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Editorial

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Dear SComS readers,

Before we introduce the articles collected in this issue, we want to reflect on practices and publication patterns of the last six years. We thereby take up ongoing debates in our field on gender diversity and inequalities in the representation of women in science (Wang et al., 2021). While female authors were strongly underrepresented in journal publications for several decades (Brosius & Haas, 2009), journals in communication and media research recently have seen a trend towards closing the gender gap, with some now showing an equal distribution of female and male authors (Beck, Domahidi, Eilders, Engelmann, & Pentzold, 2023, pp. 2, 5; Trepte & Loths, 2020). The Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research (SACM), and with it SComS, appreciates and supports the recently founded “Working Group Publication Diversity”, led by Sabine Trepte and Michael Scharnow (2023). We contribute to this discussion by reporting

the distribution of male and female authorship in all SComS publications from 2017 to 2022, i.e., all available issues since SComS is published open access (Table 1).

We see that there are more female co-author teams than male co-author teams, and also that women make up most sole authors. However, many articles are also written by a male single author or male co-author teams, together accounting for 27% of all SComS publications since 2017. Moreover, a significant part (32%) is contributed by teams of female and male authors. These mixed author teams have increased over the years, and have most recently accounted for almost half of all authorships. Overall, publications in SComS are characterized by various author constellations in terms of gender and do not show a lack in visibility of female authors, thereby aligning with recent trends in communication and media journals as described above. These data are also in line with a recent study (Müller, Peil, & Weder, 2023) sug-

Table 1: Distribution of gender among SComS authors from 2017 to 2022

Year	Female single author	Female co-author teams	Mixed author teams	Male co-author teams	Male single author	Missing	Overall number of articles
2022	15 %	20 %	48 %	5 %	13 %	0 %	n=40
2021	37 %	10 %	30 %	3 %	20 %	0 %	n=30
2020	35 %	9 %	17 %	22 %	17 %	0 %	n=23
2019	24 %	19 %	33 %	5 %	19 %	0 %	n=21
2018	28 %	17 %	24 %	10 %	21 %	0 %	n=29
2017	27 %	9 %	27 %	5 %	27 %	5 %	n=22
m (2017–2022)	27 %	15 %	32 %	8 %	19 %	1 %	N=165

Note: Data are based on all articles published in SComS from 2017 to 2022, including studies published in the General Section, Thematic Section, and Community Section as well editorials, guest editorials, book reviews, and conference reports. Overall, studies in the General Section and Thematic Section make up the majority of all articles published in SComS. Importantly, gender information is not collected during any step of the publication process. This is why coding of authorship in terms of gender was done by using first names and visual data available online. However, this only allowed us to dichotomously capture gender information by distinguishing between male and female gender. Similar to existing studies, we are aware “that this is only a first step in measuring gender diversity” (Trepte & Loths, 2020, p. 298). Missing=It was not possible to determine gender by name or available online information.



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gesting that the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a gendered impact on the short-term academic output of communication scholars in Switzerland, Germany, and Austria.

The visibility and reputation of scholars is also influenced by awards. We are very pleased to announce that our SComS Best Paper Award 2022, which honors the best article published by SComS in the past year, has been awarded to both female and male authors. As an exception, this year's award has been jointly given to two SComS articles: to Maija Ozola-Schade (2022) for her paper on *"Intergroup relations and media: The effects of media system quality in explaining immigration attitudes"* and to Esa Väliverronen, Tanja Sihvonen, Salla-Maaria Laaksonen, and Merja Koskela (2022) for the article *"Branding the 'wow-academy': The risks of promotional culture and quasi-corporate communication in higher education."* Congratulations to the authors! Ozola-Schade emphasizes that "attitudes are embedded not only in the notion of intergroup relations, they are influenced by the information environment in which public discourse about immigration is shaped" (2022, p. 363). The jurors concluded that the "findings of this comparative study are not only extremely important for research on migration, political communication and journalism, but also illustrate how important freedom of the press and democracy are for the quality of a media system and how this can affect social attitudes." The awarded paper by Väliverronen, Sihvonen, Laaksonen, and Koskela was part of the Thematic Section "Changing Communication of Higher Education Institutions," guest edited by Silke Fürst, Daniel Vogler, Isabel Sörensen, and Mike S. Schäfer. It demonstrates "possible repercussions of a quasi-corporate style of communication on the credibility of the university as a higher education institution in a hybrid media environment" (2022, p. 493). It convinced the jurors because it applies an innovative methodological design by combining content and discourse analysis to critically examine "professional, journalistic and user-generated content." Jurors also highlighted its significant contributions "to current discussions about the change of science and university communication." We sincerely thank the jurors of this year's award for their

excellent work: Hannah Früh, Constanze Jecker, Werner A. Meier, Alexander Ort, Lilian Suter, and Nina Wicke. Furthermore, special thanks go to Joan Ramon Rodriguez-Amat, who serves on our Editorial Board and helped with the preselection of papers.

This issue comprises empirical studies, theoretical papers, and book reviews and, again, originated from various author constellations, including female and male single authorships, female and male co-author teams, as well as one mixed author team. The General Section contains five articles that point in two broad directions: Three articles focus on journalism, analyzing investigative identities and young journalists' working conditions in Switzerland as well as the impact of German television news on knowledge acquisition. Two articles contribute to social media research, addressing public discourse on Reddit in the recent context of the COVID-19 pandemic and conceptualizing affordances and their application in social media research.

The General Section opens with a study from Lena Wuergler and Annik Dubied from the University of Neuchâtel, analyzing "[h]ow print journalists establish authority through their texts." The authors examined 186 investigative articles by print journalists in French-speaking Switzerland. Their analysis reveals discursive strategies for constructing an investigative identity through identity markers that depict journalists as credible knowledge producers. The findings suggest that these journalists create an investigative identity by adopting a watchdog role, demonstrating an "investigative mindset," asserting specialized skills, and demonstrating rigorous verification procedures. These markers are seen as strategic devices for claiming authority within the profession. The article is complemented by supplementary material that illustrates how each discourse strategy can also structure the overall narrative of an investigation.

This is followed by an article on "Young journalists in Switzerland: Results of a survey on aims, working conditions, and future prospects of journalists born in 1990 or later," authored by Lauro Mombelli and Daniel Beck from the University of Fribourg. The study is based on a survey of 195 young journalists

from German- and French-speaking Switzerland about their career motivations, types of employment, salaries, working hours, stress levels, job satisfaction, and future prospects. Findings indicate that young journalists prioritize self-fulfillment and idealistic motives over material gain or status. Most of the respondents have permanent positions, with median monthly incomes between 5000 and 6000 Swiss francs, which varies by media and type of employment. While they perceive a high degree of autonomy, many experience work-related stress and unpaid overtime due to insufficient resources and accelerated work processes. Job satisfaction has declined, and respondents expressed skepticism about long-term careers in journalism.

The third journalism-related article is authored by Benjamin P. Lange, Hanna Jonas, and Frank Schwab, entitled “Bist du schlau? Dann guckst du(,) *logo!* Ein Vergleich der Wissensvermittlung durch die Nachrichtensendungen *Tagesschau* und *logo!* und ihrer sprachlichen Gestaltung“ (“Are you smart? Then you watch *logo!* A comparison of the knowledge transfer by the news programs *Tagesschau* and *logo!* and their linguistic design”). They tested the hypothesis that the German, youth-oriented news show *logo!* facilitates higher knowledge acquisition through its simpler language, when compared to the adult-oriented *Tagesschau*. An online experiment involving 260 participants tested for the knowledge imparted by both programs using specific segments. Software evaluated the comprehensibility of the language used in both shows. Results indicate that *logo!* generally yields higher knowledge levels, partially attributable to its simpler language (i. e., lower word complexity, shorter sentences, and a higher Flesch-Index), though findings were not universally consistent. Interestingly, *logo!* proved more beneficial for individuals with a university degree – an observation that can be aligned with the knowledge gap hypothesis. The study concludes with practical recommendations for the linguistic design of TV news to enhance knowledge acquisition.

In “Lockdown scepticism: Australian and American doom discourse on Reddit,” Margo Van Poucke addresses the widespread consumption of online news during the COVID-19 pandemic and such ensuing be-

havior as doom-scrolling and doom-writing, as reflected on the social networking site Reddit. Using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Pragma-dialectics (PD), and critical theory, the research analyzes discourse from the subreddits r/LockdownSkepticismAU and r/LockdownSkepticism. It explores power, ideology, and argumentation within these communities, suggesting that users compensated for a perceived loss of agency by making improbable statements about the future. It also highlights diverse fallacies made by “doomers” on national COVID-19 prevention policy. Linguistic evidence illustrates the influence of “biopower” in shaping the subscribed social norms. The article contributes to critical discourse studies in the digital era, offering insights into power dynamics and argumentation in COVID-19 discourse on Reddit.

The General Section concludes with a theoretical piece by Tobias Frey from the University of Zurich: “Reconsidering a multivalent concept: An integrated affordance framework to approach technology and social media use.” After reviewing the origins of the affordance concept and its development in the communication literature, Frey exposes its inconsistent application in social media research. The keystone of his article is an integrated framework that enhances our understanding of affordances and encourages a more accurate use of related concepts and terms within social media research. This framework emphasizes the relational nature of affordances in different technological and social contexts, the abstract nature of individual, relational, and collective affordances and their distinction from outcomes such as practices and structures. It also incorporates effects and dynamics that influence both technology and actors. Finally, the article offers implications for future research that addresses technology and social media use through the lens of the affordance perspective.

This issue is complemented by two book reviews. Frank Esser from the University of Zurich gives an overview of the key features of the comprehensive “Handbuch Politischer Journalismus” (Handbook of political journalism), edited by Marlis Prinzing and Roger Blum. The handbook comprises more than 900 pages and is conceptualized as a bridge

between current research and practice, thereby attracting interested readers among communication and media scholars, politicians and administrators, journalists, and public relations practitioners. Esser praises the book for providing an overview of the various facets and functions of political journalism, with a broad range of interdisciplinary authors and perspectives as well as insights into practices and structures in different countries. It also addresses current challenges and problems in political journalism and is compelling due its practical relevance as well as clear and concise style of writing. Several contributions are written by journalists and focus on current practices and case studies. In the view of the reviewer, Prinzing and Blum have succeeded in editing a sound and useful book thanks to their strong dedication and many years of experience and expertise in the field of political journalism.

Finally, the review by Lorenzo Andolfatto, sinologist from the University of Fribourg, discusses Gianluigi Negro's historiographical work "Le voci di Pechino: Come i media hanno costruito l'identità cinese" (Beijing's voices: How the media constructed Chinese identity). The book offers a vital perspective on the relationship between media and the formation of Chinese national identity, tracing a path from Mao-era loudspeakers to today's Web 2.0. Andolfatto appreciates how it enhances our understanding of Chinese society and media by unveiling a layered ecosystem where political directives, market demands, and international influences coexist and interact. The reviewer also points out that despite the book's success in highlighting the evolution, continuities, and diversity within Chinese media, it might have been even more insightful had it explored the underrepresented voices that challenge the dominant narratives.

We hope you will enjoy reading this issue.

Silke Fürst, Thilo von Pape, and Mike Meißner

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SComS

General Section

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Performing investigative identities: How print journalists establish authority through their texts

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Abstract

Faced with an increasingly challenging environment, journalists and news organizations are looking to investigative journalism as a symbolic resource to assert their professionalism. However, while the literature recognizes a strong link between authority and professionalism on the one hand, and investigative journalism and professionalism on the other, it has overlooked how investigative journalism itself can be used to establish authority. This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring how investigative pieces contribute to the legitimization of journalists in French-speaking Switzerland. To answer this question, we conducted a thematic and discursive qualitative analysis of 186 investigative pieces to examine identity markers that present journalists as particularly legitimate knowledge producers. Our findings show how print journalists perform an investigative identity throughout their texts. This includes playing a watchdog role, demonstrating an “investigative mindset,” claiming specialized skills, and / or highlighting their thorough verification procedure. By employing these strategies, investigative journalists seek recognition based on their social role, their individual traits, their specialized skills, and / or their incontrovertible knowledge claims. We analyze these four identity markers as strategic devices for claiming special authority within the journalistic profession.

Keywords

investigative journalism, news coverage, journalists, authority, boundary work, discourse analysis, thematic analysis, Switzerland

1 Introduction

Contemporary journalism faces multiple challenges. Economic, political, and technological transformations are affecting journalists and news organizations, particularly legacy media outlets (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019, p. 7). News institutions notably face increasing competition with non-journalistic news providers (Tong, 2018) and a decline in public trust (Reese, 2019). This threatens not only the economy of the media industry, but also journalists’ authority (Vos & Thomas, 2018). Since authority – understood here as “the right to be listened to” (Höpfl, 1999, p. 219) – is necessary for journalism to exist (Carlson, 2017), it can be expected that journalists would try to regain or reinforce their authority in some way.

One of those ways is investigative journalism. Because investigative journalism embodies a set of core practices and values in

the profession, it is considered a symbolically higher form of journalism (Carson, 2020). It can therefore be leveraged to compete in a challenging environment and reaffirm journalists’ authority – and, by extension, their legitimacy (Hamilton, 2016). Indeed, investigative reporting functions as a professional ideal on which journalists can rely to legitimize their profession (Bromley, 2007). Consequently, we argue that investigative journalism should be a preferred place of inquiry for researchers seeking to describe how journalists and legacy media outlets defend, protect, or assert their authority. As Bjerknes (2020, p. 1037) notes, studying what investigative journalists do is “crucial to our understanding of journalism’s legitimacy and role in society.”

Despite a strong link between professionalism and authority on the one hand (Anderson, 2017; Carlson, 2017, pp. 29–49), and between investigative journalism and



professionalism on the other (Cancela, Gerber, & Dubied, 2021; Olsen, 2018, p. 238; Wagemans, Witschge, & Deuze, 2016), few studies have explored the relationship between investigative journalism and authority (Bjerknes, 2020). One relevant framework for analyzing journalists' efforts to establish authority is boundary work (Carlson & Lewis, 2019), and "identity markers" in particular (Singer, 2007; Tandoc & Jenkins, 2018). This study draws on that framework to identify discursive strategies for constructing an investigative identity in news stories. Based on a thematic and discursive qualitative analysis of 186 investigative pieces published in newspapers in French-speaking Switzerland, the study shows that this identity is constructed through explicit and implicit claims to an investigative epistemology, an investigative mindset, a watchdog role, and / or specialized skills. Our findings highlight that those identity markers might contribute to setting boundaries not only at the borders of the profession, but also within it.

The study focuses on French-speaking Switzerland. In recent years, Swiss investigative journalism has become the focus of various studies, mostly regarding journalists' narrated conceptions, negotiations, and practices (Cancela et al., 2021; Labarthe, 2020). They notably indicate that several media outlets (either local newspapers, supra-regional newspapers, or public broadcasters) have recently created investigative units with varying degrees of formality within their newsroom (Cancela, 2021). Some journalists are also involved in major cross-border investigative consortiums, such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) or the European Investigative Consortium (EIC).¹ In this regard, the Swiss media landscape partly follows the global development of investigative journalism, which tends to be collaborative, cross-border, and data-oriented (Carson & Farhall, 2018). However, many investigations in Switzerland continue to be undertaken at a local level (Cancela, 2021).

1 For instance, the investigative unit at Tamedia (the publisher of *Le Matin Dimanche*, *Tribune de Genève* and *24 Heures*) has participated in ICIJ investigations since 2013 and later joined the EIC, of which the public broadcaster RTS is also a member.

Because of the country's linguistic and political segmentation, the Swiss media landscape is still dominated by local and supra-regional newspapers (Fög, 2021; Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 25), although the diversity of published content tends to decrease under the pressure of media convergence and concentration (Bonfadelli & Meier, 2021). The newspaper sector is owned by private companies, whereas the broadcasting sector is mostly funded by state subsidies (Künzler, 2013). Although the circumstances in Switzerland cannot be generalized to wider contexts, the Swiss media landscape provides a promising field of observation, as its historical transformations largely reflect the dynamics observable in many European countries (Clavien, 2017, p. 10). Previous research has shown that the Swiss journalists' working conditions and conceptions of the roles of journalism in society are similar to those in other Western countries (Bonin et al., 2017; Hanitzsch et al., 2011). Because the freedom of the press is strongly protected in Switzerland, Swiss journalists enjoy a high degree of autonomy in their profession (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 67). Therefore, the way in which Swiss investigative journalists experience their professional identity is likely representative for journalists across Northern European countries (Cancela et al., 2021).

2 Conceptual framework: Journalistic authority

To understand journalistic authority, it is important to acknowledge that this issue is "deeply interwoven with professionalism" (Carlson, 2017, p. 30). Like any profession, journalism aims to define and control a "jurisdiction" over a particular domain (Abbott, 1988). While some professions are constituted by "formalized bodies of knowledge" (Zelizer, 1993, p. 189), journalism is not. As Carlson (2015, p. 8) states: "Journalism [...] lacks the formal barriers commonly associated with a profession, such as licensing, educational requirements, or trade association membership. To be a plumber requires a license; to be a journalist requires, in 2015, an Internet connection."

Tong (2018, p. 257) argues that journalism thus “depends on discursively constructing professional norms and ideals to maintain its boundaries and legitimacy.” In other words, journalists use professional norms, ideals, and standards (e.g., professional ethics) to draw boundaries between who is a journalist and who is not (Carlson & Lewis, 2019), and between “good” and “bad” members of the profession (Singer, 2007). Journalists can engage in such boundary work both within and at the borders of the profession (Bjerknes, 2020; Zelizer, 1993). Indeed, any discussion of journalism’s boundaries necessarily involves a discussion of identity markers (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2018, p. 584) that allow journalists both to define themselves (i.e., “Who I am”) and demarcate themselves (i.e., “Who I am not”) (Singer, 2007).

Professional norms, values, and standards are constantly evolving (Singer, 2007; Steensen, 2017). As definitions of good (or the “best”) journalism change, so does the boundary between who is a journalist and who is not. For instance, some outlets or reporters previously considered as “outsiders” are now being recognized as legitimate players in the journalistic field (Schapals, 2022; Stringer, 2018). Boundaries concerning acceptable and unacceptable styles and forms of journalism are similarly shifting (Broersma, 2007).

Boundary work can be broadly described as a struggle for authority since it involves questioning or delimiting who possesses the legitimate “right to be listened to.” The nature and scope of journalistic authority is a site of ongoing contestation “between those who want to maintain it and those who seek to reform, displace, challenge, or erode it” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). This discursive struggle commonly takes place through meta-journalistic discourses, in which several actors construct, reiterate, or challenge the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practice (Bjerknes, 2020; Carlson & Lewis, 2019; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Marchi, 2019; Schapals, 2022). Cancino-Borbón, Barrios, and Salas-Vega (2021) argue that journalists’ narrations of their role constitute a form of boundary work, particularly when they describe the evolution of acceptable practices during the coverage of an event.

2.1 Authority and news forms

However, authority is also mediated through news content (Carlson, 2017, p. 15) and is observable in discursive strategies (Carvalho, 2008, pp. 169–170). For instance, quoting expert sources allows journalists to legitimate their knowledge claims (Carlson, 2017, p. 149). The discourse and form of conventional, fact-based news journalism is based on an underlying promise to deliver authoritative information about current events (Karlsson, Clerwall, & Nord, 2017). For Carlson (2017, p. 15), the ways in which news texts are shaped “communicate meaning about events being covered while also signaling the legitimacy of the news accounts.” Media claims to authority depend on the recognition, by the journalists and the public, of conventional news presentation as a form that provides authoritative information. Consequently, “stepping outside that set of conventions risks stepping outside the claim to be able to ‘get at the truth’” (Matheson, 2004, p. 446).

Finally, news stories also contain observable traces of reporters performing professional roles (Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015; Mellado, 2015; Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014). According to Hanitzsch and Vos (2017, p. 126), “by enacting a specific journalistic role [...], journalists – often inadvertently – take position in the discursive construction of journalism’s identity.” In this view, reporters’ conceptions of their role and their professional ideologies shape their journalistic practice; reporters, mostly unconsciously “perpetuate these deep structures through professional performance” (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 369).

Following Raemy and Vos (2021, pp. 115–116), journalistic roles are considered as institutional scripts that journalists use and adapt to perform social roles. For example, “when journalists speak of the ‘fourth estate,’ they tap into a socially validated institutional script.” For Hanitzsch and Vos (2017, p. 125), journalists may activate a role from this collective repertoire as a “marker of their journalistic identity.” From this perspective, we argue that the enactment of a journalistic role in news content can act as an “identity marker” and be used for “authority-seeking purposes” (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022, p. 2312).

However, Raemy (2021, pp. 843–846) underlines that journalistic roles are only one part of professional identity, which is also composed of features associated with individual journalists (their personality, skills, knowledge, and experience), as well as features associated with their organizational and community affiliations. While Raemy's study focuses on news professionals' discourse, our study focuses on professional identity as it is enacted in news content. In this regard, we hypothesized that identity markers in news texts can correspond to three levels (individual, organizational, and social) of professional identity.

2.2 Investigative journalism and professionalism

While journalistic authority is closely interwoven with professionalism, professionalism is, in turn, closely interwoven with investigative journalism. According to Vos and Thomas (2018, p. 2006), professionals protect their authority against non-journalists by defending "old-fashioned journalism" and pointing to "the past and a golden age of muckraking and investigation." Journalists and editors in legacy media consider their historical "investigative" role as the core of their profession (Tong, 2018). Even digital-native news organizations like BuzzFeed and Vice emphasize "traditional journalistic norms and practices" and invest in investigative journalism to gain legitimacy, recognition, and prestige within the profession (Stringer, 2018). In France, *Mediapart's* journalists have reverted to the traditional values of investigative reporting to distinguish themselves from legacy media (Wagemans et al., 2016). In both cases, journalists see investigative reporting as a professional ideal on which they can draw to enhance their symbolic capital, credibility, and prestige.

Indeed, as Schapals (2022, pp. 47–52) has shown, "peripheral" actors in the UK, Germany, and Australia regularly claim to uphold journalistic ideals such as the "watchdog function," "exposing wrongdoing," or "holding power accountable." Paradoxically, they deliberately position themselves as "divergent" from traditional media organizations while exhibiting "the same ideological professional norms and practices held

by journalists for centuries." As Tong (2018, p. 265) notes, "the persistence in practicing investigative journalism, which for many constitutes the most prestigious journalism, contributes to maintaining or restoring the ethical image of journalism." In sum, faced with the crisis that affects contemporary journalism as a whole, "investigative journalism is more than ever displayed as a symbolic resource allowing them [journalists] to reaffirm their professionalism" (Descamps, 2017, p. 221). One remaining question is how this symbolic resource is used *in news stories* to enhance reporters' perceived professionalism, and thus their authority.

Considering that (1) investigative reporting is a symbolic resource for seeking authority, (2) authority is established partly by identity markers, and (3) news content can be a place in which journalistic authority is asserted, we assume that investigative pieces should contain markers of a particular professional identity: an "investigative" identity. This hypothesis resulted in the following research questions:

- 1) Do investigative pieces contain specific identity markers?
- 2) How do these identity markers contribute to establishing the journalist's authority?

2.3 Investigative journalism as subject of discussion

Examining how investigative journalists can establish and maintain their authority in news texts involves determining what the distinctive features of investigative journalism are. This is not an easy task for several reasons.

First, no consensus definition of investigative journalism currently exists among either academics or practitioners (De Burgh, 2008; van Eijk, 2005). In general, researchers describe investigative reporting as something "more" than regular journalism, but do not provide the same criteria to characterize this "more" (Wuergler, Cancela, Dubied, & Gerber, 2023).

From the practitioners' side, Cancela et al. (2021) have shown that journalists tend to define investigative journalism according to several criteria, which can materialize in varying degrees. They describe "investigative traits" such as "curiosity," "tenacity," or "criti-

cal thinking,” but also refer to criteria such as revealing secrets, exposing wrongdoing, and initiative. Olsen (2018, p. 294) also speaks of an “investigative mindset” that includes being “critical and rigorous,” “patient,” “creative in getting the information,” or “brave.”

Second, until now, very few studies have focused on the *output* of investigative journalism, that is, the investigative stories themselves. Some do this indirectly by focusing on “quality journalism” (Olsen, 2018) or prize-winning news (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). Others examine the text of investigative stories, but mainly to obtain quantitative results (Abdenour, 2015; Carson 2020; Cordell, 2009; Knobel, 2018). Gearing (2021) quotes case studies, but mostly focuses on the journalists’ techniques and the impact of the stories. Hence, as Bjerknes (2020, p. 1040) noted, empirical work on investigative journalism is still “surprisingly rare,” and qualitative studies on investigative stories are even rarer.

One of the most prominent studies of investigative narratives is Ettema and Glasser’s *Custodians of conscience* (1998). Using both qualitative content analysis and interviews with journalists, the authors draw attention to the paradoxical “disengaged conscience” of investigative journalists, who seek to act both as “detached observers” and as “custodians of conscience.” They also point out a distinction between the epistemology of daily reporters and investigative reporters (1998, pp. 156–160). In their view, daily reporters make knowledge claims that are pre-justified by authoritative sources, while investigative journalists defend their knowledge claims through epistemic justification. This relates to what Bjerknes (2020, pp. 1041–1041) calls the “investigative epistemology,” in which every knowledge claim “must be checked, verified and confirmed regardless of how it was obtained and who or what the sources are.” According to Bjerknes (2020, p. 1040), the distinctive epistemology of investigative journalists plays a key role in the “demarcation process surrounding investigative journalism.”

Based on the literature review, the distinctive features of investigative journalism relate to a particular epistemology (verification, confirmation, evidential standards, initiative), to individual “traits” or “mindset” (curiosity, courage, tenacity, skepticism) and

to social roles (revealing secrets, exposing wrongdoings). We have therefore hypothesized that markers of an investigative identity can materialize in a wide range of discursive forms.

3 Data and methods

We thus applied an iterative approach (Tracy, 2020) guided by the literature on investigative journalism (Carson, 2020; Hamilton, 2016; Knobel, 2018) in which we allowed codes to emerge inductively from the data. The iterative process allowed us to identify several markers of an investigative identity in news text, which correspond to different features of investigative journalism. All of them serve to discursively establish the reporter’s journalistic authority.

3.1 Data selection

For this study, we focused on investigative stories published in print media outlets. Although digital media and new technologies are receiving much attention within academia, we argue that print media are of particular interest for the issue of authority. First, local and regional newspapers are the most endangered media outlets (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019, pp. 7–8) and thus likely to work particularly hard to reaffirm their role as legitimate news providers. Second, print outlets remain a favored medium for investigative journalism, even today (Carson, 2020, pp. 105–143; Hamilton, 2016, p. 280; Knobel, 2018, p. 1).

We compiled a corpus of investigative pieces based on a series of internal criteria (Wuergler et al., 2023). To establish these criteria, we considered investigative journalism as a specific process and looked for traces of that process appearing in the text. This allowed us to observe that the sources quoted in news content are good indicators of this investigative process (Olsen, 2018, p. 115). Our internal criteria for identifying investigative stories were as follows: the article must (1) be written (and signed) by one or more journalists; (2) quote several unrelated sources, some of which must appear hard to reach or process; (3) make use of evidence and not simply juxtapose various points of

view.² It should be noted that these criteria are independent from the discourse structure of the texts or sentences, which deserve further analysis.

The corpus comprises 186 press articles published in six newspapers between January 1 and September 30, 2018. This list was designed to ensure a wide diversity of press in French-speaking Switzerland by including newspapers with a variety of readerships (upper class, generalist, or popular) that are published both daily and weekly, provide national and regional coverage, and have large and small circulations.³ While homogeneous in terms of medium (printed press), the final corpus is very diverse in terms of topics, structures, methods, and styles (Wuergler et al., 2023).

3.2 Three-step analysis

Our first step was to conduct a thematic analysis of all articles in the corpus by applying codes to text segments using a qualitative analysis software (Atlas.ti). The list of codes was created using an abductive-reasoning, iterative approach (Tracy, 2020) that involved alternating between inductive and deductive approaches (Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017, p. 31). The categories were initially created inductively from the news stories and were mainly data-driven (Schreier, 2012). However, they were then refined based on the literature on investigative journalism, which helped to further define and explain the categories. Thus, the coding categories were initially closely related to the content of the quotations in the news stories, and pro-

gressively refined, reframed, and compiled to arrive at a rationalized, operational analytical system (Bardin, 1996). In other words, based on their common characteristics, quotations and codes were grouped into progressively more abstract explanatory categories, moving from descriptive to more theoretical coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 101–110).

Traditionally, thematic content analysis does not consider the general structure of a text and thus ignores its explicit coherence (Burton-Jeangros et al., 2009, p. 35). For the coding procedure, however, we drew on the *Critical Discourse Analysis* framework (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 1988), which is more interpretative and concerned with structure and coherence. We used macro-propositions⁴ as coding units and examined the interplay between their thematic content and their discursive function within the text as a whole (van Dijk, 1988). We coded each macro-proposition according to:

- 1) What is said (main topic, theme).
- 2) Who says it (news source / journalist).
- 3) The discourse function of the macro-proposition within the text.

These categories turned out to be exhaustive (each segment could be coded in a category), exclusive (each segment was coded only in one dominant category), and homogeneous (following the same coding principle) (Bardin, 1996, pp. 125–132).

In the second step, we analyzed the normalized density and the frequency (Atlas.ti, 2021) of each coding category within the corpus to identify general characteristics of investigative narratives in French-speaking Switzerland.

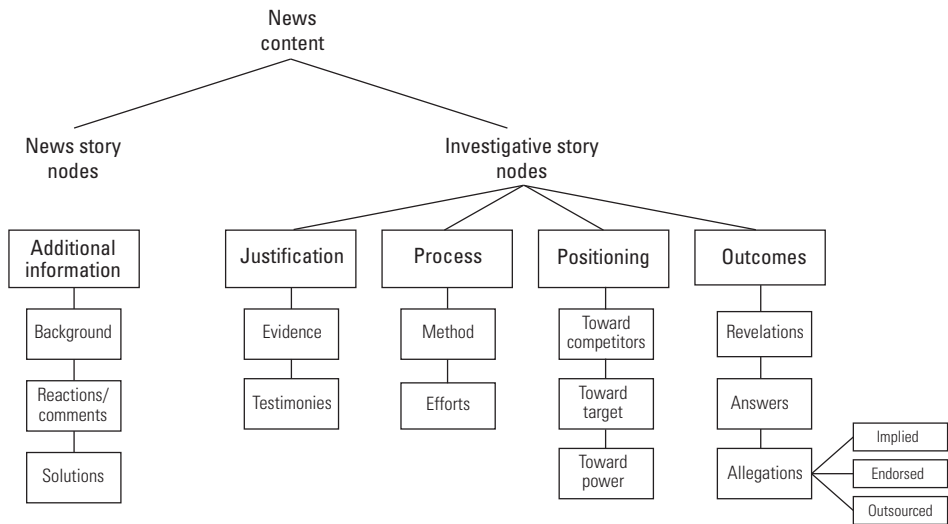
In the third step, we analyzed the discursive strategies used by investigative journalists at the lexical and sentence level to engage in boundary work within each category. For this step, we drew on previous studies on news discourse analysis (Bednarek, 2016; Bednarek & Caple, 2012; Martin & White, 2005; Montgomery, 2007; Semino & Short, 2004; White, 2020), paying particular atten-

2 For more information about these criteria and our selection method, see Wuergler et al. (2023).

3 *Le Temps* is a daily national reference newspaper with a small print run (35 000); *Le Matin Dimanche* is a Sunday national generalist newspaper with a large print run (89 000); *24 Heures* and *Tribune de Genève* are both daily regional generalist newspapers covering two French-speaking cantons (Vaud and Geneva). Since 2018, they share most of their content. Therefore, they were considered as one medium with large print runs (83 000). *Arcinfo* is a daily local popular newspaper with a small print run (25 000), covering mainly one canton (Neuchâtel). Finally, *L'Illustré* is a weekly popular newspaper with a medium print run (61 000) (REMP, 2018).

4 In contrast to propositions, macro-propositions do not refer to clauses or sentences but to larger stretches of texts expressing a specific topic.

Figure 1: Categories system



tion to the reporter’s stance, appraisals, and attribution strategies.

The results of this three-step analysis – i. e., a description of the coding categories and their density and frequency, as well as investigative journalists’ discursive strategies – are presented in the next section. The quoted excerpts have been chosen for their representativeness of the various recurrent discursive strategies (Bednarek, 2016, p. 32), which we analyzed within each coding category. In the supplementary material, we show how these discursive strategies also shape the entire structure of investigative pieces.

4 Results

The coding procedure allowed us to identify 14 content categories (sub-nodes), which we further grouped into five main categories (nodes), as presented in the chart above (Figure 1).

We considered the “background,” “verbal reactions,” and “solutions” sub-nodes as additional information that could be deleted without affecting the main story. We then looked for the normalized density and the frequency of each node within the corpus to analyze their overall distribution (Table 1).

4.1 Justification

The “justification” category consists of all evidence used to prove the “pivotal facts” (Ettema & Glasser, 1998, p. 142) of the story, including documents and experts’ statements and victims’ testimonies. Justification segments can usually be identified by formulations such as “according to,” “say(s) X,” or “show(s) Y.” Since attribution of quotations to sources is a key feature of news text in general (Bednarek & Caple, 2012), most of these segments are assertive, and thus semantically and grammatically resemble those of any news story (Montgomery, 2007, p. 120), as shown in this excerpt:

K’s husband’s name appears in seven other companies, associations and foundations that support and finance various projects in Switzerland [...]. According to Lorenzo Vidino, funding for Muslim Brotherhood-related projects in Europe usually comes from foreign donors (Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait, among others). (Krafft, 2018)⁵

5 All the quoted articles are referenced in the supplementary material. All translations from French to English have been made by the authors.

Table 1: Distribution and frequency of the categories (in percent)

Main categories	Additional information			Justification		Process		Positioning			Outcomes		
Normalized density: Proportion (%) of the category within the data	22			39		4		14			21		
Frequency of the category: occurrence in % texts	96			98		54		80			99		
Subcategories	Back-ground	Reactions, comments	Solutions	Evidences	Testimonies	Method Efforts		Toward competitors	Toward target	Toward power	Revelations	Answers	Allegations*
Normalized density: Proportion (%) of the subcategory within the data	14	7	1	32	7	2	2	0	8	6	8	3	10
Frequency of the subcategory: occurrence in % texts	88	49	12	94	46	32	35	6	61	56	75	47	82

Note: *The “allegations” category was further divided into “suggested allegations” (1 %; 35 %), “endorsed allegations” (2 %; 35 %), and “outsourced allegations” (7 %; 79 %).

4.1.1 Suggesting an active stance

However, some ways in which material is integrated into or quoted in news stories emphasize the investigative reporter’s active stance, as opposed to the “passive stance of the daily reporter” (Ettema & Glasser, 2006). These segments include formulations such as “contacted / questioned, X says,” “according to the documents we managed to consult / obtain,” “according to our research / the data we collected,” or “according to several / different / many sources.” All these formulations suggest that the journalist actively sought evidence, verification, or confirmation. Indeed, the verb “to confirm” appears in 157 quotations, as in the following example:

Contacted, the spokesman of the Public Ministry [...] “*confirms* the opening of an investigation,” *without further comment*. (Roselli, 2018)

This excerpt not only provides evidence but also suggests that the journalist knew information that she was not supposed to know. Moreover, it suggests that she became aware of the information through unofficial sources and was able to push official bodies to confirm it, despite their reluctance to do so.

4.1.2 Materializing evidence

Another recurring discursive strategy is to directly quote written material authored by oth-

er people. In addition to lending authenticity, flavor, and color to the story (Bednarek & Capple, 2012, p. 214), this technique transforms evidence into “incontrovertible facts” (Bell, 1991, pp. 207–208) by discursively “showing” them:

These intermediaries react with a mixture of panic and annoyance, emphasized by the use of capital letters. “*THE CLIENT HAS DISAPPEARED! I CAN’T FIND HIM anymore!!!!*” writes a Swiss asset manager. [...] “*WE CANNOT GO BACK* the next day to ask for more papers. *WE LOOK LIKE FUCKING AMATEURS*.” (Haederli, Brönnimann, & Zihlmann, 2018)

A look at the company’s entry in the British Commercial Register shows that the oligarch was still listed as being domiciled in Switzerland yesterday. “*Name: Roman Abramovich. Nationality: Russian. Domicile: Switzerland,*” mentions the public and official database. (Odehnal, Knellwolf, & Parvex, 2018)

The above quotations correspond to what Semino and Short (2004, p. 50) call “writing presentation in texts,” which seems more accurate than “speech presentation in text”: “The fact that the source is a written text creates higher expectations that the quotation is a faithful word-by-word representation of (part of) the original.” The writing presenta-

tion of text therefore suggests a diminished human intervention between the “real evidence” and the readers, providing the quotations with the same “mechanical objectivity” as photography (Carlson, 2019). This technique enhances the story’s epistemic authority, and thus its legitimacy.

In general, the justification segments highlight the rigorous verification procedure applied by the journalist and the robustness of the evidence, thereby reflecting the principles of the investigative epistemology (Bjerknes, 2020; Ettema & Glasser, 2006).

4.2 Process

The “process” category consists of segments that describe the journalist’s method or mention difficulties encountered in obtaining information. The “process” segments account for only 4% of the corpus text but appear in 54% of the articles. Information about the method used by the journalist appears in 32% of the articles, while information about the difficulties encountered appears in 35%. This indicates that, most of the time, journalists mentioned their process only briefly, as in these excerpts:

L’Illustré interviewed relatives about their roles and relationships. Most of those involved wished to remain anonymous. (Dana, 2018)

Its chairman [...] did not wish to answer our questions. [X.] does not talk. (Bernet, 2018b)

In most cases, the process information is not presented in well-defined segments, but is scattered in justification segments:

On an extract from the debt collection register, which we have obtained, we can see, for example, that a greengrocer is claiming more than 170,000 francs in debts. [...] In this document, we also see that the company of X totals more than 700,000 francs of debt collection since 2014 [...]. One year ago, A., N. and I. realized that their AVS accounts had not been provisioned since 2016, as confirmed by a recent statement from the compensation fund. However, their share of the contributions was indeed deducted, as evidenced by their salary slips. (Grosjean, 2018)

In this case, the reader can infer that the journalist carefully verified each fact by searching for the corresponding document. However, this excerpt is more about proving facts than detailing the method used. Indeed, the coding results make clear that investigative journalists rarely insist on their method when they use traditional – and thus non-extraordinary – legwork journalism, such as interviewing people or reading documents.

4.2.1 Method: Data-driven mindset

Apart from a few articles that recount each step of the investigation (see the “process structure” section in Table 5 in the supplementary material), the largest segments devoted to methodological issues usually appear in data-driven investigations (Parasie, 2015) or, more generally, in articles in which quantitative data plays a major role. These include details on the figures used and how they are calculated:

The analysis conducted by “Le Matin Dimanche” is based on the key figures for nursing homes published annually since 2012 by the Federal Office of Public Health. [...] Qualified care staff was calculated by multiplying total staff, expressed as full-time equivalents, by the percentage of care staff, and then by the percentage of qualified care staff. In order to compare the nursing homes, the resulting figure was reduced to the actual number of beds in each facility. The calculation was validated by specialists from the FSO [Federal Statistics Office]. (Haederli & Boss, 2018)

In line with Weber, Engebretsen, and Kennedy’s (2018, p. 202) observations, most of these “how-we-did-it” passages appear at the end of data journalism stories. By including these “meta-stories,” investigative journalists are ultimately fostering disclosure transparency, which involves explaining “the way news is selected and produced” (Karlsson, 2010, p. 537). In their analysis of the *The New York Times’ Caliphate* podcast, Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau (2022, p. 2312) state that disclosure transparency serves “to convince audiences of the authority of the journalistic method.” Moreover, disclosure transparency is deemed a crucial and commonly held principle of data journalism (Weber et al., 2018). Since such methodological “meta-sto-

ries” are a key feature of data journalism, they help link the investigative stories with the specialized sub-field of investigative data journalism.

4.2.2 Efforts: Facing difficulties

Journalists regularly evoke the difficulties encountered in obtaining information (e.g., “getting a complete picture of medical salaries is an uphill battle;” “there are no public statistics on the number of penal complaints against police officers”). The struggle to obtain information is even more obvious in text segments that mention legal battles the journalists are facing, such as publications bans or the denial of a request to access documents. In these (sometimes substantial) segments, investigative journalists assert that they will fight or have fought in court to secure publication or access rights:

What happened? “*Le Matin Dimanche*” was prevented from writing about it, as the judge of the Commercial Court of the Canton of Zurich issued super-provisional measures at the request of [R.] on Friday evening. *Our newsroom will continue to fight to obtain the right to reveal this information which, in our opinion, is in the public interest.* (Parvex, Knellwolf, & Zihlmann, 2018)

The mentions of those legal hurdles highlight journalists’ “adaptability and perseverance” (Bjeknes, 2020, p. 12) in the face of adversity. They also highlight journalists’ determination to uncover facts that someone wants hidden, which is often considered a specific feature of investigative reporting (De Burgh, 2008, p. 15). Such emphases on legal impediments also implicitly suggest that defenders of the public interest (journalists) are victims of systemic failures.

4.3 Positioning

The “positioning” category systematically includes inter-discursive markers, as it involves journalists directly or indirectly quoting previous news stories or other people’s discourses. It is composed of textual segments in which the journalists confront the target of the story with an accusation or adopt a stance toward others’ statements (Martin & White, 2005, p. 92), whether of those in power or of other media outlets.

Since investigative journalism is considered a means for media outlets to distinguish themselves from their competitors (Hamilton, 2016), we expected the journalists to promote their own work by distinguishing it from their competitors’ work. This did occur – reporters occasionally mentioned that an event “didn’t make the headline,” “went unnoticed,” or happened “without much press coverage” – but the scarcity of those segments (density 0.2%; frequency 6%) suggests that this strategy is not a common or clear boundary marker, at least in their texts.

4.3.1 Toward targets: Confronting wrongdoers

In the “confrontation” segments, the target of the article is given a chance to tell their “side of the story.” This is almost a mandatory step in the investigative process: “Sooner or later, you must confront your ‘target’ with the allegations” (Harcup, 2015, p. 106). Ettema and Glasser (1998, p. 176) argue that confrontation segments have even become “a ritualized display” mandated by the conventions of journalistic objectivity and ethics. Our analysis seems to confirm their observation, since almost two thirds of the articles (61%) include such “confrontation” segments. Indeed, most of them are formally anecdotal, i.e., condensed into a single paragraph and left at the end of the article:

She [the person concerned] denies any conflict of interest. “As president of [company R]’s distribution body, I have very little involvement in decision-making. [...] My role is to ensure that the rules are respected and to decide in case of a tie [...] but I have never had to do so.” (Giroud & Signorell, 2018)

Most confrontation segments are introduced with formulations such as “X defends himself of ...,” “X denies that ...,” “X contests that ...,” or “X replies that ...” Such attributing verbs convey the target’s unfavorable attitude toward the alleged claims. As Bednarek (2006, p. 176) states, they are “illocutionary attributing expressions,” which “make explicit the speaker’s (supposed) purpose.” The confrontation segments thus implicitly suggest a conflict, or at least a tension, between the journalist’s and the alleged wrongdoers’ po-

sitions. In some cases, the journalists even mention the targets' refusals to comment:

The spokesman of [X.] replied to all our questions that “*he did not wish to comment on personal matters and ongoing proceedings.*” (Parvex et al., 2018)

[...] the two institutions do not explain this delay, *hiding behind the ongoing investigation.* (Besson, 2021)

[Company R.] disputes these figures, *without putting forward* any others [...]. [Companies A. and P.] also deny any coordination, *without answering precisely* on the existence of “contact” between the two manufacturers. (Haederli & Philippin, 2021)

Such segments have a double meaning: First, they confirm that the journalists fulfilled their duty of fair-mindedness by giving the target an opportunity to defend himself or herself. Second, they function as an argumentative device. A refusal to respond to an accusation is commonly interpreted as an admission (Dulong, 2000), since denial is the expected response. According to Bilmes (1988, p. 167), “if one fails to deny an accusation, a denial is noticeably absent and is a cause for inference, the most common inference being that the accusation is true.” As Ettema and Glasser (1998, p. 176) point out, such confrontational statements are thus a “credibility tactic,” “intended to say more about the veracity of the reporter than the accused.”

4.3.2 Challenging public statements

This leads us to the third category, “positioning” (i. e., toward power), which appears in 56% of the articles. This includes dialogistic positioning, by which the speaker “adopt[s] a stance towards the value positions being referenced by the text” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 92). The most common dialogistic strategy observed is to follow a source quotation with a contrasting or opposing proposition, introduced with an adversative conjunction (e. g., “however, nevertheless, despite, in any case, in either case” (Idegbekwe, 2019, p. 45), as in the examples below:

Until now, [Company X] admitted that it had provided support to [Company y], which “needed help.” *However, in reality*, it has done more. (Krafft & Le Bec, 2018)

P. defends himself in a “memo to the media” [...]. “*There is no secret* in my tax situation,” says the first sentence of his two-page text. The investigation by “Le Matin Dimanche” reveals *that there are, however, grey areas* [...]. (Citroni, 2018)

[Company S.] claims that its electricity has been 100% Swiss and renewable for a year. *However*, it imports up to 20% of its electricity. (Bernet, 2018a)

The effect of adversative conjunctions is “to negate either partially or totally the information that precedes it” (Idegbekwe, 2019, p. 45). Their use in this context suggests that the people or institutions quoted did not (completely) tell the truth, or even contradicted themselves.

All positioning segments reflect an opposition or conflict between what certain people or institutions have said or done and what the journalist demonstrates. Following Mellado (2015), we can describe these segments as markers of journalists performing their watchdog role. Indeed, Mellado (2015, p. 604) considers that the watchdog dimension is performed in news content notably when the journalist “question[s] the veracity or validity of what [...] individuals or groups in power say or do” or when the news story contains “evidence of conflict between the journalist and those in power.”

4.4 Outcomes

The “outcomes” category comprises segments that present the “pivotal facts” of the investigative story. Such segments were identified in almost every article of the corpus (99%) and make up one fifth of the data. We distinguish three sub-nodes: “revealing unknown facts,” “answering questions,” and “denouncing someone/something.” The latter sub-node is further divided into “endorsed allegations,” “implied allegations,” and “outsourced allegations,” based on whether a source or the journalist makes the denunciation (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, p. 155) and on how explicit the charges are.

4.4.1 Raising allegations

Most frequently, allegations in our corpus are “outsourced” (density 7%; frequency 79%) – i. e., they are attributed to victims or authoritative experts. These usually appear at the end of an article:

As a result, the Church investigates many only internally [...]. *Is it truly appropriate? The magistrates are sceptical* [...]. *“These are not reliable* [...]. In the past, so many cases have been hushed up! *To me, it’s impossible to trust them.*” (Boss & Jeannet, 2018)

Thus, the authors often assign the most radical judgments to other people, which allows them to maintain the objective “reporter voice” (Feez, Iedema, & White, 2008, p. 21). Subjectivity is introduced through the use of quotations “in order to increase newsworthiness” (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, p. 155).

“Endorsed allegations,” by contrast, consist of journalists’ explicit opinions or judgments as demonstrated through negative adjectives, nouns, verbs, or adverbs:

About fifteen companies *have abused the credibility* of cross-border workers by offering them *aberrant employment contracts*. [Company U.]’s partner companies have used [...] the loopholes in the legal system *to exploit poorly qualified workers*. The *unscrupulous bosses* promised the drivers a better life in Switzerland. (Jeannet, 2018)

In other examples of “endorsed allegations,” journalists appeal to normative standards: They denounce a transgression by explaining what individuals or groups should have done according to the standard and contrasting this with what they actually did:

The problem is that *a ban exists for a foundation like A.* [...]: neither the members of the board nor their relatives can be employed by the foundation. *However* [...] [G.] *does not only support* the director of [foundation A.], but his wife also handles human resources. (Arboit, 2018)

Such propositions correspond to what Ettema and Glasser (1998, pp. 71–73) have termed the “objectification of moral standards”: investigative journalists’ attempt to transform

moral claims into empirical claims. In this way, the journalists denounce a transgression without expressing subjective appraisals.

In the case of implied allegations, the speaker only suggests wrongdoings or problems:

[lead] M. has numerous connections with structures in French-speaking Switzerland that are active in mosques. *His links with organizations close to the Muslim Brotherhood are multiple.* (Krafft, 2018)

As in this example, several investigations focus on the dubious relationships of individuals, notably with organizations deemed as fundamentalist. The allegations are thus quite vague and sometimes even euphemistic.

Following Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020), endorsed and outsourced allegations are understood as expressions of two different orientations of the watchdog reporter: detached watchdog and interventionist watchdog. Outsourced and implied allegations draw legitimacy from the norm of objectivity, which refers back to more general journalistic professionalism (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). In contrast, endorsed allegations are the ultimate form of adversarialism (Ettema & Glasser, 1998, pp. 63–66): The journalist assumes responsibility for the denunciation and thus adopts an explicit critical position toward those in positions of power. It constructs a self-representation that is closer (although not altogether similar) to what Aucoin (2007) described as the typical muckraker journalist. While the detached watchdog relies on journalistic professional norms and values to establish authority, the interventionist watchdog relies on the more specific “democratic role” of the fourth estate for this purpose.

4.4.2 Revealing unknown facts

The “revelation” segments explicitly or implicitly emphasize what is secret or new in the story, i. e., the unexpectedness of the disclosed facts. We coded a large proportion of the story headlines and leads as belonging to the “revelation” node.

[title]: In Berne, the Green Party is the richest in lobbyists

[lead]: As a revision of the rules is currently discussed, “*Le Matin Dimanche*” combed through the guest list of the Parliament. *Surprise!* (Bailat & Parvex, 2018)

In this example, the title highlights what is new, while the lead emphasizes the laborious journalistic process (“combed through”) and the unexpectedness of the scoop (“Surprise!”), signaling that unknown facts could be disclosed thanks to the media outlet’s investigation. Formulations like “our investigation shows which hours are at risk” or “our investigation makes it possible to publish a global figure, which has never before been calculated” emphasize the same news properties (novelty and product of an investigation).

The journalists also regularly highlight the secret, confidential, sensitive, or classified nature of the information disclosed. In several excerpts, the journalists make extensive use of the lexical field of secrecy and mystery, through formulations like “one of the best-kept secrets of...” and “investigation on the hidden side of...”. Keywords such as “revelations” and “investigation” are in this same vein. More generally, several quotations suggest that the journalist had access to normally inaccessible and even ultra-secret information and sources, notably investigations made by the judicial authorities, the police, or the secret services:

An investigator, *who is not allowed to speak to the media*, confirmed to “*Matin Dimanche*” an incident during the WADA symposium a year and a half ago. *No details*. But his description fits with *the start of an investigation by the Swiss Federal Prosecutor’s Office (MPC) in March 2017 – for “a cyber attack against the World Anti-Doping Agency”*. (Knellwolf, Odehnal, & Plattner, 2018)

Revealing hidden facts that would not have come to the public’s attention without one’s own research is one of the main contributions of investigative journalism (Cordell, 2009, p. 121). By referring to the novelty or secrecy of the facts disclosed and to the laborious process undertaken, journalists are clearly placing their texts in the category of investigative journalism. Quoting unnamed, secret sources also helps “efficiently create

an image of investigative reporting” (Poler Kovačič & Erjavec, 2011, p. 336).

4.4.3 Answering questions

Investigative journalists often pose questions or raise doubt in their articles. This can be done through “incomprehensible evaluators” (Bednarek, 2006, p. 69), such as “it is unclear why/how” or it “raised questions about,”⁶ or through the formal structure of an interrogative sentence (Ivanova, 2020, pp. 502–503):

- 1) “How did it get to that point? Behind this drift lies a war between judges and lawyers” (Burnier, 2018).
- 2) “How is it possible that these expired medications have been administered [...]? This exceptional case reveals the weaknesses of the system” (Parvex, 2018).
- 3) “Do the links mentioned by [X.] really exist? According to our research, they do” (Bernet & Roselli, 2018).
- 4) “How big is this wave of departures? Accounts vary. A well-informed source mentions 21 departures, spread out between 2015, 2016 and 2017” (Boeglin, 2018).

Such questions may appear in the introduction or lead of the articles (1–2), or in the body of the text (3–4). These questions are systematically embedded into a three-part structure: exposition – question – answer. The journalists obviously do not expect an answer from anyone; hence, the questions serve primarily to introduce the (documented) answer, which is the result of the journalist’s investigation. The questions are used to pique readers’ curiosity (Ivanova, 2020, p. 507), but they also serve to emphasize the writer’s own curiosity. As Athanasiadou (1991, p. 108) stated, “the chief motivation for information questions is to be found in a desire for knowledge.” The questions are not asked in order to get an answer, but to emphasize the journalist’s desire for knowledge. Indeed, curiosity

6 Sentences such as “This case raises some questions about the way in which the Swiss authorities conduct these investigations and about the influence of international politics in these decisions” (Parvex et al., 2018) were also coded in the “question” category. However, they appear far less frequently than formal interrogative sentences.

is mentioned by practitioners as one of the most important investigative traits (Cancela et al., 2021, p. 886).

5 Discussion: The construction of three investigative identities

Through our coding procedure, we classified macro-propositions of investigative stories and identified four discourse categories and ten sub-categories that set these stories apart from ordinary news reporting. The coding categories should not be viewed as designed *per se* for the construction of an investigative identity – the texts aim mostly at providing relevant facts to the readers. However, they show that investigative pieces are mainly composed of macro-propositions that have different discourse functions than those of ordinary news pieces.

On the one hand, journalists do not quote documents and sources as *facts* but as *evidence* for their explicit or implicit position. The dominance of “justification” segments both in density (32%) and frequency (98%) within the corpus shows that investigative journalists primarily seek authority through their seemingly incontrovertible knowledge claims.

On the other hand, journalists do not present “both sides” of the story as equal, but rather take a position in 80% of the articles. Even when written in an impersonal style, investigative pieces engage the responsibility of their authors. This result suggests that investigative pieces should be interpreted as reporters’ positioning on the truth (Ettema & Glasser, 1998, p. 161).

The coding results are in line with Bjerknes’ (2020, p. 1047) analysis of meta-journalistic content, which demonstrates that traditional legwork methods “are usually only mentioned in passing.” On the contrary, “meta-stories” are fully outlined in investigative pieces based on data-journalism or innovative methods, which serve as “epistemic resources in the struggle for identity and recognition within the field of journalism” (Bjerknes, 2020, p. 1037).

At the micro-level of text, some identity-markers emphasize the reporters’ personal investigative mindset (curiosity, perse-

verance, or adaptability), their investigative epistemology (active stance or careful verification procedure), their watchdog role (by confronting targets or making value judgments) or their specialized skills and creativity (through meta-stories on the investigative process). While we can observe these discursive strategies at the micro-level of language, they can also shape the article’s larger structure (see supplementary material).

Most of the observed discursive strategies suggest a high degree of commitment on the part of the journalist in terms of effort and verification. Journalists that employ them therefore rely on traditional journalistic norms and practices to gain legitimacy, recognition, and prestige (Stringer, 2018). The same is true for performing the watchdog role since this comes under the esteemed fourth-estate function of journalism. However, as we have shown, reporters can perform this role in either a detached or an interventionist way (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020).

The detached watchdog orientation mainly consists of performing “journalistic traditions associated to objectivity” (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020, p. 53). In this sense, we claim that the detached watchdog performance, as well as performances of an “investigative epistemology,” act as a professional intrinsic argument (Carlson, 2018, p. 1884) for the authority of journalism as a whole: i. e., what the journalist is doing is “normal journalism” (Cancela et al., 2021) at its best. This intrinsic argument seeks to establish authority by reaffirming the professional (and traditional) journalistic culture and implicitly showing what makes good journalism (Marchi, 2019; Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022, pp. 2321–2322).

In contrast, we argue that the interventionist watchdog performance acts as a boundary marker both at the borders of and within the journalistic profession. At the borders, it discursively reaffirms journalism’s independence from other centers of power and thus its autonomy (Carlson & Lewis, 2019, p. 127). Within the profession, an interventionist watchdog performance emphasizes the journalist’s commitment to the highly valued but “rarely enacted” (Raemy & Vos, 2021, p. 119) institutional role of the fourth

Table 2: Discursive categories constructing investigative identities

Investigative identity	The “good” journalist		The “adversarial” journalist		The “inventive” factfinder	
Categories	Justification; Revelations	Outsourced; implied allegations	Positioning	Endorsed allegations	Method	Efforts; answering questions
Performance	Performing an investigative “epistemology”	Performing the detached-watchdog role	Performing the interventionist watchdog role	Performing the interventionist-watchdog role	Performing specialized, data skills	Performing an investigative “mindset”
Density	47 %	8 %	14 %	2 %	2 %	5 %
		55 %		16 %		7 %
Argument for authority seeking	Journalism’s core values		Fourth estate (social role)		Personal traits	

estate – i. e., it signals that the reporter is not engaged in “normal journalism” but adversarial journalism. Indeed, the interventionist watchdog orientation involves making the journalist’s own voice apparent in their news texts (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020, p. 56). Journalists thus take on responsibility for publicly denouncing wrongdoing or criticizing the statements of others, a social role specifically associated with investigative reporting or muckraking. In this perspective, the interventionist watchdog acts as a marker of a specific professional ideology within journalistic culture (Cancela et al., 2021; Hanitzsch, 2007).

Finally, when reporters mention their specialized skills and creativity, they implicitly set a boundary between themselves and “normal” news journalists, but also between themselves and “traditional” investigative journalists. In the words of Bjercknes (2020), they are the “inventive factfinders” while the others are merely “factfinders.”

The identities that emerge are thus of three kinds (Table 2): the “good” journalist, the “adversarial” journalist, and the “inventive” journalist. All three are based on a core differentiation from “ordinary” journalists that operates at varying degrees. The “good journalist” identity reaffirms core professional values and asserts general journalistic authority by contributing to the “inter-group” struggle at the borders of journalism. The “adversarial journalist” identity engages in boundary work at the borders of the profession by reaffirming journalism’s autonomy, but also within the profession by claiming special authority for a sub-group of journalists with a shared professional ideology. It therefore sets “intra-professional” bound-

aries between investigative journalists (who fulfill the role of the fourth estate) and other, “ordinary” journalists. The “inventive journalist” identity engages in inter-personal boundary work by claiming special expertise as individual journalist.

6 Conclusion

This article has shown that authority is constructed in investigative pieces through “investigative markers” corresponding to several levels of journalistic identity (Raemy, 2021, pp. 843–846): the macro-level of professional culture, the meso-level of the highly valued (but rarely performed) social role of the fourth estate, and the micro-level of individual qualities. At the micro-level of language, multiple types of identity markers might be found in the same investigative piece, but at the macro level of discourse structure (see supplementary material), the articles are generally dominated by one of the three identities observed. The general dispersion of the categories associated with each of the three identities suggests that investigative journalists in French-speaking Switzerland mainly seek to establish authority by reaffirming the core values of journalistic culture.

While our analysis is a first attempt to document how investigative articles can contribute to journalistic authority, as well as to qualitatively analyze how journalists’ professional identities and roles materialize in news content, it provides little information on the actual process of investigative reporting. Following Bjercknes (2020) we would suggest that further empirical observations be conducted on the process of investigative journalism,

with a focus on the writing phase. Additionally, in line with Ettema and Glasser's work (1988, p. 23), it would be worth comparing our results with the "reporters' own understanding of their intellectual enterprise" to examine the extent to which journalists are consciously constructing their identities when writing their investigative pieces.

Further research could also focus on regions or countries outside French-speaking Switzerland. For example, since Switzerland's linguistic regions are strongly influenced by the culture of neighboring nations (Germany, France, and Italy) (Udris, Eisenegger, Vogler, Schneider, & Häuptli, 2020, p. 259), it would be interesting to compare our findings with those obtained from similar corpora for German-speaking Switzerland. Furthermore, our study focuses on print media. Future studies might compare our results with an analysis of investigative pieces produced for radio and television, since news content varies by media type (Udris et al., 2020, p. 265). Moreover, while Swiss journalists' role orientations and performances do not differ significantly from those of other Western journalists (Raemy & Vos, 2021, p. 124), we would encourage researchers to conduct similar qualitative analyses in other cultural contexts.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the

authors (unedited). <https://www.hope.uzh.ch/scoms/article/view/j.scoms.2023.02.3488>

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Young journalists in Switzerland: Results of a survey on aims, working conditions, and future prospects of journalists born in 1990 or later

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Abstract

The study examines the job situation of young journalists in Switzerland. For this purpose, an online survey of 195 journalists in German-speaking and French-speaking Switzerland born in 1990 or later has been conducted, providing data on socio-demographics, educational situation, career choice motives, type of employment, salary, working time, stress situations, job satisfaction, and future prospects. Young journalists have chosen their job mainly for reasons of self-fulfilment, but idealistic motives are also widespread, while material gain and status play no role in their career choice. A majority of the respondents are permanently employed in a full-time or part-time position, and the median gross monthly income is between 5000 and 6000 Swiss francs, with large differences depending on media and employment type. A high degree of autonomy is perceived at work. However, many young journalists work overtime, and two thirds state that they experience stress at work. They criticise insufficient financial resources and see the acceleration of work processes as a threat. Overall, job satisfaction of young Swiss journalists has decreased compared to previous studies. Respondents are rather pessimistic about the future of journalism, and a majority considers it unlikely that they will work as journalists for their entire professional life.

Keywords

journalism studies, journalistic profession, working conditions, young journalists, Switzerland, survey

1 Introduction

Lacking resources have been an ongoing problem in journalism for several years. Changing habits in media use and digital platforms competing with traditional media in the advertising market are seen as the main causes for this crisis, which also affects the media in Switzerland and neighbouring countries (e.g., Eisenegger, 2019). Media companies react by cutting staff and merging or closing editorial offices, and various titles are forced to cease publication. Recent cases in Switzerland include the merger of the previously independent local editorial offices of the newspapers *Berner Zeitung* and *Der Bund* in Bern by their owner TX Group, the concentration of radio news production by SRF, the public-service broadcaster in the German-speaking part of the country, at one

studio in Zurich, as well as various magazines and local newspapers having closed down (Bühler & Moser, 2022). Even though several new online media entered the Swiss market in the past years, the overall number of jobs in journalism is decreasing, and the media content loses diversity (Vogler & Siegen, 2021).

The pressure to cut costs also affects the conditions under which the remaining journalists work: Permanent positions could be cut for cost reasons, and interns and freelancers, possibly working in precarious conditions, could be employed instead (Hanitzsch, Seethaler, & Wyss, 2019, p. 11). Journalists work overtime because the same work has to be done by fewer people, and they are in fear of losing their jobs (Heim & Graf, 2020, pp. 24–30). Unsatisfying working conditions may lead to an exodus from the profession



or prevent some young people from choosing it at all: Journalists who left their jobs state that they felt increasingly under pressure and doubted about the prospects within their own profession, while they found more attractive alternatives in other fields, for example in public relations (Albrecht & Bühler, 2021; Tröhler, 2022). The number of applications for schools of journalism in Switzerland, for example at Medienausbildungszentrum (MAZ) in Lucerne, has also decreased in recent years (Beck, 2021). Although there are overall less jobs in journalism than in the past, media companies observe that it has become more difficult to recruit suitable employees for open positions (Lüthi, 2022).

The ability to attract committed and qualified professionals, and to keep them in the profession to benefit from their experience, is essential for the future of media companies and for journalism in general. In order to understand the current developments, it is interesting to examine more in-depth the situation of young journalists, who entered journalism only a short time ago and still have a long career ahead of them: Why have they chosen this profession, and which factors may influence their decision to keep it for a longer term or to leave it? The goal of this study is thus to analyse aims, working conditions, and future prospects of journalists in Switzerland at the beginning of their career. Regarding their aims, the focus will be on career choice motives and role conceptions. Working conditions include formal factors such as employment type and duration, working hours, and the salary, but also the perception of stress and job satisfaction. The analysis of future prospects allows to investigate whether young professionals can imagine to stay journalists for a longer term and what would be reasons for them to leave the profession.

The study is based on the data of a standardised online survey, in which a total of 195 media professionals born in 1990 or later took part in February and March 2021. It is the first comprehensive survey specifically aimed at young journalists in Switzerland. In some parts, it provides an update for this group to the latest general survey among Swiss journalists, conducted for the “Worlds of Journalism Study” (WJS) in 2015 (Ding-

erkus, Dubied, Keel, Sacco, & Wyss, 2018). However, the questionnaire goes further into detail than the WJS with questions on working conditions and future prospects, which can be considered particularly relevant for young journalists in the context of the discussion about the declining attractiveness of the profession. The focus on journalists aged 30 or younger allows to compare respondents of more or less the same generation, who can expect that the biggest part of their professional life is still ahead of them. Furthermore, since their education is not long time ago or sometimes still ongoing, their views on future prospects are comparable to those of journalism students, which have already been analysed in other European countries (Hanitzsch, Lauerer, & Steindl, 2016).

2 Conceptual foundation and state of research

Earlier surveys about journalists’ ideals, aims, and attitudes often refer to systems theory (e. g., Keel, 2011; Marr, Wyss, Blum, & Bonfadelli, 2001): Journalism is perceived as a subsystem of society and the goal is to explore how journalists see their functions for the society as a whole and for other subsystems. A more recent approach laying more stress on individual actors and taking greater account of dynamic developments is discursive institutionalism. According to this concept, journalism is understood as an institution following norms and rules for news gathering (Sparrow, 2006, p. 155). Young media professionals learn journalistic norms and rules during their training and will use them as a guide for decisions in their everyday professional life. However, these norms and rules are constantly negotiated and questioned in professional and social discourses. Journalism as an institution constituted by norms and rules is thus not static, but can adapt to changing conditions. The discourse that shapes the institution of journalism is accessible by surveys among its members, i. e., journalists (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, pp. 3–7). Questions on role conceptions, but also on career choice motives, thus give an insight how journalists perceive the norms and rules of their profession.

The way in which journalists can actually implement their aims and ideals in their daily work depends on various factors. A well-known model to systematise the factors influencing journalistic work is the hierarchy of influences model by Shoemaker and Reese (1996). At the core of this model, which is visualised as a set of concentric circles, are the journalists' individual attitudes. Beyond this individual level are the routine level, which includes work routines and professional standards, the organisational level dealing with policies and economic imperatives of media organisations, the social-institutional level capturing the influence of institutions in politics and society, and the social system in which journalism operates (Reese, 2019). In surveys among journalists, questions on working conditions such as payment, working time, or the perception of stress and autonomy at work allow to explore influences on the organisational and on the social-institutional level. Hanitzsch et al. (2016, pp. 467–468) refer to six major developments on these levels in recent years that have an impact on journalistic work: (1) declining revenues from advertisements, especially in the print media sector, (2) changes in media use, with traditional mass media losing young audiences, (3) the loss of the information monopoly of traditional media due to the Internet, and, as a consequence, (4) the change in function of journalists from “gatekeepers” to “gatewatchers”; (5) decreasing trust in journalistic news offerings, and (6) cost-cutting measures at media companies affecting the staff.

In order to systematically analyse the professional field of young journalists, it is useful to define exactly who is a journalist. Since the job title is not protected by Swiss law (Impressum, 2014), and since there is no consensus in academia how the profession should be defined (Donsbach, 2009, p. 82), the membership criteria of professional associations offer a point of reference for what constitutes the group of journalists. Professional associations in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland agree that a journalist is a person who spends a substantial part of his or her working time on journalistic activities or training. Journalistic activity is understood as the creation of contributions for the editorial part of a news media product

(Deutscher Journalisten-Verband, 2020; Impressum, 2021; Österreichischer Journalisten Club, 2020; Syndicom, 2021). Kaltenbrunner, Karmasin, Kraus, and Zimmermann (2007) suggest three possible approaches to define the population of a survey among journalists: Professional affiliation is determined either by membership in a professional organisation (formal approach), by performing journalistic activities in a media organisation (structural-institutional approach), or, in the broadest sense, by a professional activity in which journalistic norms and rules are observed (individual approach).

In the first comprehensive survey among Swiss journalists dating from 1998, the 2020 participants whose data were analysed were largely recruited through the membership directories of professional associations (Marr et al., 2001). One decade later, the follow-up study by Keel (2011) with 2509 respondents used this selection method only for print media; journalists of other media types were contacted via their media companies. The most recent major study on Swiss media professionals, for which 909 journalists were interviewed between 2014 and 2015 as part of the international Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS), also recruited the participants via the media companies (Dingerkus et al., 2018). This allowed to collect data from journalists who were not organised in professional associations and provided information on the importance of these associations: A majority of 57% of the respondents in Switzerland stated that they were members of professional associations (Dietrich-Gsenger & Seethaler, 2019, p. 55).

Regarding the state of research on Swiss journalists' working conditions, the WJS provides some general findings. A large majority of the respondents view recent changes in their profession critically and mention increasing competition, less time for research, heavier workloads, and longer working hours (Seethaler, 2019, pp. 219–224). Similar findings were made in a study conducted at the University of Fribourg in 2014, in which around 1000 Swiss journalists participated: Many respondents complained about the lack of time for in-depth research and for maintaining networks (Puppis, Schönhagen, Fürst, Hofstetter, & Meissner, 2014, p. 24).

Furthermore, despite increased pressure and rising living costs, the average salary has remained constant at around 6300 Swiss francs since 1998, with large differences depending on the type of media (Lauerer, Dingerkus, & Steindl, 2019; Marr et al., 2001, p. 66).

The working conditions of Swiss media professionals have also been examined in studies commissioned by professional organisations and trade-unions. In 2006, the journalists' associations Comedia (which later became Syndicom), Impressum, SSM (Schweizer Syndikat Medienschaffender / Syndicat suisse des mass media / Sindicato svizzero dei massmedia), and the Association of Swiss Specialist Journalists (SFJ-AJS), in cooperation with the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions (SGB-USS), conducted a survey on the wage situation in which 1150 journalists participated (Oesch & Graf, 2007). A new edition of the study with 1190 respondents was published in 2020 (Heim & Graf, 2020). In addition to the wage situation, this study also examined stress factors, working hours, perception of future prospects, and job satisfaction. Questions on stress and fear of losing one's job were formulated in the same way as in the Swiss Health Survey conducted in 2017 (FSO, 2019, p. 28), which allows comparisons between journalists and the population as a whole. In the 2020 survey, as in 2006, large differences in income could be found depending on the type of media, and freelance journalists were significantly less paid than permanent employees (Heim & Graf, 2020, pp. 8–18). On average, respondents worked 2.4 hours more per week than they were paid for; one fifth felt they were under constant pressure to meet deadlines (Heim & Graf, 2020, pp. 25–28). Sixty percent of freelance journalists and 25% of permanent employees rated their current work situation as insecure, compared to 16% of respondents from all occupational groups in the 2017 Swiss Health Survey. Around 90% of the survey participants considered it difficult to find an equivalent new employment if they lose their current job (Heim & Graf, 2020, pp. 28–30, 33). Various other studies have examined how journalists experience stress situations and discuss factors such as time pressure, lacking work-life balance, fear at work or for one's job, bad working atmo-

sphere, or restrictions on autonomy at work (e. g., Beck & Münger, 1998; Bodin, 2000; Puppis et al., 2014).

Information on the situation of young journalists in Switzerland is partly available from the data of the major Swiss journalist surveys. However, the under 30-year-olds only make up a minority in each of these surveys (11% in the study by Marr et al. (2001), 6% in the study by Keel (2011), 14% in the WJS (Dietrich-Gsenger & Seethaler, 2019, p. 57). Moreover, the authors only partially address specific findings on this age group in their publications, which makes comparisons over time difficult. Accordingly, young journalists are strongly represented at private radio and television stations and in local and regional departments (Dietrich-Gsenger & Seethaler, 2019, p. 59; Keel, 2011, pp. 147–148, 163–164; Marr et al., 2001, pp. 98–100). Their share is very high in the salary bracket below 4000 Swiss francs (Keel, 2011, p. 202), and they often have fixed-term contracts (Lauerer et al., 2019, p. 84). In their perception of journalistic roles, they identify more strongly than older colleagues with audience-oriented role conceptions such as the animator and the service provider (Keel, 2011, pp. 234–235). Finally, their willingness to recommend their profession to other people tends to decrease (Keel, 2011, p. 250).

Surveys of journalism students on the perception of their intended profession have been conducted in various other European countries, namely by Hanitzsch et al. (2016) in Germany, Nygren & Stygbrand (2014) in Sweden, Russia, Poland, Finland, and Estonia, Hovden, Bjørnsen, Ottosen, Willig, and Zilliacus-Tikkanen (2009) in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, as well as Hanna and Sanders (2007) in the United Kingdom. Many participants in these surveys were already working in journalism alongside their studies, and they were specifically asked about career choice motives and their perception of the future of journalism. Among other findings, it became clear that students were more pessimistic about their prospects with increasing professional experience. In Western Europe, economic factors such as the influence of advertising or the concentration of media ownership, as well as worsened working conditions, for example due to

accelerated work processes, were seen as the main problems of journalism. Nevertheless, many students were not deterred from starting a career in journalism by these problems, and their motives to become a journalist could mainly be attributed to personal fulfilment (Hanitzsch et al., 2016, pp. 478–479).

3 Method

The situation of young journalists (up to the age of 30) in Switzerland is examined in this study by means of a standardised online survey. Beside the collection of socio-demographic data and information on the educational situation, the focus is on the following aspects and research questions:

- › RQ1: Career choice motives and role conceptions: Why have the respondents decided to become journalists? How do they identify with journalistic roles?
- › RQ2: Formal working conditions: Are journalists employed full-time or part-time, for a limited or unlimited period? How many hours of overtime do they have per week? What is the wage situation?
- › RQ3: Stress and job satisfaction: To what extent do the respondents suffer from stress, and to what causes do they attribute this stress? Are they satisfied with their career choice?
- › RQ4: Future prospects: How do the respondents see their own professional future and the future of journalism in general? Can they imagine to stay journalists for a longer term? If not, what would be possible reasons to leave the profession?

In order to ensure compatibility, questions and items used for the survey are based on existing studies. The WJS (Dingerkus et al., 2018) and the previous general survey among Swiss journalists by Keel (2011) are the main sources for questions and answer options regarding socio-demographic data, educational situation, media type, and the perception of journalistic roles. Type and duration of the employment, the wage categories, and job satisfaction are also measured in the same way as in the WJS. Other sources are used to get a deeper insight into particular aspects:

The question on working overtime was taken from the trade union study by Heim and Graf (2020), while the perception of how much time is available for various tasks was measured in the same way as in the survey by Puppis et al. (2014). Questions on stress situations correspond to those as used by Heim and Graf (2020), but their original source is the Swiss Health Survey from 2017 (FSO, 2020). Most items on career choice motives and future prospects are taken from the survey among journalism students by Hanitzsch et al. (2016). An additional question about possible reasons to leave journalism is based on the measurement of the intention to change one's job in the Randstad Employer Brand Research study (Randstad Germany, 2021).

A combination of the formal and the structural-institutional approach was used to determine the sample of the survey. The questionnaire, available in German and French, was intended to reach journalists aged 30 or younger, based in German- and French-speaking Switzerland and working for one or more media companies at the time of the survey or until at least 2019. The majority of respondents was recruited via the Swiss Association of Young Journalists (JJS), Impressum, Syndicom, and SSM – all of these associations had agreed to forward the link to the questionnaire to their members. A total of 707 journalists were contacted, 399 of them by JJS alone, an organization specifically aimed at journalists up to the age of 30. In addition, one research university and three universities of applied sciences in Switzerland distributed the questionnaire among their former and current students in the fields of journalism, communication, and media. Attention was also drawn to the project via social media. Cases not belonging to the target group were sorted out at the beginning of the questionnaire by means of control questions on year of birth and work for a media company. The survey was online from 23 February to 14 March 2021 and provided evaluable data from a total of 195 people. Respondents born in 1990 who had already reached the age of 31 at the time of the survey were retained in the sample (see Table 7, supplementary material).

Of the respondents who entirely filled in the questionnaire, 118 (61 %) are female and 77 are male. This share is almost in accordance with the gender proportions among the members of JJS (as of July 2022, 226 women, i. e., 59 %, and 156 men according to the JJS general secretariat); already the WJS has found a majority of women among Swiss journalists aged 30 and younger, in contrast to the higher age groups (Dietrich-Gsenger & Seethaler, 2019, p. 58). The median age is 27. With a share of almost 87 %, German-speaking Switzerland is overrepresented; 11 % of the respondents are from French-speaking Switzerland, 2 % indicated another language region. Thirty-three percent of all journalists in the sample work mainly for a paid daily newspaper, 17 % for the online edition of a print medium, radio or television station, 14 % for private radio stations, 10 % for private television, 9 % for a stand-alone online medium, and 7 % each for public-service radio and television. About two thirds of the survey participants can be described as academics: 47 % have a Bachelor's or Master's degree from a research university (more than half of them in the field of communication or journalism), 22 % have a degree from a university of applied sciences, usually in communication or journalism. The most common journalistic education is an internship or traineeship that lasted less than one year (experienced by 61 % of all respondents), followed by longer practical trainings on the job (29 %), and studies and courses at journalism schools (for details on socio-demographics and education, see the supplementary material, Tables 7 to 10). Compared to data from Swiss journalists in the late 2000s (Keel, 2011, p. 188), the importance of shorter internships and degrees from research universities and universities of applied sciences has further increased, while longer internships and diplomas from journalism schools have become less frequent.

4 Results

In accordance with the research questions, the overview of the survey results is divided into four parts: career choice motives and role conceptions (RQ1), formal working

conditions (RQ2), stress and job satisfaction (RQ3), and future prospects (RQ4). Where possible, the findings will be compared with results from previous studies in which journalists were asked the same questions.

4.1 Career choice motives and role conceptions (RQ1)

In terms of career choice motives, young Swiss journalists confirm the findings of earlier studies. Like in the survey among journalism students in Germany conducted by Hanitzsch et al. (2016, p. 473), the strongest motives can be assigned to the field of self-fulfilment: 93 % of the respondents indicate that the pursuit of a varied and exciting activity was an important reason for choosing the profession (n=195). Other important motives are getting to know interesting people (85 %), the opportunity to be creative (82 %), the joy of writing (65 %), and the great independence in the job (57 %). A number of idealistic motives are also stated as important reasons for becoming a journalist: the commitment to freedom and democracy (55 %), acting against injustice (49 %), controlling people of power (44 %), and being able to help people with problems in their everyday lives (35 %). In contrast, the prestige of the profession (18 %) and material aspects such as job security (10 %) and attractive salaries (6 %) are of little importance. The approval ratings for the latter two items are even lower than in the German survey by Hanitzsch et al. (2016, p. 475), in which they were still considered important motives for becoming a journalist by around one fifth of the respondents.

Regarding role conceptions, Table 1 shows that the results of the present study largely coincide with those of the survey of Swiss journalists of all ages conducted for the WJS project in 2015 (Dingerkus et al., 2018, p. 125; Hanitzsch & Lauerer, 2019): Most young Swiss journalists identify with the role of the neutral disseminator and find it very or extremely important to report things as they are. The roles of detached observer and analyst also receive high approval. Political roles such as providing information people need to make political decisions, motivating people to participate, and providing a platform to let people express different views, as well as promoting tolerance and cultural diversity,

Table 1: Importance of journalistic roles (n = 195)

Role	Mean	Strong agreement in %
Report things as they are	4.8	98.5
Be a detached observer	4.2	83.6
Provide analysis of current affairs	4.3	82.6
Provide information people need to make political decisions	4.2	81.5
Tell stories about the world	4.0	71.3
Motivate people to participate in political activity	3.9	68.2
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	4.0	68.2
Let people express their views	3.7	63.1
Educate the audience	3.7	60.0
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	3.6	59.5
Monitor and scrutinise political leaders	3.4	48.2
Advocate for social change	3.4	47.2
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	3.4	46.2
Monitor and scrutinise business	3.2	43.1
Provide entertainment and relaxation	3.3	37.9
Be an adversary of the government	3.0	31.8
Support national development	2.9	28.2
Influence public opinion	2.8	26.2
Set the political agenda	2.7	16.9
Convey a positive image of political leadership	1.5	0.5
Support government policy	1.6	0.5

Note: Values are measured on a five-level scale: 1 = not important at all, 2 = rather unimportant, 3 = partly important, 4 = very important, 5 = extremely important; “Strong agreement” includes percentage of responses with values 4 and 5; items correspond to those as used by Dingerkus et al. (2018).

and educating the audience, are still important to many respondents. Role conceptions related to monitoring and scrutinising government or business, but also the service provider and entertainer roles, which used to be rather popular among younger journalists according to previous studies (Keel, 2011, pp. 234–235), seem to be less relevant. The approval rate for the entertainer role among young Swiss journalists in 2021 is only slightly higher than among Swiss journalists of all ages in the WJS (Hanitzsch & Lauerer, 2019, p. 155). The difference is more important for the service provider role (providing advice, orientation and direction for daily life; 60% in the present study, 39% for all Swiss journalists in the WJS). Apart from this, there are no essential changes in role conceptions compared to previous surveys, which indicates that young journalists still adopt the values of the profession shared by their older colleagues.

4.2 Formal working conditions (RQ2)

Table 2 provides an overview of young journalists’ formal working conditions in Switzerland. Forty-five percent of the survey participants have full-time employment, 29% work part-time, and 24% work on a freelance basis. Over 80% of the survey participants who gave an answer regarding their employment (n = 176) work on a permanent basis, while 19% are employed on a fixed-term basis. Compared to the data in the WJS survey from 2015, the proportion of both freelance and fixed-term employment among young journalists in 2021 is thus higher than among journalists of all ages six years earlier – a total of 8% of all Swiss respondents then worked as freelance journalists, and around 10% had a fixed-term employment contract (Lauerer et al., 2019, pp. 81–84). Nevertheless, permanent full-time employment is still the most common type of employment also among young journalists. In contrast to the aforementioned study, there are no significant gender differences in the current survey, neither in terms of employment type (full-time,

Table 2: Formal working conditions: Percentages of employment type and duration, salary brackets, and weekly overtime

	Women ($n_{\min}=102, n_{\max}=118$)	Men ($n_{\min}=70, n_{\max}=77$)	All ($n_{\min}=172, n_{\max}=195$)
Employment type			
Full-time	46.6	41.6	44.6
Part-time	25.4	35.1	29.2
Freelance	25.4	20.8	24.1
Other type	2.5	2.6	2.6
Employment duration			
Permanent	81.1	81.4	81.3
Fixed-term	18.9	18.6	18.8
Gross monthly salary			
≤ 4000 francs	34.5	23.4	30.0
4001–6000 francs	38.1	40.3	39.0
6001–8000 francs	25.6	32.5	28.4
>8000 francs	1.8	3.9	2.7
Overtime per week			
<1 hour	21.8	16.7	19.8
1 to 3 hours	37.3	36.1	36.8
3 to 6 hours	33.6	33.4	33.5
>6 hours	7.2	13.9	9.8

Note: The questions on employment type and duration, and on gross monthly salary correspond to those as used in the WJS (Dingerkus et al., 2018; Lauerer et al., 2019); salaries were measured in categories of 1000 Swiss francs each: 1=0 to 1000 francs, 2=1001 to 2000 francs, 3=2001 to 3000 francs, ..., 10=9001 to 10000 francs; none of the respondents reported a monthly salary of over 10000 francs; respondents working part-time were asked to indicate their salary for a 100% employment; the question on overtime per week was asked in the same way as in the study by Heim and Graf (2020).

part-time, or freelance) [$\chi^2(3, N=195)=2.516, p=.472$] nor in terms of duration (permanent or fixed-term) [$\chi^2(1, N=176)=0.002, p=.961$].

In terms of gross monthly income, the median is between 5000 and 6000 Swiss francs, but about a third each of the respondents earn less than 4000 Swiss francs, between 4000 and 6000 Swiss francs, and more than 6000 Swiss francs per month. Compared to earlier Swiss studies, the proportion of journalists aged 30 or younger in the wage bracket up to 4000 Swiss francs has not increased: in 1998 it was 37%, in 2008 it was 42% (Keel, 2011, p. 202).

The wage significantly depends on the employment type. Seventy-one percent of all freelance journalists earn less than 4000 francs per month from journalistic activities ($n=41$), compared to 20% of the fully employed journalists ($n=87$). Only 14% of the part-time employed ($n=57$) stated that they would be in the lowest wage category if they worked full-time. The differences between the three groups are confirmed by a

Kruskal-Wallis test [$H(2)=46.460, p<.001$]. Dunn-Bonferroni tests show that the wage differences between full-time employed journalists and freelancers [$z=6.288, p<.001, r=.548$], as well as between part-time employed journalists (calculated on their full-time salary) and freelancers [$z=5.975, p<.001, r=.600$], are strongly significant. On the other hand, there is no significant difference between the salary classes of full-time and part-time employed journalists [$z=-0.196, p=.845, r=.016$].

The media type is also an important factor. Since journalists could give multiple responses when indicating the main media types that they are working for, the income distribution was calculated separately for each medium. This produced some remarkable results: 59% of the journalists mainly working for public-service radio and television ($n=27$) have a monthly salary above 6000 francs, compared to only 4% at private radio stations ($n=25$) and 18% at online-only media ($n=17$). In contrast, 44% of the journalists

Table 3: Available time to do the daily work (nmin = 120, nmax = 192)

I have enough time to ...	Mean	Strong agreement in %
write my own articles or features.	3.9	68.0
check obtained information and its sources.	3.7	60.4
revise the content of media releases.	3.6	51.5
do all daily work in a way that is satisfactory for me.	3.4	47.3
revise reports from news agencies and correspondents.	3.2	43.3
conduct in-depth investigations on-site.	2.8	24.8
establish and maintain my own network of sources.	2.7	23.8

Note: Values are measured on a five-level scale: 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=very often; "Strong agreement" includes percentage of responses with values 4 and 5; journalists who chose the answer option "not my duty" are considered missing cases; items correspond to those as used by Puppis et al. (2014).

Table 4: Frequency of encountered stress situations (n = 193)

Stressful situations	Mean	Strong agreement in %
I have to think about too many things at the same time.	3.9	71.0
I experience stress at work.	3.8	65.8
I must hurry to do my job.	3.8	64.8
My work requires me to hide feelings.	2.5	19.2
I struggle to balance work and private life.	2.7	18.7
I encounter tensions when dealing with colleagues or clients.	2.5	17.1
I have little autonomy in how I do my job.	1.9	5.2
I am sometimes afraid at work (for my safety or that of others).	1.6	4.1

Note: Values are measured on a five-level scale: 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=mostly, 5=always; "Strong agreement" includes percentage of responses with values 4 and 5; items correspond to those as used in the 2017 Swiss health survey (FSO, 2020, p. 114).

mainly working for private radio stations and 53 % of the employees at online-only media, but only 4 % at public-service media, earn less than 4000 francs per month.

Compared to their male colleagues, young female journalists are more represented in the lowest wage bracket and less among salaries above 6000 francs. Women are over-represented among freelance journalists (66 %) and among collaborators of private radio stations (68 %), where the wages are generally lower, and less present in public-service media (55 %) with their well-paid jobs. However, the overall difference regarding wage categories between female and male journalists is not statistically significant according to a Kruskal-Wallis test [$H(1) = 3.108, p = .078$].

Regardless of the level of employment, a large majority of all respondents indicate that they work unpaid overtime. In over 40 % of all cases, it is more than three hours per week. On average, the difference between effective and paid working time is a good three and a half hours per week. This is one hour more

than the value found by Heim and Graf (2020, p. 26) in their survey of Swiss journalists on behalf of journalists' associations.

Despite the long working hours, about half of the respondents say that they have too little time to do all their daily work in a satisfactory way. For a majority of respondents, there is enough time for essential activities such as writing articles or features, and checking sources (Table 3). However, they complain about the lack of time for in-depth investigations and for maintaining their network of informants – only a quarter of the respondents are satisfied with the situation in these fields. These are similar values to those found by Puppis et al. (2014) among Swiss journalists of all ages almost a decade ago.

4.3 Stress and job satisfaction (RQ3)

The long working hours and the impression that there is still not sufficient time to do the job in a satisfactory way have an impact on the mental health of young journalists. A majority of the survey participants indicate that they have to endure frequently or constant-

Table 5: Possible reasons for leaving journalism (n = 185)

Possible reasons for leaving journalism	Mean	Strong agreement in %
Lack of work-life balance	3.5	60.5
General desire for change	3.2	50.3
Uncertain future of one's own job	3.0	45.9
Lack of opportunities to advance personally	3.1	43.8
Lack of identification with the company culture	3.0	42.2
Desire to earn more money	3.0	41.6

Note: Values are measured on a five-level scale: 1 = do not agree at all, 2 = rather disagree, 3 = partly agree, 4 = strongly agree, 5 = very strongly agree; "Strong agreement" includes percentage of responses with values 4 and 5; items are based on those as used in the Randstad Employer Brand Research study to measure the willingness to leave a job in general (Randstad Germany, 2021, p. 13).

ly three of the stressful situations they were asked about: Over 70 % state that they have to think about too many things at the same time, and two thirds each experience stress at work or have the impression that they always have to hurry at work (Table 4). Other stressful situations, such as hiding one's feelings at work, problems with finding the balance between work and family life, and conflicts with colleagues or customers, are mentioned as frequent or constant problems by one fifth of the respondents. Fear at work (for one's own safety or that of others) is mentioned only occasionally, and most respondents do not perceive a lack of autonomy in their job.

Many young journalists are thus frequently confronted with stressful situations, but a clear majority of 85 % state that they can cope with stress well or fairly well (n = 194). Compared to earlier studies, however, job satisfaction has declined over time. While a majority of 59 % say they would recommend their profession to other persons, 25 % would rather advise against it, and 17 % are unsure (n = 195). Previous Swiss surveys recorded significantly higher percentages in this field: In 1998, 83 % recommended their profession to others, and in 2008, it was still 69 % (Keel, 2011, p. 250). The differences in job satisfaction according to age and stress perception are striking. Among respondents aged 19 to 24 (i. e., born in 1997 or later), 75 % would recommend their job to others (n = 48), while only 53 % among the 25- to 31-year-olds (n = 147) would do the same [$\chi^2(2, N = 195) = 8.015, p = .018$]. This could be a sign that satisfaction decreases with growing professional experience. Similarly, journalists stating that they experience higher amounts of stress at work are less

likely to recommend their job to others [$\chi^2(2, N = 194) = 7.438, p = .024$]: The approval rate is 72 % among journalists who say that they do not mostly or always experience stress (n = 67), but only 52 % among those who do so (n = 127). The median salary of journalists who recommend their jobs to others is between 5001 and 6000 francs per month, while it is only between 4001 and 5000 francs among those who do not encourage others to become journalists and those who are undecided. However, the Kruskal-Wallis test does not confirm that job satisfaction depends on the salary [$H(2) = 2.917, p = .233$].

4.4 Future prospects (RQ4)

Overall, job satisfaction is limited. This is also matched by the finding that 53 % of the respondents consider it rather unlikely that they will spend their entire professional life in journalism. Only 42 % consider this prospect likely, 5 % are undecided (n = 195). Table 5 documents that more than 60 % see the lack of work-life balance as the most important reason for leaving journalism in the future, followed by a general desire for change, the uncertain future of one's job, lack of opportunities to advance personally, lack of identification with the company culture, and the desire to earn more money.

Only 49 % of the respondents are optimistic about their own professional future in journalism, 27 % are pessimistic, and 24 % are undecided (n = 184). However, the future of journalism itself is seen even more pessimistically: 46 % are rather pessimistic, 24 % optimistic, and 30 % undecided (n = 189). Table 6 gives an overview of the reasons for this critical view: 87 % of the respondents consider insufficient financial resources to be a major

Table 6: Perception of challenges and problems in journalism (n = 193)

Challenges and issues that may be a danger for journalism	Mean	Strong agreement in %
Lack of financial resources	4.3	86.5
Concentration of media ownership	4.1	74.1
Acceleration of work procedures	4.0	73.6
Profit expectations by investors	3.9	63.2
Increasing psychological stress on journalists	3.7	58.5
Competition from Internet platforms	3.6	56.0
Influence of advertising on journalistic content	3.5	49.7
Influence of public relations and lobbyists	3.2	33.7
Insufficient professional ethics	3.0	31.1
Limited access to information	2.8	26.4
Insufficiently educated journalists	2.8	26.4
Partisan journalism	2.8	22.3
Intertwining media and politics	2.8	18.7
Deficiencies in journalism education	2.6	18.1
Physical threats to journalists	2.5	16.1
Self-censorship	2.5	12.4
State intervention in the media sector	2.2	11.4
Censorship	2.0	8.8
Legal provisions	2.2	7.8
Foreign investments in Swiss media	2.2	6.7

Note: Values are measured on a five-level scale: 1=do not agree at all, 2=rather disagree, 3=partly agree, 4=strongly agree, 5=very strongly agree; “Strong agreement” includes percentage of responses with values 4 and 5; items correspond to those as used by Hanitzsch et al. (2016), adapted to the situation in Switzerland in the item on foreign investments.

problem in journalism. A majority of respondents also name the concentration of media ownership, the acceleration of work procedures, the profit expectations by investors, the increase in psychological stress on journalists, and competition from Internet platforms as major challenges and issues. The young journalists thus consider economic factors and deteriorating working conditions as the greatest dangers for journalism. The influence of external actors on journalism is seen as less of a problem. In this context, the respondents rate the influence of economic actors via advertising and public relations as more problematic than the influence of political actors or state intervention.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In a standardised online survey, 195 journalists born in 1990 or later from the German- and the French-speaking part of Switzerland were asked about their professional situation, in particular their education, motives for choosing the profession, role concep-

tions, formal working conditions, stress and job satisfaction, as well as their view of their own future and the future of journalism. This is the first comprehensive study in Switzerland specifically aimed at young journalists. However, the data can be compared with findings from earlier Swiss studies and with surveys of young journalists and journalism students in other European countries.

With regard to education and employment types, the current study confirms the findings from the WJS (Dingerkus et al., 2018; Lauerer et al., 2019): The degree of academisation of young journalists is high, and the classic access to the profession still consists of rather short internships at editorial offices. Compared to the data of all Swiss respondents from the WJS, the share of both freelance and temporary employment is significantly higher among journalists aged 30 or younger in 2021. Nevertheless, permanent full-time positions are by far the most common form of employment among young media professionals.

Compared to the studies by Hanitzsch et al. (2016) and Dingerkus et al. (2018), ca-

reer choice motives and role conceptions (RQ1) have not changed significantly: The most important reason for young people to become journalists is the prospect of an exciting, varied, and creative job, followed by idealistic motives related to the functions of journalism for society. Material motives are even less important than in the previous surveys. Young journalists in Switzerland continue to identify most strongly with the role models of the neutral disseminator, the detached observer, and the analyst. The findings on role conceptions also support the theoretical notion of journalism as a discursive institution whose norms and values are passed on to a new generation.

While young journalists are oriented towards the common ideals and goals of the profession, the findings on working conditions (RQ2), as well as on stress and job satisfaction (RQ3), indicate that the implementation of these ideals is sometimes difficult. On the positive side, the proportion of journalists in the lowest salary bracket has not increased compared to previous Swiss surveys (Dingerkus et al., 2018; Keel, 2011), and the respondents still perceive a high degree of autonomy in their work. The situation with working hours is more problematic: Almost half of all respondents work more than three hours of unpaid overtime per week. Calculated over a year, this adds up to 20 days of overtime, which often can neither be compensated nor offset. At the same time, about half of the respondents also state that they have too little time to complete their tasks in a way that is satisfactory to them. This situation leads to stress – a majority of respondents indicate that they are regularly exposed to stressful situations. In particular, time pressure leads respondents to feel that they have to think about too many things at the same time and that they are constantly in a hurry.

These stress factors may have an impact not only on the individual health of workers, but also on the future of the industry as a whole. The survey shows distinctly lower job satisfaction than the studies by Keel (2011) and Dingerkus et al. (2018). Especially journalists with more work experience would no longer recommend their profession to others without reservations. Regarding the respondents' own future prospects (RQ4), a major-

ity considers it unlikely that they will work as journalists for their entire professional life. Principal reasons given for a possible change are the lack of work-life balance, the uncertain future of one's job, and the lack of opportunities to advance personally. Overall, respondents are rather pessimistic about the future of journalism. In their view, the lack of resources and other economic constraints, as well as the resulting poor working conditions, are a major threat to the industry.

Due to the research design, this study provides a rather broad overview of the current situation of young journalists in Switzerland. There would definitely be potential for more in-depth studies, especially on aspects such as time management, mental health, and motives for leaving the profession. It would also be valuable to repeat standardised surveys regularly, compare their findings over time, and thereby trace developments. A major limitation of the study is the representation of different language regions: Since the survey was only conducted in German and in French, it does not provide information about young journalists in the two smaller Swiss language regions. Furthermore, the proportion of responses from French-speaking Switzerland was very low, which made comparisons by language region impossible. Previous surveys among Swiss journalists found overall similar working conditions in the three major language regions (Puppis et al., 2014, pp. 39–40), but observed in fact some differences, notably higher job satisfaction in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland than in German-speaking Switzerland (Dingerkus et al., 2018, p. 126) and more complaints about diminishing time resources in French-speaking Switzerland than in the other regions (Puppis et al., 2014, p. 24). Average wages are similar in all three language regions, but the lowest proportion of very low incomes is found in French-speaking Switzerland. This could be an effect of the collective labour agreement between publishers and journalists in print and online media in this region, which provides for minimum wages for employees and freelancers (Heim & Graf, 2020, p. 13).

A reason for the overrepresentation of German-speaking journalists in this study is the recruitment of the survey participants

through professional associations: JJS as the leading Swiss association specifically aimed at young journalists has so far almost exclusively been active in the German-speaking part of the country. Future studies in Switzerland should thus pay more attention to a balanced representation of the different language regions. One could also argue that the recruitment process has led to an overrepresentation of journalists who are members of professional organisations. However, still 45 % of the respondents have stated that they do not belong to such an organisation.

Young people continue to choose the profession because of the interesting and varied job profile and for idealistic reasons, and they also accept downsides such as irregular working hours or working under time pressure. However, to keep the quality level of news coverage and to ensure that the profession remains attractive for newcomers, that committed professionals stay in journalism in the long term, and that job satisfaction increases again, it is essential that media companies care for good working conditions.

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Conflicts of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited). <https://www.hope.uzh.ch/scoms/article/view/j.scoms.2023.02.3604>

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Bist du schlau? Dann guckst du(,) *logo!* Ein Vergleich der Wissensvermittlung durch die Nachrichtensendungen *Tagesschau* und *logo!* und ihrer sprachlichen Gestaltung

Are you smart? Then you watch *logo!* A comparison of the knowledge acquisition by the news programs *Tagesschau* and *logo!* and their linguistic design

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Abstract

Die vorliegende empirische Studie beschäftigt sich mit dem Vergleich der *Tagesschau* mit den Kindernachrichten von *logo!* Es wurde vermutet, dass der Wissenserwerb durch *logo!* höher ausfällt und sich *logo!* durch ein niedrigeres Sprachniveau auszeichnet, was zu höherem Wissen beitragen könnte. Zur Überprüfung der Annahmen wurde ein Online-Experiment konzipiert, welches das durch beide Sendungen in Form konkreter Beiträge vermittelte Wissen von 260 Versuchspersonen empirisch überprüfte. Die verwendete Sprache wurde mit der Software LIWC analysiert; zudem wurde der Flesch-Index bestimmt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass *logo!* zu einem höheren Wissen führt, allerdings nicht für alle Beiträge gleichermassen, und teils ein niedrigeres Sprachniveau aufweist (geringere Wortkomplexität und kürzere Sätze sowie höherer Flesch-Index). Das höhere Wissen in der *logo!*-Bedingung könnte dabei teils durch die eingesetzte Sprache erklärbar sein, obwohl die Befunde nicht eindeutig sind. Schliesslich zeigte sich, dass der *logo!*-Vorteil bei Personen mit Hochschulabschluss grösser war als bei anderen Personen, was vor dem Hintergrund der Wissenskluft-Hypothese verständlich wird. Aus unseren Befunden lassen sich Praxisempfehlungen u. a. zur sprachlichen Gestaltung von TV-Nachrichten ableiten, um den Wissenserwerb zu verbessern.

Abstract

The present empirical study deals with the comparison of the *Tagesschau* with the children's news from *logo!* It was assumed that the acquisition of knowledge by *logo!* is higher and that *logo!* is characterized by a lower language level, which could contribute to higher knowledge. To test the assumptions, an online experiment was designed which empirically tested the knowledge conveyed by both programs in the form of concrete contributions from 260 study participants. The language used was analyzed with the LIWC software; the Flesch-Index was also determined. The results show that *logo!* leads to a higher level of knowledge, although not equally for all contributions, and in some cases has a lower language level (lower word complexity and shorter sentences as well as a higher Flesch-Index). The higher knowledge in the *logo!* condition could thereby be partly explained by the language used, although the findings are not entirely clear. Finally, the *logo!* advantage was found to be greater for individuals with a university degree than for others, which becomes understandable in light of the knowledge gap hypothesis. From our findings, practical recommendations can be derived, among other things, for the linguistic design of TV news in order to improve knowledge acquisition.

Schlüsselwörter

TV-Nachrichten, sprachliche Gewandtheit, Eloquenz, Sprachniveau, quantitative computergestützte Textanalyse, Wissenskluft-Hypothese

Keywords

TV news, verbal proficiency, eloquence, language level, quantitative computer-assisted text analysis, knowledge gap hypothesis



1 Einleitung

TV-Nachrichten stellen nach wie vor ein zentrales Element der Verbreitung aktueller Informationen dar – u. a., um Teilnahme am gesellschaftlichen sowie politisch-demokratischen Geschehen zu fördern (z. B. Machill, Köhler, & Waldhauser, 2006; Müller, 2018; Schwiesau & Ohler, 2016; Unz & Schwab, 2004; s. auch Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018).

Insbesondere den öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten kommt laut Rundfunkstaatsvertrag die Aufgabe zu, Bürger/-innen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zu informieren und (damit) deren Bildung zu befördern (vgl. die Medienanstalten, n. d.; Hagen, 1995). Hinsichtlich Nachrichten ist diesbezüglich die Hauptnachrichten-Sendung *Tagesschau* der ARD (Bartel, 1997; Daschmann, 2009; Gscheidle & Geese, 2017; Matzen, 2009; Wahdat, 2009) im Besonderen zu nennen.

Es scheint, als würden Nachrichten ihrer Aufgabe nachkommen; zumindest fühlen sich Rezipient/-innen meist in der Tat gut informiert – allerdings, ohne – und dieser Umstand stellt eine Herausforderung für Praxis wie Forschung dar – tatsächlich viele Informationen aus den Nachrichtenangeboten zu behalten (z. B. Machill et al., 2006; Überblick bei Winterhoff-Spurk, 2004). Diese Wissensillusion (Noelle-Neumann, 1986) legt nahe, dass die optimale Form der Informationsvermittlung durch Nachrichten noch nicht gefunden wurde. So gibt eine Mehrheit der Deutschen an, nicht (vollständig) zu verstehen, was Nachrichten thematisieren (Machill et al., 2006). Allerdings ist eine vollständige Informiertheit womöglich ohnehin nicht erwartbar bzw. auf Seite der Rezipient/-innen auch gar nicht das Ziel; ein grober Überblick über wichtige Themen könnte genügen (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018).

Wenn jedoch die nicht vollständig gelingende Informiertheit der Rezipient/-innen als Problem verstanden wird, stellt sich die Frage nach Lösungen. Eine potenzielle Lösung könnte in dem Ansatz liegen, Nachrichten in sog. leichter Sprache (z. B. Maaß, 2015) zu vermitteln. Diese Grundidee ist leitend für die vorliegende Forschung. Obwohl der Ansatz, mittels leichter Sprache (auffassbar

als niedriges Sprachniveau),¹ für bessere Informationsvermittlung zu sorgen, erstens intuitiv einleuchtet und zweitens in der Praxis bereits relativ breit zur Anwendung kommt (z. B. Deutschlandfunk, n. d.), ist noch nicht zufriedenstellend erforscht, wie eine solche Sprache auf Rezipient/-innen wirkt, z. B. hinsichtlich des tatsächlich erworbenen Wissens. Diese Forschungslücke stellte das Desiderat dar, das unsere Studie zu adressieren versuchte.

2 Begriffsklärungen und Forschungsstand

Leichte Sprache ist durch die Verwendung einfacher Wörter (Grundwortschatz) gekennzeichnet; es werden Fremd- und Fachwörter vermieden und bei derselben Referenz immer dieselben Wörter verwendet (statt auf Synonyme zurückzugreifen). Daneben ist sie durch kurze bzw. einfach strukturierte Sätze charakterisiert. Zudem wird im Falle gesprochener Sprache möglichst langsam und mit Fokus auf Sprechpausen gesprochen (Bock, 2015; Bredel & Maaß, 2019; Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, 2018; Maaß, 2015; Maaß & Bredel, 2016; Vandeghinste & Bulté, 2019; Weischenberg, 2001). Leichte Sprache weist damit starke Ähnlichkeiten zu den Konstrukten des (niedrigen/geringen) Sprachniveaus bzw. der (niedrigen/geringen) sprachlichen Gewandtheit/Elaboriertheit bzw. (niedriger/geringer) sprachlicher Fähigkeiten auf (z. B. Amusa, 2020; Lange, 2012; Lange, Hennighausen, Brill, & Schwab, 2016; Überblick bei Lange, Bögemann, & Zaretsky, 2017; s. auch Lange, Bayirli, & Schwab, 2020; Lange, Kouros, & Schwab, 2019). Wir gehen im Methodenteil ausführlicher darauf ein.

Aktuelle Forschung zeigt, dass sich die Hauptnachrichten der Fernsehsender ARD, ZDF, RTL und Sat.1 erheblich in ihrem Sprachniveau unterscheiden, wobei insbesondere die *Tagesschau* durch ein sehr hohes Sprachniveau – als angemessener Gegenpol leichter Sprache – heraussticht (Lange et al.,

1 Der Begriff «Sprachniveau» impliziert keinerlei Wertung; er wurde auf Basis der bisherigen Forschung zum Thema gewählt (Lange, Bayirli, & Schwab, 2020; s. dazu auch Kap. 2 und 4).

2019, 2020). Sollten die Grundüberlegungen hinter den Leichte-Sprache-Initiativen valide sein, müsste Wissensvermittlung durch die *Tagesschau* demnach relativ schwerfallen.

Am anderen Pol des «Schwierigkeits-Kontinuums» liessen sich – u. a. aufgrund ihrer spezifischen Zielgruppe – Kindernachrichten vermuten; zu denken wäre hier z. B. an die Kinder-Nachrichtensendung *logo!* (Krüger, 2009; Krüger & Müller, 2014; Winterhoff-Spurk, 2004). Begleitforschung zu *logo!* in der Anfangsphase der Sendung Ende der 1980er-Jahre von Winterhoff-Spurk (2004) bestätigte Wissenszuwächse für Kinder, die die Sendung rezipiert hatten.

Insgesamt fällt *logo!* durch eine besonders kindgerechte Darbietung auf; für die vorliegende Arbeit besonders bedeutsam ist die sprachliche Gestaltung. So wird mit dem Ziel einer möglichst guten Verständlichkeit versucht, dem eher niedrigen kindlichen bzw. jugendlichen Wortschatz Rechnung zu tragen, d. h. auch dem geringen Wissen um die Bedeutung von Fremdwörtern (Gleich & Schmitt, 2009; Krüger, 2009; Krüger & Müller, 2014; Redaktion *logo!*, 2019). Forschung konnte zeigen, dass bei Kindern das Verständnis von Geschichten gesteigert werden kann, wenn die Häufigkeit der verwendeten Wörter erhöht wurde, wenn also eher hochfrequente Wörter verwendet wurden (Marks, Doctorow, & Wittrock, 1974). Dies wird vor dem Hintergrund des robusten psycholinguistischen *word frequency effects* verständlich, der besagt, dass der Zugriff auf das mentale Lexikon bei hochfrequenten Wörtern schneller gelingt als bei niedrigfrequenten (z. B. Rickheit, Weiss, & Eikmeyer, 2010; vgl. Ballstaedt, Mandl, Schnotz, & Tergan, 1981). Die Frequenz von Wörtern geht mit ihrer Bekanntheit einher, was den Zugang erleichtert (Ballstaedt et al., 1981); empirische Forschung bestätigt ein besseres Verständnis durch Einsatz bekannter Wörter (Marks et al., 1974). Dieses Grundprinzip findet sich in leichter Sprache u. a. durch Verwendung von Wörtern des Grundwortschatzes wieder (vgl. Maaf, 2015). Allerdings ist die oben zitierte Forschung von Marks et al. (1974) bereits weit über 35 Jahre alt; aktuelle empirische Forschung, die sich diesem Thema widmet und die Befunde der bisherigen Forschung ggf. repliziert, ist daher wünschenswert.

Neben der Wortfrequenz ist auch die Wortkomplexität von Interesse. Da im Mittel von einer negativen Korrelation zwischen Wortfrequenz und Wortkomplexität (z. B. Wortlänge) ausgegangen wird, kann mit der Verwendung hochfrequenter Wörter auch die Wortkomplexität niedrig gehalten werden (Überblick bei Lange, 2012).

Zudem wird in *logo!* die Satzebene adressiert, indem davon ausgegangen wird, dass Kinder bzw. Jugendliche Schwierigkeiten mit langen bzw. zu komplexen Sätzen haben (Gleich & Schmitt, 2009; Krüger, 2009; Redaktion *logo!*, 2019). Angenommen wird, dass kurze Sätze das Verständnis begünstigen (Ballstaedt et al., 1981; s. auch Bruck & Stocker, 1996). Es zeigt sich somit, dass *logo!* zwei wesentliche Dimensionen leichter Sprache (nämlich Wort- und Satzebene) berücksichtigt, die auch in Konzeptionen sprachlicher Gewandtheit/Elaboriertheit und Eloquenz wesentliche Kriterien darstellen (Lange, 2012; Lange et al., 2017). Wir gehen auf das Konstrukt des Sprachniveaus und dessen Messung im Methodenteil (Kap. 4) näher ein.

Krüger (2009) überprüfte die Leichtigkeit der in *logo!* verwendeten Sprache mittels des Flesch-Indexes, der die quantitativen Masse der durchschnittlichen Satzlänge in Wörtern und der durchschnittlichen Wortlänge in Silben vereint (Flesch, 1948; s. dazu Aziz, Fook, & Alsree, 2010; Ballstaedt, 2019; Merten, 1995, S. 179) und damit ebenfalls die beiden o. g. linguistischen Ebenen abdeckt.² Krüger (2009, S. 587–588) fand für *logo!* einen Flesch-Index von 65 (Min.: 55,

2 Flesch-Index-Werte sind folgendermassen zu interpretieren: Werte von 0–30 gelten als sehr schwer (verständlich für Akademiker/-innen/Hochschulabsolventen/-innen), von 30–50 als schwer (verständlich für Studierende), von 50–60 als schwer bis mittel (verständlich für Schüler/-innen der 10.–12. Klasse), von 60–70 als mittelschwer (verständlich für Schüler/-innen der 8.–9. Klasse/im Alter von 13–15 Jahren), von 70–80 als mittel bis leicht (verständlich für Schüler/-innen der 7. Klasse), von 80–90 als leicht (verständlich für Schüler/-innen der 6. Klasse) und von 90–100 als sehr leicht (verständlich für Schüler/-innen der 5. Klasse/im Alter von 11 Jahren) (Aziz et al., 2010; Immel, 2014; Krüger, 2009; s. auch Lange et al., 2020).

Max.: 79);³ für die *Tagesschau* nennt er einen Wert von 39. Lange et al. (2020) fanden für die *Tagesschau* einen Wert von ca. 44.

Der Wert von 65 für *logo!* kann als Verwendung leichter Sprache interpretiert werden, während die Sprache der *Tagesschau* angesichts von Flesch-Index-Werten von ca. 40 als schwer einzustufen ist. Demnach wäre *logo!* sprachlich schon für Kinder und Jugendliche gut verständlich, während die *Tagesschau* (bereits erfolgte oder derzeit erfolgende) Hochschulbildung voraussetzen würde (vgl. Fussnote 2).

Zu berücksichtigen ist allerdings, dass TV-Nachrichten aus mehr als nur Sprache bestehen; es handelt sich vielmehr um multimodale Medienprodukte, bei denen verschiedene Modalitäten zusammenwirken (z. B. Bateman, 2014; Holly, 2009; Lobinger, 2012; s. auch Holly, 2010). In der Tat fällt bei *logo!* auch die ansprechende (kindgerechte) visuelle Gestaltung auf (Krüger, 2009). Studien zeigen, dass gerade Grafiken und Trickfilme besonders sinnvolle Stilmittel zur Darstellung komplizierter Zusammenhänge sind (Gleich & Schmitt, 2009; Kowalewski, 2009) und der Einsatz von textillustrierenden Bildern die Behaltensleistung verbessert (Brosius, 1998). Dies wird durch die Annahmen der Dual-Coding-Theorie verständlich: Wird eine Information verbal und visuell vermittelt (statt z. B. nur verbal), kann sich die Wahrscheinlichkeit erhöhen, dass sie behalten wird (s. dazu Gleich & Schmitt, 2009; s. dagegen z. B. auch Schnotz & Bannert, 2003).

Walma van der Molen und van der Voort (2000) fanden beim Vergleich von niederländischen TV-Nachrichten, dass nicht nur Kinder besonders gut durch Kindernachrichten Wissen erwerben können, sondern auch Erwachsene. Ist dies ein Einzelbefund? Oder weisen Kindernachrichten Gestaltungsmerkmale (z. B. sprachliche) auf, durch die nicht nur Kinder besonders gut Wissen erwerben können? Die Hypothesen und die For-

schungsfrage der vorliegenden empirischen Studie adressierten diese Thematik mit einem Fokus auf der sprachlichen Gestaltung.

3 Hypothesen und Forschungsfrage

Angesichts der Logik der Leichte-Sprache-Initiative und u. a. der von Walma van der Molen und van der Voort (2000) erbrachten Forschungsbefunde lässt sich annehmen, dass die Wissensvermittlung durch Nachrichtenbeiträge der *Tagesschau* vergleichsweise schwerfallen und – darüber hinaus – durch solche der Kindernachrichten von *logo!* besonders vorteilhaft sein sollte – und das nicht nur für Kinder, sondern auch für Erwachsene.

Auf Basis der o. g. Überlegungen und empirischen Befunde nahmen wir daher an:

H1: Haupteffekt «Sendung» (erworbenes Wissen): Erwachsene Rezipient/-innen von Beiträgen von *logo!* schneiden in einem Wissenstest besser ab als Rezipient/-innen von Beiträgen der *Tagesschau*.

H2: Haupteffekt «Sendung» (verwendete Sprache): Beiträge der Sendung *logo!* weisen ein niedrigeres Sprachniveau auf als Beiträge der *Tagesschau*.

Dies adressiert in einem ersten Schritt die Frage, ob etwaige Unterschiede im Wissenstest mit einem niedrigen Sprachniveau zusammenhängen. Es wurde erwartet, dass sich die Ergebnisse vorheriger Forschung (u. a. Krüger, 2009) für *logo!* und die *Tagesschau* erneut zeigen lassen.

H3: Die Wissenstestergebnisse korrelieren mit Markern leichter Sprache. Das heisst: Je mehr Merkmale leichter Sprache ein Nachrichtenbeitrag aufweist, desto besser schneiden Personen, die den Beitrag gesehen haben, in einem Wissenstest zum Thema des Beitrags ab. Die Ergebnisse für H1, sofern diese bestätigt wird, lassen sich somit teilweise durch die für H2, wiederum Bestätigung vorausgesetzt, erklären. Dies adressiert in einem zweiten Schritt die Frage, ob etwaige Unterschiede im

3 Allerdings verwendete Krüger (2009, S. 592) die englische Formel trotz deutschen Sprachmaterials, womit dem Umstand der im Durchschnitt längeren Wörter im Deutschen als im Englischen nicht Rechnung getragen wurde (zum Einsatz des Flesch-Index im Deutschen sowie zu grundsätzlichen Problemen mit derlei Verständlichkeitsindizes s. z. B. Immel, 2014).

Wissenstest mit einem niedrigen Sprachniveau zusammenhängen.

H4: Haupteffekt «Darbietungsform» (erworbenes Wissen): Die Nachrichtenbeiträge sind mit Unterstützung von Bildmaterial besser verständlich als ohne Bild («nur Ton»).

Diese Annahme ist u. a. aus dem Grund untersuchungswürdig, da Nachrichtenrezeption sowohl audiovisuell als auch nur auditiv erfolgen kann. Sie ergibt sich darüber hinaus aus der o. g. Dual-Coding-Theorie (Paivio, 1971; s. dazu auch Walma van der Molen & van der Voort, 2000).

H5: Interaktionseffekt zwischen «Sendung» und «Darbietungsform» (erworbenes Wissen): Es existiert ein Interaktionseffekt zwischen Sendung (*Tagesschau* vs. *logo!*) und Darbietung («mit Bild» vs. «nur Ton») dergestalt, dass *logo!* in der Bedingung «mit Bild» die beste Wissensvermittlung ermöglicht (verglichen mit der *Tagesschau* und *logo!* in der Bedingung «nur Ton»). Zwar wird bei *logo!* auf Wissensvermittlung mittels leicht verständlicher Sprache geachtet; jedoch ist auch die visuelle Gestaltung von *logo!* besonders auf gute Wissensvermittlung ausgerichtet (Kowalewski, 2009; Krüger, 2009).

Da alle Hypothesen gerichtet waren, werden die entsprechenden *p*-Werte einseitig berichtet. Schliesslich formulierten wir folgende Forschungsfrage:

Existiert ein Zusammenhang zwischen Bildungshintergrund (höchster Bildungsabschluss; s. Kap. 4.3) und dem erworbenen Wissen in Abhängigkeit von der rezipierten Sendung?

Diese Forschungsfrage zielt auf eine der wesentlichen Motivationen der Leichte-Sprache-Initiative ab, Menschen den Zugang zu medial vermittelten Informationen zu ermöglichen, die aus einem Mangel an Verständnis heraus an herkömmlichen Nachrichten nicht partizipieren können (vgl. Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, 2018). Als eine (wenn auch nicht die einzige) relevante Variable erscheint diesbezüglich

der Bildungshintergrund, wie u. a. durch vorhergehende Forschung (Winterhoff-Spurk, 2004) nahegelegt wird (s. auch Gleich, 1998).

4 Methode

Im Folgenden wird die Methode unserer quasi-experimentellen Studie vorgestellt. Zunächst gehen wir auf das Stimulusmaterial ein und beschreiben den eingesetzten Wissenstest. Darauf folgt die Beschreibung der Stichprobe und des Ablaufes der Studie. Schliesslich legen wir dar, wie das Stimulusmaterial auf Marker des Sprachniveaus untersucht wurde.

4.1 Stimulusmaterial

Als Stimulusmaterial wurden konkrete Beiträge der *Tagesschau* und von *logo!* (von April und Mai 2019) herangezogen, die eine möglichst grosse Bandbreite an Themen abdecken, um eine möglichst ökologisch valide Rezeptionssituation zu erzeugen. In Anlehnung an Walma van der Molen und van der Voort (2000) wurde darauf geachtet, Themen zu wählen, die nicht permanent in der TV-Berichterstattung vorkommen, um den Einfluss von eventuell vorhandenem Vorwissen der Versuchspersonen zu vermeiden (s. dazu auch Findahl & Höjjer, 1985). Essentiell war, nur solche Themen auszuwählen, die jeweils in den Beiträgen beider Sendungen vorkamen, um so beide Sendungen miteinander vergleichen zu können.

Zur Wahl standen elf Beiträge, die o. g. Kriterien erfüllten. Wir wählten randomisiert fünf Beiträge (s. u.) mit einer Länge von jeweils ca. 1:30–2:30 Min. aus. Die Gesamtdauer des Stimulusmaterials (alle fünf Beiträge hintereinander) lag pro Sendung jeweils bei ca. 10 Minuten und kam damit der realen TV-Nachrichten-Rezeption relativ nahe: Die *Tagesschau* hat eine Dauer von ca. 15 Min., *logo!* eine von ca. 10 Min. Wir entschieden uns für 10 Min. als Gesamtdauer des jeweiligen Stimulusmaterials, um den Umfang des Online-Fragebogens (der neben dem Stimulusmaterial aus einem umfangreichen Wissenstest bestand; s. u.) für unsere Versuchspersonen im zumutbaren Rahmen zu halten und zu verhindern, dass unnötig viele Personen die Befragung wegen zu lan-

ger Dauer abbrechen oder gegen Ende der Befragung zu unkonzentriert sind und damit keine verlässlichen Daten liefern.

Die fünf Beiträge pro Sendung behandelten die Themen: «Malaria in Afrika» (im Folgenden kurz: «Malaria»/MA), «Jungfernflug des weltgrößten Flugzeugs Stratolaunch» («Stratolaunch»/SL), «Abholzung des Brasilianischen Regenwaldes» («Brasilianischer Regenwald»/BR), «Treffen von Staats- und Regierungschefs in Peking hinsichtlich der Neuen Seidenstrasse» («Neue Seidenstrasse»/Engl. «Belt and Road Initiative»/BRI) und «Gefährdung der Biodiversität» («Biodiversität»/BD).

4.2 Konstruktion des Wissenstests und Pretest

Der Wissenstest sollte in Form von Multiple-Choice-Fragen die Vermittlung der wichtigsten Kerninformationen der Beiträge beider Sendungen im Sinne eines Recalls überprüfen. Entlang der Beiträge wurden daher insgesamt 52 Wissensfragen entworfen. Dabei handelte es sich um Fragen, die im jeweiligen Beitrag genannte Fakten abfragen und um Transferfragen. Es wurden nur solche Fragen formuliert, die sowohl auf Basis der *Tagesschau*-, als auch der *logo!*-Rezeption beantwortbar waren.

Die Fragen orientierten sich zudem am Standardmuster der Nachrichtenberichterstattung, die i. d. R. folgende Elemente beinhaltet: Ereignis, Ort, Zeit, beteiligte Personen sowie Ursachen und Konsequenzen (vgl. Findahl & Höijer, 1985). Hinsichtlich des Elementes «Ort» lautete eine Frage zum Beitrag SL z. B.: «Wo fand der Jungfernflug der Stratolaunch statt?»

Pro Frage existierten vier Antwortmöglichkeiten im Multiple-Choice-Format, von der jeweils eine richtig war. Bei der Beispielfrage zum Beitrag SL waren dies: a) in Kalifornien, b) in Kanada, c) in Colorado, d) in Connecticut, wobei a) richtig war. Für Multiple Choice wurde optiert, da sich so das vorhandene Wissen zeitökonomisch und objektiv abtesten lässt (z. B. Beutelspacher, 2014).

Mit einem Pretest wurde bestimmt, welche der Fragen final verwendet wurden. Ziel war es, zu leichte und zu schwere Fragen auszuschliessen. Die Fragen sollten einerseits grundsätzlich einen mittleren Schwierig-

keitsgrad (50 % richtig beantwortet) aufweisen, andererseits auch eine gewisse Schwierigkeitsvarianz. Wir entschieden uns daher, diejenigen Fragen final auszuwählen, die von mind. 20 % und max. 80 % (50 % ± 30 %) der Pretest-Versuchspersonen ($N=21$, Alter: $M=28.74$, $SD=13.13$) richtig beantwortet wurden. 29 der 52 Fragen erfüllten das Kriterium einer solchen Itemschwierigkeit zwischen .2 und .8 und wurden daher final ausgewählt. Damit standen pro Beitrag im Durchschnitt gut fünf Fragen (Min.=4, Max.=11) zur Verfügung. Für die statistischen Analysen wurden die Wissenstest-Mittelwerte verwendet.

4.3 Versuchspersonen der Hauptuntersuchung

Die Erhebung fand über einen Online-Fragebogen statt und die Versuchspersonen wurden über soziale Netzwerkeiten rekrutiert. Als Kompensation wurden unter allen Versuchspersonen 10×20 € verlost. Insgesamt nahmen 266 Personen teil. Mittels visueller Analyse von Box-Plots wurde eine Ausreisseranalyse durchgeführt. Sechs Personen füllten angesichts unrealistisch niedriger Bearbeitungszeiten den Online-Fragebogen nicht korrekt bzw. nicht gewissenhaft aus und wurden daher aus der Stichprobe entfernt. Die finale für die statistische Analyse verwendete Stichprobe beinhaltete somit 260 Personen (weiblich: 165, männlich: 91, divers: 2, keine Angabe: 2; Alter: $M=29.52$ Jahre, $SD=12.18$).

Die Verteilung des jeweils höchsten Bildungsabschlusses war folgendermassen: Schüler/-in: 0.8 %, mittlere Reife: 5.4 %, Fachhochschulreife: 3.1 %, Abitur: 44.6 %, Hochschulabschluss: 45.8 %, anderer Abschluss: 0.4 %. Es lagen somit zwei in etwa gleich grosse Sub-Gruppen vor, nämlich Personen mit ($n=119$) und ohne Hochschulabschluss ($n=141$). Die Aufteilung einerseits in Personen mit derzeit erfolgreicher oder schon erfolgter Hochschulbildung (d. h. Studierende und Hochschulabsolvent/-innen) und andererseits in Personen ohne Zugang zu Hochschulbildung wäre zwar auch sinnvoll gewesen, da so auch Studierende in die Gruppe der höher gebildeten Personen sortiert worden wären, allerdings hätte dies zu sehr ungleichen Gruppengrößen ($n=239$ vs. 47) und daher zu Problemen inferenzstatistischer Art

geführt, so dass wir uns auf die erstgenannte Unterscheidung bzgl. des Bildungsniveaus beschränken.

4.4 Ablauf der Hauptuntersuchung

Die Beiträge wurden integriert in einem Online-Fragebogen immer in der gleichen Reihenfolge (SL, MA, BRI, BR, BD) präsentiert. Den Versuchspersonen wurden entweder alle fünf Beiträge der *Tagesschau* ($n=128$) oder von *logo!* ($n=132$) präsentiert, wobei nochmals unterschieden wurde, ob das Material mit Bild ($n=128$) oder nur mit Ton ($n=132$) dargeboten wurde. Es gab somit vier Bedingungen, denen die Versuchspersonen jeweils randomisiert zugewiesen wurden (*Tagesschau* mit Bild: $n=63$; *Tagesschau* ohne Bild: $n=65$; *logo!* mit Bild: $n=65$; *logo!* ohne Bild: $n=67$). Die Präsentation des jeweiligen Stimulusmaterials war über einen programmierten Timer so gestaltet, dass die Versuchspersonen erst das gesamte Material ansehen mussten, bevor sie mit dem Wissenstest fortfahren konnten. Darauf folgte der oben beschriebene Multiple-Choice-Wissenstest zu den Beitragsinhalten. Die Hauptuntersuchung fand zwischen Ende Juli und Anfang September 2019 statt.

4.4 Quantitative Textanalyse der Nachrichtensprache

Die gesprochenen Texte aller Nachrichtenbeiträge wurden mit der Software Speechmatics transkribiert. Die Transkriptionen wurden mit der deutschen Version des Textanalyseprogramm «Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count» (LIWC; Wolf et al., 2008) in der Version 1.3.1 von 2015 und der von 2001 analysiert (Lange et al. 2019, 2020). Bei LIWC handelt es um ein etabliertes Programm zur quantitativen Textanalyse mit überzeugenden psychometrischen Gütekriterien (Wolf et al., 2008), welches vielfach u. a. in der kommunikationswissenschaftlichen Forschung (z. B. Ho, Hancock, & Miner, 2018), darunter auch in Forschung zur Nachrichtensprache (z. B. Lange et al., 2019), Anwendung fand.

Es wurden in Anlehnung an die Arbeiten von Lange et al. (2019, 2020) zum Sprachniveau bzw. zu leichter Sprache in Nachrichten die LIWC-Variablen herangezogen, die auf Basis empirischer Daten ein hohes Sprachni-

veau (als Gegenpol zu leichter Sprache) valide messen (jeweilige LIWC-Variable in Klammern): Satzlänge in Form von «Wörter pro Satz» («WPS»; misst Satzkomplexität), «Anteil Wörter länger als sechs Zeichen» («sixltr»; misst Wortkomplexität), Type-Token-Ratio («unique»; misst Wortschatzdiversität); ausserdem: «Wortzahl» («WC»; word count) (vgl. Lange et al., 2019, 2020). Schliesslich wurde die Sprechgeschwindigkeit in gesprochenen Wörtern pro Minute («WC/Min.») bestimmt. Vorige Forschung (z. B. Lange, 2012; Lange et al., 2019, 2020) konnte theoretisch und empirisch zeigen, dass Sprachniveau auf diesem Weg valide abgebildet werden kann.

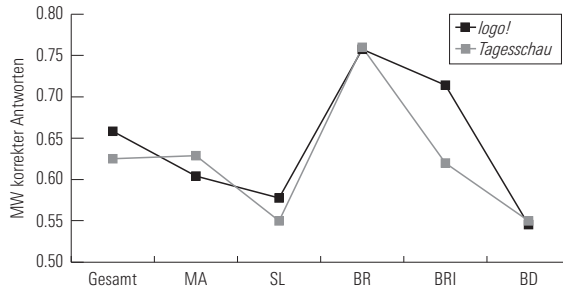
Es wurde zudem der Flesch-Index für alle Beiträge auf Basis der vorliegenden Texte bestimmt,⁴ da die Literatur explizit darauf verweist, dass die Leichtigkeit von Sprache damit empirisch abgebildet werden kann (Przybyla-Wilkin, 2016; Vandeghinste & Bulté, 2019). Zudem liegt empirische Evidenz dafür vor, dass Flesch-Index-Werte mit den Werten der o. g. LIWC-Variablen teils substantiell korrelieren (Lange et al., 2020).

5 Ergebnisse

Für H1, H4, H5 und die FF bestand die Stichprobe aus den o. g. Versuchspersonen ($N=260$). Für H2 und H3 hingegen bildeten die einzelnen fünf Beiträge für jede der zwei Sendungen in jeweils beiden Darbietungsformen die Stichprobe ($N=20$). Zu bedenken ist daher die geringe statistische Power in letztgenanntem Fall, was zur Folge hatte, dass nur besonders starke Effekte inferenzstatistisch abgesichert werden konnten. Der Fokus bei Prüfung von H2 und H3 wurde daher auf den Bericht der Effektstärken gelegt; der Signifikanzwert wird hier nur der Vollständigkeit halber jeweils mit berichtet.

4 Für die Bestimmung des Flesch-Indexes kam die für deutsches Sprachmaterial entwickelte Formel zum Einsatz: $180 - ASL - (58,5 * ASW)$. «ASL» steht für «Average Sentence Length», womit die durchschnittliche Satzlänge in Wörtern gemeint ist; «ASW» steht für «Averagen Number of Syllables per Word», d. h. für die durchschnittliche Wortlänge in Silben (s. z. B. Ballstaedt, 2019; Immel, 2014; s. auch Lange et al., 2020).

Abbildung 1: Unterschiede im Wissenstest (Mittelwert korrekter Antworten) zwischen Rezipient/-innen von *logo!* Und der *Tagesschau* (Gesamt und nach Einzelbeitrag)



Anmerkungen: Abkürzungen für Beiträge: MA=Malaria; SL=Stratolaunch; BR=Brasilianischer Regenwald; BRI=Neue Seidenstrasse, BD=Biodiversität.

5.1 Höherer Wissenszuwachs durch *logo!* (H1)

Um zu überprüfen, ob das Wissenstestergebnis (Mittelwert der korrekt beantworteten Multiple-Choice-Fragen) für *logo!* besser ausfiel als das für die *Tagesschau* und um zu überprüfen, ob dieser Haupteffekt für «Sendung» (unabhängige Variable) durch die einzelnen fünf Beiträge gleichermassen beeinflusst wurde, wurde eine MANOVA (mit dem Mittelwert der Wissenstestergebnisse der fünf Beiträge als abhängige Variablen) mit anschließenden einzelnen ANOVAS gerechnet.

Der Haupteffekt «Sendung» war hochsignifikant und moderat effektstark ($F(5, 254) = 5.298, p < .001, \eta^2 = .094$). Er kam praktisch ausschliesslich durch einen der fünf Beiträge zustande, nämlich durch BRI ($F(1, 258) = 18.916, p < .001, \eta^2 = .068$; für die anderen Beiträge $F < 1$). Abbildung 1 gibt einen Überblick über die Unterschiede.

5.2 Niedrigeres Sprachniveau in *logo!* (H2)

Ein niedrigeres Sprachniveau in *logo!* als in der *Tagesschau* wurde für zwei LIWC-Masse gefunden: So zeichnete sich *logo!* durch eine deutlich geringere Wortkomplexität («Sixltr»; $t(18) = 9.775, p < .001, d = 4.50$) und durch geringere Satzkomplexität im Sinne von kürzeren Sätzen («WPS»; $t(10488) = 3.050, p = .006, d = 1.56$) aus; im Durchschnitt verwendet die *Tagesschau* 15 Wörter pro Satz, *logo!* nur 12.

Für Wortschatzdiversität («unique») und Wortzahl («WC») ergaben sich keine

Unterschiede ($t(18) < 1, p > .2, d < 0.03$). In *logo!* wurden allerdings deutlich mehr Wörter pro Minute («WC/Min.») gesprochen ($t(18) = 5.715, p < .001, d = 2.78$), was den ersten nicht erwartbaren Befund darstellt. Die Analyse der Flesch-Werte ergab eine deutlich höhere Verständlichkeit für *logo!* ($M = 59.60, SD = 4.40$) als für die *Tagesschau* ($M = 43.80, SD = 3.74; t(18) = 8.654, p < .001, d = 3.88$).

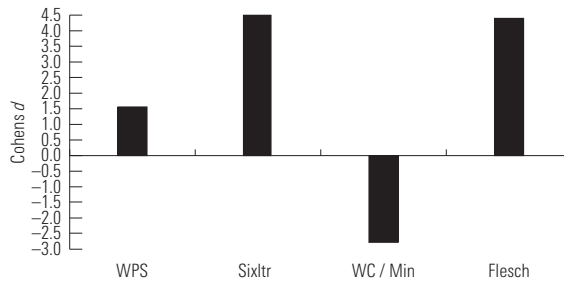
Die Effekte für leichtere Sprache in *logo!* waren mit Unterschieden von teils mehreren Standardabweichungen sehr gross. Abbildung 2 fasst diejenigen Unterschiede zwischen den Sendungen zusammen, die mindestens eine geringe Effektstärke ($d = 0.20$; Cohen, 1988) aufwiesen.

Mehrere linguistische Marker waren interkorreliert («WPS» mit «Sixltr»: $r(18) = .425, p = .031$; Flesch mit «WPS»: $r(18) = -.631, p = .002$; Flesch mit «Sixltr»: $r(18) = -.918, p < .001$).

5.3 Beitrag des Sprachniveaus zum Wissenserwerb (H3)

Über alle Beiträge beider Sendungen zeigte sich: Je weniger seltene Wörter («unique»; $r = -.704, p < .001$) und je mehr Wörter insgesamt («WC»; $r = .909, p < .001$) verwendet wurden, desto besser war das Ergebnis im Wissenstest. Für Wort- («Sixltr») und Satzkomplexität («WPS») waren die Zusammenhänge nahe Null ($r < .1$). Für Sprechtempo («WC/Min.») zeigte sich in Form einer kleinen Korrelation die Tendenz, dass langsames Sprechen mit behaltenerem Wissen korre-

Abbildung 2: Unterschiede zwischen beiden Sendungen (*logo!* vs. *Tagesschau*) nach linguistischem Merkmal



Anmerkungen: Die linguistischen Variablen sind: WPS (Satzkomplexität); Sixltr (Wortkomplexität); WC / Min (Sprechgeschwindigkeit) und der Flesch-Index. Positiv abgetragene Werte stehen für leichtere Sprache in *logo!*.

lierte ($r = -.179, p = .230$). Von vergleichbarer Grösse war das Ergebnis für den Flesch-Index: Je einfacher die Sprache war, desto weniger Wissen wurde korrekt wiedergegeben ($r = -.203, p = .195$; s. u.).

Bei ausschliesslicher Betrachtung der *Tagesschau*-Gruppe ($n = 10$) fand sich ein teilweise anderes Ergebnis: Je mehr komplexe Wörter («Sixltr»; $r = .622, p = .028$) und je mehr Wörter insgesamt («WC»; $r = .840, p = .001$) verwendet wurden, desto besser war das Ergebnis im Wissenstest. Langsameres Sprechen («WC / Min.») war ebenfalls deutlich mit mehr Wissen korreliert ($r = -.577, p = .041$). Für Satzkomplexität («WPS») war der Zusammenhang nahe Null. Für Wortschatzdiversität («unique») fand sich: Je weniger seltene Wörter verwendet wurden, desto höher war das Wissen ($r = -.482, p = .008$). Für den Flesch-Index ergab sich eine sehr hohe negative Korrelation ($r = -.787, p = .004$): Je einfacher die Sprache nach dem Index war, desto weniger Wissen ergab sich im Wissenstest (s. u.).

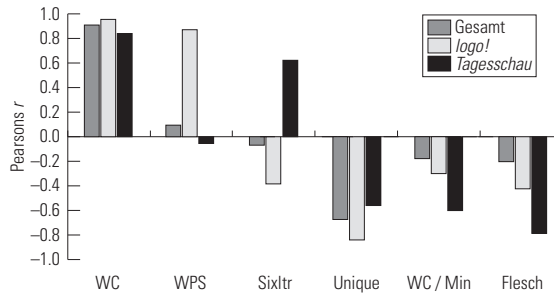
In der *logo!*-Gruppe ($n = 10$) war das Ergebnis schliesslich: Je länger die Sätze waren («WPS»; $r = .871, p < .001$), je weniger seltene Wörter («unique»; $r = -.845, p = .001$) und je mehr Wörter insgesamt («WC»; $r = .955, p < .001$) verwendet wurden, desto höher war das angeeignete Wissen. Für Wortkomplexität («Sixltr») war der Befund tendenziell: Je weniger komplexe Wörter verwendet wurden, desto höher war das Wissen ($r = -.384, p = .137$). Für das Sprechtempo war der

Befund ähnlich: Je langsamer gesprochen wurde, desto mehr Wissensfragen wurden korrekt beantwortet ($r = .328, p = .177$). Für den Flesch-Index fand sich eine negative Korrelation ($r = -.424, p = .111$). Das heisst, je einfacher die Sprache nach dem Flesch-Index war, desto weniger Wissen wurde korrekt behalten (s. o.). Auf derlei nicht erwartbare Ergebnisse wird in der Diskussion näher eingegangen. Abbildung 3 fasst die Zusammenhänge zwischen den linguistischen Variablen und den Wissenstestergebnissen zusammen.

5.4 Vorteil durch (audio-)visuelle Darbietung (H4)

Die MANOVA ergab, dass «mit Bild» das Wissen höher war als mit «nur Ton» ($M = 0.663$) das Wissen höher war als mit «nur Ton» ($M = 0.622$): $F(5, 254) = 2.372, p = .020, \eta^2 = .045$. Der Effekt kam überwiegend durch nur zwei Beiträge zustande: BD ($M = 0.591$ vs. 0.503 ; $F(1, 258) = 6.833, p = .005, \eta^2 = .026$) und BR ($M = 0.797$ vs. 0.725 ; $F(1, 258) = 6.440, p = .006, \eta^2 = .024$). Für den Beitrag BRI, der hier genannt wird, da er wesentlich für den H1-Befund ist, ging die Tendenz in dieselbe Richtung; der Effekt war aber gering und statistisch nicht signifikant ($M = 0.683$ vs. 0.656 ; $F(1, 258) = 1.562, p = .106, \eta^2 = .006$; für die übrigen zwei Beiträge $F < 1$). Abbildung 4 im Online Supplement gibt einen Überblick für die Unterschiede der beiden Darbietungsformen (s. auch Abb. 5).

Abbildung 3: Korrelationen zwischen den linguistischen Variablen und den Wissenstest-ergebnissen für alle Beiträge beider Sendungen (Gesamt)



Anmerkungen: Die linguistischen Variablen sind: WC (Wortzahl); WPS (Satzkomplexität); Sixtr (Wortkomplexität); Unique (Wortschatzdiversität); WC/Min (Sprechgeschwindigkeit) und der Flesch-Index.

5.5 Interaktionseffekt zwischen Sendung und Darbietungsform (H5)

Die Annahme, dass *logo!* im Besonderen durch visuelle Darbietung zu mehr Wissen beiträgt, konnte nicht bestätigt werden ($F < 1$). Abbildung 5 fasst die Wissenstest-ergebnisse nach Sendung und Darbietungsform zusammen.

In Abbildung 5 erkennbar sind auch hier der Haupteffekt für «Sendung» (*logo!* sorgt, vor allem bei BRI, für mehr Wissen) sowie der Haupteffekt für «Darbietungsform» («mit Bild») fällt der Wissenstest, vor allem bei BR und BD, besser aus); jedoch wird kein bedeutsamer Interaktionseffekt zwischen «Sendung» und «Darbietungsform» erkennbar.

5.6 Effekte des Bildungshintergrundes (FF)

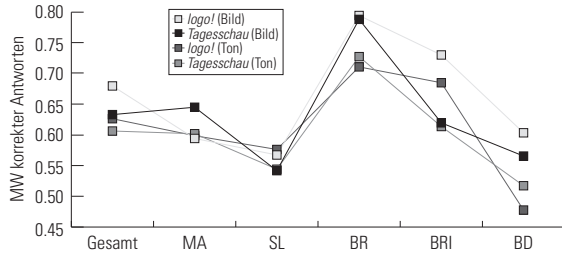
Eine MANOVA mit der dichotomen Bildungsvariable (Personen mit vs. ohne Hochschulabschluss; s. o.) und der Variable «Sendung» (*logo!* vs. *Tagesschau*) als unabhängige Variablen und den Wissenstest-ergebnissen der fünf Beiträge als abhängige Variablen ergab neben dem bereits durch andere Analysen (s. o.) evidenten Haupteffekt für «Sendung» auch einen Haupteffekt für «Bildung» ($F(5, 252) = 3,173, p = .009, \eta^2 = .059$; alle p -Werte für FF zweiseitig). Dieser kam dadurch zustande, dass Hochschulabsolvent/-innen ($M = 0.656$) bessere Wissenstest-ergebnisse erzielten als Versuchspersonen ohne Hochschulabschluss ($M = 0.630$). Der Interaktionseffekt zwischen «Sendung»

und «Bildung» wurde nicht signifikant ($F(5, 252) = 1.125, p = .348, \eta^2 = .022$). Deutlicher war das Ergebnis beim Blick auf die Einzelbeiträge. So wurde die Interaktion zwischen «Sendung» und «Bildung» für SL signifikant ($F(1, 256) = 4.874, p = .028, \eta^2 = .019$). Abbildung 6 fasst die Befunde zu den Wissenstest-ergebnissen nach Bildung und Sendung zusammen.

Es ist erkennbar, wie die Interaktion zwischen «Bildung» und «Sendung» für SL zustande kommt: Akademiker/-innen in der *logo!*-Gruppe wiesen das beste Ergebnis auf ($M = 0.629$), Akademiker/-innen in der *Tagesschau*-Gruppe das schlechteste ($M = 0.530$). Der Unterschied war statistisch signifikant und fast moderat effektstark ($t(122) = 2.444, p = .016, d = 0.44$). Nicht-Akademiker/-innen in der *logo!*-Gruppe ($M = 0.535$) zeigten eine ähnliche Leistung wie Akademiker/-innen in der *Tagesschau*-Gruppe. Etwas besser schnitten Nicht-Akademiker/-innen in der *Tagesschau*-Gruppe ab ($M = 0.565$).

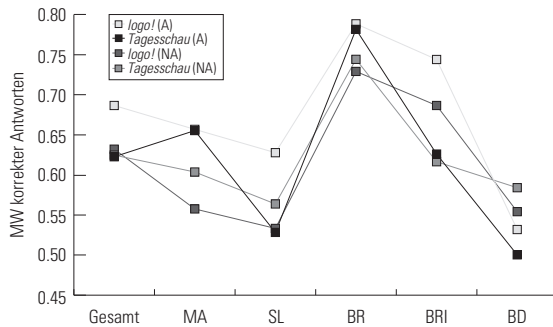
Die Interaktion für das Gesamt-Wissenstestergebnis verfehlte zwar die statistische Signifikanz (s. o.). Das für den Beitrag SL gefundene Muster deutet sich allerdings auch beim Gesamt-Ergebnis an. So zeigten Akademiker/-innen in der *logo!*-Gruppe die beste Leistung ($M = 0.688$), die anderen drei Gruppen lagen deutlich niedriger und waren untereinander sehr ähnlich (zwischen 0.624 und 0.633; s. Abb. 6). Innerhalb der Gruppe der Akademiker/-innen war der Unterschied zwischen *logo!* ($M = 0.688$) und *Tagesschau*

Abbildung 5: Unterschiede im Wissenstest (Mittelwert korrekter Antworten) nach Sendung und nach Darbietungsform (Gesamt und nach Einzelbeitrag)



Anmerkungen: Abkürzungen für Beiträge: MA=Malaria; SL=Stratolaunch; BR=Brasilianischer Regenwald; BRI=Neue Seidenstrasse, BD=Biodiversität.

Abbildung 6: Unterschiede im Wissenstest (Mittelwert korrekter Antworten) nach Sendung und Bildung der Rezipient/-innen (Akademiker/-innen = A vs. Nicht-Akademiker/-innen = NA) (Gesamt und nach Einzelbeitrag).



Anmerkungen: Abkürzungen für Beiträge: MA=Malaria; SL=Stratolaunch; BR=Brasilianischer Regenwald; BRI=Neue Seidenstrasse, BD=Biodiversität.

($M=0.624$) wiederum zugunsten von *logo!* signifikant und erneut von nennenswerter Effektstärke ($t(122)=2.301, p=.023, d=0.41$; s. Abb. 7, links). Beim Vergleich von Akademiker/-innen mit Nicht-Akademiker/-innen innerhalb der *logo!*-Gruppe fand sich ein analoges Ergebnis ($t(142)=2.043, p=.043, d=0.34$). Abbildung 7 fasst diese Befunde zusammen.

6 Diskussion

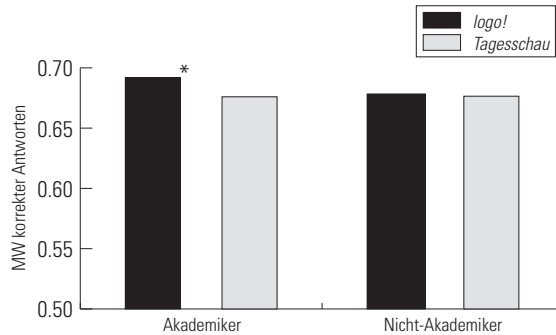
Im Folgenden werden die Ergebnisse für die einzelnen Hypothesen (H1 bis H5) sowie für die Forschungsfrage (FF) kurz zusammengefasst und diskutiert.

6.1 Höherer Wissenszuwachs durch *logo!* (H1)

Die Kindersendung *logo!* sorgt für moderat effektstark höheres Wissen der Rezipient/-innen als die *Tagesschau* (Abb. 1). Damit lässt sich grob schlussfolgern, dass auch Erwachsene (und nicht nur Kinder) von einer Nachrichtenaufbereitung wie der von *logo!* profitieren können (vgl. Walma van der Molen & van der Voort, 2000).

Es scheint hier allerdings kein globaler Effekt vorzuliegen, denn der Effekt zugunsten von *logo!* kam wesentlich durch einen der fünf Beiträge zustande (BRI) (Abb. 1). Bei Betrachtung dieses Beitrags fiel auf, dass sich zur Übermittlung der Thematik des für *logo!* typischen Erklärstücks bedient wird

Abbildung 7: Unterschiede im Wissenstest (Mittelwert korrekter Antworten) nach Sendung (*logo!* vs. *Tagesschau*) und Bildung der Rezipient/-innen (Akademiker/-innen vs. Nicht-Akademiker/-innen) (Gesamt).



Anmerkungen: Der Unterschied zwischen *logo!* und *Tagesschau* in der Gruppe der Akademiker/-innen ist statistisch signifikant (* $p < .05$).

(Krüger & Müller, 2014; Redaktion *logo!*, 2019), das sich dadurch auszeichnet, dass schwierige Themen mit reduzierter Komplexität übermittelt werden und direkt an die Erfahrungswelt der Kinder angeknüpft und sich einfacher und klarer Sprache bedient wird (Krüger & Müller, 2014; Redaktion *logo!*, 2019).

Im Gegensatz zu BRI gleichen die anderen Beiträge eher einer «typischen» Nachrichtenberichterstattung, wodurch die Vermutung nahe liegt, dass der H1-Befund zum Teil durch die Genre-Wahl bei dem einen Beitrag zustande kam. Diese auf Genre fokussierende Erklärung des Befundes steht dabei allerdings nicht im Widerspruch zu den Annahmen, dass niedriges Sprachniveau (H2, H3) und der Einsatz von Bildern (H4) den Wissenserwerb fördern; vielmehr gehen die einzelnen Elemente vermutlich Hand in Hand (vgl. Redaktion *logo!*, 2019). Gleichwohl sollte zukünftige Forschung dieser Art die Variable «Genre» stärker fokussieren. Es wäre z. B. weiter zu eruieren, ob Wissensvorteile alleine durch das Genre zu erklären sind oder ob genreunabhängig ein substantieller Teil des Wissenserwerbs durch die sprachliche Gestaltung zustande kommt. Auf das Genre des Erklärstücks entfallen etwa 15% der Sendezeit von *logo!*; fast die Hälfte der Sendezeit wird jedoch mit Filmberichten gefüllt (Krüger & Müller, 2014). Daraus liesse sich z. B. die Frage ableiten, ob ein Interaktionseffekt zwischen Genre (z. B. Erklärstück

vs. Filmbericht) und sprachlicher Gestaltung besteht.

6.2 Leichtere Sprache in *logo!* (H2)

Ein niedrigeres Sprachniveau (und damit, so die Annahme, auch leichtere Sprache; Lange et al., 2019, 2020) in *logo!* wurde hoch effektstark für mehrere theoretisch angenommene und empirisch validierte linguistische Marker des Sprachniveaus gefunden (z. B. Lange et al., 2020). Konkret handelte es sich u. a. um die durch LIWC (Wolf et al., 2008) valide gemessenen Konstrukte Satzkomplexität und Wortkomplexität (Abb. 2). Die *Tagesschau* liegt mit 15 Wörtern pro Satz deutlich über der Satzlänge umgangssprachlicher Äußerungen von 11 (Straßner, 1975); *logo!* hingegen befindet sich mit einem Wert von 12 im Bereich der Umgangssprache.

Im Einklang damit fielen die Flesch-Werte unserer empirischen Untersuchung aus (Abb. 2): Für die Beiträge von *logo!* ergab sich ein Wert von etwa 60 (mittelschwer und verständlich für ca. 14-Jährige; vgl. Aziz et al., 2010; Immel, 2014; s. FN 2). Krüger (2009) dokumentierte mit einem Wert von 65 eine ähnlich leichte Verständlichkeit von *logo!*. Für die Beiträge der *Tagesschau* fanden wir in der vorliegenden Studie einen Flesch-Index-Wert von 44. Lange et al. (2020) berichten denselben Wert; Krüger (2009) nennt den Wert 39. Diese Werte indizieren schwere Verständlichkeit und damit, dass eine gelungene Rezeption der *Tagesschau* Hochschulbildung

voraussetzt (vgl. Aziz et al., 2010; Immel, 2014; s. FN 2).

Überraschend ist der Befund, dass in *logo!* schneller gesprochen wurde als in der *Tagesschau* (Abb. 2). Bei diesem Mass weist *logo!* somit kein niedrigeres Sprachniveau als die *Tagesschau* auf, was zunächst verwundert. Denn es wäre anzunehmen, dass eine Sendung, die sich an Kinder richtet und diesen Nachrichten möglichst verständlich vermitteln will, ihrem Zielpublikum u. a. durch möglichst langsames Sprechen gerecht werden will. Zwei mögliche Erklärungen für diesen Befund kommen in Frage: Erstens zeichnet sich die *Tagesschau*, wie gezeigt, durch sehr komplexe Sprache aus (vgl. Lange et al., 2019, 2020); damit einhergehen könnte der Versuch, durch eher langsames Sprechen die sonstige sprachliche Komplexität zu kompensieren. Indirekt für diese Interpretation spricht, dass die *Tagesschau* auch im Vergleich der Hauptnachrichtensendungen anderer Sender (*heute*, *RTL Aktuell*, *SAT.1 Nachrichten*) das langsamste Sprechtempo, aber für mehrere relevante Masse das höchste Sprachniveau aufweist (Lange et al., 2019). Die gesamte Aufmachung der *Tagesschau* erscheint zweitens als sehr viel seriöser, ruhiger und gelassener, während *logo!* – vermutlich dem jungen Zielpublikum geschuldet – stärker auf Dynamik setzt.

6.3 Beitrag des Sprachniveaus zum Wissenserwerb (H3)

Es fanden sich einige Hinweise, dass die bessere Wissensvermittlung von *logo!* zum Teil durch dessen niedriges Sprachniveau zu erklären ist: Teils korrelierten die Wissenstestergebnisse positiv, vereinzelt jedoch auch negativ mit Markern eines niedrigen Sprachniveaus. Elaboriertere inferenzstatistische Verfahren waren wegen der geringen Zahl an verglichenen Sendungen ($N=2$) bzw. Beiträgen ($N=20$) nicht möglich. Zukünftige Forschung sollte daher mehr Sendungen bzw. Beiträge miteinander vergleichen. Auch wären statistische Mediationsanalysen wünschenswert; dies würde jedoch Varianz in den linguistischen Variablen innerhalb der Gruppenvariable voraussetzen.

Es ist denkbar, dass das niedrige Sprachniveau in *logo!* einen eher kleinen Teil des Gesamterfolgs der Sendung erklärt; so könnte

die hohe Redundanz, mit der Informationen in Kindernachrichten vermittelt werden, einen vergleichbar wichtigen Faktor darstellen (vgl. Walma van der Molen & van der Voort, 2000). Erneut sollte bedacht werden, dass das Sprachniveau so wie allgemein die sprachlichen Merkmale von TV-Nachrichten nur Teilaspekte der Multimodalität von TV-Nachrichten darstellen (z. B. Bateman, 2014).

Unabhängig vom Vergleich der Sender können wir allerdings relativ klar schlussfolgern, dass die Wissenstestergebnisse umso besser ausfallen, je mehr Wörter insgesamt («WC») und je weniger seltene Wörter («unique») verwendet wurden. Der erstgenannte Befund steht im Einklang mit Forschung, die einen Zusammenhang zwischen den übermittelten Informationen und der dafür benötigten Quantität an linguistischem Code sieht; umso mehr Code ist demnach nötig erstens, je mehr Informationen übermittelt werden, zweitens, je weniger berechenbar die Informationen sind, und drittens, je wichtiger die Informationen sind (Givón, 1995). Für die Praxis liesse sich ableiten, besonders Themen, hinsichtlich derer eine breite Informiertheit der Bevölkerung besonders wichtig erscheint, länger ausfallen zu lassen. Dabei sollten, wie der zweitgenannte Befund nahelegt, hochfrequente Wörter verwendet, d. h. auf seltene Wörter verzichtet werden, um möglichst viele Menschen mit unterschiedlich grossen Wortschätzen – auch solche mit geringem Wortschatz – erreichen zu können. Dass möglichst wenig elaborierte Sprache dem Wissenserwerb zuträglich ist, kann im Falle unserer Ergebnisse zum Flesch-Index allerdings nicht bestätigt werden; je niedriger der Index war, desto höher war das Wissen (Abb. 3). Denkbar ist, dass verschiedene Sprachniveau-Marker nicht unkorreliert mit anderen Faktoren sind, die den Wissenserwerb begünstigen.

Schliesslich sollte in der Gesamtschau betrachtet eher langsam gesprochen werden («WC/Min.»; Abb. 3). Diese Empfehlung kollidiert allerdings angesichts begrenzter Sendezeit mit der Forderung nach möglichst viel linguistischem Code zur Darstellung der Themen.

Insgesamt ergeben sich damit im Wesentlichen zwei praktische Implikationen, die im Einklang mit der bisherigen Forschungs-

literatur stehen (vgl. Sherry, 2004; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970): Informationen sollten sprachlich nicht zu komplex sein und nicht zu schnell dargeboten werden.

Es sollten allerdings auch die Schattenseiten (zu) einfacher Sprache berücksichtigt werden. So ist ein niedriges Sprachniveau teils auch mit niedrigerer Glaubwürdigkeit assoziiert und wird als unattraktiv empfunden (z. B. Lange et al., 2017).

6.4 Vorteil durch audiovisuelle Darbietung (H4)

In der Gesamtschau relativ klar scheint der Befund, dass mit Bild mehr Wissen korrekt wiedergegeben wird als ohne (vgl. Paivio, 1971). Allerdings war der Vorteil durch audiovisuelle Darbietung je nach Beitrag unterschiedlich gross bzw. kam er ebenfalls nur durch eine Minderheit der Beiträge zustande. Praktisch relevant wird dieser Befund u. a. dadurch, dass die *Tagesschau* z. B. im Radio auf hr-info als Live-Audio-Stream läuft. Nachrichten werden somit nicht immer audiovisuell rezipiert, wobei nur auditive Rezeption teils schlechtere Informiertheit zur Folge haben könnte – dies allerdings je nach Thema und dergleichen womöglich unterschiedlich stark.

6.5 Interaktionseffekt zwischen Sendung und Darbietungsform (H5)

Zwar wurde die Interaktion zwischen Sendung und Darbietungsform nicht signifikant; bei visueller Inspektion der entsprechenden Befunde (Abb. 5) scheint sich jedoch anzudeuten, dass gerade *logo!* nicht nur durch ein teils niedrigeres Sprachniveau zu mehr Wissen führt, sondern auch durch besonders ansprechende visuelle Gestaltung (vgl. Kowalewski, 2009; Krüger, 2009). Die vorliegende Studie fokussiert allerdings die sprachliche Gestaltung von TV-Nachrichten; bei diesen handelt es sich jedoch um multimodale Medienprodukte (z. B. Bateman, 2014). Zukünftige Forschung könnte daher noch stärker die Interaktion zwischen der Sprache und sonstigen Gestaltungsmerkmalen von TV-Nachrichten adressieren.

6.6 Effekte des Bildungshintergrundes (FF)

Wir fanden einige Hinweise darauf, dass vor allem Hochschulabsolvent/-innen von *logo!* profitieren. Dieser Befund ist aus einer Reihe von Gründen kontraintuitiv: Bei *logo!* handelt es sich um eine Kindersendung; Menschen mit Hochschulabschluss unterscheiden sich in ihrem Vorwissen und der Fähigkeit, neues Wissen zu erwerben, maximal von Kindern. Die Gestaltungsmerkmale von *logo!* entsprechen, z. B. bezüglich der verwendeten Sprache, zudem vielfach denjenigen, die empfohlen werden, um gerade bildungsferne Teile der Bevölkerung zu erreichen. Diesbezüglich ist nicht nur an Kinder, sondern auch an erwachsene Menschen mit eher niedriger Bildung zu denken (vgl. Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, 2018). So kontraintuitiv der Befund ist, er ist doch im Einklang mit Forschungsergebnissen, die zeigen, dass viel Vorwissen (dabei wird unterstellt, dass dieses mit Bildung korreliert ist) zu mehr Wissenszuwachs führt, dass also (gut aufbereitete) Informationsangebote Wissensunterschiede zwischen Menschen nicht verringern, sondern mitunter sogar vergrössern; bildungsaffine Menschen profitieren durch Mediennutzung stärker hinsichtlich Wissenszuwachsen (sog. Wissenskluff-Hypothese; s. z. B. Gleich, 1998; Hoffmann & Akbar, 2016; Mauch, 2016). Für die *Tagesschau* fanden wir in der Tat keinen Effekt des Bildungshintergrundes. Über welche Mechanismen genau die Gestaltung von *logo!* gerade bei hochgebildeten Menschen zu mehr Wissen führt, sollte weiter erforscht werden.

7 Limitationen

Unsere wesentliche Gruppenvariable war Sendung (*Tagesschau* vs. *logo!*). Als wesentlicher Faktor, über den jede der beiden Sendungen zu unterschiedlichem Wissen führt, wurde das Sprachniveau fokussiert. Obwohl unsere Forschung einem experimentellen bzw. experimentalpsychologischen Design folgte, stellte die o. g. Gruppenvariable allerdings nur einen quasi-experimentellen Faktor dar. Das bedeutet, dass die Gruppen per se existierten und nicht durch experimentelle Manipulation erstellt wurden bzw. dass

Konfundierungen von Gruppen mit anderen potenziell relevanten Faktoren nicht kontrolliert wurden. Die *Tagesschau* unterscheidet sich von *logo!* vermutlich in einer Reihe von Merkmalen, die Einfluss auf die Wissenstestergebnisse hätten nehmen können (vgl. Krüger & Müller, 2014). Obwohl unser Vorgehen den Vorteil hat, ökologisch (d. h. external) valides Stimulusmaterial verwendet zu haben, sollte zukünftige Forschung dieser Art auf stärkere experimentelle Kontrolle setzen, d. h. eigenes Nachrichtenmaterial erstellen, wobei alle Variablen konstant gehalten werden mit Ausnahmen derer, die den Kern der Forschung darstellen (z. B. das Sprachniveau), um so internal valides Stimulusmaterial zu erzeugen. Auch wäre eine Erhöhung der Stichprobengröße auf Beitragsebene wünschenswert wie auch eine Datenstruktur, die im Rahmen von Mediationsanalysen direkt testen kann, inwiefern die Wissenstestergebnisse über unterschiedliche Sprachniveaus (als Mediator) vermittelt sind (s. o.).

Eine Limitation könnte auch darin gesehen werden, dass die einzelnen Nachrichtenbeiträge nicht auf Basis einer Vorstudie ausgewählt wurden. Allerdings formulierten wir vorab auf Basis der Literatur zahlreiche Kriterien, die die Beiträge erfüllen mussten, um als Stimulusmaterial in Frage zu kommen. Auswahl und Zusammenstellung des Stimulusmaterials erfolgten somit theorie- und evidenzbasiert und waren bereits mit grossem Aufwand verbunden. Zukünftige Forschung könnte hier allerdings noch grösseren Wert auf möglichst optimale Stimulusauswahl legen und dabei auch Genre-Aspekte berücksichtigen.

Es könnte in zukünftiger Forschung ebenfalls eine Stichprobe aus Versuchspersonen mit stärkerer Bildungsvarianz angestrebt werden. In der vorliegenden Studie wiesen fast 46 % der Versuchspersonen einen Hochschulabschluss auf, fast 45 % verfügten über eine Hochschulreife. Damit war unsere Stichprobe stärker akademisiert als die deutsche Gesamtbevölkerung (Statistisches Bundesamt, n. d.). Unsere Ergebnisse könnten daher als nicht hinreichend generalisierbar angesehen werden. Allerdings existieren empirische Hinweise darauf, dass Nachrichtenrezeption und formale Bildung positiv korreliert sind (Statista, 2021). Dies würde für eine

gute Generalisierbarkeit unserer Befunde auf die reale Nachrichtenrezeption sprechen. Gleichwohl könnten die Effekte der Bildung unterschätzt worden sein, da die mangelnde Bildungsvarianz diese Effekte limitiert haben könnte.

Weiterhin lässt sich fragen, inwiefern unsere Multiple-Choice-Fragen wirklich Wissenserwerb im Sinne eines Verständnisses der Materie erfasst haben oder vielmehr nur das Erinnern an gewisse Informationen. Elaboriertere Methoden zur Erfassung des Wissens der Versuchspersonen wären daher denkbar gewesen. Wir haben uns letztlich vor allem aus ökonomischen Gründen für das sehr etablierte Multiple-Choice-Format entschieden (vgl. Beutelspacher, 2014).

Allgemein kann schliesslich der Einsatz des Flesch-Indexes kritisch gesehen werden, denn dabei handelt es um einen Lesbarkeitsindex (vgl. Aziz et al., 2010; Flesch, 1948). Im vorliegenden Fall wurden Nachrichten jedoch nicht gelesen, sondern audiovisuell rezipiert. Zwar hat vorige Forschung zu TV-Nachrichten auch den Flesch-Index verwendet (z. B. Krüger, 2009; Lange et al., 2020); dies war der wesentliche Grund für uns, ihn ebenfalls zu verwenden. Die Frage bleibt jedoch, wie geeignet er für audiovisuelle Medien ist. Besser gesagt ist der Index an sich zwar sehr wohl geeignet; das zeigen die entsprechende mathematische Formel zu seiner Berechnung und vor allem die Korrelationen mit anderen anerkannten Masssen des Sprachniveaus, wie sie in der vorliegenden Forschung, aber auch in voriger Forschung (Lange et al., 2020) evident wurden. Es würde sich jedoch anbieten, die Kategorisierung der Werte (s. FN 2) getrennt für unterschiedliche Medien vorzunehmen.

8 Fazit und Ausblick

Wir fanden, dass durch Beiträge von *logo!* mehr Wissen erworben wird als durch solche der *Tagesschau*, allerdings je nach Thema und Art der Wissensvermittlung unterschiedlich. Einer von mehreren Faktoren, die dem Wissenserwerb zuträglich sind, könnte das Sprachniveau sein.

Die Befunde, dass *logo!* zu höherem Wissen führt, erscheinen kontraintuitiv: Denn

warum sollten Millionen jeden Abend die *Tagesschau* (Gscheidle & Geese, 2017) sehen, um sich zu informieren, wenn dieses Informieren objektiv mittels Kindernachrichten teils ertragreicher wäre? Daran schliesst sich die Frage an, warum die Produzent/-innen der *Tagesschau* nicht einige (u. a. sprachliche) Gestaltungsmerkmale von *logo!* übernehmen, wenn das wesentliche Ziel doch im Informieren der Zuschauer/-innen liegt. Eine Antwort könnte lauten, dass das Informiert-Werden nicht den alleinigen, womöglich nicht einmal den wesentlichen Grund für die Rezeption einer Nachrichtensendung darstellt (Gleich, 1998). So lässt sich Nachrichtenrezeption auch als Unterhaltung und soziale Aktivität begreifen (Unz, 2011). Auch könnte allein das Rezeptionsritual das Einschalten der Sendung erklären. Das schliesst nicht aus, dass die Rezeption damit begründet wird, sich über die aktuellen Geschehnisse in der Welt informieren zu wollen; und Rezipient/-innen fühlen sich auch gut informiert, obwohl sie es mitunter nicht sind (Winterhoff-Spurk, 2004). Eine grobe Informiertheit könnte allerdings bereits ausreichen (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018).

Interessant war der Befund, dass Nicht-Akademiker/-innen ähnlich gute Wissensergebnisse durch die *Tagesschau* erzielten wie Hochschulabsolvent/-innen. Letztere profitieren allerdings nennenswert stärker durch *logo!*. Auch für die Rezeption von (besonders einfach und anschaulich vermittelten) Nachrichten durch Erwachsene scheint somit die Wissenskluft-Hypothese zuzutreffen (Mauch, 2016).

Unsere Forschung konnte interessante und praktisch relevante Ergebnisse liefern. Allerdings wäre es wünschenswert, mehr als nur zwei Sendungen miteinander zu vergleichen und mehr als fünf Beiträge pro Sendung und dabei stärker auf strenge experimentelle Kontrolle zu setzen. Da die vorliegende Studie forschungswirtschaftlich bereits hohe Anforderungen stellte, ist weiterführende Forschung nur entsprechend aufwendig zu realisieren, jedoch wünschenswert, um stärkere Differenzierungen (nach System: öffentlich-rechtlich vs. privat; nach Sendung, nach Genre usw.) mit höherer statistischer Power vornehmen zu können.

Interessenkonflikt

Die Autor/-innen erklären, dass kein Interessenkonflikt besteht.

Supplementary Material

Zu diesem Beitrag ist ein von den Autor/-innen erstelltes Online Supplement verfügbar. <https://www.hope.uzh.ch/scoms/article/view/j.scoms.2023.02.2809>

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Lockdown scepticism: Australian and American doom discourse on Reddit

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Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent infodemic, user consumption of online news content soared, leading to the issues of doom-scrolling and doom-writing. This type of behaviour may have an adverse impact on individual well-being and increase exposure to misinformation on social networking sites (SNSs), including Reddit. The present critical discourse study combines Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Pragma-dialectics (PD) and critical theory to explore the roles of power and ideology in a corpus extracted from r/LockdownSkepticismAU and r/LockdownSkepticism, and to evaluate the Redditors' argumentation. The analysis shows that the users of both subreddits appear to compensate a perceived loss of agency by making improbable statements about the future. The doomers' arguments, as part of their online deliberations on issues relating to national COVID-19 prevention policy, reveal several fallacies. Linguistic evidence is provided for how biopower, in its ability to further life or death, is constitutive of the social norms to which both subreddit communities subscribe.

Keywords

systemic functional linguistics, argumentation, critical discourse studies, Reddit, COVID-19, social media

1 Introduction

Aiming to control one's fears through gathering as much information as possible on a particular issue at hand is a common human tendency. Since COVID-19 was a novel virus, a large amount of content was produced by the media to communicate its dangers to the public and to provide instructions on protection and safety. This plethora of facts, figures and anecdotes related to the pandemic was accompanied by various restrictions, such as mask-wearing or social distancing and led to activities such as "doom-scrolling," a phenomenon that has been studied in psychology (Anand et al., 2022; Price et al., 2022; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). The term doom-scrolling appears to have originated from a popular tweet posted by a user reminding themselves to put a hold on the noxious habit of incessantly scrolling their news feed on social media looking for COVID-19 updates (Jennings, 2020). It constitutes a social practice with no clear purpose that social media users may engage in on SNSs (social networking ser-

vices) which allow for easy scrolling, such as Twitter, Facebook, or Reddit. The negative effects of the online activity on the subjective well-being of – especially younger people – may consist of increased anxiety and depression, as demonstrated by Price et al. (2022), who studied its impact on mental health.

Tandon, Dhir, Almugren, AlNemer, and Mäntymäki (2021) have emphasised the need for a more multi-disciplinary approach to the topic, as the construct is largely context-dependent. So far, only a handful of studies have been conducted on the phenomenon, most of which adopted a solely qualitative and non-linguistic approach (Buchanan, Aknin, Lotun, & Sandstrom, 2021; Mannell & Meese, 2022; Paulsen & Fuller, 2020). However, as a social issue, doom-scrolling informs the discursive practice of SNS users interacting online, an activity which may be referred to as "doom-writing." Individuals who continuously scroll through their news feeds, looking for updates on the pandemic, are also regular contributors to online discussions and tend to express their own viewpoints



on topics pertaining to the COVID-19 crisis (Jiang et al., 2021). Hence, this paper adopts a three-pronged approach to investigate various samples of doom discourse on Reddit. The discursive practice may be defined as a type of disaster rhetoric based on an often unrealistic fear of the future. Meaningful grammatical patterns, fallacious moves in argumentation and putative ideological positions are the three angles taken to examine verbal exchanges between doom writers on two subreddits focusing on the same overarching topic of national lockdowns. The online discussions on the SNS appear to be motivated by doomerism (Reddit, n.d.), which is based on the belief that society is irreversibly headed for collapse (Omar, 2022). However, as the present study shows, the ideology itself appears to be an amalgamation of different forms of pessimistic thinking not limited to climate change.

Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) views discourse as a type of social practice which is both conditioned by the social structure, institution, or situation it occurs in, while, at the same time, constituting these elements, implying that social media discourse is shaped by its context but may also affect reality (Wodak, 2014). This paper hopes to contribute to the existing body of knowledge surrounding the social media practice of doom-writing by examining the roles of power and agency in the use of doom discourse related to COVID-19 lockdowns among two culturally distinct groups of Reddit users. It further aims to critically evaluate the doomers' argumentation and ideological motivations. More specifically, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Pragma-dialectics and critical theory are combined into a mixed-methods approach to CDS to explore the Reddit users' representations of "Doers" and "Instigators" within the comment threads of two subreddits created by anti-lockdown activists. The study examines how the users attempt to convince other Redditors of the veracity of their apocalyptic viewpoints as well as putative ideological motives for their digital discursive behaviour. It has high relevance for the intervention by online content moderators aiming to prevent the spread of misinformation.

2 Literature review

In this chapter, the doomer meme is explained. Some further information on Reddit as a social media platform is provided in sub-section 2.2. Then, the systems of transitivity and ergativity are discussed. The subsequent sub-section includes a description of the Pragma-dialectical approach to discourse analysis. Finally, the interlocutors' ideological motivations are being explored.

2.1 The doomer meme

Although the exact meaning of the term *meme* is rather obtuse, Dawkins' (1976/2006) definition of a meme as an acquired concept implies that it constitutes a form of culture-specific communication between a creator and a general audience, an entity that can be copied, similarly to how a gene is being replicated, through a process of natural selection. One such meme, created by Christian Grodecki or Wojak, was posted to Krautchan, a defunct German bulletin board, similar to 4chan, in 2010. It subsequently gained world-wide popularity in its shared expression of Millennial disillusionment and disaffection (Z, 2015). Drawing on Mouffe's (2013) theory on democratic agonism, Tuters and Hagen (2020) describe how digital communities often use memes for political purpose, an anonymous activity referred to as "memetic antagonism." The same can be said for the two groups of interlocutors on the subreddits which form the focus of the present investigation, as they criticise and reject governmental COVID-19 policies through the use of memes, as well as discourse.

Doom writers on Reddit constitute a collective which comprises various subgroups of individuals who congregate online, sharing similar affinities, and who each identify with a certain archetype, depending on their political orientation. The most well-known type is the left-wing climate doomer, who rejects climate activism based on their doomsday views (Aspinwall, 2022). The second type is the existential doomer, whose transition into adulthood is marred by their "boomer" parents' toxic consumerism (Huber, 2020). A third character, the political doomer, has emerged as well, promoting activism under the form of protest against perceived dictatorial powers, as is the case on the two subred-

dits under investigation. Barthel, Stocking, Holcomb, and Mitchell (2016) posit that the Reddit user population appears to mostly consist of young males. The quasi-omnipresent “geek” stereotype qualifies the average Redditor as “white, male, middle-class and heterosexual” (Kendall, 2011). Massanari’s (2020, p. 182) description of Reddit users depicts them as individuals who are inclined to “engage and support conspiracy theories, especially if they relate to geek fandom or if it furthers their own vision of geek masculinity.” This form of “toxic masculinity” appears to be founded on a sense of intellectual superiority. However, some Redditors self-identify as female or otherwise, as such representing a small minority on the two subreddits. In a counter move, the original Wojak meme of the doomer, which emerged in pre-COVID times, was later juxtaposed by the doomer girl or “doomerette” meme (Philipp, 2020).

2.2 Reddit

Reddit is an American social networking site which describes itself as a “network of communities where people can dive into their interests, hobbies and passions” (Reddit, n. d.). The online platform effectively merges various social media functions, such as news feeds or shareability, and Usenet groups, guaranteeing full anonymity while actively monitoring posts and discussions. Despite its admirable aim to allow “open and authentic discussion and debate” on the website (Reddit, n. d.), the company is increasingly being confronted with subreddits that spread misinformation and controversial content among users (Taylor, 2021). Reddit moderators monitor various “subreddits” using an in-built system referred to as “Auto Moderator,” which automatically applies checks on any web content that is being posted in the communities. Users can vote content up or down, promoting high-quality posts to the top of the feed and relegating less interesting ones to the bottom of the pile. The platform’s CEO announced that “manipulating or cheating Reddit to amplify any particular viewpoint” is against its policies and that users are allowed to freely express themselves as long as their discourse follows the SNS’s code of conduct (Reddit, n. d.). However, any participation in the production of doom dis-

course on a SNS may lead to an availability cascade “through which expressed perceptions trigger chains of individual responses that make these perceptions appear increasingly plausible through their rising availability in public discourse” (Kuran & Sunstein, 1999, p. 685), as will be shown.

2.3 Transitivity and ergativity

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) posit posits that text presupposes choice in a meaning-making process which unfolds in a context of situation. Every SNS user continuously makes linguistic selections to describe reality, to interact with other users and to produce coherent digital discourse. The use of this type of discourse has been investigated by several functional linguists (Bartlett & O’Grady, 2017; Zappavigna, 2021), primarily focusing on Twitter (Gardner & Alsop, 2016), using Appraisal theory (Martin, 2000; Martin & White, 2005; Ross & Caldwell, 2020), multimodal analysis (Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018; van Leeuwen, 2005), and Corpus Linguistics (Miller & Luporini, 2018). As emphasised by Lukin (2019), a transitivity analysis may reveal important insights into the ideational representations of social actors, based on ideological discrepancies, a perspective followed in this study.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 284) distinguish between the transitive and ergative models of transitivity. Within the transitive system, the *Participant* initiating the action is referred to as the *Actor*, whereas, in the ergative model, the entity is referred to as the *Agent*. Subsequently, there are “doing” clauses, with two Participants, in which the process is instigated by an Actor:

- (1) The government (Actor) is destroying (Process) our livelihoods (Goal).

In a causal event like the one above, the energy is being brought into the activity by the Actor, *the government*, while the Goal, *our livelihoods*, passively undergoes the act of *destroying*.

There are “happening” clauses as well, again, with two Participants, in which the process is actualised and represented as being “self-engendered.” In the following exam-

ple, the Medium, *our livelihoods* instigates the action of the *crumpling*:

- (2) Our livelihoods (Medium) are crumpling (Process).

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 285), the two models co-exist in the English language, which means that any clause can be interpreted in both ways. In the transitive or “linear” model, the Actor is the most important Participant, with an optional Goal, whereas, in the ergative or “nuclear” model, the main Participant is the Medium, with an optional or hidden Agent (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 295). Constructs with only one Participant exist as well (Davidse & Lamirou, 2002):

- (3) People (Actor) were dying (Process).

The following example shows an intransitive or inergative construction:

- (4) The virus (Medium) spreads (Process).

Unlike a transitive clause, an ergative construal may be paraphrased using a causative, with the first example showing an incorrect construction:

- (5) *The government (Agent) caused (Pro-) our livelihoods (Medium) to destroy (-cess).
- (6) COVID-19 (Agent) caused (Pro-) our livelihoods (Medium) to crumple (-cess).

Some verbs can occur in both transitive and intransitive constructions. Thompson and Ramos (1995) argue that the question of causation or lack of it is stronger delineated through the use of such identical ergative pairs, which has an impact in terms of how Participants represent reality:

- (7) The government (Actor) has ended (Process) the lockdown (Goal).
- (8) The lockdown (Medium) has ended (Process).

In the agentive intransitive, with the verb *end*, the intransitive Subject, *the lockdown*,

is involved in the action, while the transitive construal forces the Actor, *the government*, to act upon the lockdown, rendering this particular entity more passive and inert. As Davidse (2002) explains, Participants in clauses are organised in “inherent voice relations” to the process within a construction paradigm (p. 143). When analysing discourse produced by various social actors, each of whom are construing reality by making their own linguistic choices, it is worthwhile to explore whether they adopt a transitive or ergative viewpoint, especially when investigating their representations of agency. Subsequently, the included grammatical analysis focuses on semantic categories which occur most often in the role of “Doer” in the extracted doom discourse but also on possible Instigators of actions or events.¹

2.4 Fallacious moves in doom discourse

The Pragma-dialectical approach (Van Eemeren, 2018) is increasingly being applied to the analysis of digital discourse (Demir, 2020; Feng, Zhao, & Feng, 2021), since a data-driven project can search large data sets for potential biases (Table 1). Why and how digital discourses occur, however, still needs to be looked into using a more detailed analytical and contextualising approach. Referring back to psychology, the multifarious concept of cognitive bias was coined by Tversky and Kahneman (1981). It pertains to the assumption that human beings are “predictably irrational” (Ariely, 2009). They tend to focus more on what they can easily remember and, often, information of an extreme character is easier to recall than banal facts. Subsequently, individuals tend to create their own subjective reality, through heuristics and based on various beliefs.

Dialogical exchanges on SNSs may be regarded as a form of deliberation, especially on Reddit. The users’ verbal interactions may be seen “as part of an explicit or implicit discussion between parties who try to resolve a difference of opinion [...] by testing the acceptability of the standpoints concerned” (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2004, p. 21). As

¹ Of course, each of the individual users may opt for a transitive or ergative representation as well.

such, the Redditors' posts and comments are likely to include strategic manoeuvring, with users aiming to convince others of the truth of the information they share. As part of a critical discussion within a pragma-dialectical framework, the digital discourse that is being exchanged among doomers, needs to be *externalised*, meaning that it constitutes a public expression of a particular viewpoint, *functionalised*, meaning that it has a specific purpose, *socialised*, meaning that it takes place between two or more users, and *dialectified*, meaning that it aims to resolve a difference of opinion (Van Eemeren & Garssen, 2015). While trying to maintain an adequate balance between effectiveness and reasonableness, however, the process of deliberation may be obscured by various fallacious moves (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2004). In an online environment, SNS users often make judgements and decisions based on previous individual experiences, other users' perceived authority, or general group tendencies, without first evaluating their claims using rational thinking, which may have an undesirable impact on their verbal behaviour and decision-making. With the help of argumentative indicators, the user arguments may be reconstructed and evaluated in terms of their rhetorical reasonableness and effectiveness asking critical questions (Rocci, 2009; Van Eemeren, Houtlosser, & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007).

2.5 Ideological motivations

In recent years, social research has turned away from rationality and shown a renewed interest in the study of affect, inspired by the work of scholars such as Whitehead (Stenner, 2008), Deleuze (Massumi, 2002), or Guatarri (Poynton & Lee, 2011), which might lead to the assumption that a study of the impact of power and ideology on language use and the analysis of logic-based argumentation in digital discourse may not be worthwhile. Nothing could be further from the truth. SNS users still express individual viewpoints, including politically coloured ones, on a large number of topics, through the exchange of discourse with other users, and their arguments remain located within a wider context that has a considerable impact on their reasoning. This renders the study of online dialogical inter-

action more pertinent than ever. SNSs such as Reddit do not only "validate individual's emotive understanding of the affairs but also encourage a dynamic of communication that rewards such behavior" (KhosraviNik, 2018, p. 433).

As neoliberal subjects, users are constantly exposed to consumer-driven algorithms which target and control the content of SNSs. Subsequently, power remains an equally important and highly relevant concept in the analysis of digital discourse. KhosraviNik (2018, p. 440) posits that the algorithms that regulate social media platforms constitute "ideologically laden systems, which work with a normalized market logic in line with the increasing corporatization of digital platforms." They may seem devoid of any sentiment but turn out to exert a political influence over both the content that is being shared in digital communities and their members. Since SNS users participate in discussions or engage in debate with other users, concepts such as power and truth thus remain valid - the latter more than ever, with misinformation being increasingly prevalent on SNSs.

Doomerism has various characteristics that may link it to neoliberalism, an ideological system which emerged in the 1970s, but which origins trace back to the post-war era. It profoundly remoulded Western economy and the system's impact reverberated on the rest of the world (Piketty, 2020). It needs to be noted that neoliberalism is not a stable system and materialises depending on when and where it arises, including on social media (Grieverson, 2018; Phelan, 2018). Within an overarching neoliberal context, Foucault's (1977–1978 / 2004) concept of biopower constitutes "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy" (p. 1). Since the start of the pandemic, the American and Australian governments have been engaged in biopolitics, with as their main aims the management of citizens' health and the prevention of COVID-19. Based on minimal governmental interference, biopower also leaves it to subjects to regulate themselves. Subsequently, power is no longer a unilateral given between a government and citizens, in terms of domi-

Table 1: Research framework

	SFL	Pragma-dialectics	Critical theory
Focus	Grammatical meanings	Rhetorical patterns	Power structures and ideological motivations
Goals	Agency / power	Logical fallacies and pragmatic effects	Impact of power and ideology
Analytical tools	Transitivity / ergativity analysis	Reconstruction and evaluation of argumentation	Critical evaluation based on the literature
Parameters	Context of situation	Context-sensitive	Socio-cultural context

nation and resistance, but a dynamic notion, which implies that subjects are governing both themselves and other subjects. Thus, it is worthwhile to conduct an investigation of power structures predominantly focusing on the complex power relationships that exist between human subjects. According to Foucault (1984/1997, p. 288),

we must distinguish between power relations understood as strategic games between liberties – in which some try to control the conduct of others, who in turn try to avoid allowing their conduct to be controlled or try to control the conduct of others – and the states of domination that people ordinarily call power.

Strategic power games are especially played out on SNSs, where users interact with others, in an attempt to influence or even change their behaviour and thought. It is important to add that this type of governmentality entails individual freedom, rather than sovereign rule:

when one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others, when one characterizes these actions as the government of men by other men – in the broadest sense of the term – one includes an important element: freedom. (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 221)

Since power and knowledge are closely related in Foucault’s work, the concept of power needs to be studied within social practice, such as online discussions.

Doomerism, as a set of beliefs adhered to by doomers, plays a key role in the dynamic interplay between power, knowledge, and truth (Nath, 2011). It offers subjects the choice of either accepting or rejecting rules

and regulations issued by institutional power, of which the latter action may be seen as a form of covert resistance. COVID-19 policies such as lockdowns are concrete examples of biopolitics aiming “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order” (Foucault, 1976/1998, p. 138). They embody governmental mechanisms linked to the regulation of citizens’ health and health-related behaviour. However, doomerist rebellion is not a type of positive resistance against the repressive powers of the government, a topic often discussed in CDS. What actually underlie the digital discourses uttered by doomers and their intentionalities are shared neoliberal values, such as self-reliance or self-interest, deeply entrenched in individualist thought and directed towards other users.

3 Research method

Two data sets were developed by interrogating the Reddit API using Python 3 and through the extraction of text from the comment threads of the subreddits *r/Lockdown-SkepticismAU* (1374 subscribers), created on 31 July 2020, and *r/LockdownSkepticism* (46684 subscribers), created on 25 March 2020. The data include the 500 top comments on the most up-voted posts in both subreddits on 12 September 2021. The Australian subreddit shares the same theme as the American one but is smaller in terms of subscribers. Only text contained within the comment threads was included in the analysis. As Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler (2011) point out, some of the challenges linked to the analysis of excerpts extracted from SNSs pertain to the representativeness of the samples and trolls who incite the other users

with hateful utterances. Even though the discourse that is being exchanged could be linked to various groups of lockdown activists in both countries, the present paper does not claim that the users' discursive exchanges reflect those of existing offline movements. Any contributions made by trolls were clearly indicated by the subreddit's moderation bot and highly repetitive in character, which made them easy to avoid. The subreddit r/LockdownSkepticism adds content labels to a large number of their posts, such as "positivity/good news", "announcement", "analysis", "vaccine update", "opinion piece", and so on. Moderators also label weekly comment threads as "positivity threads", "vents and rants", "humour and memes", "Unpinned Megahub", and "Sunday Best-of". Most of these labels are missing on the r/LockdownSkepticismAU subreddit, probably because the group is smaller. Even though Redditors use pseudonyms, considerable efforts were made to completely anonymise the data by conducting a regex search for all capitalised letters, excluding "I", using Notepad++ and using replacements for names, geographical locations, dates, and the like in any examples, when necessary. The author never added any posts or comments to the subreddit and has no contact with any of its users.

First, the Redditors' transitivity and ergativity choices were analysed using Notepad++ and following Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) SFL framework, to explore the impact of power and ideology through their use of material verbal processes. Then, some of the users' arguments were reconstructed and evaluated, with a specific focus on the most common fallacious patterns of reasoning encountered in the discourse samples. Finally, an attempt was made at uncovering any ideological motivations behind the exchanged doom discourse.

4 Transitivity and ergativity analysis

In the following sub-sections, the results of the transitivity and ergativity analysis are shown and discussed. A detailed interpretation of the data is provided, as well as several concrete examples.

4.1 Australian doom discourse

The extracted data from r/LockdownSkepticismAU included 758 verbal processes, of which 624 were [transitive] and 134 [intransitive]. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), Actors who appear both in transitive and intransitive clauses constitute the most powerful Participants or "Doers" in discourse. The main Actor in the Australian doomers' transitive constructions is the Australian *government*, which exerts power over *vaccinations*, or *boosters*, together with *politicians* such as Victorian Premier Dan Andrews, who controls the *roadmap* out of the pandemic, or *playgrounds*:

- (9) *They* (Actor) *'ve made* (Process) *this* (Goal) into a full-on religion for two years.
- (10) No doubt *they* (Actor) *will* (Pro-) *still be rolling out* (-cess) *the boosters* (Goal) regardless.
- (11) *Dan Andrews* (Actor) *is going to release* (Process) *his roadmap* (Goal) on Sunday.
- (12) *The premier* (Actor) *closed* (Process) *playgrounds* (Goal) based on no fucking evidence that it spreads from kids to kids there.

Other entities with authority, such as Gladys Berejikian, *people* in general, various places, and abstract objects are Actors as well:

- (13) *She* (Gladys Berejikian) (Actor) *hasn't ordered* (Process) *five or more lockdowns* (Goal) over tiny amounts of cases.
- (14) None of these people (Actor) would do (Process) this sort of thing (Goal) if they actually thought being punched was a real possibility.
- (15) *The UK* (Actor) *is dropping* (Process) *their vaccine passport* (Goal).
- (16) What *are* (Pro-) *all these measures* (Actor) *doing* (-cess) *to society* (Goal)?

When making transitivity choices, doomers represent themselves as Participants who mainly have an impact on text:

- (17) *I* (Actor) *will post* (Process) *it* (Goal) there soon.

Doomers further use the effective structure regarding all the new things they must deal with, such as *hand sanitiser*, as well as various individuals such as *double dosers* or *neckbeards*:

- (18) If you get serious discomfort from hand sanitiser, *you* (Actor) *should stop using* (Process) *it* (Goal) right away.
- (19) *Let's* (Actor) *break* (Process) *the double dosers* (Goal) into different acceptable risk groups amongst themselves.
- (20) *Let's* (Actor) *ban* (Process) *all the fat slovenly neckbeards on r/Australia* (Goal) from accessing healthcare due to their "refusal to take responsibility for a preventable disease."

The same members, mentioned earlier as Actors in transitive construals, appear in intransitive constructions, which reveals their importance in the doomers' representation of a pandemic reality. Some of these are entities with authority, such as the *government* or *politicians*:

- (21) *They* (Actor) also *can't go* (Process) full china and start killing people.
- (22) *She* (Actor)'s *hiding* (Process) in her basement just like Joe Biden.

Others are the *doomers* themselves, and other *people*:

- (23) *I* (Actor) push my shoulders back, keep my head up and smile and *walk* (Process) past them.
- (24) *The rusted on supporters* (Actor) *are* (Pro-) visibly *dwindling* (-cess).

Finally, places and abstract objects appear in intransitive constructions as well:

- (25) *Australia* (Actor) *has fallen* (Process) because Australians themselves are stupid, cowardly, and pathetic.
- (26) See, *lockdowns* (Actor) *work* (Process).

The Australian Redditors also choose to represent reality as it is happening by opting for various ergative constructions, without adding an Agent. As mentioned earlier, Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) ergative model is one of

cause-and-effect and the middle structure can include a hidden Agent or Instigator. Common nouns such as *things* or *it* are used most frequently, indicating the users' lack of knowledge of what exactly is going on in the wider context of society:

- (27) Stay strong, *good things* (Medium) *are coming* (Process).
- (28) ... then *it* (Medium) *doesn't* (Pro-) really *work* (-cess).

By means of these ergative structures the Redditors describe various actions as if they were occurring on their own, evoking an atmosphere of chaos and loss of control. In the sample, abstract entities, such as *antibodies*, *COVID spikes*, *cases*, or *virus behaviour* are all involved in self-engendered actions as Mediums (see examples below). The anti-lockdown activists mainly describe actions that refer to change, such as *decay*, *clear up*, *drop*, or *change*, as well as to the speed at which the entities are changing using adverbs such as *faster*, or *quicker*. Modality (*will*, *should*) or negation (*won't*) are used as well:

- (29) *Antibodies from vaccination* (Medium) *decay* (Process) faster than from natural immunity (Manner).
- (30) *Our Covid spikes* (Medium) *will clear up* (Process) quicker than in overcautious states (Manner).
- (31) *Cases* (Medium) *should start dropping* (Process) going into summer.
- (32) *Virus behaviour* (Medium) *won't change* (Process).

The Australian doomers further depict a reality that includes drastic actions and movements spiralling out of control, such as *spread*, *shift*, or *end*. They use adverbs of manner such as *easily*, *quicker*, or *pretty quickly* to describe the events:

- (33) *The virus* (Medium) *spreads* (Process) easily (Manner).
- (34) *Public opinion* (Medium) *can shift* (Process) quicker than a state can gather info and react (Manner).
- (35) *The hysteria* (Medium) *would end* (Process) pretty quickly (Manner).

Most of the inergative clauses are quasi-autonomous events with a hidden Agent. Possible Instigators for this type of clauses are predominantly non-human. For example, the construction *Things may escalate quickly from there*, which is used by the doomers, can be rephrased as:

(36) *Opening up again* (Instigator) may escalate things quickly from there.

This and most of the other possible Instigators are out of the users' control, such as *vaccinations* or *fake news*:

(37) *Vaccinations* (Instigator) are calming down things in the south.

(38) *Fake news* (Instigator) can shift public opinion quicker than a state can gather info and react.

The doomers cannot control other people's *coughing*, or *social distancing* behaviour:

(39) *Coughing* (Instigator) spreads the virus easily.

(40) *Social distancing* (Instigator) will clear up our Covid spikes quicker than in overcautious states.

Nor can they control the most powerful entity of all, *the government*:

(41) *The government* (Instigator) should end the lockdown.

Some of the ergative constructions, however, can only include one Participant, a Medium that, unlike the Medium in inergative clauses, is involved in the action. For example, *antibodies from vaccination*, which participate in the action of *decaying*:

(42) *Antibodies from vaccination* (Medium) *decay* (Process) faster than from natural immunity (Manner).

Similarly, cases are involved in the action of dropping:

(43) *Cases* (Medium) *should start dropping* (Process) going into summer (Time).

Again, both entities are out of the users' control.

4.2 American doom discourse

Retrieved data from r/LockdownSkepticism included 600 verbal processes, of which 408 were [transitive] and 192 [intransitive]. The American doomers represent themselves as having an impact on various entities within their own direct environment, such as *girls*, or *masks*:

(44) *I* (Actor) *'ve pulled* (Process) *girls* (Goal) IRL who probably wouldn't even see me in their stacks on Tinder.

(45) *Are* (Pro-) *you* (Actor) actually *using* (-cess) *masks* (Goal) in the Netherlands?

The main Actors in their world, however, are *people* and not the government. Various individuals exert power over Goals which may be situated as being limited to their own individual world and bodies. These closely resemble the Goals impacted upon by doomers, such as *infections*, *grandmas*, or the COVID-19 *virus*:

(46) Inevitably, *some people who travelled to hot spots* (Actor) *will bring* (Process) *infections* (Goal) home.

(47) *All those damn anti-maskers* (Actor) *<are> killing* (Process) *all the grandmas and soon all life on earth* (Goal).

(48) *So many vaccinated* (Actor) *are catching* (Process) *this virus* (Goal) and *circulating* (Process) *it* (Goal) in their elite vaccinated bubbles.

Similar to their Australian counterparts, the American doomers appear to favour middle structures to describe entities that are moving from one state to another by themselves, such as *science*, *confidence*, or *the world population*. Again, most of the ergative constructions relate to change, with doomers using verbs such as *change*, *drop*, or *increase*, indicated by adverbs of manner to indicate the way in which things are occurring, or modality (*might*):

(49) *The science* (Medium) *changed* (Process).

(50) *Confidence* (Medium) *might be dropping* (Process) in countries whose Zero-Covid

approach is locking their borders (Location).

- (51) *The world population* (Medium) *increased* (Process) at the same pace as in prior years (Manner).

The r/LockdownSkepticism users also describe actions and movements of entities that seem out of their control, such as *public opinion*, or *the virus*:

- (52) *Public opinion* (Medium) *continues to shift* (Process) toward requiring vaccinations as a means to restore normalcy (Location).
- (53) *The virus* (Medium) *is moving* (Process) slowly (Manner).

The American users further mention several entities that are involved in the actions of *ending* or *continuing*, such as *restrictions* or *deaths*:

- (54) *Any new restrictions* (Medium) *end* (Process) when those in power arbitrarily decide (Time).
- (55) *The deaths* (Medium) *continue* (Process) in Florida (Location).

All ergative construals in the sample have a possible Instigator, which means that the actions are semi-autonomous. The American doomers do not have any control over possible human Instigators such as *the general public*, *experts*, or *individuals*:

- (56) *The general public* (Instigator) might be dropping confidence in countries whose Zero-Covid approach is locking their borders.
- (57) *Experts* (Instigator) have moved the measuring sticks continuously.
- (58) *Individuals* (Instigator) spread the virus around.

They also do not have an impact on various non-human Instigators, such as *vaccines*, *changes*, or *chemicals*:

- (59) *Vaccines* (Instigator) have changed things.

- (60) *Changes* (Instigator) end any new restrictions when those in power arbitrarily decide.

- (61) *Gene-altering chemicals* (Instigator) have grown and mutated those seeds.

Now the transitivity and ergativity analyses are complete, it is worthwhile to examine the Australian and American doomers' argumentation.

5 Reconstruction and critical evaluation of argumentation

First, the notion of fallacies is explained. The remaining sub-sections discuss several examples of illogical reasoning pertaining to the preventive measure of lockdowns during the pandemic. Some of the interlocutors' most pertinent arguments are reconstructed and critically evaluated.

5.1 Sarcasm as strategic manoeuvring

Some of the doomers' arguments appear to be illogical. They continuously attempt to evaluate information posted by other users. Possible illocutionary effects of the Reditors' speech acts include inviting other doomers into sharing the same presumptions. Some of the perlocutionary effects of their posts and replies could even result in their participation in protests or riots, since anti-lockdown movements occur when a collective of bodies assume that their discourse and actions might affect the political powers and perceived anti-democratic measures against COVID-19. Any fallacies may be signalled by argumentative indicators in the discourse and summed up in a brief argument scheme. Finally, by asking critical questions associated with the argument schemes, the unreasonableness of the users' argumentation may be elucidated.

It needs to be added that the doomers advance standpoints in the belief that the readers of their comments and replies may not accept the views they express (Houtlosser, 1998), since, in pragma-dialectics, the concept of "standpoint" is different from "attitude." Subsequently, any sarcasm, as a manifestation of irony, should be seen as a form of strategic manoeuvring (Van Eemeren, 2010).

Some of the doomers' perceived inappropriate utterances to be interpreted as "derailments" violating the norms of a reasonable discussion, thus rendering the statements fallacious (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002). A reconstruction of the doomers' arguments may exemplify the most salient logical fallacies in the samples, and by posing critical questions, the unreasonableness of the users' arguments may be laid bare. Several excerpts taken from the two subreddits under investigation contain causal and symptomatic argumentation, better known under the more popular terms used to describe the rhetorical phenomena, as discussed in the analytical examples that follow.

5.2 The bandwagon effect

When SNS users appeal to a questionable source of authority, their argumentation may derail into an *argumentum ad populum* or "bandwagon effect," a type of reasoning that is omnipresent in both samples. Two examples, taken from each of the subreddits, are presented below. Any argumentative indicators are indicated in bold. The reconstructed argumentation and several critical questions (CQ) are included as well:

r/LockdownSkepticismAU

Post: "Singapore shows Australia that 80 per cent vaccination won't stop infections surging" (Dasey, 2021).

- T1: So, mental health professionals are trying to help Singaporeans live in a new normal. So *even* psychologists are in on this bullshit too.
- T2: The majority of psychologists are mentally ill and psychopaths.
- T3: *Yeah*, I've noticed this too. Long before Covid, the ones I've met seem to have issues...
- T4: Psychologists are the reason for all of this...

T1 excludes the assertion expressed in the article. If psychologists are included in the government's plot, then it is impossible for them to help people adjust to life in the new normal. T3's response underlines the similarity between their own standpoint and that

of T2, indicated by the expression "too." T3 further uses "yeah" to indicate that they accept T2's standpoint. Subsequently, T4's argument may be reconstructed as:

X is true
for A, B and C say X is true

CQ: Is X true?

r/LockdownSkepticism

Post: "Federal government to require vaccinations for all federal public servants, air and train passengers." (Tasker, 2021, October 6).

- T1: The top comment on r/worldnews promotes making unvaccinated people second-class citizens. We are surrounded by Nazis.
- T2: *Yes* we are. Induced mass psychosis has visited humanity once again. This will not end well...
- T3: *I'm with you*. Humanity is disgusting. Life has no value...
- T4: Wow, that's hard-line! *But actually* in hindsight preferable?

T1 reasons that, if the top comment is that unvaccinated people should be treated as second-class citizens, then they must be surrounded by Nazis. T2 accepts T1's standpoint, indicated by "yes" and uses the strong modal auxiliary verb "will" to make a prediction about the future. T3 agrees with T2 ("I'm with you"), concluding that "humanity is disgusting" and that "life has no value". T4 uses the stance adverb "actually" to qualify their standpoint to indicate that something unexpected is about to follow ("in hindsight preferable"). They also use "but" to signal to T1, T2 and T3 that they are willing to accept their extreme views. The interlocutors are using causal argumentation to justify their predictions about the future:

X is true
for A, B and C say X is true

CQ: Is X true?

5.3 The gambler’s fallacy

Another fallacy constitutes “the belief that runs of one binary outcome will be balanced by the opposite outcome” and that “the longer the run, the stronger the belief that the opposite outcome is due to appear” (Baron & Leider, 2010, p. 118). Based on this type of bias, referred to as the “gambler’s fallacy,” individuals’ perceived risk of the same event re-occurring decreases, as shown in the examples below.

R/LockdownSkepticismAU

Post: “NSW 1,124 cases today.” (cluns_killa, 2021).

T1: Winter is over, they (cases) *should* start dropping going into summer. Isn’t that what every single graph from around the world shows?

T2: *See*, lockdowns are unnecessary.

Seen from a binary perspective, case numbers can either increase or decrease. T1 reasons that, since cases have been constantly increasing in winter, they should start decreasing in summer based on the premise that this is what happened in the rest of the world. Their standpoint (“cases should start dropping”) is indicated by the deontic modal verb “should” and modified by the question that follows, seeking confirmation from other Reddit users. T1 is implying here that lockdowns are not necessary. T2 agrees with T1’s standpoint. The expression “see”, used by T2, indicates symptomatic argumentation, as T2 argues that cases drop naturally, without any government measures such as lockdowns. Overall, the interlocutors’ argumentation is pragmatic, since it indicates a causal process with a particular desired result:

X is desirable
for X leads to Y
and Y is desirable

CQ: Does X lead to Y?

r/LockdownSkepticism

Post: “Dr. Scott Gottlieb expects coronavirus to be an ‘endemic’ virus in U.S. after delta surge” (Singh, 2021).

T1: Delta is *probably* the last big wave. *Because* it’s so contagious, by the end of the summer, early fall, most people *will* already be immune via natural immunity or vaccine acquired immunity. Sure, we can expect seasonal resurgences for several years, *but it will* just become a virus that circulates like the flu.

T2: They *will* be ready with Quadruple Omega 5000.

The virus can either remain an issue or not. T1 reasons that, since the influenza virus behaved in a certain way in the past, COVID-19 will follow its example. They are using the epistemic modal adverb “probably” to indicate that their standpoint of the virus behaving in the same way as influenza can be justified in an objective fashion. The marker “because” has an explanatory function, but also signals that T1 is arguing why they think that Delta is the last wave. An exclusion *a minore* occurs here as well, as T1 is using “but” followed by the strong assertive verb “will”, which is an indicator of confrontation. T1 flouts Dr Gottlieb’s standpoint that COVID-19 will remain an issue in the future by asserting that their perception of the virus spreading like the flu excludes seasonal resurgences of it and, as such, maintains that it will not be a problem at all. T2 accepts T1’s standpoint and reasons that, if the virus becomes an issue, the government will have a new vaccine ready, which is more of a sarcastic remark, indicated by the hyperbole “quadruple.” This is pragmatic argumentation:

X is desirable
for X leads to Y
and Y is desirable

CQ: Does X lead to Y?

5.4 Loss aversion or doom reasoning

Focusing more on losses than wins is another common human tendency. Individuals tend to avoid losses when making decisions. This type of bias is related to the “fear of missing out” (FoMO). Loss aversion may be used to

persuade people to get into action by avoiding to lose something, a tactic which is extensively used for marketing purposes. However, if the situation appears too overwhelming and people are effectively deprived of something, the result of this type of “doom reasoning” may be anger or refusal. Consider the following examples taken from the two subreddits:

r/LockdownSkepticismAU

Post: “Interesting Information about Medical Exemptions” (TheHoovyPrince, 2021).

T1: They’re simply trying to make life next to impossible without it. Vax passports *are going to* govern everything in Aus.

T2: Damn.

T3: GPs aren’t *even* allowed to issue mask exemptions. Madness.

T4: Wow, what the hell!

T1’s standpoint constitutes a prediction about future government policy, indicated by the future tense marker “going to.” T1 asserts that, since one needs a vaccination passport to engage in everyday activities, the effect will be that passports will determine all activities in the future. The interlocutors do not seem to be willing to tolerate simple inconveniences such as vaccinations or masks, even though the measures were put into place to help protect them. T2 and T4’s interjections (“damn”; “wow”; “what the hell”) express their shared frustration at the restrictions. T3 presents their standpoint as an argument that trumps any previous argumentation by using “even.” The cause-to-effect argument structure is as follows:

if X happens

then Y happens

CQ: Will Y happen?

r/LockdownSkepticism:

Post: “COVID plague may take years to end, experts tell UCSF forum” (Allday, 2021).

T1: It *could* be “over” tomorrow if we decided we wanted it to be.

T2: Exactly, this *could* have been done with a year ago. Instead we are back at square one and *actually*, in an even worse position. Now we’ve got these vax passports that *will* ban people from carrying out normal everyday tasks.

T3: All it takes is to turn off the TV and stop testing. All of a sudden, common cold and flu *would* reappear and we *would* go on with our lives.

The post suggests that restrictions will continue to be in place for several more years. T1 is using cause-to-effect argumentation and reasons that, if one simple decision is made to stop the restrictions, the issue of ongoing loss of freedom will be resolved. T1, T2 and T3 are using modal auxiliary verbs to construe a more desirable reality. T2 qualifies their standpoint by using the marker “actually” to announce a surprising fact (“in an even worse situation”). They also use the strong assertive verb “will” to predict that vaccination passports will have a negative impact on everyday life. T2’s argues that, if the government decides to continue the COVID-19 emergency situation, things will only get worse. Subsequently, the argument may be reconstructed as:

if X happens

then Y happens

CQ: Will Y happen?

5.5 The Dunning-Kruger effect

It is a human tendency to overestimate one’s own abilities. This illusion of knowledge may lead to risk-taking behaviour and poor choices. Those with little expertise in the extensive field of epidemiology often seem to pose as public health experts on SNSs, as the following examples show.

r/LockdownSkepticismAU

Post: “Unvaccinated people should be denied healthcare if they refuse to take responsibility for a preventable disease” (Meme, 2021).

- T1: Hospitals in the US got paid to list patients as having died from Covid. The number of deaths is fraudulent.
- T2: Covid was 4% of world deaths last year. Heart disease and strokes took the number one spot... *again*.
- T3: *OFFICIALLY*, <it was> 4%.

T1’s standpoint (“the number of deaths is fraudulent”) is based on the unlikely premise that American hospitals were paid to list patients as having died from COVID-19. T2’s standpoint aligns with that of T1 when asserting that the fatality of COVID-19 was low based on the premise that heart disease and stroke led to a higher number of deaths. T3’s standpoint implies that the actual number of deaths was probably lower than 4%, whereas calculating how deadly a new virus is can be challenging, even for experienced scientists. When qualifying their standpoint, T3 uses the domain adverb “officially” to assert that they possess correct information regarding COVID-19.

This is position-to-know argumentation, which may be reconstructed as follows:

- A, B and C assert that they are in a position to know some expert knowledge containing propositions X, Y and Z.
- A claims that X is true (false).
- B claims that Y is true (false).
- C claims that Z is true (false).
- Therefore, X, Y and Z are true (false).

- CQ1: Is A really in a position to know that the number of deaths is fraudulent?
- CQ2: Is B in a position to know that heart disease and strokes took the number one spot?
- CQ3: Is C in a position to know the actual number of deaths?
- CQ4: Are A, B and C trustworthy sources?

r/LockdownSkepticism

Post: “Federal government to require vaccinations for all federal public servants, air and train passengers.” (Tasker, 2021).

T1: This looks hinky as HELL *to me*, especially when TPTB are *still* touting fxxxing *masks*, KNOWING they do nothing against an aerosol spread virus only

- 96 microns in size, and -AGAIN- the virus has a 99.9% survival rate for all but the oldest and fattest, and they have a 90–95% survival rate; Hell, Tammy “666 pounds” Slaton survived.
- T2: In SF you now need a vaccine to do *anything* indoors.

T1’s standpoint (“This looks hinky as hell”) is based on the premises that The Powers That Be (TPTB) are recommending masks despite being aware of their ineffectiveness and that the virus still has a high survival rate, even for older adults or people with obesity. Even though T1 presents their views as facts, they appear to be based on nothing but anecdotal evidence. T1 uses the force modifying expression “to me” out of fear that their standpoint may not be accepted by other Reddit users. T2’s standpoint (“In South Florida vaccination is required for all indoor activities”) is based on vague personal experience alone, signalled by the hyperbole “anything.”

This is, again, position-to-know argumentation, which may be reconstructed as follows:

- A and B assert they are in a position to know some expert knowledge containing propositions X, Y and Z.
- A claims X and Y are true.
- B claims Z is true.
- Therefore, X, Y and Z are true.

- CQ1: Is A really in a position to know that masks are useless against the virus and that the virus has a 99.9% survival rate for young and slim individuals?
- CQ2: Is B in a position to know that one must be vaccinated to be able to carry out any indoor activities?
- CQ3: Are A and B trustworthy sources?

5.6 Information cascade

With doom-scrolling, another cognitive bias occurs: upon scrolling through a constant flow of information on a particular topic, individuals may reach a conclusion based on anecdotal evidence presented by others who do not have any expertise on the matter or who present information that has been taken out of context, as the result of an information

cascade. This becomes clear in the examples added below.

R/LockdownSkepticismAU

Post: “NSW Health limits residents of locked-down tower block to six beers per day” (Nils-son & O’Doherty, 2021).

T1: They do *this for China’s social credit system* as well.

T2: Imagine when your vaccine passport *is able to* control how many units of alcohol you *can* purchase on a daily/weekly basis.

T3: Once introduced, this *won’t* be far from the truth. Expect all your medical data to be integrated into the passport.

T4: It’s a digital class system. You *can* be elevated or demoted and have your rights expanded or removed on a whim.

The discussion starts with T1 drawing a comparison between a particular lockdown restriction and China’s social credit system, indicated by “as well” (X does Z as well). T4 asserts that Australian society may turn into a digital class system that resembles the Reddit SNS. However, a digital class system pertains to unequal access to the Internet and has nothing to do with vaccination passports. T2, T3 and T4 are using various modal verbs to make predictions about the future. T4’s argument is based on the untrustworthy information shared by T1, T2 and T3. Argument scheme:

X is true
for A, B and C say X is true.
CQ: Is X true?

r/LockdownSkepticism

Post: “Federal government to require vaccinations for all federal public servants, air and train passengers” (Tasker, 2021).

T1: It’s hard to maintain optimism when things are happening this quickly.

T2: They want 100% (or very close to it) of the population vaccinated.

T3: Oh, *I have no doubts* mandatory boosters *are coming*.

T3 concludes that mandatory booster injections will be required in the near future, indicated by the strong assertive force modifying expression “I have no doubts”. Their standpoint is based on subjective information shared by T1 and a fact proposed by T2, who weakens their proposition by adding “or very close to it” to leave some room for doubt.

Argument scheme:

X is true
for A and B say X is true.

CQ: Is X the case?

Some of the most prominent fallacious patterns in the Australian and American Redditors’ argumentation have now been elucidated.

6 Ideological motivations

Political doomerism inspired worldwide anti-lockdown movements, over-emphasising the negative impact of COVID-19 prevention actions taken by the government and protesting against new rules and regulations. Based on the Great Barrington declaration, a fraudulent open letter, political doomers favoured a herd immunity approach to protect the economy, a solution that was heavily condemned by scientists (Great Barrington Declaration, 2021). In the American Reddit sample, for example, one of the doomers criticises the Australian approach to the pandemic by claiming that “they are dramatically delaying herd immunity” (Van Poucke, 2021b). It further emerges from the samples that the doomers’ strategy involves a focused protection plan aimed at segregating vulnerable individuals to allow others to continue their everyday activities. According to one of the Australian doomers, the government wants to “force vaccination and lockdown is just a political play to impose the idea that state has control over you” (Van Poucke, 2021a). The same sceptical attitude towards lockdowns is advanced by both groups of doomers, and recalls Schmitt’s (2010), *Ausnahmezustand* or “state of exception,” referred to by Agamben (2008). Agamben’s reasoning may be used to justify measures that deviate from the law, of

which the avoidance of mask-wearing, promoted in the examined doom discourse, is a good example.

SNSs further constitute the perfect tool for allowing subjects to monitor both their own and other citizens' behaviour by measuring it out against a set of shared, established norms. Fallacies such as the Dunning-Kruger and bandwagon effects exemplify this type of online practice. When users claim knowledge of how one should deal with a pandemic and other members of the group follow their example, it often leads to a critical evaluation or even a public condemnation of how other individuals conduct themselves. For example, the group consensus in the Australian subreddit sample is that masks are useless, which leads its users to openly ridicule mask wearers: "I almost can't believe my eyes when I see a morbidly obese person pulling their mask over their nose when walking outside" (Van Poucke, 2021a). Any established policies or "regimes of truth" may encourage right-wing populist political doomers to adopt the same binary view and to dichotomise between themselves as healthy bodies and others as deviating from their norms.

Neoliberal subjects are expected to be entrepreneurs of themselves, but, at the same time, they are strictly controlled and, in some cases, exploited. As mentioned earlier, Foucault (1978–1979/2004) refers to this type of entrepreneurship of the self as biopower. Their social relations are being organised around the concept of enterprise, including their interactions with other users on SNSs. Subsequently, to the "homo oeconomicus," the Other will also be an entrepreneur and subjectively judged on how well they manage themselves, which may lead to discrimination (Reisigl & Wodak, 2005). Several examples of the alienation of people with obesity can be found on both subreddits.

Self-promotion further plays a significant role in the online behaviour of neoliberal subjects in social networks, creating the illusion of individuality and free speech while primarily targeting human capital. This also is the case for the Reddit users on *r/LockdownSkepticism* and *r/LockdownSkepticismAU*, whose doom discourse largely promotes self-interest. They are involved

in strategic games aiming to determine the "value" of other subjects, as they engage in critical discussions which, often, amount to expressions of bias, rather than consensus. The doomers primarily employ causal argumentation ("if x, then y"), with the aims of displaying their superior knowledge, establishing "truths," and sharing a desired reality as an alternative to the dystopian world they have co-constructed themselves through discourse and subjective experiences.

7 Conclusion

The systemic functional grammatical analysis in this paper focused on transitivity, intransitivity and ergativity. In terms of transitivity, the *r/LockdownSkepticismAU* users represent the Australian government and politicians as the most powerful Actors or Doers who primarily impact entities within the public sphere. As for the Australian doomers, their reach extends over online messages and various pandemic-related objects. Apart from these, they also have an influence over "double dosers," a derogatory term to indicate people's double vaccination status, or "neckbeards," which is Internet slang for "socially inept, overweight, and dirty" male individuals (Lawson, 2019). In contrast, the *r/LockdownSkepticism* users tend to depict people as the main Doers. These Actors manipulate entities within the personal domain. However, they also have an impact on other doomers' comments and replies, as they exchange views on various topics linked to COVID-19.

The verbal processes of "happening," as uncovered through the ergativity analysis, provide further insight into how the Australian and American doomers represent reality. Various entities as well as several human and non-human Instigators are considered beyond the users' control, revealing a shared perceived sense of loss of agency. The Australian Reddit users' ergativity choices concern abstract COVID-19-related things over which they have no reach. These entities are involved in actions of irrepressible change. Hidden Instigators are beyond the Australian doomers' power as well, primarily including things that are related to other people's be-

haviour. They cannot control the authorities and seem to feel overwhelmed by the online presence of fake news. In a similar fashion, the American Reddit users' ergativity selections also relate to change. They agree with the Australian doomers that the virus and public opinion are beyond their control. The hidden Instigators in the users' ergative constructions mostly constitute positive items. Unlike the other group of Redditors, the American users also focus on the human entities themselves.

A critical evaluation of the American and Australian doomers' argumentation, using a pragma-dialectical approach, further shows how the interlocutors of both subreddits mainly use causal argumentation and epistemic modality to make groundless predictions about the future. Deontic modality is used as well, to indicate the users' expectations regarding the behaviour of the COVID-19 virus. The arguments put forward by the doomers contain several impediments to appropriately reasonable discussion which may be linked to popular phenomena such as the Dunning-Kruger effect, or information cascade. Even though possible perlocutionary effects of doom discourse might include the interactants' engagement in acts of anti-lockdown protest, the Reddit users' main aim appears to be the mere validation of their claims.

Knowing the facts that digital discourse is highly dynamic in nature and that SNS user behaviour tends to be erratic and irrational in character might thwart the insights provided in this paper. Another limitation concerns the size of the excerpts. An even larger sample of doom discourses could yield different results. Subsequently, the current study merely provides a partial view into how digital doom discourse behaves at a certain point in time. A multimodal approach could add additional valuable insights. Nevertheless, it has become clear that political doomers appear to be motivated, not immediately by a fear of imminent societal collapse, as in the archetypal doomer's case, but rather by bio-power and self-interest. A critical evaluation of the doomers' argumentation has further unveiled that, whenever individuals sharing a set of common values interact online, ideological dichotomies are bound to arise,

which may lead to the alienation of other users who do not meet the collective standard. It is hoped that the study's insights on the use of digital doom discourse and its possible effects on SNS users may help provide valuable insights into human behaviour both on and outside of Reddit.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Reconsidering a multivalent concept: An integrated affordance framework to approach technology and social media use

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Abstract

The affordance concept has been widely used in communication studies to theorize and examine social media use beyond specific features and practices. However, its implementation is characterized by an inconsistent use of terms and a neglect of the concept's relationality. The present article demonstrates and addresses these shortcomings. First, it briefly reviews the affordance perspective's origins and its further development in communication literature. Second, it outlines the perspective's diverse but inconsistent application in social media research. Third, it introduces an integrated framework that contributes to a better understanding of affordances and supports a more precise use of the underlying concepts and terms in social media research. The framework a) emphasizes the relational nature of affordances as opportunities for action that occur in various technological and social contexts and are contingent on designed and cognitive mechanisms, b) it highlights the abstract nature of individual, relational, and collective affordances that are distinct from outcomes such as practices and structures, and c) it encompasses effects and dynamics that impact both technology and actors. Drawing on the framework, the article concludes with conceptual, empirical and terminological implications for future research approaching technology and social media use from an affordance perspective.

Keywords

affordances, imagined affordances, technology, social media, social media sites, relationality

1 Introduction

This article explores a multivalent concept regularly used and continuously debated in and across disciplines – *affordance*. Commonly referring to what material artifacts allow people to do (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) affordances proved valuable to identify and investigate opportunities for interaction with technology and new media beyond single features or practices (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Ellison & Vitak, 2015). First introduced in ecological psychology (Gibson, 1979), affordances were later adapted in design theory (Norman, 1988) and further advanced to conceptualize the users' interaction with technology (Gaver, 1991; Hutchby, 2001). In social media literature, rather technology-centered early work on affordances of social network sites (boyd, 2008; Papacharissi & Gibson, 2011) stimulated a shift toward a user-centered understanding of affordances (e.g., Costa, 2018; Jones, 2020; Valkenburg &

Piotrowski, 2017) and related outcomes (e.g., Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Loh & Walsh, 2021). Although both perspectives undoubtedly provided valuable insight to social media use, the varying reinterpretations of affordances resulted in inconsistent and sometimes inappropriate use of the term (Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017) and a neglect of its relational and abstract nature (Nagy & Neff, 2015, 2023).

The aim of this article is to demonstrate and address these shortcomings and to foster a better understanding and more precise application of the affordance perspective in social media research. First, it briefly reviews the origins of the affordance concept and the diverse ways it has been advanced in communication literature. Second, it outlines the concept's application in social media studies entailing a shift from a rather technology-centered toward a user-centered perspective, resulting in inconsistent and inappropriate use of terms. Third, an affordance framework is



introduced that integrates original and contemporary theoretical work and highlights key aspects of an affordance perspective that must be acknowledged to overcome identified shortcomings in social media literature. This framework a) emphasizes the relational nature of affordances as opportunities for action (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001) that occur in various technological (Ilten, 2015; Postigo, 2016) and social contexts (Davis, 2020) and are contingent on designed mechanisms on the side of technology (Davis, 2020; Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Norman, 2013), and cognitive mechanisms on the side of actors (Costa, 2018; Gaver, 1991; Gibson, 1979), b) highlights the abstract nature of affordances (Gibson, 1979; Nagy & Neff, 2015, 2023; Shaw, 2017) and differentiates individual, relational and collective affordances (Hutchby, 2001; Leonardi, 2013; Turner & Turner, 2002; Vaast, Safadi, Lapointe, & Nagoita, 2017; Weichold & Thonhauser, 2020; Wellman, 2001) that are distinct from outcomes such as practices and structures (Evans et al., 2017; Volkoff & Strong, 2017), and c) encompasses effects and dynamics that affect both technology and actors (Abidin, 2021; boyd, 2008, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2018). The framework is illustrated and discussed with examples related to social media use. Conceptual, empirical, and terminological implications for future research are outlined and discussed on the backdrop of today's social media landscape.

2 Origins and advancements of the affordance approach

Originating in ecological psychology, the affordance concept was introduced to reflect how actors perceive opportunities to act provided by the environment (Gibson, 1979). In Gibson's view, people primarily perceive what objects afford (e.g., a cave offering shelter) rather than its properties or qualities (e.g., the cave being made from stone). Simultaneously, people might differ in their perception or interpretation of the environment (a cave can be missed or appears too small), highlighting the relationality of affordances, which are constituted by the environment *and* the actor. Adapted to human-made

objects or artifacts, Norman (1988) followed a design-oriented perspective and understood affordances as inherent properties of objects that people might perceive. Thus, the quality of design is reflected by the ways people perceive and engage with intentionally embedded affordances. Norman (2013) further expanded on the role of perception by introducing designed signifiers that make certain affordances visible to end-users. This design-focused interpretation and the emphasis on the actor's perception made the concept accessible for human-computer interaction and Internet studies (McGrenere & Ho, 2000), where it has been additionally refined.

Gaver (1991), for instance, argued that the relation between technology and user goes beyond visual perception, and *technology affordances* should be defined regarding people's interaction with technology. Depending on the fact that perception can be incomplete or incorrect, Gaver (1991) introduced "hidden affordances" to emphasize that certain affordances can be overlooked due to missing information. "False affordances," on the other hand consider that users might have wrong impressions about what is afforded. Gaver (1996) further demonstrated that affordances do not only exist regarding individual actions but also regarding social interactions. Such afforded sociality is inherent to a vast part of today's technology that connects users online. Technology's *social affordances* have thus been discussed as "the possibilities that technological changes afford for social relations and social structure" (Wellman, 2001, p. 228).

Another relevant contribution in the field of communication was Hutchby's (2001) conception of affordances between technological determinism and social constructivism incorporating both functional and relational aspects of *communication affordances*. In Hutchby's view, technology functionally enables or restrains actions, whereas the perception and enactment of these opportunities must be conceptualized as relational. Thus, while the material features of technology are constant, affordances are dynamic and affected by the social context of the users. Such a perspective facilitated the investigation of media technologies (Hogan, 2009;

Nagy & Neff, 2015; Wellman et al., 2003) and over the years, technology affordances have been advanced in at least three aspects: scholars introduced categories of affordances, distinguished affordances from related aspects, and further developed the concept itself.

2.1 Categories of technology affordances

To reflect the concept's level of granularity, several categories of technology affordances were introduced. Early on, Turner and Turner (2002) distinguished affordances of basic usability related to features, affordances supporting individual user tasks, and affordances that depend on and affect cultural values. Others emphasized the role of shared practices or goals and proposed affordances that reflect actions among related actors. Leonardi (2013), for instance, investigated individualized, collective, and shared affordances of technology in organizations, while Vaast et al. (2017) used connective affordances to describe collective engagement in the political realm. Weichold and Thonhauser (2020) recently further clarified the concept of collective affordances, identifying collectives as the central unit of collective action instead of the individuals with the collective in mind. To reflect how affordances are used in the communication field, Bucher and Helmond (2018) proposed a dichotomy between concrete feature-oriented low-level affordances reflecting the perspective of Norman (1988) and more abstract high-level affordances that follow the Gibsonian understanding of affordances as a relation.

2.2 Boundaries between concepts

Furthermore, scholars aimed to refine boundaries between affordances and related aspects such as features, practices, and outcomes. For example, in regards to technological properties, Postigo (2016) and Ilten (2015) advocated to clearly distinguish affordances from design features (e.g., the like button) and systems (e.g., recommender systems). Others focused on the strict distinction between affordances and their actualization (Strong et al., 2014; Volkoff & Strong, 2017) and argued that affordances should be treated as potentials for action and not as the action itself or "the state or condition that is

reached after an action is taken" (Volkoff & Strong, 2017, p. 237). In a similar vein, Evans et al. (2017) emphasized that affordances only lead to behaviors and other outcomes and cannot represent behaviors or outcomes themselves. They outlined a set of threshold criteria that encourages scholars to assess a proposed affordance by confirming that it is 1) neither an object nor a feature of an object, 2) not an outcome, and 3) that it has variability. These conceptual restrictions should ensure that the mediating role of affordances between object and outcomes is recognized. Otherwise one runs the risk of deterministically relating objects to outcomes "where an object leads to the outcome without any indication of the process or reasons for the relationship" (Evans et al., 2017, p. 39).

2.3 Conceptual advancements

Aside from contributions that help to identify distinct affordances or narrow their conceptual scope, communication scholars additionally advanced the affordance concept itself. To emphasize users' active comprehension of their technology use, McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015, p. 1) introduced *vernacular affordances* relating to "how people themselves understand affordances in their encounters with technology." In their view, affordances are part of a sense-making process that is not linked to any particular technological artifact. Therefore, affordances "are not experienced in isolation, but rather in relation to a complex ecology of other tools with other affordances" (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015, p. 2). Nagy and Neff (2015), introduced *imagined affordances* to better reflect how "the meanings of technology are negotiated and renegotiated by users through perception, mediation, and materiality" (p. 7). Imagined affordances "emerge between users' perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers" (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 5). Consequently, they entail the rational and emotional aspects of users' involvement with technology and technological aspects that might be beyond the user's control (e.g., algorithms). Shaw (2017) similarly connects technology and actors by using Stuart Hall's (1973 / 1991) is

model of “encoding/decoding.” From that perspective, certain technological opportunities of interactivity are not only perceptible but might be encoded into design to be promoted or discouraged while users decode and assert meaning to them (Shaw, 2017). Following Nagy and Neff (2015), Shaw understands the relation between technology and users as a negotiation. In another approach that emphasizes this reciprocity between technology and actors, Davis and Chouinard (2016) advocated to be less concerned with *what* technological artifacts afford and rather ask “*how* artifacts afford, *for whom* and *under what circumstances*” (Davis & Chouinard, 2016, p. 241). Davis (2020) thus builds on the idea that technology not only allows but also constrains actions and proposes to consider *mechanisms* that entail requests for encouragement or refusal of actions. On the side of the actors, Davis (2020) introduced the term *conditions*, which considers how people perceive a set of functions and constraints (perception), vary in levels of skill (dexterity), and experience different support for certain actions regarding cultural or institutional norms (cultural and institutional legitimacy).

3 Social media research and affordances

As part of the broad application and adaption of affordances in technology and communication literature, the concept has also been used to delineate the specific characteristics of social media and social media use. In social media research, numerous conceptions of social media affordances can be traced back to boyd’s (2008, 2014) initial use of the terminology to describe affordances of interaction structures on social network sites.

3.1 Affordances of interaction structures online: A technology-centered starting point

Boyd’s (2008, 2011) investigation of interaction structures on social network sites is considered a fundamental contribution to the literature concerned with social media affordances (Abidin, 2021). Building on the conceptualization of content on social network sites as bits, boyd characterized the

resulting “networked publics” with four affordances: persistence (content is recorded and archived), replicability (content can be duplicated), scalability (potential visibility of content is great), and searchability (content can be accessed through search) (boyd, 2011, p. 46). In addition, these affordances were linked to three dynamics inherent to such online structures (boyd, 2008, 2011): First, the potentially unlimited reach of content confronts users with invisible audiences. Second, the lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries induces an intermingling of social circles, entailing a so-called context collapse. Last, and dependent on the former dynamics, communication on such platforms entails a blurring of private and public.

Boyd’s attribution of affordances to content and related interaction structures has been criticized as a rather technology-centered approach. Jones (2020), for instance argued that such affordances rather describe structural features and had little to do with relationality between technology and actors. The searchability of social network sites, for example, “is really just a rephrasing of the technical feature of the site as it is imagined by designers (i. e., the search bar)” (Jones, 2020, p. 280). Furthermore, concern has been raised that such affordances would run the risk of deterministic analysis, overlooking users’ agency (Costa, 2018; Ilten, 2015). Although agency is often defined rather simple as the “capacity to act or cause change” (Gunn, 2011, p. 27) in communication literature, its assumed existence is crucial in major user-centered theories (e.g., the uses-and-gratification approach, Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973, or selective exposure theory, Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). User agency, in this case entailing the capacity to deliberately engage with media and to a certain extent anticipate and choose the related consequences (Klapper, 1960) is seen as particularly neglected in boyd’s (2008) introduced dynamics. Costa (2018), for instance criticized the often-studied context collapse (for an overview see Davis & Jurgenson, 2014) as a Western-centric generalization that overlooks the relational component of affordances and neglects users’ active social media use. In her ethnographic critique, Costa (2018) demonstrated that context collapse – in this

case on Facebook – can be circumvented with multiple accounts and does not occur in all cultural environments.

Despite concerns regarding technology-centrist tendencies of boyd’s approach, the introduced affordances and outcomes have sparked significant research over the years. Scholars have adopted its premises and conceptualized affordances closer to inherent and stable features of technology. Papacharissi and Gibson (2011), for instance, introduced shareability as an attribute of social network sites that constitutes an architectural feature and Postigo (2016) similarly uses a feature-oriented understanding of affordances to identify YouTube’s social affordances. However, boyd’s linking of interaction structures to mostly negative outcomes for users also stimulated conceptual and empirical work aiming to account for users’ active engagement with social media more comprehensively.

3.2 Social media affordances: The advancement of a user-centered perspective

In recent years, scholars have introduced additional social media affordances such as shareability, editability, accessibility, and retrievability (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Despite the overlap in terms and the inherent connection to properties of content or interaction structures introduced by boyd (2008, 2011), scholars reframed the meaning of affordances to better reflect user agency encompassing the consideration and deliberate enactment of opportunities for action. Valkenburg and Piotrowski (2017), for instance, understood affordances as offered possibilities that increase perceived control. Consequently, they no longer referred to scalability as the potential visibility of content but to the opportunity for users “to choose the size and nature of their audience” (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017, p. 221). Following this perspective, they added affordances such as identifiability (the opportunity to communicate anonymously or display one’s identity) and cue manageability (the opportunity to show or hide cues to one’s identity) (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Others introduced affordances such as visibility and association (Treem & Leonardi, 2013),

self-presentation and awareness (Rice et al., 2017), or signaling (Manata & Spottswood, 2021).

Concurrently, scholars adjusted the dynamics identified by boyd (2008) with a similar intention to reflect users’ evaluations and decisions in social media use. Invisible audiences, for example, were conceptualized in terms of *imagined audiences* (Litt, 2012) that guide practices and change on the level of applications or single posts (Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Stsiampkouskaya, Joinson, Piwek, & Stevens, 2021). Moreover, the often referenced context collapse was reformulated more nuanced by the distinction of *context collusion* and *context collision*, reflecting that users either intentionally or unintentionally blur various contexts (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). In line with that shift toward a user-centered perspective on social media affordances and accompanying the conceptual work, numerous studies have applied an affordance approach to investigate how users cope with invisible audiences, intermingling social contexts, and privacy issues on social media. For example, it was demonstrated how users apply self-censorship, curate their personal online network through unfriending or unfollowing, and create multiple accounts on the same platform (Costa, 2018; Duffy & Chan, 2019; John & Gal, 2018; Triggs, Møller, & Neumayer, 2019).

3.3 Conceptual advancements

While various conceptual and empirical work has understood affordances as opportunities for action and emphasized the role of practices impacting outcomes, scholars have also advocated for more fundamental advancements to the affordance concept to better account for the distinct characteristics of social media use. Costa (2018), for instance built on a critique of the deterministic characteristics of context collapse on social media and argued that affordances cannot be known aside from their actualization because they only take shape through practices. Thus, she introduced the concept of *affordances-in-practice*, describing the “enactment of platform properties by specific users within social and cultural contexts,” directly linking affordances to their actualization. Jones (2020) advocated investigating

social media affordances *as sites of contestations*, which can be better understood by considering the specificity of user groups, the textual and material status of social media, and power imbalances between users and platforms. Investigating what Facebook affords musicians, Jones (2020) demonstrated how a focus on practices of specific users provides insight into contestations enacted between social media platforms and users. Similar to Costa (2018), Jones (2020) advocated shifting the focus toward concrete outcomes as the only way affordances can be observed. Consequentially, the concept of imagined affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015) is rejected. “If users can imagine something but not do it, then it is not an affordance, since the platform doesn’t ‘afford’ it” (Jones, 2020, p. 281).

In contrast to these conceptual works that endorse a user-centered perspective, Bucher and Helmond (2018) introduced a *platform-sensitive approach to social media affordances*. The approach expands on the reciprocal dependencies between users and technology and additionally emphasizes the role of agency on the side of technology. While human agency is relatively uncontroversial in communication literature,¹ non-human agency has been only discussed at length in the 21st century (Gunn, 2011) and is considered increasingly important in communication theory (Jansen, 2016). Proponents of the Montreal School, for instance, allow for non-human agency by understanding actors as someone or something that makes a difference, and agency as “making a difference” (Cooren, 2006, p. 82). Actor-network theory similarly attributes agency to non-human things, proposing that they “might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid” (Latour, 2005, p. 72). Drawing on that literature, Bucher and Helmond

(2018) argue that non-human agency must be taken into account to reflect affordances’ relationality: “To do the relational view on affordances full justice, we need to consider the multi-directionality of agency and connectivity at play” (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 28). Due to the socio-technical nature of social media it is not only of interest what social media platforms afford users, but also what users afford platforms. Their approach thus does not only recognize actors beyond users and designers (e.g., advertisers, developers, and researchers) but furthermore emphasizes the adaptability and personalization of technological environments on the individual level and the entanglement of technology and users through feedback-loops and algorithms. Algorithms can adaptively incorporate intentional design and the engagement of end-users to display relevant content for users, increase reach of advertisements, or prolong engagement with platforms in general – all processes that give new relevance to the question of who is affording what to whom (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 28). Because such mechanisms can be more or less perceived and understood by users (Bucher, 2017; Gruber, Hargittai, Karaoglu, & Brombach, 2021), they can entail what Gaver (1991) introduced as hidden affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

3.4 An unresolved debate and remaining definitional confusion

Affordances promise a middle ground between technological determinism and social constructivism, that avoids an overly pronounced allocation of power toward technology or the individual (Hutchby, 2001). Yet, the success of the concept can in part be attributed to the failure to overcome such tendencies (Lievrouw, 2014; Nagy & Neff, 2015) and the debate about the right balance between the two perspectives has been ongoing ever since the concept was introduced in communication literature. Scholars (Lievrouw, 2014; Nagy & Neff, 2015) argued that within the communication field, affordances have been mainly used in terms of a user-centered perspective “placing power in the hands of the users, rather than with the technologies or their designers” (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 2). Conversely, the application of affordances

1 The concept of agency is of course discussed in more detail and, for example, understood as “constituted and constrained by the material and symbolic elements of context and culture” (Campbell, 2005, p. 3). Consequently, agency itself, similar to affordances, can as well be understood as a relational concept. However, the related in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

has also been described as rather technology-centered (Costa, 2018; Ilten, 2015; Jones, 2020) pointing to approaches that conceptualized affordances closer to properties or architectural features of technology (boyd, 2008; Graves, 2007; Papacharissi & Gibson, 2011; Postigo, 2016). Jones (2020), for instance, recently observed the “strong tendency even within sociologically minded work to utilize affordances in order to primarily consider the novelty of technological capacity, rather than the relational nature of agents and objects” (Jones, 2020, p. 279).

Although the affordance concept gained renewed attention with the emergence of social media (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), the debate is far from resolved in social media literature. As shown above, affordances derived from properties of technology or communication structures on social network sites (boyd, 2008, 2014) were often reinterpreted to represent opportunities for action (e.g., Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017) and related dynamics were extended to better reflect user agency (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Litt, 2012). More fundamental conceptual advances continuously aimed to counterbalance deterministic tendencies and argued that affordances can only be identified through practices (Costa, 2018; Jones, 2020). Despite the valuable insight provided by a user-centered approach to social media affordances, it comes with conceptual shortcomings. More often than not, it neglects the distinction between the abstract affordances and their actualization as outcomes (Strong et al., 2014; Volkoff & Strong, 2017), disregards concepts such as hidden and false affordances (Gaver, 1991) or imagined affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015), and fails to consider the active role of technology, that might be understood as non-human agency (Cooren, 2006; Latour, 2005) and has particular relevance with regard to socio-technological aspects of social media (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

In light of the divergent conceptions on a spectrum from affordances as properties of technology to affordances as individual practices, it is not surprising, that the investigation of social media affordances has been characterized by a definitional confusion and inconsistent use of terms (Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Evans et al., 2017). Such in-

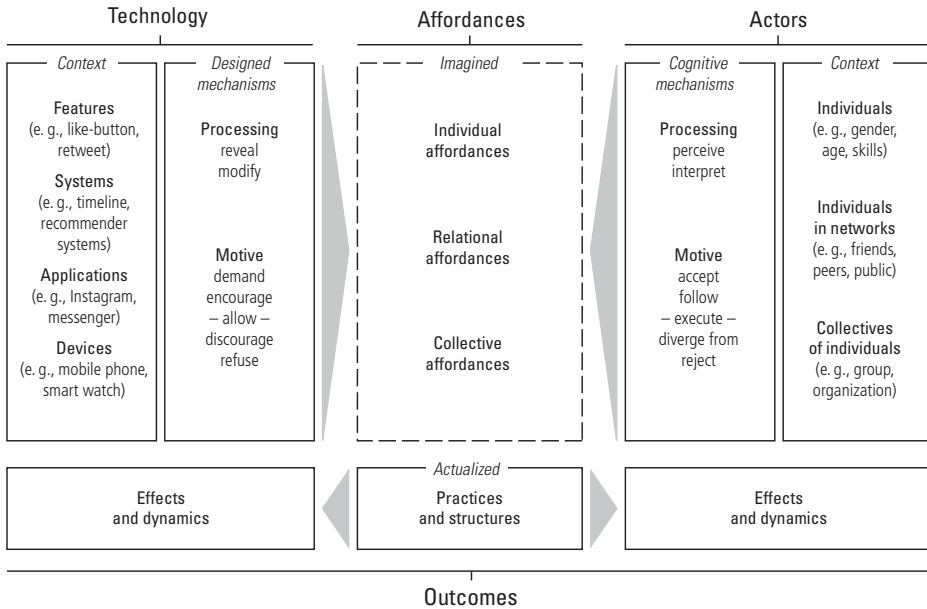
consistencies can be exemplified using “one of the most popular presumed affordances, particularly regarding social media sites” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 42): visibility. Originally, visibility has been understood as a potential outcome of the affordance scalability (boyd, 2008). Later it has been assessed as an affordance of social media sites referring to the “potential audience who can bear witness” (boyd, 2014, p. 11) or as an affordance of social media allowing users to display personal information and to perceive information about others (Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Simultaneously, visibility has been operationalized restrictively to perceiving the activities of others on social media (Manata & Spottswood, 2021; Rice et al., 2017). In addition to this variety of conceptions, there is even disagreement whether visibility is an affordance in the first place. Evans et al. (2017, p. 40), for instance, argued that visibility is neither a feature, an object, nor an outcome and can be assessed as an affordance reflecting “the relational link among the object, user, and outcomes.” In contrast, Volkoff and Strong (2017) understood visibility as a state that blurs action potential and outcomes and masks both actions and possible actors (in this case, provider and receiver of information). Thus, they reject visibility as an affordance and rather understand it as an outcome.

In the remainder of this article, an affordance framework is introduced that contributes to a better understanding of the conceptual work on affordances in general and promotes more precise use of concepts and terms in social media research.

4 An integrated affordance framework

This section outlines an affordance framework that integrates introduced conceptual work to convey the key aspects of an affordance perspective and facilitate access to the related concepts and literature. Affordances are conceptualized as abstract opportunities for action that are distinct from features and outcomes, as suggested by Evans et al. (2017). That understanding simplifies the simultaneous consideration of both technology (how

Figure 1: Integrated affordance framework to approach technology and social media use



Note: The upper part of the framework centers on imagined affordances entailing the relation between technology and actors, emphasizing the relational and abstract nature of affordances (Gibson, 1979; Nagy & Neff, 2015, 2023; Shaw, 2017). Contingent on both contexts (Davis, 2020; Ilten, 2015; Postigo, 2016) and mechanisms (Costa, 2018; Davis, 2020; Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Gaver, 1991; Gibson, 1979; Norman, 2013), affordances emerge that can be identified on several levels: individual affordances primarily relate to the individual actor (Leonardi, 2013; Turner & Turner, 2002), relational affordances encompass communication affordances or social affordances (Hutchby, 2001; Wellman, 2001), and collective affordances are considered if collectives are the unit of collective action (Leonardi, 2013; Turner & Turner, 2002; Vaast et al., 2017; Weichold & Thonhauser, 2020). In the lower part of the framework, outcomes emerge from the actualization of affordances (Evans et al., 2017; Volkoff & Strong, 2017) in terms of practices (e.g., Duffy & Chan, 2019; Triggs et al., 2019) and structures (boyd, 2008, 2011) that in turn affect technology and designed mechanisms as well as actors and cognitive mechanisms through effects and dynamics (Abidin, 2021; boyd, 2008, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

do technological artifacts introduce, impact, and provide such opportunities) and the actor (how does an actor perceive, interpret, and evaluate such opportunities). To adhere to Gibson’s (1979) view of affordances as a relational construct constituted by both environment and actors, both the functional and relational aspects of technology are considered as well as the perception and interpretation of actions by actors (Hutchby, 2001).

Figure 1 depicts the integrated affordance framework that understands an affordance as an abstract opportunity of action that is constituted in technological and social contexts, contingent on designed and cognitive mechanisms, and differentiated from its actualization as outcomes that affect both technology and actors. For clarity, relevant literature is not displayed in the framework itself but referenced below, where the framework

is explained in brief (see note in Figure 1). In the following, the components of the framework are discussed in detail and illustrated with examples in social media use. Terms that are depicted in Figure 1 will be emphasized through italics when first used.

4.1 Technology

The *context* of technology is advancing previous work (Ilten, 2015; Postigo, 2016) to consider a continuum of single features (e.g., a like-button), systems (e.g., recommender systems), applications (e.g., Instagram), and devices (e.g., mobile phone). The purpose of the technological context is to explicitly distinguish technological properties from affordances (Evans et al., 2017) and to take into account that affordances can be related to multiple levels of scale (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015).

Designed mechanisms are located between technology and affordances and reflect the intentional design embedded in technology (Davis, 2020; Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Norman, 2013) or even non-human agency (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Following Davis (2020), the framework presumes the two-sided nature of affordances entailing enablement and constraint and emphasizes the intentional design behind both using the term *motive*. Thus, technology not only allows but also encourages and demands, as well as discourages or refuses certain actions. While a feature to post a picture on a social media platform might encourage the user to tag people in the picture, it might discourage the user from uploading pictures that show certain content or even refuse the upload of too many pictures in a certain time frame. Technological *processing* on the other hand reveals and modifies affordances and related motives. Properties of social media technology for instance, determine if and how affordances are imagined and actualized through revealed information, reflecting what Norman (2013) referred to as signifiers. While motives determine if an action is allowed (or refused), signifiers communicate where (and how) the action should (or should not) occur. Notifications, for example, remind users about the opportunities for action at a given time (e.g., to consume new content in a feed). Additionally, technology directly modifies affordances, congruent with motives. Algorithms, for example, have a considerable impact on the affordances of social media applications. They determine which recent contacts are highlighted, what content is suggested, and which contacts get notified about posted content. Particularly, affordances that are modified by algorithms therefore might be more or less perceived and understood by users (Bucher, 2017), depending on whether and how clearly they are revealed by signifiers.

4.2 Actors

The *context* of actors distinguishes three situations in which individuals act. First, individuals might be situated on their own and interact with technology independent of others. They engage with technology depending on their personal dispositions such as gen-

der, age, and skills. Second, individuals are connected with others and act in networks constituted apart from technology (e.g., friendship circles) or within technology (e.g., connections on social network platforms). In that case, individuals often do not act on their own but in relation to at least one other actor (e.g., indicating social behavior or communication). Finally, individuals are more explicitly connected in collectives through cooperation toward shared engagement, goals, or outcomes. Here, not the individual but the collective of individuals is in focus and “emergent behavior is fundamentally contingent upon the interacting individuals engaged in the collective, whose actions both shape and are shaped by the collective action” (Weichold & Thonhauser, 2020, p. 2). Collectives might entail companies, interest groups, or political movements.

Cognitive mechanisms relate to cognitive and emotional processes that precede and complement interaction with technology. Building on Davis (2020) and mirroring the technological mechanisms of revealing and modifying, such mechanisms entail *processing* in the form of actors’ perception and interpretation. The integration of cognitive aspects reflects Norman’s (2013) emphasis on perception and incorporates the missing or misinterpretation of opportunities for action (Gaver, 1991). Additionally, it considers the role of personal or cultural backgrounds (Costa, 2018; Davis, 2020) that might impact if and how actors perceive and interpret processes and motives of technology (e.g., the skill level, social norms, or cultural values). In congruence with motives on the side of technology, the evaluation of opportunities for action can be distinguished along a spectrum of possible types of *motives* of actors as well. Actors can decide to accept or follow requests, execute what is allowed, and diverge from or reject what technology encourages or demands. This distinction highlights the actor’s opportunities beyond the guidance of designed mechanisms and reflects the numerous studies demonstrating users’ non-conformity with what is seemingly encouraged by systems and features (Costa, 2018; Duffy & Chan, 2019; Triggs et al., 2019). Additionally, it incorporates the complete rejection of applications or devices and,

therefore, allows the inclusion of non-users and non-use as an expression of user agency (Chib, Ang, Ibasco, & Nguyen, 2021) on a conceptual level.

4.3 Affordances

In accordance with the context of actors and summarizing previously established classifications, three general categories of affordances are distinguished: individual, relational, and collective affordances. *Individual affordances* refer to opportunities for action that can be actualized by an individual independent from others and whose outcomes, for the most part, affect the individual itself. They reflect the affordances of individual user tasks introduced by Turner and Turner (2002) and Leonardi's (2013) individualized affordances. As such, they can be located on multiple levels of technology (e.g., update profile information, screening recommended content, passing time on Instagram or the mobile phone). *Relational affordances* refer to opportunities for action, whose actualization depends on at least one other actor and whose outcomes might affect the acting individual and others. They entail opportunities for social and communicative actions and thus represent social (Wellman et al., 2003) or communicative affordances (Hutchby, 2001). Such relational opportunities for action can be investigated on multiple levels of technology as well. For example, a heart button allows a single communicative act, retweets the diffusion of information among multiple actors, and applications and devices the access to one's personal network. *Collective affordances* refer to opportunities for action whose actualization depends on a coordinated effort toward a shared engagement or outcome within groups, organizations, or communities (Weichold & Thonhauser, 2020). They entail collective or shared affordances (Leonardi, 2013), connective affordances in the political realm (Vaast et al., 2017), or even cultural affordances on a societal level (Turner & Turner, 2002). On a small scale, collective affordances can be actualized through features and systems (e.g., group chats or subreddits), or applications (e.g., Slack or multiplayer games). It has to be noted that collective affordances do not reflect opportunities for action of single individuals but

rather opportunities for action of collectives constituted by individuals (e.g., to organize or to implement a shared agenda). Collective affordances therefore do not only depend on two or more individuals but "depend upon an agential system beyond individual organisms" (Weichold & Thonhauser, 2020, p. 7).

Following Nagy and Neff (2015), all opportunities for action are understood as *imagined affordances*, incorporating intentions, expectations, and perceptions of designers and actors. Affordances, therefore, exist before and without their actualization (Volkoff & Strong, 2017). The relational and variable nature of imagined affordances is particularly emphasized by including designed and cognitive mechanisms. While technology's designed processing and actors' internal processing are predominantly relevant in the constitution of imagined affordances, motives on both sides are rather important toward their actualization. However, only the interplay of all four aspects comprehensively describes what precedes the actualization of affordances. For example, a social network platform encourages a user to indicate a relation status toward another user, using a tailored notification that reveals how easy it is to accomplish and how useful the information is to others. This relational affordance, however, is modified to the effect that all other actors in a personal network are notified about its actualization. Let us assume the encouragement is perceived, and the modifying mechanism is known to the actor from experience or signifiers. If both are interpreted as intrusive and therefore rejected, outcomes emerge that entail practices bypassing that opportunity for action. In contrast to Jones' (2020) argument, one cannot deduce that therefore the affordance never existed. A different user, or the same user under other circumstances, might accept the encouragement and indicate the relation status.

Although the separation into individual, relational, and collective affordances can guide the conceptual focus or the operationalization of concrete affordances, it cannot fully reflect overlaps between categories. For example, an individual affordance (e.g., to upload a profile picture) might entail a relational component (e.g., to convey a certain

image to others) and a collective component (e.g., to impact public opinion through a uniform profile picture representing a political movement).

4.4 Outcomes

Following Evans et al. (2017), outcomes are distinct from imagined affordances and understood as their actualization. The framework distinguishes between practices and structures as well as effects and dynamics that might affect technology and related designed mechanisms, as well as actors and their cognitive mechanisms. *Practices* are the direct consequence of the actualization of individual affordances and reflect all possible individual acts (e.g., use of a feature or using an application). They affect actors on the individual level, embedded in the term effects. In addition to achieving or missing the individual target outcome of the action and a variety of unintended effects, practices might also affect future cognitive processing or motives regarding the use of technology. The often overlooked opposite direction (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) is covered as well insofar as the accumulation of practices among certain actors can affect technology and its design mechanisms. While a feature that is missed or never used might get removed from an application, algorithms continuously consider practices to reveal or modify affordances adaptively. Therefore, how users' practices inform algorithms might be understood as something users afford to platforms (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

Structures reflect the accumulation of actualized relational and collective affordances (e.g., friendship or communication networks on social network platforms). They can have effects on individual actors, their cognitive processing as well as technology and its mechanisms. Additionally, they can moderate the impact of individual practices and perpetuate or reinforce certain effects over time, reflected in the term dynamics. Research examining structures and their influence on individual practices can be located here. Notably, this focus on structures and their dynamics, as popularized by boyd (2008), can be followed apart from an affordance approach, as was recently demonstrated with the investigation of refracted publics

and their dynamics (Abidin, 2021). To incorporate structures and dynamics into an affordance perspective would require conceptualizing them as outcomes of affordances, not as affordances themselves.

How outcomes impact technology and actors, as well as the designed and cognitive mechanisms, emphasizes the dynamic (Hutchby, 2001) and interdependent (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015) nature of affordances. The framework thus encompasses how the engagement of certain actors regarding mechanisms of a particular application might affect the variety of other applications or their features (e.g., the adoption of the popular story function of Snapchat by Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok). Moreover, such outcomes might also impact the future interaction with technology of users or non-users.

5 Discussion and implications

What has driven the application and advancement of the affordance concept in technology and communication literature can be considerably explained with disagreement and definitional confusion regarding the appropriate attention toward technological properties or individual practices and outcomes (Lievrouw, 2014; Nagy & Neff, 2015). This was particularly the case in social media research, where influential conceptual work focused on the properties of interaction structures online (boyd, 2008) and scholars subsequently adapted and developed concepts to better reflect user agency. However, these theoretical advancements have been far more concerned with rethinking the related outcomes or the cognitive processes and practices of users than the concept of affordances itself exemplified through concepts such as context collusion (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014) or imagined audiences (Litt, 2012). Moreover, recent contributions have further distanced the affordance approach from its abstract origins and focused on actualized affordances regarding practices (Costa, 2018; Jones, 2020). In doing so, important contributions that emphasize the relational aspect of affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015, 2023), distinguish between affordances and outcomes

(Volkoff & Strong, 2017), and consider the reciprocal relation between technology and users (Davis, 2020; Shaw, 2017) or even consider non-human agency (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), have been neglected.

The aim of the present article was to outline an affordance framework that reemphasizes the relational and abstract nature of the concept by strictly conceptualizing affordances as opportunities for action. Drawing on important conceptual work (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Davis, 2020; Shaw, 2017), the framework reflects the technological and social contexts where opportunities for action occur and the constitution of affordances through designed mechanisms on the side of technology and the cognitive mechanisms on the side of actors. Furthermore, it distinguishes abstract affordances from their actualization regarding outcomes such as practices and structures (Evans et al., 2017; Volkoff & Strong, 2017). Although technological mechanisms and actors' cognitive mechanisms can be investigated independently, the framework emphasizes that neither can be ignored when affordances are of interest or when an affordance approach is used to investigate outcomes. The notion of imagined affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015, 2023) embodies this premise and cements the relational and abstract nature of the concept. Therefore, it prevents the term affordances from being restrictively used in respect to "what technology allows" or "how users interact with technology."

While the presented framework facilitates the understanding of affordances and informs on relevant literature, four implications can be derived to guide future theoretical and empirical work using an affordance approach. First, it seems crucial to maintain affordances as a relational concept that links technology and actors and therefore "points both ways, to the environment and to the observer" (Gibson, 1979, p. 129). On the one hand, affordances must be conceptualized as opportunities for action that are simultaneously constituted by technology *and* actors but might exist apart from intentions of designers as well as apart from existing practices. Only such a relational understanding allows to consider a design-oriented perspective (Davis, 2020; Davis & Chouinard, 2016;

Norman, 2013) in terms of designed mechanisms and at the same time recognize actors' cognitive mechanisms (Costa, 2018; Gaver, 1991; Gibson, 1979). Given the increasing relevancy of non-human agency in communication theory (Jansen, 2016) and its crucial role in today's digital media (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), an in-depth discussion on hidden, revealed, and modified affordances as well as the potentially incomplete perception or understanding on the side of users (Bucher, 2017; Gruber et al., 2021) seems much needed. Algorithms such as recommender systems (Karimi, Jannach, & Jugovac, 2018) are in part designed to achieve a certain goal (e.g., view time, clicks) based on user's or similar users' previous practices, while these practices themselves are predicated on the users' knowledge and attitudes toward such systems (for an overview, see Mitova et al., 2022). Therefore, related affordances cannot be understood without acknowledging that reciprocal relation between technology and actors. Concepts such as Bucher's (2017) imaginary algorithms might prove useful to acknowledge the interplay between technology and users through affordances that are based on or modified by algorithms.

Second, and extending the reasoning above, it seems necessary to clearly distinguish abstract affordances from their concrete actualization. Although it continues to be valuable to investigate individual practices and emerging communication structures online and even acknowledge them affecting both technology and actors, an affordance approach is only applicable if practices and structures are considered as outcomes. Approaches that aimed to better account for user agency (e.g., Costa, 2018; Jones 2020) highlight relevant aspects that oppose deterministic interpretations of affordances related to structures. However, to blur affordances and practices (Costa, 2018) or deny the existence of affordances if no practices can be observed (Jones, 2020), similarly misconstrues outcomes as affordances and arguably rather disregards relevant conceptual work acknowledging the role of technology than adding insight to the role of the actor. First, a conceptualization of affordances too close to their actualization fundamentally complicates the consideration of designed

mechanism because such mechanisms may very well exist or are perceived by some actors even without any related practices taking place. Second, algorithmic systems where technological mechanisms are continuously updated and adapted are particularly hard to conceptualize in terms of affordances when only the eventual practices are considered, and the reciprocity between technology and actors via effects and mechanisms is not taken into account. Third, practices are usually understood as the interaction of end-users (i. e., social media users) with technology. A too strong focus on such practices thus also runs the risk of ignoring the fact that, especially in the case of social media, other actors are also involved, such as influencers, advertisers, or even the platforms themselves, rendering the question “who affords what, to whom” (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 28) increasingly complex. Consequently, too much emphasis on practices of end-users in conceptual work on social media affordances would make any further investigation of additional actors difficult, if not impossible. Precisely because the temptation is great to link affordances to the utilization of most popular features (e. g., the story function) or the diffusion of types of content (e. g., ephemeral content) across platforms, it is important to maintain a clear distinction between affordances and outcomes as proposed by Evans et al. (2017) and emphasized in the presented framework.

Third, and related to an empirical application of an affordance perspective, scholars might benefit from reflecting on the technological and social contexts in which they are investigating affordances. Regarding the technological context, it might prove useful to analyze the affordances of individual features, applications, or devices in isolation. The affordance of reaching specific others with content, for instance, can be assigned to a specific feature (e. g., Tweet), a system (e. g., promoted, or algorithmic curation), an application (e. g., a messenger service), or a device (e. g., mobile phone). However, some scholars propose to approach affordances more holistically by acknowledging that people understand affordances as “nested layers at different levels of scale” (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015, p. 2). Given that social media

platforms are often used in parallel (Horvát & Hargittai, 2021; Waterloo, Baumgartner, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2018) and they increasingly overlap regarding features (e. g., ephemeral stories on Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok) speaks for such a perspective. Independent of the approach, it is important, however, that affordances and analysis units of the technological context are clearly distinguished, as has already been discussed in detail (Evans et al., 2017; Volkoff & Strong, 2017). In terms of the individual context, it is relevant to decide whether the actor in question is conceptualized as a single individual, an individual that is integrated into a network of actors through particular relations, or as a collective of individuals that is connected through shared engagement, goals, or outcomes. Often, this is not a given circumstance but a choice of perspective that comes with consequences for the conceptual approach and the analysis strategy. Given the increasing interest in the particularities of networked communication structures online (Bode, 2016; Thorson & Wells, 2016) and online communities (Abidin, 2021) it might be of value to investigate affordances beyond the individual acting on its own and rather investigate individuals as networked actors and collectives perceiving and enacting opportunities for action online. The introduced framework not only distinguishes the relevant contexts, but also distinguishes the relevant types of affordances of interest. Relational affordances might entail social or communication affordances that can be conceptualized and operationalized relationally. The rather ambivalent affordance of visibility for instance, might be investigated with a focus on the relational opportunity to perceive, address, or reach specific actors, clearly specifying the actor in question (the provider or receiver of information) and allowing to investigate both the role of specific features (direct message, story, post, or streams) and particular contacts (e. g., friends, peers, family, popular people). Collective affordances might be of interest across a wide spectrum of goal-oriented collectives from individuals in group chats to political movements on social media platforms. In order to approach such affordances, both the technological as

well as the social context need to be clarified, as suggested by the framework.

Finally, it seems relevant to establish and apply a terminology that best preserves the underlying conceptual understanding of affordances as relational and abstract opportunities for action. In agreement with Jones (2020), it seems helpful to use verbs and their “-ing” labels, emphasizing the potential action and the actor in question (e.g., perceiving, addressing, reaching), rather than “-ability”-nouns, that can be associated with content and features (e.g., scalability or searchability) or leave room for interpretation regarding the actor or outcome in focus (e.g., visibility). Such a differentiation seems particularly important in social media research where users are involved in their double role as recipients and communicators, and actors beyond the end-user and even non-human actors might be considered (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

With these conceptional, empirical, and terminological implications in mind, opportunities for action on social media can be investigated as individual, relational, or collective affordances, that ultimately result in practices and structures with related effects and dynamics, when actualized. The introduced framework not only provides a useful overview of the theoretical background to consider when applying the concept of affordances but also allows researchers to identify and convey their research focus within this valuable and rich perspective.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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BOOK REVIEW

Marlis Prinzing & Roger Blum (Hrsg.). Handbuch Politischer Journalismus. Köln: Herbert von Halem, 2021, 912 Seiten. ISBN 978-3-86962-240-8

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Marlis Prinzing und Roger Blum haben das «Handbuch Politischer Journalismus» herausgegeben, weil es bisher keine vergleichbare Publikation gab, obwohl der politische Journalismus ein zentrales Feld der Berichterstattung ist. Das Handbuch versteht sich als Brücke zwischen aktueller Forschung und Praxis. Es enthält Beiträge aus unterschiedlichen Disziplinen und gibt länderübergreifende Einblicke in die vielfältigen Arbeitsfelder des politischen Journalismus – mit Schwerpunkten auf Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz. Diese Zusammenführung unterschiedlicher Perspektiven verdeutlicht den integrativen Anspruch des 900 Seiten starken Werks. Es hat sich zum Ziel gesetzt, «den politischen Journalismus in modernen [...] europäischen [...] Demokratien einmal gesamthaft darzustellen» (S. 17). Dies war, wie Prinzing und Blum in ihrer Einleitung einräumen, ein arbeitsintensives Unterfangen, das sich aber – wie der Erfolg zeigt – gelohnt hat. Das Handbuch gewinnt sein Publikum in der Medien- und Kommunikationswissenschaft, in der Medienpraxis und Politik, in der PR- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit sowie in der Verwaltung und den Staatskanzleien. Der Erfolg gründet in verschiedenen Stärken des Buches.

Die erste Stärke des Handbuchs liegt im eingelösten Anspruch, einen umfassenden Überblick über die verschiedenen Facetten des politischen Journalismus zu geben. Es erläutert die Funktionen, die Geschichte und die klassischen Themenfelder des Politikjournalismus. Es thematisiert dessen Rollen, Methoden, Quellen, Berichterstattungsformen, Anlässe, Beziehungsnetze, Ausbildungswege, Publikumswirkungen sowie Schwächen und Herausforderungen.

Die zweite Stärke ist der interdisziplinäre Ansatz. Das Handbuch berücksichtigt verschiedene wissenschaftliche Disziplinen und Forschungsfelder, wie Kommunikationswissenschaft, Politikwissenschaft, Journalistik und Politische Kommunikation, um ein umfassendes Verständnis des politischen Journalismus zu ermöglichen. Der Herausgeberin und dem Herausgeber ist es gelungen, Expertinnen und Experten von vielen namhaften Instituten für das Handbuch zu gewinnen. Aus der Perspektive der allgemeinen Kommunikationswissenschaft beleuchtet beispielsweise Heinz Bonfadelli (Zürich) die theoretischen Grundlagen, Joachim Trebbe (Berlin) die Rolle des Fernsehens, Julia Metag (Münster) die Rolle der sozialen Medien und Wolfgang Schweiger (Hohenheim) die Rolle anderer Online-Formate für den politischen Journalismus. Katharina Kleinen-von Königslöw (Hamburg) erläutert Bezüge zur politischen Satire, Benjamin Krämer (München) zum politischen Populismus und Hans Mathias Kepplinger (Mainz) zu Medienereignissen. Marcus Maurer und Simon Kruschinski (ebenfalls Mainz) erläutern die Wirkungen des politischen Journalismus. Als Vertreter der Politikwissenschaft setzt sich beispielsweise Thomas Meyer (Dortmund) mit dem Rudelverhalten im Politikjournalismus auseinander und Daniel Kübler (Zürich) widmet sich der Berichterstattung über Volksabstimmungen. Als Vertreter der Journalistik erläutert beispielsweise Klaus-Dieter Altmeppen (Eichstätt) Berichterstattungskonzepte im Politikjournalismus, Markus Beiler (Leipzig) Nähe und Distanz zwischen politischen und journalistischen Akteuren, Guido Keel (Winterthur) Persönlichkeitsmerkmale im Politikjournalismus und Colin Porlezza (Lu-



gano) den Trend zur Automatisierung. Hinzu kommen Expertinnen und Experten aus den Bereichen der Medienethik, darunter Christian Schicha (Erlangen-Nürnberg) zu Inszenierungen und Marlis Prinzing (Köln) zu Rechten und Pflichten des politischen Journalismus; sowie aus dem Bereich der politischen Kommunikation, etwa Gerhard Vowe (Düsseldorf) zu Politikbegriffen, Olaf Jandura (Düsseldorf) zur Parlamentsberichterstattung, Patrick Donges (Leipzig) zur Parteienberichterstattung, Stefan Geiss (Trondheim) zu politischen Talkshows und Melanie Magin (ebenfalls Trondheim) zur Wahlberichterstattung.

Eine dritte Stärke des Buches liegt in der Auseinandersetzung mit aktuellen Herausforderungen des politischen Journalismus. Hier sticht vor allem das Schlusskapitel hervor, in dem Vertreterinnen und Vertreter aus Wissenschaft (Bernd Blöbaum, Margreth Lünenborg, Frank Marcinkowski, Michael Meyen, Christoph Neuberger, Barbara Pfetsch, Bernhard Pörksen, Siegfried Weischenberg und Hartmut Wessler) und Medienpraxis (Alexandra Förderl-Schmid von der *Süddeutschen Zeitung*, Christof Moser vom *Republik-Magazin*, Ralf Schuler von der *Bild-Zeitung* sowie der ehemalige SRG-Generaldirektor Roger de Weck) ihre Einschätzungen abgeben. Zusammengefasst soll politischer Journalismus in einer demokratischen Gesellschaft relevante Informationen vermitteln, Transparenz und Orientierung bieten, Vielfalt abbilden und auf Unparteilichkeit achten. Er soll Objektivität wahren, die Mächtigen kritisch hinterfragen und kontrollieren und mit innovativen Formaten ein breites Publikum erreichen. Zu den aktuellen Defiziten des politischen Journalismus zählen nach diesen Aussagen mangelndes Zuhören, fehlende Vielfalt, zu starke Orientierung an Klickraten und zu grosse Nähe zu politischen Entscheidungsträgern sowie allgemein wirtschaftliche Zwänge. Letztere führen zu mangelnden Ressourcen für die Recherche, zur Zunahme von Falschmeldungen und schliesslich zu einer Verschlechterung der Informationsversorgung der Bürgerinnen und Bürger. Als weitere Probleme identifiziert werden eine ausgeprägte Einseitigkeit, eine mangelnde Trennung von Nachricht und Meinung sowie eine moralische

Aufladung und ein pädagogischer Duktus, der zu Populismusvorwürfen führt.

Die vierte Stärke des Handbuchs liegt in seinem Praxisbezug. Viele Beiträge sind aus der Anwendungsperspektive geschrieben und nutzen konkrete Fallstudien und Beispiele aus der realen Welt, um die Inhalte greifbarer zu machen. Ein Drittel aller Beiträge stammt von journalistischen Praktikerrinnen und Praktikern, darunter bekannte Namen aus der deutschen und schweizerischen Medienszene. Aus Deutschland sind zum Beispiel Heribert Prantl (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*) zum politischen Kommentar, Marietta Slomka (*ZDF heute journal*) zum politischen Interview, Helge Fuhrst (*ARD-Tagesthemen*) zu Chefredaktoren, Jörg Schönenborn (WDR-Programmdirektor) zu Wahlen oder Oliver Schröm (*ARD-Panorama*) zu investigativen Recherchen vertreten. Aus der Schweiz berichten Urs Leuthard (*SRF-Tageschau*) über Newsroom-Reformen, Fredy Gsteiger (SRF-Radio) über diplomatische Konferenzen, Eric Gujer (*NZZ*) über Chefredaktoren, Jean-Martin Büttner (*Tages-Anzeiger*) über Demonstrationen, Susanne Wille (*SRF-10 vor 10*) über Live-Übertragungen oder Kurt Pelda (*Weltwoche, Tages-Anzeiger*) über Kriegsberichterstattung. Diese Anwendungskapitel bieten interessante Einblicke hinter die Kulissen und wissen im Idealfall – beispielsweise bei Schröm oder Pelda – mit sehr reflektierten und aufschlussreichen Einschätzungen aufzuwarten.

Eine fünfte Stärke liegt in der Problemorientierung. Neben vielen deskriptiv-medienkundlichen Kapiteln, die eher Servicecharakter haben, sticht eine Gruppe von Kapiteln mit aktuellen Problemaufrissen instruktiv hervor. Dazu gehören eine Diskussion der Staatsabhängigkeit und Parteilichkeit der Medien (Melanie Magin), der Boulevardisierung (Hans-Jürgen Arlt), der Skandalisierung (Hanne Detel), der Intimisierung (Patrik Etinger) sowie der Polarisierung und Diffamierung (Wolfgang Hagen). Politischer Journalismus kann auch durch PR-Determinismus (René Gossenbacher), Elitenintegration (Olaf Hoffjann), Stereotypisierung (Martina Thiele), Geschlechterdisparität (Anja Maier), Verschwörungstheorien (Uwe Krüger) oder Ressourcenmangel (Sonja Schwetje) gefährdet oder degeneriert sein.

Eine sechste Stärke liegt in der ergänzenden internationalen Dimension. Zum einen bietet das Handbuch in verschiedenen Kapiteln Einblicke in die Arbeit politischer Journalistinnen und Journalisten in Medienhauptstädten wie Berlin, Brüssel, Paris oder Washington. Zum anderen enthält es Länderkapitel zu folgenden Mediensystemen: Deutschland, Österreich, die Schweiz, Liechtenstein, Luxemburg, Frankreich, Belgien, die Niederlande, Dänemark, Schweden, Polen, Tschechien, die Slowakei, Ungarn, Slowenien, Italien, Grossbritannien, den USA und Russland.

Eine siebte Stärke liegt in der Autorität der Herausgeberin Marlis Prinzing und des Herausgebers Roger Blum. Beide bringen ihre langjährige Erfahrung und Expertise in das Buch ein. Sie schlagen folgende Definition von Politikjournalismus vor:

Es ist jener Journalismus, der sich entweder engagiert oder kritisch-distanziert mit den Rahmenbedingungen, Absichten, Ereignissen, Handlungen, Themen und Akteuren des politisch-administrativen Systems und politischer Bürgeraktionen befasst und die Informationen darüber dem Publikum über Kanäle aktueller und öffentlicher Medien so rasch, so kompetent, so verständlich und so unterhaltend wie möglich vermittelt, in Zusammenhänge einordnet und kommentiert. Jene, die politischen Journalismus betreiben, werden dadurch selber politisch aktiv, als sie analysierend, Position beziehend, alarmierend, seismografisch oder skandalisierend in den politischen Prozess eingreifen. (S. 21)

In einem eigenen Essay über den politischen Journalismus zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts analysiert Blum den politischen

Krisenkontext, die zunehmende Elitenintegration zwischen Politik und Journalismus im Westen und die wachsende Staatsabhängigkeit der Medien ausserhalb des Westens. Den deutschsprachigen Nachrichtenmedien attestiert er ein unverändertes Bekenntnis zur Kontrollfunktion und zum investigativen Journalismus.

Eine letzte Stärke ist die Zugänglichkeit. Das Handbuch ist in einem verständlichen und klaren Stil geschrieben, der es für das Fachpublikum, für Studierende und Laien leicht zugänglich macht. Dies macht das «Handbuch Politischer Journalismus» zu einer fundierten und nützlichen Ressource für alle, die sich für politische Berichterstattung interessieren oder in diesem Bereich arbeiten wollen.

Kein Buch ist ganz ohne Schwächen, und man merkt dem Handbuch gelegentlich die Mühe an, die es dem Herausgeberpaar, aber auch den Mitwirkenden gekostet haben muss, diese Mammutaufgabe zu bewältigen. Weder am Ende der Unterkapitel noch am Ende des Buches finden sich Synthesen, die das Erarbeitete auf ein bestimmtes Ziel hin bündeln. Man merkt einigen zentralen Kapiteln, wie etwa dem von Blum «über den politischen Journalismus zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts», an, dass sie bereits ein wenig an Aktualität eingebüsst haben. Dies ist bei Projekten dieser Dimension wohl ebenso unvermeidlich wie kleinere Inkonsistenzen in der Herangehensweise der Kapitel. Die enorme Breite der behandelten Themen führt zudem zwangsläufig zu Kompromissen in der Detailtiefe der Kapitel. Diese kleinen Schwächen schmälern den Wert des Buches jedoch kaum und man wünscht dem «Handbuch Politischer Journalismus» viele weitere Leserinnen und Leser.

BOOK REVIEW

Gianluigi Negro. *Le voci di Pechino: Come i media hanno costruito l'identità cinese*. Roma: LUISS University Press, 2022, pp. 192. ISBN 978-88-610579-0-6

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Gianluigi Negro's *Le voci di Pechino: Come i media hanno costruito l'identità cinese* (Beijing's voices: How the media constructed Chinese identity) presents a much welcome intervention at the intersection of Sinology and Media Studies from a historiographical perspective. By tracking the diachronic shifts and continuities across different communication technologies, practices, and policies in the People's Republic of China (PRC), the book develops a systematic understanding of the role of media in the construction of modern Chinese national identity. In doing so, it offers a valuable conceptual map for keeping track of the different actors and tensions that have shaped the Chinese media landscape from the rooftop loudspeakers of the Mao era to the Web 2.0 of today.

On the background of late Xi Jinping's autocratic push, the rabid proliferation of Wolf Warrior-like nationalism, and the steady flow of "good China stories" across all sorts of communication outlets, it would be easy and convenient to cast the whole of Chinese media as one broadcasting monolith geared at disseminating the party-state's directives. Yet, as this book's eight agile chapters show, this would be a simplification. While it remains true that the history of the PRC and its current political arrangement have characterized the country's media in their own distinctive ways, these emerge less as a uniform apparatus than a layered ecosystem in which political directives are negotiated with the demands of the market; foreign capital interacts with domestic investments; and Hollywood's latest movies coexist with state-sanctioned productions and national blockbusters. It is to eschew such simplifications and the ever-present scholarly vice of attributing "Chinese characteristics" to any

phenomenon originating from this fabricated entity we call "China" that Negro begins his analysis of the Chinese media system with a useful reflection on method (in chapter 2). Undergirded by solid familiarity with its variegated object of study as well as command of Chinese-language literature on the matter, Negro's "multifocal historical approach" succeeds in the goal of "opening up the past" as an interpretative horizon for understanding the present and the future of Chinese society, without falling into the traps of technological determinism and reventant orientalism. The result of this approach is, as Negro argues, a "de-Westernized" history of Chinese media that productively intertwines material and technological concerns, administrative practices, socio-political contexts, and the changing epistemological valences of the notion of media communication itself.

Negro's methodological considerations lay the premises for a necessary reflection (presented in chapter 3) on the key concepts needed for defining a history of media in the PRC. Taking the foundation of the socialist republic as its point of departure, the book triangulates Chinese media in terms of "communication," "system," and "propaganda." By focusing on the shifts in the idea of communication from pre-Yan'an *jiaotong* (interactive communication) to post-1949 *zhuanbo* (top-down dissemination) in the early years of the PRC, the book brings attentions to the early influence of Western models in the development of Chinese media, but more importantly to the gradual adoption of Soviet blueprints after 1949. The PRC's geopolitical alignment with the USSR led to a systematization of the media apparatus across a constellation of bureaus and organs under the umbrella of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Propagan-



da Department, whose function was and is to shape public opinion and advance a coherent “collective vision” (*weiguan*) at the national, regional, and local level, according to the political leadership’s directives. This vision was the product of a propaganda (*xuanchuan*) project that was not limited in purpose to mass mobilization, but also included education, community building, and networking between the different layers of society. As Negro ultimately argues, while the processes of economic reform put into place by Deng Xiaoping from the late 1970s led to a progressive liberalization of the Chinese media ecosystem – and with it the transformation of the public from “citizens and spectators to users and consumers” (p. 49) – these foundational traits “continue to have a meaningful influence nowadays” (p. 65).

This system-oriented approach to Chinese media informs and is at the same time corroborated by the book’s three core chapters on the press and the radio (chapter 4), television and cinema (chapter 5), and the Internet (chapter 6). While – as the book’s structure suggests – each of these technologies could be considered as the most representative of one specific historical period (respectively the Mao era; the Deng era up to the third generation of the CCP leadership; and the post-Beijing Olympics globalized era), a closer look at their braided histories reveals, as Negro writes, “a continuity, rather than a discontinuity, in the evolution of China’s media system in the medium and long term” (p. 34). This continuity can be characterized as a forward-oriented circularity, to the extent that all these communication technologies were mobilized for showcasing to the national and international public what the new Chinese nation ought to be, while the idea of “new China” itself kept being updated: from the socialist project of Mao Zedong to the socialist market economy of Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, the economic superpower of Hu Jintao, and the ultranationalist autocracy of today. Like these different visions of the nation, the media technologies that portrayed them did not progressively replace each other, but rather engendered “a complex process of stratification, ever more global today” (p. 148).

The strength of the book lies then in its capacity to cut through this layered history to show how each new media technology became, upon its adoption, a locus of convergence between political aspirations, technological innovations, economic concerns, and international resonances. Although the central government’s ever-present preoccupation with cultural hegemony and national identity (which translate into the practice of propaganda) played a crucial role in these processes, Negro’s particular attention to the administrative aspects of media technology adoption highlights how such concerns have always been grounded in the coordination of managerial practices and the proper functioning of material infrastructures at all levels of the country’s configuration, from the newspaper distribution networks (which relied on the national postal service) and the “radio reception operators” of the post-liberation era; the central state’s systematic overview of the “many processes of commercialization, pluralization, and liberalization of the television sector” (p. 90) that have been taking place during the 1980s; to the CCP’s ongoing efforts at reining in the tumultuous development of the Chinese Internet since the early 2000s (for example via the China Internet Network Information Center or the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission recently created by Xi Jinping).

All these threads are brought together by Negro in the book’s final chapter, which is centered around the notion of media convergence – “the gradual coming together of different media technologies that once used to be distinct [...] brought forth by the digitalization of media content and the central role of the Internet” (pp. 128–129). While the concept of media convergence stems from Western media theory, Negro correctly points out that the equivalent term *ronghe* also plays an important role in relation to media policies in the text of the *12th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development* drafted in 2011, as well as in the *Guiding Principles for the Promotion of an Integrated Development of Traditional and Emerging Media* – a white paper published by the Chinese government in 2014. Although the notion of *ronghe* as media convergence explains well the general orientation of the Chinese media

landscape of today, one wishes here that the author did not follow (as an historian) the party line in such descriptively close fashion. In 2009, media scholar Yang Guobin described the Chinese Internet as a “contested” space in which the state’s official narration clashed with a new public sphere then in the making; to a certain extent, the same could be said of the Chinese media landscape as whole. In this respect, Negro’s insightful analysis would have further benefited from also exploring those minor media outlets that, by trying to advance counter-narrations to the party-state’s vulgate of new China, were by the latter obliterated – one can think here of the independent animation of Pi San; the queer web drama *Addicted* (*Shangyin*); or the progressive online media platform Bullog.cn

(*Niubo wang*). Were such “voices” brought into the conversation too, the reader would have better understood the topology of the grounds on which the party-state’s battle for cultural hegemony is being fought.

These marginal notes notwithstanding, Negro’s book succeeds in presenting a history of Chinese media on their own terms – one that does not pander to predictable yellow-perilist expectations; does not indulge in Cold-War reductions; nor does it flatten its object of study through a Western methodological perspective. In an (Italian) publishing market in which a phantasmatic “West” is continually staged against millenarian dragons and empires, Beijing’s voices are definitely worth listening to.

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