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INTERVIEW

Reflections on the social role of a changing journalism

An interview with Tim Vos

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Abstract

Journalism faces a gap between the legitimizing discourses of professionals and their daily practices, reflecting conflicts between economic and cultural capital. Tim Vos, a distinguished researcher at Michigan State University and a member of the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS), addresses this issue in an interview with *Revista Pauta Geral*. Among other topics, Vos connects the restoration of trust in journalism to a move away from commercial models and commends the growing academic influence in the field. He also examines the media ecosystems of the United States and Brazil, with a focus on political polarization and the impacts of digital platforms.

Keywords: Journalism. Social role. Tim Vos.

Reflexões sobre o papel social de um jornalismo em transformação: uma entrevista com Tim Vos

Resumo

O jornalismo enfrenta um hiato entre os discursos legitimadores dos profissionais e suas rotinas diárias, refletindo conflitos entre capital econômico e cultural. Tim Vos, renomado pesquisador da Michigan State University e membro da *Worlds of Journalism Study* (WJS), discute essa questão em entrevista à *Revista Pauta Geral*. Entre outros tópicos, o professor relaciona a recuperação da confiança no jornalismo ao afastamento do modelo comercial e elogia a crescente influência acadêmica no setor. Ele também explora os ecossistemas midiáticos dos Estados Unidos e Brasil, com ênfase para a polarização política e os impactos das plataformas digitais.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo. Papel social. Tim Vos.

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Introduction

In a field that is undergoing structural changes like journalism, in which certain institutional values circulate socially, often in a romanticized way, problematizing the tensions between the expectations created by professionals for their career and the concrete reality that these same actors face on a daily basis is a vast subject for scientific research. Beyond the potential frustrations with the occupation, the gap between a normative vision of the area and its manifestation as a daily practice reveals the capacity for adaptation and organicity of this activity in the face of different economic, historical and cultural contexts, from the Global North to the Global South, from liberal democracies to autocratic societies.

Immersed in these and other issues, renowned American researcher Tim Vos, a professor at Michigan State University's College of Communication Arts and Sciences and a member of the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS), a civil society organization that seeks to support academic research into the state of journalism in different countries, turns in this interview with **Revista Pauta Geral — Estudos em Jornalismo** (Pauta Geral Magazine — Studies in Journalism), to reflect on the social role of the craft in contemporary times. In the midst of a context of growing demands in the world of work, the researcher emphasizes that the professionals themselves use a legitimizing discourse about the social value of the activity, even if this does not coincide with their production routines. “I think it would be easy to come to the conclusion that journalists' discourses about their social roles are largely performative”, says the researcher, before stating that “this is an unduly cynical approach”. For him, among many aspects, this way of acting seems to be one of the counterweights that still balance the conflicts between economic capital and cultural, or journalistic, capital, something that, in his opinion, should be credited to university education. Without any intention of predicting the future, the interviewee bets that the recovery of trust in journalists will involve moving away from the commercial model.

Although he is skeptical about the actions taken so far to tackle the phenomenon of disinformation, such as the projects aimed at regulating digital platforms, Tim Vos celebrates the fact that “some of the most influential voices for change in journalism are now coming from within academia”. The argument even prompts him to point out the need to develop some collective research agendas, working on issues that are dear to the most diverse societies.

The interview also touched on other topics. Institutional restrictions, such as those faced by journalists forced into exile, like many Syrian professionals, and the challenges of

strengthening local news initiatives are some of them. In the latter case, Tim Vos establishes political and economic differences that mean that the idea of a “news desert” is relatively far removed from the North American reality. While the country's vast geographic territory, which he pointed out as one of the factors in media decentralization, is a characteristic that coincides with Brazil, on the other hand, the strong economic market and, especially, the high degree of autonomy of state governments are factors that diverge from the Brazilian reality. On the other hand, this doesn't mean that the US media ecosystem doesn't suffer from issues linked to the imperative of digital platforms. The polarization of political identities, on the right and left of the political spectrum, as the researcher points out, is a factor of attention for those seeking to understand the challenges facing contemporary journalism. Check it out.

When delving into the social roles of journalism, you argue that there's a gap between what the profession commits to normatively and what journalists actually deliver to the public. Given that the societal roles of journalism in democracies carry historical weight and considering the diverse political, cultural, and economic realities, there's ongoing discussion about disparities between what's commonly known as the Global North and Global South. In this context, it seems reasonable to think that there are core roles in journalism that have a certain universality. In countries like the United States and Brazil, both recently under the governance of far-right presidents, which of these roles has faced the most scrutiny and challenges? How do these differences impact the roles of journalism in these specific political landscapes?

The last complete data we have from the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS) have indeed shown that there are core journalistic roles that receive broad support from the Global North and Global South. These include commitments to notions of monitorial and interventionist journalism. I would caution though – as a member of the Worlds of Journalism project – that these are broad role orientations and that actual roles, as conceived and practiced by journalists on the frontlines of doing daily news work, have more nuance and elasticity than are captured in WJS surveys. When we interview journalists about their roles and how those role conceptions manifest – or don’t – in their work, we see journalists are quite adaptive to contexts (Raemy & Vos, 2021).

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So, there's a lot to unpack here. First, I think it's important that we be clear about what we mean by journalism's social roles. I tend to use the term 'role' when referring to journalists' emic, discursive construction of what they see as their normative obligations to society. I use 'role orientation' to refer to the etic approach, whereby researchers group a set of conceptually related roles under a broader label. Journalists talk about being watchdogs, mirrors, curators, and so on. These are emic labels. Journalists don't use terms like, disseminator or collaborator, and so on – these are etic labels. So, when we say that journalists in the Global North and South share certain role orientations, we should be aware that actual conceptions of roles can still vary from place to place and perhaps from news organization to news organization and individual to individual.

Which journalistic roles have faced the most scrutiny in places such as Brazil and the US is an empirical question that I don't have a sufficiently complete set of data to answer, but I think there are clues that researchers can look at.

Authoritarian movements – whether far-right or otherwise – have long construed journalists who perform analytical-deliberative, critical-monitorial, and advocative-radical role orientations as antagonistic forces (Farkas & Schou, 2024; McNair, 2006). These role orientations have been formed in the context democratic norms – norms that clash with authoritarian objectives (Vos, 2016). As long as journalists purport to be authoritative sources of truth, committed to empowering citizens with knowledge about the performance and fitness of those holding power, authoritarian power holders will seek to undercut journalism.

That being said, I think we need a collective research agenda that zeros in on how pressure is applied to journalists in democracies such as the US and Brazil, where far-right movements are active. Frank Russell and I (2019) have used a theoretical framework to identify how pressures can be regulative, normative, and cognitive and that actors can employ incentives that use coercive, moral, or remunerative means to achieve their ends. So, what the actual instances of these kinds of pressures in the two countries and how effective have they been. As we argue, journalists have mechanisms to resist pressure – publicity, norms, and procedures. But how have those mechanisms fared?

In the US there was the widely studied instance of news organizations coordinating an editorial campaign (publicity) to challenge then President Donald Trump's labelling of journalists as 'enemies of the people' and 'fake news' (Carlson, Robinson, & Lewis, 2021a; Koliska & Chadha, 2023; Lawrence & Moon, 2021; Moon & Lawrence, 2023) – a form of

cognitive pressure using mostly moral means (mostly moral outrage). But we can see in instances like this that journalists' resistance is tempered by their own norms – trying to avoid being a partisan actor themselves – and cognizant of their own economic fragility in a market system where playing the political middle ground was seen as a financial necessity. Again, we need more research here – beyond the few high-profile cases.

Similar to the United States, Brazil has witnessed a rise in attacks against journalists in recent years. How can we emphasize the significance of journalism and journalists without succumbing to the dilemma concerning social roles explored in your work? (Namely, the disparities between what journalism commits to normatively and what journalists actually deliver to the public.)

It's worth noting that journalists do indeed oftentimes perform the kind of journalism they aspire to. However, the findings that show a gap between ideals and practices has understandably gotten a lot of attention. But we need to be candid that the reasons for those gaps have been under-explored and under-theorized. The notable finding that journalists value watchdog, investigative forms of journalism, but that we see little evidence of this in their work (Tandoc, Hellmueller, & Vos, 2013), has been the occasion for a lot of speculation. I think it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that journalists' discourses about their social roles are largely performative – that is, journalists deploy a legitimizing discourse about the social value of journalism to democratic society, but the reality is more mundane. It's really just covering events, or more geared to sports and lifestyle journalism.

I think this is an unduly cynical take. Part of what Patric Raemy and I (2021) found with Swiss journalists, is that the gap is partly an artifact of how we've studied the issue. Journalists say that they collectively value watchdog journalism and feel that their organizations need to challenge those in political and social power, but their particular assignments on a given day may be geared toward other journalistic roles, such as disseminator, storyteller, or guide roles. Meanwhile, the Swiss journalists also argued that they were always being vigilant watchdogs, but that this work didn't always manifest in news content. By asking critical questions and maintaining a critical posture, powerful actors are kept in line and hence there are no news stories about corruption to publish. So, this might look like a gap, but it's a gap between role conception and news content, not necessarily a gap between role conception and role performance.

So, I said 'partly' a methodological artifact. The other main explanation is that journalists face a host of structural barriers in accomplishing their work. For someone who has studied and theorized gatekeeping processes (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Vos, 2019b), this is little surprise. Indeed, what Frank Russell and I (2019) have argued is that a host of institutional constraints are stacked up against journalists – often on purpose – to keep journalists from doing their job in quite the way journalists want to do it. Those constraints can come from institutions with lots or little power, but even modest forms of power can alter the news.

I want to use exiled journalists as an example – a phenomenon more prominent in the Global South than North, and, I think, particularly relevant to your question. I don't think you can doubt the strong sense of mission that drives the work of many exiled journalists (Badran & Smets, 2021). But some of those journalists readily admit their exile limits their ability to fulfill their journalistic social roles (Frère, 2017). In fact, some journalists are sent to exile for this very reason. The best journalism often comes from being deeply embedded in a place and in proximity to key sources (Vos & Hanusch, 2024), and hence institutions with the power to dislocate journalists do so to limit their role performance – that is, to keep them from fully being a watchdog.

At the same time, though, the evidence is that exiled journalists form conceptions of their role that are unique to their circumstances (Porlezza & Arafat, 2022). Porlezza and Arafat (2022) document how journalists in exile from Syria perform something akin to a watchdog role – what they call a "sousveillance role," whereby they "monitor and document violations by the regime forces, armed opposition factions, and foreign military troops against journalists and human rights defenders in conflict zones and hold powers to account" (p. 1884) – that is adapted to their current displacement. They also point to how other traditional roles take on a new form, such as an educator role becoming a trainer role. The point is that journalists negotiate changes to their role conceptions to align them to their role practices – practices that are affected by other institutions with the power to affect their work conditions (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

Allow me to return to my original answer – journalists often are able to perform the kind of journalism they want to. In some instances, this is a fairly simple accomplishment since there's little push back; in other instances, it requires conviction and courage. When coercive power gets used in the US, often in one-off interactions with journalists, it has a chilling effect. But journalists have soldiered on – even in far more coercive circumstances

(González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021; Karaliova, 2020; Şahin, 2022) – because of their strong institutional commitments. For no small number of journalists, journalism isn't journalism if it is uncritical of those in power. It would be unimaginable to not perform their journalistic roles.

The American corporate media has been a model adopted by several countries, including Brazil. However, unlike the situation here — where we work with the concept of "News Deserts", referring to small towns lacking local/regional journalistic outlets — the American system is relatively decentralized. What characteristics of regional and global coverage in journalistic practice in the United States contribute to such decentralization? Is there truly space for local or community media outlets?

Decentralization probably owes its long history in the US to some path dependent processes. The vast US geography, the relative autonomy of state governments in US history, and US economic markets – to name a few factors – created a media system that was hard to fundamentally change. Technological changes – first radio, then television, then cable and satellite, then digitalized networks – have pushed and pulled journalism if various directions since but the earlier model has been slow to cede ground. The result is a hybrid system where national news outlets have developed through broadcast and then internet technologies, with newspapers still mostly pinned to place. So, journalism is still largely decentralized, but the forces of centralization have gained a lot of ground in recent years.

So, we've been in a constitutive moment whereby the older economic incentives are being dramatically reworked. Local commercial markets that supported newspapers have been disrupted, so those newspapers are increasingly closing up. In turns out advertising markets have several ways to reach customers in the digital age, and most of those ways are better than what newspapers offer. In conjunction with this, the polarization of political identities has driven audiences to partisan outlets, which are mostly national – only sometimes local and regional – because that's where economies of scale exist and where people can have their political identities validated (Wenzel, 2020).

Plenty of people still want local news, but these other forces are working against local news outlets (Gulyas, Jenkins, & Bergström, 2023). Some local and regional digital news startups have been reasonably successful, but funding models are still relatively unstable. And local television news operations continue to hang on. But I think we're starting to reach

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the logical limits of commercially supported local journalism. I think Victor Pickard's (2020; 2015) work is quite convincing on this point. In a recent piece Timothy Neff and Pickard (2023) point to considerable evidence that news deserts are much less of a problem in media systems with a strong public media tradition. Democracy needs news, so perhaps democratically funding journalism is a necessity. Even so, I expect change in this direction in the US to be very slow. Authoritarian political actors have every incentive to block public, collective resources going to journalism.

You argue that the principles of citizen journalism could, at some point, give way to discussions on engagement. In your view, is journalism moving towards a realignment primarily focused on the pursuit of views, likes, and shares, or has this, in a sense, always been intrinsic to the activity but configured differently?

To this point I've touched on, but mostly danced around, a significant fault line in Western journalism. When democracy is eroding in places such as the US and Brazil, we understandably champion journalism as a key democratic institution. When we talk about the role of journalism and journalism's authority and legitimacy, we of course emphasize journalism's record as a force for good in challenging undemocratic and antidemocratic actors (Vos & Thomas, 2018). For any social institution to be seen as legitimate, it must anchor its legitimacy in broadly shared social values. Democracy has been the highest of those values in several parts of the Western world (Vos, 2016).

But discourses promoting democratic journalistic roles have not always been honest about journalism's commercial logic. When we look at the history of journalists arriving at journalism's normative roles, we see that they did so in the face of critical interlocutors who argued that journalistic decisions were driven by profit motives. Teri Finneman and I (2017) showed how journalists discursively constructed a normative gatekeeping role – positioning journalism as a public service – as an answer to charges that news judgments were based on what sold papers.

If journalism is going to succeed in a media system like the US, it has had to succeed in the marketplace. But journalism's commercial incentives are a major source of distrust in news media (Van Dalen, 2019). As my colleagues and I have showed, journalists have tried to have it both ways – they have begun to embrace the idea that it is necessary to market the news on social media, but they have made attempts to argue this is less about money

and more about the obligation to get important information in front of the public (Tandoc Jr & Vos, 2016; Vos, Thomas, & Tandoc Jr, 2023). It's unclear if anyone besides journalists believe this discourse. The trust data would suggest not.

As Ryan Thomas and I have shown, journalists argued at the turn of the 21st century that they were legitimate because they made money. Meanwhile quasi-journalists, such as citizen journalists and bloggers, did not make money and hence were illegitimate (2018). The assumption was that the market rewarded good journalism. But that argument quickly backfired when the commercial economic model for traditional forms of journalism all but collapsed. Of course, I can't predict the future, but I would argue that the key to regaining trust is for journalism to move away from a commercial model. I think this would make more of a difference than any number of engagement efforts alone. As Stephanie Craft and I (2018) argue, engagement has to be authentic. People have to believe they are truly being heard, and the relationship is not just extractive, for trust to flourish.

As journalistic work faces growing precarity and the simultaneous integration of new technologies into productive routines, the "exhaustive typologies of journalistic roles" seem to widen the divide between journalism's commitments and its actual delivery. How do you evaluate this context?

A number of options are possible. Some of journalism's normative roles take resources – experienced journalists, time, and money. Smaller news organizations and many legacy news outlets in commercial media systems are short on all three. Technological shortcuts, using robot journalism and generative AI, can now be used to turn out news with fewer resources, but they have limits when it comes to performing analytical-deliberative, critical-monitorial, and advocative-radical role orientations. So, yes, the gap between ideals and practices may indeed widen.

Journalism has always been resilient. But journalists face strong headwinds nowadays. Not the least of our concerns should be the precarity facing journalists and the expanding professional demands placed on them make it harder and harder for some forms of journalism to flourish. For example, journalists have been encouraged to develop their own brand but this drains journalists and invites unwelcome attention, especially for women journalists (Finneman, Thomas, & Jenkins, 2019).

Another option is that journalists' normative ideals will change to align to what they can accomplish. I've already mentioned some examples of this when it comes to exiled journalists. These kinds of adaptive responses happen in a range of authoritarian environments.

At least one more option would be for journalists to embrace different forms of journalistic practice that then come with a different set of norms. I'm thinking of forms of lifestyle journalism, or what Thomas Hanitzsch and I (2018) refer to as journalism about everyday life, which can be important and consequential to individuals' identify formation, for example, but are anchored in normative ideals of helpfulness rather than ideals about critical-monitorial role orientations (Thomas, 2019).

I think it's important that journalism scholars research these changing conditions and what the changing conditions mean for role performance and role orientation.

Until now, we've explored the social roles of journalism through the lens of geopolitical differences, precarization, and the integration of technologies in production processes. How would you evaluate the quality of journalism teaching in the ongoing discourse about the social role of journalists? Does it still adhere to normative institutionalization? Is there a divergence between journalism education and the professionals entering the workforce?

I don't really have an empirical basis for assessing the quality of journalism instruction in a general sense. I see anecdotal evidence in journalism textbooks, but I've not systematically analyzed how these textbooks have communicated the role that journalism plays in society. My sense is that journalism education still presents students with a fairly narrow range of journalistic roles, mostly around analytical-deliberative and critical-monitorial orientations. These are clearly important roles in democratic societies, so it makes sense to impress these obligations on student journalists.

Take Pierre Bourdieu's (1998, 2005) arguments about the tensions between cultural capital and economic capital. It's actually fairly amazing that economic capital isn't the first and last consideration for news outlets these days, given the financial precarity of journalism. Yet the formation of cultural capital – or journalistic capital – is so strong that it remains a reasonably effective counterbalance to a commercial logic. Journalism education should receive no small amount of the credit for the strength of that journalistic capital. In the US,

when journalism schools were being formed, largely at the behest of professional journalism associations, those associations gave schools the charge of articulating and defending journalism's professional ethos (Winfield, 2008). They've largely held true to that mission.

The downside, however, is that journalism education was, for a long time, fairly uncritical of the shortcomings of some forms of journalistic capital, particularly in its defense of journalistic objectivity, as I've shown in some of my work (Vos, 2012), and in its narrow conceptualization of journalistic autonomy (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022).

The upside is that some of the most influential voices for change in journalism are now coming from inside the academy. Journalism's turn to audience and community engagement is a positive development (Nelson, 2019) – it was a development that journalism educators have championed.

Meanwhile, there needs to be room for more change in how journalism educators address the social roles of journalism. For too long, advocative-radical role orientations and role orientations related to everyday life were normatively marginalized, to the point where some argued these roles laid outside the boundaries of journalism. These roles represent no small amount of the journalism ecosystem these days, but journalism educators have done the field a disservice by failing to provide compelling normative guidelines and foundations for these forms of journalism. A small number of journalism scholars (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009; Thomas, 2019) have offered well-reasoned normative foundations for these roles, but they seem to be ignored in journalism textbooks, which instead repeat the same old – albeit important – discourses about monitorial roles.

The College of Communication Arts and Sciences at Michigan State University has been around for over a century, positioning itself as one of the world's top and most innovative journalism schools. Can you point out the major changes and innovations in journalism education at the institution?

The School of Journalism is actually in the process now of a top-to-bottom overhaul of the curriculum. So, get back to me in a year or so when our faculty have come to a consensus on how we want to reinterpret journalism education.

I will provide one narrow example, though, of a theme we're trying to integrate into our curriculum. We are trying to teach ways of doing journalism that are less extractive from, and more engaged with, the communities that we report on. When journalists stick a

microphone in someone's face to just get a quote for a story, that usually means that they've already decided what their story is.

We saw this firsthand last year on our own campus, and it drove home for us the need for change. On February 13, 2023, a gunman entered two campus buildings and randomly shot students. Three died, others sustained life changing injuries. One student who died and one who was left paralyzed were taking classes in the College of Communication Arts and Sciences. The national media descended on Michigan State's campus, cameras rolled during a memorial service, and grieving students were stopped on the sidewalk to ask how they felt. Many in the campus community were angered by the parachute journalists' intrusiveness.

What was most missing in this instance and is missing in far too many other cases is human reciprocity. Stephanie Craft and I (2018) have written about norms surrounding journalistic listening. What is clear to me from that research is that journalists have a very thin, one-dimensional view of listening. Even when journalists hold out listening as an important skill and ethic, they see it narrowly and instrumentally. Journalists see listening largely in terms of a monitorial role, such that failing to listen well results in missing the story. But the scholarship on listening sees it much differently – listening is about openness, about being open to seeing the world in a different way. This gap may well be a source of distrust of news media.

Closely related to this lack of listening has been a lack of understanding about human response to trauma. Most professions that deal with trauma have adapted so-called trauma-informed practices so as not to retraumatize people in efforts to help. Journalists, of course, deal with all manner of traumatic situations but have been slow to educate themselves on trauma-informed practices. Kevin Becker and Lori Shontz (2022) put it bluntly: "no organized or consistent approaches for teaching journalists about the impacts of trauma on their own lives, and the lives of those who are impacted by tragedy, have been developed." Our goal in the Michigan State University School of Journalism is develop a trauma-informed pedagogy for journalists.

We recognize that journalists face headwinds here too. Journalists are often being asked to do more and more with less time and fewer resources. But, at the very least, we need to build competencies for doing good journalism. Ideally ,we can help reshape journalistic capital so there are strong normative guidelines for journalistic listening and trauma-informed practice.

The advent of digital platforms has dissolved the distinctions between entertainment, sponsored content, and informational/journalistic content. The aesthetic aspects of journalism have been repurposed for various ends, and presently, the profession contends unequally with other content types that align with the heightened immediacy and interactivity demanded by social media. Could you discuss how the disparities between what journalism commits to institutionally and what it actually delivers on a daily basis contribute to the landscape of misinformation?

I'm probably going off in a different direction from what you're asking in the question but please indulge me. Part of the trust issues facing journalism come from the fact that the public judges journalism based on the content that they see or hear from news outlets, and not on what journalists say about journalism's value to society. So, journalists talk about journalism as a necessary feature of democratic self-governance, but what audiences see might include sponsored content, lots and lots of ads, horoscopes, or – in some cases – sensationalism, sexism, and thinly veiled racism. Journalists expect news audiences to discern between sponsored content and real news stories or between straight news and opinion or between serious publications and tabloids, and it's just not clear that audiences reliably make those distinctions. We can decry the lack of news media literacy and blame audiences for not sorting these things out, but that's not a strategy to gain trust.

I think it's important that journalistic actors listen to how audiences experience the news. This gets to the edges of my area of expertise, but what I found in a study with colleagues (Vos, Eichholz, & Karaliova, 2019) is that journalists and audiences generally value the same kinds of journalistic roles – albeit some roles are more or less valued than others – but the issue is that audiences look at role performance in ways that journalists don't.

Along the same lines, back in 2016, certain segments of the US news audience were highly critical of news outlets giving so much airtime and column space to Donald Trump and his outlandish statements. Journalists rationalized the coverage by saying this is the role of journalism: voters need to know what a major candidate for president thinks and says (Parks, 2019). Traditional news values point to news that is out of the ordinary (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006), so journalists – in their own eyes – were just doing good journalism. Audiences suspected ulterior motives. Then, the CEO of CBS, a leading national television network, came out and said it: Trump might not be good for the country but he was good for

CBS (Gutsche Jr, 2018). Those critics took this as evidence that coverage wasn't driven by high-minded journalistic ideals, but by baser financial considerations.

There's some evidence that journalists are responsive to audience criticisms. The Trump presidency did result in journalists doing things differently, such as labeling lies, conspiracy theories, and other mis- and disinformation as such (Carlson, Robinson, & Lewis, 2021b). There's still the question of whether this is an effective strategy or whether it just gives disinformation metaphorical oxygen (Martel & Rand, 2023; Oeldorf-Hirsch, Schmierbach, Appelman, & Boyle, 2020).

The regulation of digital platforms has been a widely debated topic. In Brazil, the "Fake News Bill", officially named Bill 2,630/20, proposes measures to combat misinformation and the spread of false content on social networks and private messaging services. The bill has stirred significant controversy in Brazil, leading to a direct clash between conservative religious lawmakers and Big Tech companies that have exploited the platform to bypass their own terms of use and propagate misinformation on the subject. In the United States, President Joe Biden recently signed an executive order to regulate the use of Artificial Intelligence. However, despite being part of political discussions, the regulation of social media appears to be progressing at a pace as slow as it is in Brazil. Could you provide context on the measures currently under discussion in the United States that you consider important for safeguarding journalism? Is there any initiative among journalists themselves regarding this issue?

Those who follow this topic more closely than I do might be aware of credible regulatory efforts to address misinformation, but I haven't seen any of the solutions being put forward by academics and policy thinktanks getting any traction in Washington, DC. The US tradition, of course, is to place the burden on individuals to take their own steps to control their information environment. The social media giants have even funded some of these information literacy initiatives. I'm pessimistic this will ever be enough to curb the flow of mis- and disinformation, even when there are life and death consequences, as there were during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I don't foresee any US policy solutions on the horizon to curtail misinformation, either. The two major political parties in the US each control parts of the US branches of

government and they would never trust agencies under the control of the other party with the power to label some information as mis- or disinformation. Trump's presidential administration and campaign devolved into a major source of disinformation, so trust is very low. Republican lawmakers have made a show of charging the tech giants of working with Democrats to curb misinformation, arguing for the social media companies to keep out of 'censoring' political speech. So were a long way from policy solutions.

One of the few remaining avenues left in the US is libel law, but that only comes into play when disinformation harms the reputation of a person or entity. The conservative cable channel, Fox News, was taken to court for amplifying disinformation about a voting machine company. Fox settled the case out of court for US$787 million. As large as the judgment was, it addressed only a tiny sliver of the disinformation circulating about the 2020 US election, which in turn is only a sliver of the disinformation about all kinds of other topics.

The European Union has a track record of regulating the social media platforms most often used for mis- and disinformation. I think we'll have to look to them for leadership on this front.

In the current landscape with the emergence of various actors and social groups, who retains the legitimacy to delineate the social roles of journalism?

Journalists have never had complete autonomy in delineating their social roles. Institutional theory holds that all institutions – journalism included – have to negotiate their legitimacy in the context of broad social norms and in dialogue with other social actors (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Parsons, 2007; Vos, 2019a). If a social system prizes collectivism, for example, journalistic and other institutional actors will likely need to position themselves as agents of the collective good to be seen as legitimate (Christians et al., 2009). With the rise of misinformation and disinformation in the digital age, and the subsequent threats to democratic self-governance, journalists have been situating their own legitimacy by carving out a normative role as fact checkers (Graves, 2016). Lest we forget, the inclusion of fact checking in news articles was relatively controversial a decade ago. Some even saw it as inconsistent with journalism's tradition roles. That changed as news organizations adapted quickly to new social and political dynamics (Graves & Lauer, 2020).

Social roles are fundamentally about social legitimacy. So, institutional actors have strong incentives to be attuned to the evolution of social values and situate themselves

accordingly. For example, as Stephanie Craft and I have shown (2017), as transparency emerged as a social value in many Western democracies, journalists developed a normative discourse around their own transparency and their contributions to broader social transparency. Journalistic norms are about what is proper, right, and good – as understood by journalists, but also as seen by other social actors.

I think the dynamic I'm describing here is still very much in operation today, but it's become complicated by at least two factors. First, the social negotiation of journalistic roles and their relative legitimacy are being made more difficult by the increased presence of bad faith actors. Authoritarian and populist leaders are actively trying to undercut traditional journalistic roles that are based on journalists' authority as independent judges of truthfulness. Without a good faith negotiator of journalism's social role, it's unclear how journalists will try to adapt. The early evidence is the verbal (and sometimes physical) attacks are being met with a strong defense of traditional roles, but also, ironically, by greater legitimacy of critical and adversarial roles (Hanitzsch et al., 2019).

The second complication here is the broadening of who can be considered journalistic actors. I've been using the term 'journalistic actors' in my responses here and you might be thinking this is unduly abstract. Why not just say 'journalist'? Well, who is a journalist (and what is journalism) is clearly contested in the digital age. And an assortment of people who work within news organizations, such as marketers and legal counsel, don't actually see themselves of journalists but yet sometimes speak on behalf of journalism.

Wilson Lowrey, Ryan Thomas, and I (Vos, Lowrey, & Thomas, 2023) have been working on a project where we are trying to identify who speaks for journalism. We've been studying so called metajournalistic discourse, typically seen as what journalists say about journalism. But the truth is, it's a broad set of journalistic actors who speak on behalf of journalism. Sometimes they're not even people within a news outlet who have an outsize role in constructing the legitimacy of journalistic roles. Sometimes it's the staff of a trade publication or journalistic trade association, or it's journalism educators, or it's "ideational entrepreneurs" – that is, thought leaders who advocate for changes in journalism and have a sizeable following and platform. All of these actors have a voice in negotiating the substance of journalistic roles and the legitimacy of those roles.

In fact, this is what keeps journalism a dynamic institution. Roles change and practices change as all kinds of journalistic actors are in dialogue with each other and with other social actors.

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