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# Recoding Journalism: Establishing Normative Dimensions for a Twenty-First Century News Media

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## ABSTRACT

This essay argues that there are overlooked yet important journalistic beliefs, norms, rules and practices regarding, *aesthetics, automation, distribution, engagement, identity, and proximity* that could be a part of formalized codes of ethics. There are four reasons why these should be formalized. First, making the implicit normative dimensions explicit allow for a shared understanding of journalism, cutting across institutional borders. Second, it promotes a more unified and homogenized understanding of journalism across the institution based on those shared explicit norms (normative isomorphism). Third, it reduces the fuzziness of these codes and sharpens their functions as boundary objects, simplifying the negotiation between journalists and audiences. Fourth, and finally, these implicit codes might be an untapped resource that could make journalism better connect with citizens and increase its legitimacy. The paper offers two main contributions to journalism studies. First, it shows that elements of journalistic practice and culture that seem disparate in fact play similar institutional roles, forming boundary objects as sites of tension where codes are negotiated by different actors. Second, systematizing these informal codes into the style of traditional codes of ethics renders them more visible and could help journalism scholars understand the uneven formation and evolution of journalistic norms.

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## Introduction: Why Do Codes of Ethics Exist?

This article is an intervention into contemporary debates about journalism's legitimacy crisis, i.e., a perceived weakening of journalism's legitimacy or authority to present information seen as truthful and relevant to the public (see for example Broersma 2019; Callison and Young 2019; Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2021; Nadler 2020; and Reese 2021 for recent scholarly contributions to this debate). Our text also owes a debt to recent scholarly discussions about rethinking, reframing and even disrupting journalism ethics in a digital, fragmented world (Michailidou and Trenz 2021; Porlezza and Eberwein 2022; Ward 2018, 2019). Stephen Ward notably points out that the new digital context of journalism has shifted the entire domain of what is considered ethical issues in journalism—

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traditional problems of accuracy, verification, allegiance, confidentiality have been joined problems of identity (who should be considered a journalist?), of engagement (how should journalists handle contact with audiences?) and of global impact (how should journalists handle the fact that their reporting can have an impact far outside “their” national borders?) (Ward 2018, 4–5).

In this article, we join these debates about the legitimacy of journalism and journalism ethics. We present a theoretical proposition—which we do not test empirically within the scope of this paper, but for which there is some empirical support—for how journalism can address its legitimacy issues through modifying existing codes of journalistic ethics (the “recoding” of the title) by formalizing and making explicit hitherto overlooked yet existing and important journalistic norms. Formalized codes of journalistic ethics (like the SPJ code of ethics, see Society of Professional Journalists 2021) have never formalized *all* journalistic norms into explicit codes—in fact, we argue, such codes of ethics have only ever formalized a small and highly selective portion of all the institutional normative standards of journalism.

What, then, is the purpose of a code of journalistic ethics? At first look, the answer seems obvious: to provide clear and unambiguous rules that will encourage ethical behaviour among journalists and guarantee that ethical practices are followed in newsrooms. However, if we look at codes of ethics using a lens of institutional history, a more complex picture emerges. Many scholars agree that the creation of codes of ethics is a key element in the professionalization of journalism, and indeed of any profession (e.g., Abbott 1983; Allison 1986; Tumber and Prentoulis 2005). As such, the purpose of an ethics code is not solely to regulate behaviour but also that the institution collectively is *seen* to regulate behaviour. For example, ethics codes also enable professional associations and other organizations to control the profession by punishing deviant members of the profession (Allison 1986, 8). Furthermore, journalistic associations historically often proposed codes of ethics as an alternative to legislation; professional self-regulation instead of government regulation (Petersson 2006; Wilkins and Brennen 2004). Indeed, the main reason for forming such associations in the first place often was to create commonly accepted ethics codes and systems of self-regulation, as shown in for example Paul Pratte’s history of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (Pratte 1995).

There is thus a performative aspect of ethics codes—Stephen Ward alludes to this when he links the formal codification of journalistic ethics in the nineteenth century to a Victorian discourse of respectability, i.e., having formal rules for their professional conduct helped make journalists respectable (Ward 2015, 228–231). Codes should not just regulate behaviour but also make explicit the higher purpose of the institution, contributing to the legitimacy and social status both of individual practitioners and organizations who act within the framework of the institution. In other words, they provide an arena for negotiating what journalism is and is supposed to be across the institution, but also in the eyes of the public. Yet we cannot simply reduce formalized codes of ethics to a kind of status tool, as evidenced by the fact that in many cases they just formalize ethical beliefs already held. Stephen Banning shows as much in his study of ethical debates within the Missouri Press Association in the mid-nineteenth century—debates that showed that many journalists already held ethical beliefs codified decades later in the ethics codes of Sigma Delta Chi and ASNE (Banning 1999). Early journalism education

programmes in the United States had courses in “journalistic ethics” before any widely accepted formal code of ethics existed (Ross 1957, 470). Ethics codes thus do not create ethical systems as much as formalize them.

This brings us back to the purpose of this article. Based on the idea that journalists hold particular ethical beliefs, and engage in concomitant practices enacting these beliefs, prior to those beliefs becoming codified, it makes sense that there are still things journalists identify as good practice (and act accordingly), without these things necessarily being part of formalized codes of ethics. Some of these non-formalized beliefs may be long-standing, others may have emerged in response to new technologies or other new conditions. Formalized codes of ethics are just the tip of the iceberg (as it were) of journalistic beliefs about what constitutes good practice.

We argue there are four main reasons why journalism institutionally—that is to say, collectively—should formalize some hitherto non-formalized norms and values and incorporate them into existing codes of journalistic ethics. *First*, updating and making explicit normative dimensions currently implicit helps create a concise and shared understanding of journalism that cuts across institutional borders. *Second*, it promotes a more unified and homogenized understanding of journalism across the institution based on those shared explicit norms (using the terminology of institutional theory, this is called normative isomorphism; see the following section). *Third*, it reduces the fuzziness of ethical codes and emphasize their role as boundary objects, providing an arena for negotiation between journalists and the public about what journalism is supposed to be. *Fourth*, and finally, these implicit codes are an untapped resource for increasing the societal legitimacy and authority of journalism—particularly in the eyes of the public. In this, we follow Ward’s exhortation to “disrupt” journalism ethics in order to create (potentially) a stronger public dimension of journalistic ethics (Ward 2018, 2015, 16–17).

Our discussion of a recoding of journalism takes place against the backdrop of US journalism. While journalistic ethics codes, norms, practices and working conditions vary across the globe, there are also similarities regardless of the national context (Hanitzsch et al. 2019)—and while it may be problematic, US journalism is *de facto* an exemplar for journalists around the world.

## **Institutional Theory and Codes of Ethics: Institutional Isomorphism and Boundary Objects**

Scholars often frame the legitimacy crisis of journalism as part of a long-term process of *de-institutionalization* (e.g., Reese 2021). The obvious solution to this problem is to encourage *re-institutionalization* (cf. Picard 2014). To unpack how journalism can re-institutionalize itself with enhanced reflexivity, we adopt an institutional theory approach and analyze the role that ethics codes can play as *boundary objects* to provide a cohesive understanding of what journalism is across institutional borders (see also Ryfe 2017). The explicit, formalized nature of codes of ethics can provide a common ground for negotiating journalistic identity across institutional boundaries.

The task of this article is to unearth existing but as-of-yet implicit ethical beliefs, norms, rules, and practices in journalism and categorize them. As such, our project aligns with a wide range of critical journalism research aimed at making explicit the taken-for-granted elements of journalistic belief systems and practices. Our contribution to this kind of

journalism research is twofold: first, by categorizing implicit codes, we can see that elements of journalistic practice and culture that seem disparate in fact play similar institutional roles, forming boundary objects where different actors negotiate around these codes. Second, by presenting suggestions for how to systematize these informal codes into the style of traditional ethics codes, we render them more visible. This adds to the scholarly understanding of the uneven formation and evolution of journalistic norms.

### ***Institutional Isomorphism and Codes of Ethics***

As news organizations and individuals begin to hold shared institutional norms, these organizations and individuals will also increasingly share practices, i.e., behave similarly to other actors within the same institutional framework. This institutional homogenization is guided by three mechanisms—*coercive*, *mimetic*, and *normative isomorphism* (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

*Coercive isomorphism* refers to the formal (and to some extent informal) pressures all institutional actors must follow (e.g., legal frameworks but also overarching cultural norms). *Mimetic isomorphism* refers to practices and decisions derived from symbolic uncertainty not associated to the direct influence of others. News organizations tend to imitate the actions that other actors within the industry carry out successfully (memorably described as “fear-driven innovation” by Nguyen 2008). Finally, *normative isomorphism* refers to the “collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work (...) and to establish a cognitive base and legitimation for their occupational autonomy” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 152). Those working within the institutional framework have beliefs, norms, rules, and practices that cut across organizations.

Most journalism historians agree that the institutionalization of journalism was particularly rapid in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; not incidentally, this was when the first formalized journalistic ethics codes appeared. These codes were an essential part of the formation of journalism as a societal institution and a key mechanism for institutional isomorphism by standardizing a set of norms, behaviours, and practices across the journalistic field (again, see Ward 2015, 197f). Yet, as noted these codes mostly formalized already-existing rules and practices. Thus, in this case practices preceded the formalization of norms. An institution *is* the sum of expressions and behaviours that are anchored in “routinized practices, implicit and explicit norms” (Vos 2020, 736)—change the practice, and the institutional norms are changed, and vice versa. Admittedly, isomorphic pressures affect the institutional field unevenly, and therefore, there is room for “organizations at the margins of fields to sidestep pressures for conformity” (Quirke 2013, 1675), which explains the uneven adoption of journalistic codes by different organizations across the globe.

In the later history of journalism, we also see examples of the relationship between practices and norms being reversed—or largely non-existent. Transparency, for example, emerged as an aspiration rather than a practice, as it was incorporated in SPJ’s codes of ethics before signs of any widespread use (Karlsson 2021). By contrast, the “wall” between the newsroom and advertising has gradually eroded in the past decades without this being acknowledged by any major revisions to codes of ethics (Coddington 2015). SPJ’s code of ethics states that journalists should “Distinguish news from

advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Prominently label sponsored content". Yet, the so-called native advertising feeds on the very blurring of the line between news and advertising and is a growing and lucrative practice—indicating an increasing gap between code and practice.

Thus, there is a noticeable expectation gap between the formalized *ideal* ethics and the semi-/non-formalized *actual* ethics (Backof and Martin 1991; Davis 2003). Furthermore, formalized ethics codes are not necessarily upfront about to whom they apply. They are frequently written as if mainly addressed to working reporters, yet many of the things proscribed in ethics codes are outside the purview of reporters (e.g., it is *managers*, not reporters, who decide when and how to label content as native advertising—a point also made by McManus 1997).

Institutions also want to influence the actions of other institutions in order to align them with their own goals. As a result, journalistic codes and behaviour are a product of both what journalism wants to be in its own eyes, and negotiating its place among other societal institutions (Örnebring and Karlsson 2022). We can thus view ethics codes as the most evident and authoritative rules for how the journalistic institution reproduces itself, how it interacts with other institutions, and according to what standards it wishes to be held accountable (Karlsson 2021; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Wilkins and Brennen 2004).

### ***Ethics Codes as Institutional Boundary Objects***

While journalistic codes of ethics may present themselves as blueprints for how journalism should operate, they are often fuzzy in practice. The translation of formalized norms to real-life practice is contested, because ethics codes are not interpreted in the same way across news outlets or neighbouring institutions, resulting in niches of divergent practices across news organizations (Beckert 2010). We thus view the codes of journalism as *boundary objects* that crystalize normative assumptions present in journalism. Moreover, focusing on objects can reveal many dimensions of the institution as they enable to identify routines, diverse practices and lines of authority among organizations within the institution (Neff 2015).

More specifically, as defined by Star and Griesemer (1989), boundary objects incorporate intersecting social worlds. Boundary objects are "both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites" (393). In the original conceptualization, boundary objects served as anchors by which several actors cooperated. We view codes of ethics as boundary objects because they are (following Star 2010, 603) "something people (or, in computer science, other objects, and programmes) *act toward and with*" [our emphasis]. Just as scholarly journals are boundary objects and obligatory passage points for scholars (Star and Griesemer 1989), we argue that ethics codes serve the same point of reference for journalists, for the public, and for other stakeholders as well. They become sites of contestation over what different stakeholders expect journalism should be. Thus, codes of ethics must be anchored both inside and outside the institution in order both to guide internal practices and to make external evaluation possible—codes of ethics cannot diverge too much from public expectations of how journalism should work (as Ward notes, ethics codes must be rooted in a "common morality", see Ward 2015, 16). This is

because “boundary objects are not simply passive vehicles that allow communication between communities of practice or knowledge, but elements that encapsulate the broader social meaning of a concept” (Fox 2011, 82). The social meaning of the concept of “news” is constructed and evaluated not only by criteria set up within the journalistic institution itself, but also to some extent according to criteria set up—implicitly or explicitly—by other institutions, or by the public. Indeed, as Ryfe (2017) states, “the roles of journalism will be strongly shaped by the logics of the other social fields it serves” (40).

Star explains boundary objects as being composed of “Interpretive flexibility, the structure of informatic and work process needs and arrangements, and, finally, the dynamic between ill-structured and more tailored uses of the objects” (Star 2010, 601). The interpretive flexibility of boundary objects means that they are “both adaptable to different viewpoints and robust enough to maintain identity across them” (Star and Griesemer 1989, 387) and, thus, applicable to different institutions<sup>1</sup> and in local contexts. This allows them to “operate as a support for heterogeneous translations as a knowledge integration mechanism, as mediation in the coordination process of experts and non-experts” (Trompette and Vinck 2009, 3). If the journalistic institution, other institutions, and the public have different interpretations of these codes, it is because each of them uses these objects to qualify whether “the news” falls inside or outside proper journalism.

If the boundary object is to function as a resource for or bridge between institutions, it must speak to the interest and integrity of the parties concerned. For example, both actors internal and external to journalism agree that *verification* is a normatively foundational practice for the journalistic institution. Journalists need verification to build credibility and claim legitimacy both individually and for the institution. Citizens need verification in order to categorize information as news. Elected politicians need verification in order to know how their constituents view implemented policies. Advertisers are also served by verification of news since it does not apply to ads (and thus allows for promises less grounded in reality), and so on. However, exactly *how* verification should work is a more open issue.

Furthermore, the boundary objects can be applied more or less purposefully, e.g., enacted in a way according to the perceived normative framework. For this to happen, all involved institutions are required to do substantial amounts of labour (Star and Griesemer 1989). While Lewis and Usher’s (2016, 547) opted to consider news in itself as the boundary object, we argue that viewing journalistic codes (the formalized as well as the less formalized kinds) as boundary objects is a more accurate representation of institutional processes and mechanisms. News is the material expression of these codes, and only through the interpretations of such codes can we tell news from mere information. Contestation happens when some of these objects (codes) are not clearly formalized, and therefore the interpretations made by journalists and the public are based on implicit ideas that might or might not be shared.

From an institutional perspective, then, some boundary objects are resources that can be converted into leverage and legitimacy, while others reverse that process (Star and Griesemer 1989). The original boundary objects were repositories, ideal types, coincident boundaries, and standardized forms, all within the context of museums. These examples were supposed to be concrete constructs that helped bridge gaps between social worlds by facilitating intergroup communication. In the context of journalism, ethics codes provide explicit means for resolving conflicts. Our argument is that the shifting



ontological foundation of journalism has given other boundary objects/codes—most as yet non-formalized—an even more central role than previously. Furthermore, we argue that some of journalism's boundary objects are untapped resources that could influence the idea of journalism in the social imaginary.

From this argument, we offer two propositions. First, if journalism and neighbouring key institutions do not share the same view of important boundary objects, then all parties need to actively work toward closing this interpretative gap. This can be a bad-faith as well as a good-faith process—other institutions might use propaganda techniques to get the public to go along with their definition of the boundary object and force journalism to follow along. Journalism and its neighbouring institutions also need to find adequate arrangements for incorporating new boundary objects. In order for journalism to maintain social legitimacy and strive towards its overarching goal (whatever that might be), it thus needs to *act toward and with*, rather than *oppose and work against* key boundary objects, whether it recognizes these objects or not. Moreover, some non-formalized codes may be more crucial as institutional resources than formalized codes.

Second, boundary objects must be both adaptable to various local viewpoints and coherent enough to apply to all members across the institution as they “... are simultaneously concrete and abstract, specific and general, conventionalized. They are often internally heterogeneous” (Star and Griesemer 1989, 408). However, without explicitly formalized boundaries, the negotiation of what news is across institutions will be based on vague idealizations that vary across camps. Taking the SPJ codes of ethics as an example, they state that journalists should consider sources' motives before promising anonymity. The term “consider” does not provide any detail on what kind of *practice* that should follow after the sources “motives” have been “considered” (e.g., how should motives be analyzed, judged, and possibly debunked, and how should this affect publishing decisions?). “Motive consideration” practices may vary a lot from outlet to outlet, meeting or failing the expected standards from within and outside the journalistic institution. Similarly, the SPJ code of ethics devotes attention on how to deal with sources, but there is not a single word on how to deal with search engines or social network services. Yet all these other actors also influence (often considerably) how journalism is made, and by extension also influence public enlightenment (the professed goal of journalism).

Thus, on the one hand, journalism has meticulously codified interactions with a specific category of actors (sources), but on the other hand, does not attempt to guide in the slightest the interaction with another category of actors (platforms). This makes it difficult to discern an overarching organizing logic in most formalized codes of ethics. Consequently, we may actually best understand “journalism ethics” as responses to various practical problems that do not necessarily display any inner coherence or logical consistency other than the internal dynamics of the institution (Ward 2020; see also Wilkins and Brennen 2004). Formalizing these codes offer opportunities for stability but also the potential for pushing journalism into “critical junctures, in which the system is shocked and opportunities for new directions arise, followed by the creation of new institutional orders and a corresponding increase in stability” (Ryfe 2006, 138). This leads us to posit three key characteristics of journalistic codes of ethics, namely; (a) they address several disparate normative dimensions, ones which for one reason or another have been a site of discursive struggle that journalism has reacted to or acted upon; (b) they



are primarily oriented towards contemporary, local, and individual problems, and subsequently; (c) the norms underlying the codes have changed across time and place, frequently faster than the codes themselves have changed. In short, journalistic ethics codes emerge mainly in reactive and often haphazard ways in interactions with surrounding conditions and institutions. As expressions of institutional norms, they are also always incomplete/partial, as many key codes (i.e., norms that guide behaviour) of journalism remain non-formalized. It is to these non-formalized codes we now turn.

## Journalism Recoded

We suggest six primary categories of codes of journalism that are implicit, non-formalized, and yet undoubtedly exist as journalists and members of the public already use them to assess the authority and legitimacy of journalism. These are codes of *aesthetics*, *automation*, *distribution*, *engagement*, *identity* and *proximity*. These categories serve as examples, and they are not an exhaustive list. There are potentially more categories of codes, but we opted for these because they are the ones for which we can find the most unambiguous evidence for in existing scholarship. These categories of codes have all been subject to contestation; they have demonstrably changed over time as the conditions of journalism have changed; and they cover areas of profound importance to journalism. Thus, the formalization of these codes could potentially enforce all three isomorphic mechanisms (coercive, mimetic, and normative) in order to increase the legitimacy of journalism in the eyes of outside actors. Moreover, becoming formalized is what makes these implicit codes become concrete boundary objects by which neighbouring institutions can understand and judge journalism.

We recognize that the task of making implicit norms explicit is not easy. Therefore, as a thought experiment, at the end of each section on the six categories, we propose three formalized statements regarding the category, written so as to be possible to include in existing codes of journalistic ethics. In a real-life setting, the process of changing codes of ethics would of course be led by key organizations within the framework of institutional journalism, and in dialogue with other institutions in general and the public in particular. Our formalized statements are meant as starting points, interventions, and even provocations for discussions of additions to and revisions of existing codes of ethics.

### Codes of Aesthetics

These codes refer to ideas of how journalism should appear and look like. It emphasizes on the *form* of news as “the persisting visible and narrative structure of news” as means of creating and signalling authority (Carlson 2017, 53). The SPJ code of ethics nods towards the importance of aesthetics without going into detail: “Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Prominently label sponsored content”. The code provides no specifics on what enables a news story to be “distinguished” from an ad.

The public’s first impression of journalism comes from the organization and appearance of letters, images, sounds, and other aesthetical properties. Native advertising is an example of the power of appearance. Native advertising is not journalism, yet it *passes* as journalism. Most readers have trouble differentiating native advertising from

news stories and as many as two-thirds are unable to tell the difference between the two (Wojdyski and Evans 2016). Native advertising making use of the aesthetic standards of journalism is not a bug but a feature—the point is to have a special category of advertising that does not look like regular advertising (Ferrer-Conill and Karlsson 2018). Tellingly, organizations and actors within the journalistic institution that used to be critical of this practice, e.g., the *New York Times* and *The Guardian*, have later become enthusiastic adopters (Wojdyski 2019). Using our terminology, native advertising works precisely because the aesthetic expression of journalism is a boundary object. News looking in a particular way is a part of the social meaning of journalism.

Tuchman (1978) highlighted the aesthetic dimension of when she referred to news as ritualized symbolic practices where formats of presentation serve as the audience's heuristic cues to determine whether they are faced with news or something else. Hence, the appearance of journalism often becomes journalism: "journalism" and "appearance" are often empirically inseparable (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001). The appearance is a part of what makes journalism trustworthy and, cynically, also what makes it possible to charge a premium for native advertising and making it a growing global practice (Ferrer-Conill and Karlsson 2018). Another example would be the many (primarily) right-wing organizations that present their content using aesthetic codes of journalism precisely in order to undermine traditional journalism (Reese 2021, 48–50).

Breaches of aesthetic codes do affect how audiences view journalism. This is confirmed by research reporting that issues such as spelling, the design of websites, and well-balanced use of language (neither too simple nor too difficult) are important aspects of good journalism in the public's minds (Karlsson and Clerwall 2019). Without consideration of the linguistic, style, or design dimensions of journalism in *codes of aesthetics*, trust in journalism may well continue to decline and, in turn, impact its legitimacy, authority, and role in and influence on society.

#### Formalized Codes of Aesthetics

- news organization owners and managers should make sure that, within their own outlets, the aesthetic format associated with news is reserved for reporting
- employees at all levels of news organizations (but particularly owners and managers) should resist actors outside the journalistic institution attempting to pass off information as news by mimicking typical journalistic aesthetics.
- those involved in news production and presentation should present the news in a graphically pleasant manner, with accessible and linguistically correct language.

### **Codes of Automation**

Some tasks in journalism can now be performed in semi-independent ways in all parts of the journalistic process by assemblages of computer algorithms (Ananny 2016; Zamith 2019). Today, automated tools produce millions of news items without human intervention post-setup. This might not be a problem per se, but there are reasons for concern as automation, and the algorithmic assemblages behind automation, becomes more deeply integrated into journalism and contributes to the publishing and circulation of distorted or even incorrect news stories (Carlson 2018). One issue is that the software

underpinning the algorithms has usually been developed outside both the individual news organizations as well as the journalistic institution. Thus, the logic governing their operations might have different parameters compared to those preferred within the journalistic institution (Simon 2022).

Another issue is that automation is not limited to one software programme. There might be several externally developed software programmes interacting with each other in various decision-making processes within the newsroom, which amplifies many issues (Ananny 2016). If this was not challenging enough, a third issue is that algorithms driving automation can be self-learning, which means that they produce behaviour that is unknown to anyone or anything but themselves (Bucher 2018; Burrell 2016; Dourish 2016). Thus, any individual news organization might use several interacting, self-learning algorithms, all originating not just outside the organization but outside the journalistic institution— and human journalists might only occasionally enter these algorithmic processes. This presents challenges for the news organization to, among other things, explain why a news story appears the way it does; protect the integrity of the newsgathering and decision-making processes from hidden influence and bias; and take responsibility for the results (see Ananny 2016 and Dörr and Hollnbucher 2017, for an excellent breakdown of the ethical challenges of algorithms in journalism). If, as we argued earlier, the purpose of a code of ethics is to (seem to) regulate behaviour, the “black box” challenge of algorithm-driven automation certainly presents ethical problems for the journalistic institution. Yet, despite this potentially far-reaching impact on journalism, there is no mention of the role of algorithms or third-party automation in the SPJ codes of ethics (nor in many other codes of ethics). However, the process has not gone unnoticed and there are some suggested guidelines produced by other entities (Ivancsics and Hansen 2019; Kent 2019).

#### Formalized codes of automation

- Owners and managers in news organizations should not defer editorial decision-making to algorithms without careful consideration of their potential harms and implications for their professional goals and expectations.
- News organizations should offer as much transparency as they can about the logics behind the use of algorithms as well as their inner workings to promote public understanding and permit algorithmic audits
- whenever news organizations employ several algorithmic operators, it should be clear who is to be addressed for accountability.

### ***Codes of Distribution***

One of the aspects of news making that has evolved the most in recent years is distribution. Most news organizations (print and broadcast alike) were unprepared for the challenges of networked media after enjoying long-standing distribution monopolies. Search engines and news aggregators capitalized on algorithmic curation and distribution of news. In fact, news aggregators created the first of many jurisdictional struggles over

the distribution of news, as institutional interlopers from the digital world outmatched the technical expertise of legacy news organizations and journalists (Anderson 2013). Algorithms and platforms grew in importance as legacy news organizations rushed onto social media to circulate their stories (Schulte 2009). This move was not just an attempt to meet the audience where the audience gathered, but rather to use social media affordances and the labour of audience members sharing news within their networks (Kalsnes and Larsson 2018).

Relying on distribution by third-party tech giants who understand the internet better than news organizations has generated a wide range of unexpected challenges. For example, Vázquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal, and López-García (2019) found that news distributed via Instagram across 17 news media outlets resulted in similar ephemeral journalism, contingent on the format demands of the platforms. News organizations have forfeited a degree of institutional identity as they rely on third party platforms to distribute their content. Tensions increased in 2018, when Facebook made the strategic decision to deprioritize news in favour of friends' posts (Cornia et al. 2018). The catastrophic decline of news exposure as the result of a single algorithmic tweak by Facebook exposed the platform dependency of contemporary news distribution (Meese and Hurcombe 2020). The decision to rely on Facebook for distribution was, in effect, a normative decision that threatened legacy news media's ability to reach the very public that journalism seeks to enlighten.

The current journalism landscape consists of an array of trial and error alternatives from traditional news organizations trying to reclaim the audience and regain some measure of control over digital distribution. Digital news outlets are now switching to subscription and paywall models, hoping to increase audience loyalty (Nelson and Kim 2021). Keeping the news inside institutional boundaries and not letting third parties distribute them is the current industry consensus. Using platforms increases the risk of losing control over their content, yet a couple of decades ago, the codes were such that journalistic organizations were willing to take that risk. Depending on platforms could undermine the *authority* of journalism, while paywalls protect that authority but in a *shrinking* and culturally less relevant domain (Örnebring and Karlsson 2022). Formalizing *codes of distribution* could impact the way in which news organizations reach the public journalism seek to enlighten in the years to come.

#### Formalized Codes of Distribution

- news organization owners should price their news moderately so it can be accessed by those with small economic resources by considering what constitutes a “greater public interest”.
- if news organizations use paywalls, owners and managers should be prepared to drop these paywalls in instances and circumstances of great public interest.
- news organization owners and managers should rely as little as possible on third parties as means of distribution. When not possible, they should monitor news items that spread widely on social media platforms and engage in discourse to correct false information and misinterpretation, in particular information from news outlets and journalists.

## Codes of Engagement

A key unspoken assumption of journalism is that the audience should not only read the news for information but that they should also *care* about the news on some deeper level. Arguably, the only meaningful measure of journalism's relevance is how much it connects with the public—if audiences ignore journalism then news organization will lose both financial viability and social authority. *Codes of engagement* encompass the assumptions about what relationship journalism should have with its audience(s).

Traditionally, the ideal form of “engagement” was civic and political engagement. The audience was an opaque and distant mass whose feedback was of little use in the newsroom (Beam 1995). Keeping the audience at a distance ensured editorial autonomy from the public (Gans 1979), keeping legitimacy within the hands of news organizations. The digitalization of journalism, however, challenged this notion as it initiated what some have called the “audience turn” in journalism (Costera Meijer 2020). From a distant actor to a closer relationship, the degree of participation of the audience in the news production process has become a site of tension (Schmidt and Loosen 2015)—i.e., engagement is a boundary object.

The prevalent institutional understanding of audience engagement is largely as something quantifiable that can be turned into currency (Nelson and Webster 2016). Journalists' and editors' fixation on metrics rationalizes their work and reinforces their position in the field (Petre 2021). Yet as Ferrer-Conill (2017) shows, when *Bleacher Report* codified the rules of production, trying to maximize audience engagement, an excessive reliance of metrics led to a decline in content quality. Deploying technical tools to measure engagement is far easier than other, more granular strategies (e.g., community building). The metrics-based code of engagement is based on a reductionist view of engagement that magnifies behavioural and technical interactions and overlooks the emotional, spatiotemporal, and normative dimensions of engagement (Steensen, Ferrer-Conill, and Peters 2020). For instance, there is a crucial difference between triggering audience emotions to make them spread the news on social networks driven by anger or fury, and fostering the audience's emotions on social issues and public life. Since there is an increased institutional drive towards getting emotional reactions from the audience (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020), it follows that journalists will, in their daily work, become more concerned with what kind of emotions they should stir or subdue. Maybe with explicit *codes of engagement*, news organizations will formally recognize a more integrated mode of interaction with the public, one that better fulfils journalistic norms and ideals.

### Formalized Codes of Engagement

- news organization owners and managers should make every effort to assess audience engagement with means that go beyond metrics and what is measurable, which could lead to a skewed understanding of the public.
- those involved in news decisions must consider and balance the emotions they want to enhance or subdue and clearly express those in the news.
- journalists should not misinterpret shares, comments, and likes or other measurements as neither the expression of individuals nor aggregations thereof

## Codes of Identity

Codes of identity are all the norms related to the perennial question “Who is a journalist?”—who can be a journalist, what does it take to be a journalist, and (perhaps most importantly) who is *not* a journalist (Eldridge 2018). Codes of identity also include the norms surrounding how journalism itself should deal with identity. Some of these latter codes are indeed often formalized already, e.g., the SPJ code exhorts journalists to “Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear” and to “Avoid stereotyping” (SPJ 2021). A lot of the contestation around codes of identity in contemporary journalism comes from the discrepancy between the latter (formalized) codes and the former (implicit) ones. As in many other cases we have discussed, the codes of ethics prescribe something but do not give guidance as to how it should be achieved. One of the best ways to achieve source diversity and to avoid stereotyping would obviously be to have more diverse newsrooms. That reporter diversity leads to news diversity is well established in research, e.g., (Liebler and Smith 1997; Zeldes and Fico 2005; Ziegler and White 1990), yet in most countries, newsroom diversity lags far behind national population diversity.

Journalists may not like to admit it, but there is plenty of evidence that there is a very strong implicit identity norm in journalism that says “Journalists should be male and white”. Journalism is complicit in reproducing social injustice and often fails to cover the minorities that most suffer from social injustice (Callison and Young 2019; Richardson 2020). This implication of the necessity of a more active stance in promoting diversity and justice sits uneasily with another journalistic code, that of passivity/neutrality—the idea that journalists fulfil their democratic duty simply by reporting (a role Schudson has referred to as “reluctant stewardship,” 2013, 169). This passive ideal is precisely what reproduces existing codes of identity in journalism: journalists outside the implicitly inscribed identity are automatically “advocates,” incapable of being “objective” or “neutral”. Making these codes of identity explicit would be the first step towards changing them, creating more inclusive codes that could function as institutional resources for increasing journalism’s legitimacy among marginalized and minoritized communities who currently have little reason to trust journalism.

### Formalized Codes of Identity

- diversity (in all its dimensions) in newsrooms is the key way of ensuring journalism will avoid stereotypes and seek out the voices less heard. News organization owners and managers must, therefore, actively work toward having diverse newsrooms.
- journalists should be trusted to do their work professionally regardless of their background unless there is clear evidence of the opposite. However, journalists should be careful and considerate when they cover institutions which they are close to, especially when they belong to a traditional majority group (white, male, able, etc.) as institutions generally speak to the interests of the majority.
- news organization owners and managers are responsible for all news organizations employees (not just journalists) being introduced to the formalized codes of ethics that guide news reporting and dissemination.

## Codes of Proximity

Codes of proximity are norms surrounding *when and where* journalism should be performed, produced, and disseminated. Journalism is dependent on a temporal and spatial context, and its relevance increases in relation to the temporal and geographical proximity of the events covered. It is well-established that the spatiotemporal proximity of a news event tends to greatly impact public interest in it (Tuchman 1978) and, as Zelizer (1993) argues, important aspects of professional journalistic authority are derived from “being there” when an event happens (see also Usher 2019). While proximity is one of the foundational codes of journalism, codes of ethics are conspicuously silent on matters of time, space, and geography—despite a growing concern with so-called news deserts, a concern rooted in implicit codes of proximity and presence in local communities.

“Being there” could well be recognized as a formalized ethical principle. Research has shown that the distance between where events occur and where journalists are situated affects the quality of news. Hess and Waller (2016) showed that journalists cherished local knowledge as key to doing their job. In Usher’s interview study showing how the relocation of the newsroom of *The Miami Herald* away from the city centre affected coverage and, in the long run, possibly the newspapers standing in the community, one of the respondents said, “I am more disconnected from the core of the community than ever before” (Usher 2015, 1012). Proximity is important to the public too. For instance, both Hess and Wallers interview study and a focus group study (Karlsson and Clerwall 2019) found that audience disliked the lack of correct pronunciation of local places by journalists.

Proximity to events is also the key motive for including images from the public in news stories in the absence of should-have-been-on-location-journalists (Ahva and Pantti 2014). *Codes of proximity* are so embedded in journalism that news outlets often try to manufacture the illusion of close proximity when such proximity does not exist (Huxford 2007). Yet, despite this important spatial and temporal relationship to community attachment and the quality of journalism, the distance between where events take place and the location from where journalists cover them only has increased in the last decade as local newspapers and offices shut down. Abernathy (2020) documents that the United States alone has lost 2100 newspapers over 15 years call many of the remaining “ghost papers” as they are shells of their former selves.

A formal articulation of the dynamics of proximity in relation to journalism, what journalism covers, and its audiences, would thus be an essential step to endow journalism with relevance, authority, and legitimacy.

### Formalized Codes of Proximity

- news should be reported by journalists with local knowledge that are embedded in one way or another in the community on which they report.
- if news organizations use local journalists and fixers to strengthen proximity in foreign reporting, then news organization owners and managers should make sure that local support staff are credited, paid an equitable salary, and covered by insurance.
- journalists should balance the importance and newsworthiness of events regarding their temporal proximity (downplay immediacy in favour of societal relevance).



Taken together, we use these categories to propose a *recoding* of journalistic ethics. Formalizing what has previously been implicit or at best semi-formalized can help guide efforts to re-institutionalize journalism and maintain social legitimacy and economic viability. Most importantly it may help journalism to fulfil its self-articulated goal of public enlightenment.

## A Future Research Agenda

In this article, we have advanced the argument that codes of ethics are safeguards for (the perception of) journalistic behaviour. We have also argued that codes of ethics, whether implicit or explicit, are boundary objects insofar as they are sites of contestation of what journalism can and should be, and that these boundary objects can either increase or decrease the legitimacy of the institution. Finally, we have argued (by providing examples) that there are several implicit codes of ethics that would likely improve the legitimacy of the journalistic institution if they are formally recognized.

A key issue to consider is how to balance these demands against each other, and against existing codes of ethics. For instance, while a formal education is necessary to learn journalistic skills and norms, it also brings the risk of mainstreaming. Less reliance on platforms for distribution might increase the price of news, which would counter the mission of reaching those with less means. However, these kind of dilemmas or balancing acts are already present in current codes of ethics like the SPJ code. Consider, for instance, “Remember that neither speed nor format excuses inaccuracy” and “Gather, update and correct information throughout the life of a news story”. If news organizations and journalists adhered to the first guideline, there would be no inaccuracy in the news. Yet the second guideline presupposes that inaccuracies have been committed, or there would not be a need for corrections. Solving or balancing the dilemmas inherent in the different demands is something that commonly takes place at the level of the different individual news organizations, with varying degrees of success.

Tracking the success rate would help answer a key question with regards to our theoretical propositions—to what extent such a formalization of implicit norms would have any impact on journalistic practice or the role of journalism in society. We think there are at least three strands of empirical study that could be initially productive. The first would be to ask journalists (managers as well as reporters) and audience members what they think about the proposed codes—both as standalone items and in relation to already existing codes of ethics, in order to see how the proposed codes would fare when ranked together. This could be explored through multiple methods such as interviews, focus groups, or surveys. Second, there is also an opportunity to investigate the proposed codes in experimental settings. For instance, we could measure how graphically pleasant and linguistically correct news stories are evaluated in terms of readability, credibility, and political engagement, compared to news stories that deviate from established aesthetic codes. That, in turn, could inform management decisions.

More broadly, the proposed codes would likely be unevenly and slowly applied to different media systems, newsrooms and journalists, just like current codes of ethics, where factors such as economic pressure or political affiliation on the newsroom or status of the individual journalists provide different conditions of application and adherence. Thus, a third research strand would be a comparative approach—doing

comparisons both between individual news organizations, and between practices on the national level.

Through such studies, we would learn about the applicability for our propositions; the level of conflict or agreement within the journalistic institution about the codes or dimensions; the level of conflict or agreement between the journalistic institution and the public; and whether some codes or dimensions would be more valued than others. To summarize, empirical studies would inform to what extent these codes work as boundary objects.

However, formalizing what has hitherto been implicit and non-formalized (yet crucial!) is at least the first step toward providing an explicit common ground for journalists in a time of change, particularly as the very existence of things like “truth” and “reality” are challenged by political interests.

We have argued that there are good reasons to think that these codes might help journalism to serve the public, contribute to public enlightenment, and to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair, and thorough. Crucially, by formalizing these implicit norms, they will also become part of journalism’s vocabulary and accountability in a very distinct way. They would highly unlikely dictate how journalism is carried out in everyday practice, but just like the current articulated codes of ethics, they could be neglected or worked against in the long run, but instead become important points of reference (for actors internal as well as external to the journalistic institution). These codes could become explicit objects of common identity within journalism and across institutional boundaries. Rather than being seen as issues of economy, technology, or convenience, our way of reasoning brings the ethical dimensions of journalism front and centre. We should judge actions like shutting down local editorial offices, not hiring copyeditors, letting algorithms make publishing decisions, rely on platforms for distribution, or having a too-homogenous staff not by whether such actions are financially necessary but rather whether they are *ethical*. We hope that the recoding of journalism we articulate here will serve as inspiration for journalists and academics who wish to continue discussing the areas that make journalism a public good in the service of democracy, as democracy itself is changing.

## Note

1. Star use numerous nomenclatures—groups, social worlds, institutions and parties—when describing the different actors involved. For consistency, and since we use institutional theory, we have used institutions with the exception of citizens since they are not an institution in a strict sense.

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