journalism being produced regardless of the issues that currently permeate the journalism industry in the U.S., audiences should more actively engage with quality news sources who are dedicated to fulfill this role.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore and analyze the role perceptions of long-form and commentary magazine journalists in the current state of U.S. democracy by asking three research questions:

RQ1: What function do editors and writers at long-form and commentary magazines perceive their magazines uphold in the current state of U.S. democracy?

The interviews revealed that long-form magazine journalists place a lot of emphasis on their publications' role of providing depth and context to news events that are covered on a surface level by daily media outlets in a moment where the news cycle has become faster than ever before because of the proliferation of news sources and social media. Long-form and commentary magazines' role is to provide historical background, argumentative and interpretive pieces so audiences have the ability to digest news content as more than "just facts" and understand what is at stake, by implementing literary elements, such as narratives, as a driving force to tell these stories and evoke empathy in audiences. These findings are consistent with Van Krieken's (2019) description of long-form and narrative journalism, and with Kitch's (2005), and Abrahamson's (2007) writings about magazines being a dialogical and a product of their social and cultural moment. As Abrahamson (2007) stated, magazine exceptionalism deals with the idea that magazines are unique from other media outlets such as newspapers or broadcast media. Abrahamson (2007) argued that magazines not only reflect the social reality of their time but can also serve as a catalyst for social change and can shape the social reality of the moment. This idea was reflected by journalists highlighting their magazines' ability to change conversations and bring topics to the forefront that otherwise might be overlooked. One could argue that other forms of media also have this ability, such as podcasts, which also have a

conversational tone and evokes closeness to audiences. Although, a counterargument could be that podcasts rely much more on opinions, conversations and interactions between hosts and guests than magazine journalism, which can include opinion and commentary, but still relies on traditional journalistic reporting and sourcing that can also be complimented by visual resources.

Regarding journalists' role perception of their publications, findings were consistent with McIntyre, Dahmen and Abdenour (2016) role perception study, where they built upon Weaver and colleagues' (2007) journalistic role perception work and developed a new denomination labeled the contextualist role, with the characteristics of "acting socially responsible, alerting the public of threats and opportunities, contributing to society's well-being, and accurately portraying the world" (McIntyre, Dahmen and Abdenour, 2016, p. 1667). Although the analysis section noted that Weaver and colleagues role perceptions (2007) and Schudson's (2008) journalistic functions would be the theories used to analyze the findings of the study, another review of the literature revealed that the contextualist role developed by McIntyre, Dahmen and Abdenour (2016) was the most accurate to describe how journalists in the sample perceived their publications.

Journalists acknowledged the influence and power their magazines have to set the news agenda in the country, and also used different measures of quality to their own publications and later put them in context with the broader journalism industry, stating that what sets these magazines apart from other outlets is their robust and rigorous reporting and fact-checking standards, as well as "value added," which referred to the ability of magazines to place themselves in a broader conversation about an issue of interest with arguments and angles that no other outlets provide. Journalists' considerations of quality in their own outlets upholds what Mott (1930) wrote about long-form magazines as providers of high-quality democratic literature

and furnishing a contemporaneous history of their time. These journalists also contextualized their publication's role in the current state of U.S. democracy by first describing how they perceived the current landscape in the country, which they labeled as unstable. Therefore, journalists conceived the role of their magazine as a critical and essential one in the country's history because of how precarious they perceived the current state of U.S. democracy. Journalists in the sample understood and assumed their responsibility and duty to citizens currently, where the political landscape in the U.S. is considered to be complex and polarized and how their coverage brings understanding to issues in this context.

Knowing how journalists perceive the current state of U.S. democracy helps to better understand how they consider their role and duties. It was relevant to ask this question because it served as a primer for them to place themselves in a moment in time and to describe that moment, while they elaborated on what they think is at stake when they report and produce content for their publications. It's relevant to lay out and understand the findings regarding how journalists perceive the current state of U.S. democracy, because this helps figure out how they make sense of their own role in that context. Since long-form and commentary magazine journalists are currently reporting, writing, and as they said, bringing depth and context about this topic to the forefront to help audiences not only be informed and educated, but to understand and grasp what is at stake at this moment in the country's history.

In this specific context, it's then pertinent to state that long-form and commentary magazines have the resources to clearly articulate the stakes for the future of the country in terms of democracy. Journalists described this topic as big and abstract; one that people are weary of making claims about and have a hard time wrapping their heads around. Therefore, the role of the long-form and commentary magazine in the current state of U.S. democracy is to bring depth

to the daily stories that only show the surface of issues. Since journalists perceive that democracy is currently unstable, ideally, the role of the magazine would then be to make a topic as abstract and intimidating as democracy, more digestible and less challenging to understand. Although, issues arise when the readership shows a lack of interest in consuming this content, when outlets whose duties are to articulate and disseminate these issues lose resources, therefore, the roles of journalism in this context are endangered as democracy is currently perceived to be.

RQ2: How do editors and writers at long-form and commentary magazines perceive their own roles and functions in the current state of U.S. democracy?

Journalists in this study compared their own roles to the role of their magazines, which was one of providing depth, context, analysis and nuance to issues, as well as accurately reporting the truth “as they see it.” This finding lines up Weaver and colleagues’ (2007) model, specifically the interpretive role in which the journalist analyzes news events for the public. This is also consistent with Schudson’s (2008) function of analysis (which he also labeled as explanatory), where the journalist dissects news events and makes them more comprehensible for readers. Journalists also highlighted their role of informing and educating the public, an inherently normative value that aligns with Schudson’s (2008) function of information. Journalists also perceived the content of their roles as argumentative, as they continuously highlighted how their work in these magazines was to balance arguments from both sides of the political spectrum to educate and highlight voices that might be overlooked by these magazines’ readership. This specific finding aligns with Schudson’s (2008) function of social empathy, where Schudson refers to journalists “encouraging empathy and understanding in the audience” (p.19) by reflecting different perspectives and ways that citizens live their lives, which serves a

democratic function since this gives audiences an opportunity to know more about their fellow citizens through news content.

Something worth noting on journalists' perceptions of their roles is a specific case in this study: Participant 9, who placed a special significance in being able to provide a point of view in her pieces, where she offered an example of a profile she wrote of a powerful and prominent political figure in the U.S., in which she thoroughly reported on his life story and conducted interviews while also clearly stating what she thought about him. This seems especially relevant in this participant's case because she specializes in writing pieces about power structures and dynamics that include special considerations of gender and race, as she described her beat. Her job allows her to provide analysis and interpretation of these power structures and dynamics, and how they interact in the broader state of the country and the state of U.S. democracy. When looking at Schudson's (2008) functions, he included a seventh one which he called publicizing representative democracy. He explains that the role for journalism should be "democratic but not populist, that regards and respects constitutionalism and champions a strong role in representative democracies for the protection of minority rights" (p. 23). He also explains that this function should materialize itself as journalists covering more carefully some institutions and relationships that they might take for granted or ignore, and he adds that journalists have not yet been able to articulate a broad normative function of their craft in these terms. Having laid out these two points, I believe it's pertinent to argue that this specific role perception of Participant 9 hints at this journalistic function.

It's also worth noting that when conveying their role perceptions, participants did not limit themselves to only one role or function. This is also consistent with what McIntyre, Dahmen and Abdenour (2016) highlighted in their study, as well as other role perception studies,

which showed that journalists role perceptions can be multi-dimensional, with journalists ascribing to more than one role or function at the same time (Deuze, 2002; Johnstone et al., 1972; McIntyre, Dahmen and Abdenour, 2016; Weaver et al, 2007; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996).

In terms of their individual role perceptions, journalists in the sample were able to articulate what they believed their role was, although, at times, some of them drew a boundary regarding their role of providing analysis and commentary in their written pieces. For example, Participant 10 showed some pushback when talking about the analysis role, when long-form and magazine journalists are more argumentative in their pieces and embrace bringing some of their opinions to the forefront. He said he particularly holds back when it comes to doing this, making him an outlier in the sample. The rest of participants in the sample owned this role comfortably, with Participant 9 even saying that she does not believe it's possible to take opinions out of long-form reporting, showing that this practice is something she accepts and embraces as a strength of long-form magazine journalism. Participant 4 stated that although he values journalism that reports on "just the facts" —naming the Associated Press as an example— he felt happy that "this is not what he has to do," or limit himself to, in his daily work. Similarly, Participant 8 mentioned that providing commentary or opinion to long-form pieces is mainly what long-form and commentary magazine journalists do, although he also said that there is still a value of journalism that, in his words, "does not put a thumb on the scale," referring to newspaper journalism. These examples show participants drawing a clear boundary between what they believe newspaper and/or news wire service journalists should limit themselves to do (report just the facts), and what long-form and commentary magazine journalists themselves believe are more allowed to do, which is leaning more on the analysis function by blurring the line between informing just the facts and providing commentary at the same time.

RQ3: What do writers at long-form and commentary magazines think will be the roles of this genre in U.S. democracy through the 2024 election and afterwards?

Journalists provided definitive answers to what they believed the role of their magazine and the long-form genre was, highlighting that their publications have upheld their role throughout history, thus, this question was explored through participant's contextualization of the current state of U.S. democracy and what they believe will take place regarding the journalistic coverage of the 2024 election. Journalists accomplished this by looking back on the last two elections, assessing the quality of the coverage and the faults that journalists in the U.S. have committed up until this point, mostly citing cable news network's coverage of Donald Trump and the prioritization of horse race journalism instead of policy stories.

Journalists highlighted the decline of local journalism as a significant concern and believed that without healthy and robust local coverage, the 2024 election will be lacking, and audiences' informational needs will not be met. Journalists recognized that national media outlets, including their publications, pick up news stories and expand upon them. Despite this, they also acknowledged that this doesn't fully make up for the lack of local media coverage because 1) most of those stories end up being a "one off story" most of the time, 2) national journalists are usually not able to effectively connect with local communities and 3) most journalists fail to try to fill out the local journalism void because of local or uncovered communities being blind spots, which results in journalists chasing the same stories and remaining in a "redundant news bubble."

Elite magazine journalists showing serious concern for the decline of local news media was a seemingly obvious but still unexpected finding in this study. Now, it's pertinent to highlight that there is a dichotomy in what magazine journalists do with regard to their work as

bringing depth and context to daily news stories. While they instinctively expressed that this is their job, it was intriguing to see how they also recognize that they fail to do so at smaller scales, specifically when it comes to effectively providing depth and context to stories at the local level, which they said national outlets tend to pick up and expand upon, because of their inevitable disconnect with the local communities they sometimes cover.

Although journalists admitted that what they do in their long-form magazines does not fill the gaps of local media outlets, it's a reality that these outlets have more time and resources that other outlets don't have, to give daily news more context so audiences can be better informed and educated, which is a service these journalists and their outlets provide. Journalists were conscious of the gaps of local journalism and although they don't think that magazines, in this case national high-profile magazines, can fill out the void that the disappearance of local journalism is leaving, they conceive their role as an important one, regarding both covering the current state of U.S. democracy for audiences to understand what is at stake, and to the journalism industry. They do this not necessarily by filling the gap of local journalism, but by complimenting what local outlets are still covering with deeper, nuanced and argumentative pieces that offer other angles and perspectives to current issues.

In this context, it's pertinent to argue that the particular finding of magazine journalists providing depth and context, and in turn perceiving their magazine and the long-form genre as fulfilling a contextualist role (McIntyre, Dahmen and Abdenour, 2016), should not be interpreted or analyzed in a vacuum. For this finding to be analyzed in a more significant way, it has to be put in context with the rest of what journalists discussed in the interviews: 1) the decline of local journalism and how that can be considered a threat to democracy; 2) how audiences at times fail to fulfill their civic duty by not seeking out high-quality news sources but at the same time are

being failed by the corporations who currently own local media outlets because of the profit model that is currently instated in the journalism industry, and 3) the lack of funding and layouts in local outlets. This in turn, results in audiences not having their informational needs fully met, and them having to turn to social media, national news sources that are disconnected from the issues that permeate local communities, or cable news who prioritize ratings over responsible coverage of issues. Therefore, magazines' role, according to participants, is to contextualize and convey the current stakes in a critical moment not only for the country, but for the journalism industry.

Journalists also grappled with their inherent but at times uncomfortable responsibility of accurately and truthfully informing audiences, in the context of figuring out how to cover Donald Trump as a politician, as well as dismantling his lies because of the fear of being perceived as biased by audiences. On the implications of journalists' conception of their duties normatively and prioritizing telling the truth over other journalistic duties, this finding could be analyzed through questioning why long-form magazine journalists in this sample instinctively prioritized their responsibility of telling the truth or getting at the truth above other journalistic duties. This might be because in order to provide context, analyze or interpret news events, it's imperative to first accurately represent news events. When placing their normative considerations of their duties and the prioritization of truth in context with their conflict on dismantling lies said by Donald Trump, this finding gains more significance, since journalists repeatedly said that dismantling these lies complicates their work and puts them in an uncomfortable situation with audiences, which might be why the normative value of reporting the truth becomes even more important to them.

Although comparing what journalists say they do with what they actually do, (Mellado, Hellmueller & Weaver, 2017) is beyond the scope of this study, it's also worth noting that a fair amount of pieces appeared in a quick Google search for articles that included the terms Trump and lies in these publications websites, where journalists' articles directly point out that Donald Trump has lied about a variety of things amid his run as a politician. Other searches that included the names of past presidents and lies, still yielded some results, although not as many. For example, articles written between 2006 and 2008 touched on falsehoods proliferated by the Bush administration regarding the invasion of Iraq. Articles from 1998 referred to former President Clinton's lying under oath and denying allegations of his sexual affairs that were later discovered to be true. It's worth noting that these three instances of politicians lying are somewhat different from each other, and that some of these past lies were not being uncovered in real time by journalists. The lies of the Bush administration and Clinton, respectively, were amid events that were still in development at the time, and these falsehoods were being uncovered as the events unfolded. In the present, journalists are faced with the task and the duty of dismantling falsehoods that, in this case, former President Trump says in real time, also with the proliferation of digital journalism and social media. Although journalists recognized that it's hard or uncomfortable to "say that someone is lying," they don't seem to be shying away from doing that, as they acknowledge it's their job and their responsibility. As such, this study was valuable because it provided an opportunity to examine how long-form and commentary magazine journalists make sense and negotiate their journalistic duty to report the truth in this context.

Having reviewed the findings for this research question, it's appropriate to conclude that long-form and commentary magazine journalists believe that their genre, beyond contextualizing, bringing depth and nuance to issues, informing and educating audiences, will be

essential when covering the 2024 election, since they perceived themselves and their outlets as producers of high quality journalism that audiences need in order to make informed decisions about the future of their country. Although journalists recognized that audiences fail to prioritize high quality news content, they agreed that regardless, long-form and nuanced stories that dissect complex issues are still a priority and a responsibility to produce, showing that they might be choosing to focus on readers who are already interested in consuming this content. As it was previously stated, journalists in the sample, with the exception of two participants, did not go into detail about who their readers are or what might be their characteristics. Participant 4 merely mentioned that Magazine B has a readership that “cares a lot about democracy issues.”

Participant 10 referred to the readership of long-form and commentary magazines as cosmopolitan with a left of center political leaning. In terms of the roles that audiences play in democracy, journalists provided a general view on this referring to the wider audience and not about their specific readership, saying that the purpose of the content they produce is for audiences to be educated and informed at the moment of making critical decisions that could change the course through their democratic participation in electoral processes.

Practical and academic implications

The value of this research relies on its contribution to scholarship and practice. It was important to explore the role perceptions of long-form and magazine journalists since magazines and magazine workers are rising but still underrepresented topics in academic research.

Journalists' role perceptions have been explored before through the framework that Weaver and colleagues (2007) developed, but beyond that, this study also explored these roles through the lens of Schudson's (2008) journalistic functions. This was a significant approach since these functions are definitions Schudson (2008) developed as things that journalism can do for

democracy. Given the current state of U.S. democracy and how journalists interpreted this moment in time, it was pertinent to analyze these functions as they help understand how these journalists make sense of their contributions to U.S. society. Thus, this study added to the existing literature about role perceptions of journalists in a democratic society and to the scholarly literature around magazine research.

Regarding practical implications, these findings highlight the prioritization of policy stories and less focus on horse race coverage during elections. One participant said that horse race stories could be done to subsidize the production of stories that focus on policy issues. Therefore, these findings call editors and writers to assign and report on these types of news content, regardless of its popularity or profitability. One of the most significant contributions is journalists' acknowledgement of issues that currently impact the health of the journalism industry, especially the decline of local journalism and how this also affects the informational needs of audiences and arguably, the state of U.S. democracy within itself. Since evidence suggests that corporations place profits over journalistic duties, senior media practitioners and leadership in non-profit news organizations could look at these findings and possibly develop strategies to recover what local communities have lost with the gutting of local newsrooms. On the other hand, up and coming journalists could be moved by these findings and devote themselves to the coverage of local communities with vocation and meaning. Not only because as participants said, local newsrooms tend to be the birthplace of renowned national journalists, but also because local communities are in desperate need of journalists' services. Despite a current environment of hostility toward journalists, participants hinted it was possible that an increase in local media coverage could improve current levels of polarization in the country and bridge societal divides.

Limitations

This study's results only apply to the scope of its sample; thus, they can't be generalized to a wider population of journalists. The sample was made of 11 journalists, and although this is within the parameters of role perception studies conducted prior, the results could have varied if a wider population of journalists would have been included. Another limitation worth noting is the lack of diversity in the journalist's backgrounds. Despite aiming to make the sample as diverse as possible, a majority of white journalists agreed to participate in the study. Also, in the search of participants, I noticed that mostly male and white journalists are the ones covering politics at higher rates than journalists of other backgrounds. Although providing a solution for this is beyond the scope of this study, I recognize that the results might have looked different and arguably could have been more significant if the sample would have been more diverse.

Future Research

These findings only apply to the scope of this study and its limitations, and they are not intended to be generalized to wider groups of media practitioners. It would be useful for another researcher to conduct quantitative studies to test the theories that this research builds upon, not only in mainstream magazines that specialize in long-form and commentary pieces but also across other types of media platforms (Schudson, 2008; Weaver et al., 2007), to portray a wider picture of the country's media practitioners and their perceived roles in the current state of U.S. democracy. Further research could also focus on exploring more deeply the Schudson's (2008) seventh function of publicizing representative democracy, as he stated that journalists have yet to articulate this function in normative ways.

Participants of this study were journalists who work for long-form and commentary magazines in the U.S., which are renowned and prestigious publications, therefore, participants

of this study were media workers with considerable amounts of experience in the journalistic world. It would be valuable if future research on this topic focused on smaller or local print media and included participants with less years of experience or up-and-coming journalists and editors to compare findings and discover if journalists' points of view regarding this topic vary based on generational differences. Conducting a focus group with these inquiries in mind would be an interesting approach.

Also, this study only focused on analyzing the role perceptions of magazine journalists in the current state of U.S. democracy. It would be worthwhile if a future study took these role perceptions and functions into account to develop a framework that could juxtapose, compare and analyze the role performance of these practitioners in their publications (Mellado, Hellmueller & Weaver, 2017). It would also be worthwhile for future researchers of this topic to do a more in-depth examination, such as an ethnographic study on the journalists' and editors' processes of pitching stories, reporting, writing, editing, fact-checking, and publishing at their respective publications and how these relate to the informational needs of their audiences in the context of the current state of democracy in the U.S. Lastly, further research could also focus on exploring how either long-form and commentary magazine journalists, or other types of media practitioners, consider and characterize their specific audiences and how they contextualize their own role with the role that these audiences play in democracy.

Conclusion

This research was conducted with the goal of contributing to more research and knowledge about magazine journalists, as well as journalists' perceptions of their roles and outlets in the current state of U.S. democracy. Long-form and commentary magazine journalists in this study emphasized their role as interpretive, analytical, informational and evoking social

empathy through their pieces. They also highlighted concerns that should be addressed practically in the journalism industry, such as the decline of local journalism and deficiencies in election coverage, such as too much focus on horse race journalism and media outlets' failure to figure out how to cover Donald Trump as a politician. Journalists highlighted the role of their magazines as contextualists, as described by McIntyre, Dahmen and Abdenour (2016). Given the findings of this study and journalists considerations of their work, it's important to acknowledge all the different things that long-form and commentary magazines can accomplish while serving us as audiences. They can help us understand issues beyond what is labeled as hard news, that are as important for us to function in a society. They can bridge gaps and evoke empathy by, for example, explaining cultures we don't know; music we don't often listen to; books we haven't read and movies we haven't seen. As audiences, practitioners, and researchers, we shall think of the storytelling that these magazines provide as something that goes beyond just political coverage, policy stories or stories deemed as soft news. It can serve as a window into unexplored parts of our world, countries and communities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Recruiting email

Dear Ms., Mr. (name of participant)

I am a Master's student at the Missouri School of Journalism, and I'm conducting a research study on how journalists and editors at long-form and commentary magazines perceive their roles in the current state of U.S. democracy. For this study, I plan to interview journalists and editors about their work at these outlets and their role perceptions. Would you be willing to be one of my participants for this study? The interview would take an estimated 30 minutes to one hour maximum, and would be administered via phone or Zoom, depending on your preference and availability. You will be granted complete confidentiality.

If you agree to participate, I will make a donation in your name of up to \$30 to any journalism or press freedom organization of your preference. I'm offering this opportunity to all potential participants as a token of appreciation for considering taking part in my research study.

If you would like to participate, please contact me at vcn9rb@umsystem.edu or by phone at 480-703-4509. Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated and will help me in completing my master's degree.

I am happy to address any questions or concerns, and am grateful for your consideration.

Respectful regards,

Valerie Nava.

Appendix B

Informed consent

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Project Title: Through the looking glass: Role perceptions of long-form and commentary magazine writers and editors in the current state of U.S. democracy.

Principal Investigator/Researcher: Valerie Nava

IRB Reference Number: #2096813 MU

You are invited to take part in a research project. You must be 18 years of age or older. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop participating in this study at any time. The purpose of this research project is to the role perceptions and functions of magazine journalists in the current state of U.S. democracy as well as the perception they have of their publication's role in this landscape. You are being asked to participate in an interview about your work as a long-form magazine journalist or editor. If you agree to an interview, you will be asked for permission to record the audio of the interview. Your participation should last up to an hour, and you can choose not to answer or skip any question you wish. Your name or any other personally identifiable information will not be used in the published research. Your participation will be without compensation. The information you provide will be kept confidential and only the research team will have access to it.

An employee's decision about research participation will not affect (favorably or unfavorably) performance evaluations, career advancement, or other employment-related decisions made by peers or supervisors.

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri researcher at vcn9rb@umsystem.edu or by phone at 480-703-4509. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or muresearchirb@missouri.edu. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you want to talk privately about any concerns or issues related to your participation, you may contact the Research Participant Advocacy at 888-280-5002 (a free call) or email muresearchrpa@missouri.edu.

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

Appendix C

Interview protocol:

RQ1: What roles do writers at long-form and commentary magazines perceive their magazines uphold in the current state of U.S. democracy?

1. What is the role of the long-form and commentary magazine in the current state of U.S. democracy?
2. How would you describe the state of U.S. democracy at this moment in time?
3. What is the role of your specific magazine in the current state of U.S. democracy?
4. What does this magazine do that no other magazine, publication, or outlet in the U.S. does?

RQ2: How do writers at long-form and commentary magazines perceive their own roles and functions in the current state of U.S. democracy?

5. What is your unique role at this publication?

Probe as necessary:

What are your primary responsibilities in this role?

6. What would you say is your specific role as a journalist/editor of a magazine in the current state of U.S. democracy?
7. How does your day-to-day role and functions in your magazine connect to the magazine's overarching goal?
8. What are your specific duties to uphold in a democratic society as a long-form or commentary magazine journalist?

RQ3: What do editors and writers at long-form and commentary magazines think will be the roles of this genre in U.S. democracy through the 2024 election and afterwards?

9. Does the journalism industry meet what the U.S. needs for the 2024 election?

Probe as necessary:

Why or why not?

If not, what would need to happen for the journalism industry in the U.S. to meet those needs?

10. Do you believe people in your organization or other journalists in your circle are meeting those needs?

11. Do you perceive any shortcomings in the ways that journalists currently cover electoral processes in the U.S.?

Probe as necessary:

If so, what are they? If not, what do you believe they are doing right?

12. What could U.S. journalists covering electoral processes improve? How should they improve it?

13. What type of media coverage do you believe the 2024 election will receive? Does this match the idea you have of what the coverage of the 2024 election should look like?

14. What do you believe journalism is ultimately for?