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Article

**The Dislocation of News Journalism:**

**A Conceptual Framework for the Study of Epistemologies of Digital Journalism**

**Abstract**

This article focuses on news journalism, social media platforms and power, and key implications for epistemology. The conceptual framework presented is intended to inspire and guide future studies relating to the emerging sub-field of journalism research that we refer to as “Epistemologies of Digital Journalism”. The article discusses the dependencies between news media and social media platforms (non-proprietary to the news media). The authority and democratic role of news journalism pivot on claims that it regularly provides accurate and verified public knowledge. However, how are the epistemic claims of news journalism and the practices of justifications affected by news journalism’s increased dependency on social media platforms? This is the overall question discussed in this article. The article discusses the intricate power dependencies between news media and social media platforms and proceeds to discuss implications for epistemology. It presents a three-fold approach differentiating between (1) articulated knowledge and truth claims, (2) justification in the journalism practices and (3) the acceptance/rejections of knowledge claims in audience activities. This approach facilitates a systematic analysis of how diverse aspects of epistemology interrelate with, and are sometimes conditioned by, the transformations of news and social media.

**Keywords**

Social media, digital journalism, epistemology, platforms, dislocation, power dependency, news

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**1. Introduction: epistemologies of digital journalism**

This conceptual article focuses on the relationships between news journalism, social media platforms, power dependencies and epistemology. The article aims to conceptualize and critically discuss *dislocation of news journalism*, and key implications for epistemology. The concept of *dislocation of news journalism* comprises a series of parallel developments regarding shifting power dependencies between two actors: *the news media* and *platform companies*. A platform is a digital infrastructure with affordances offering diverse kinds of information and communication, as well as opportunities to produce, publish and engage with content. Platform companies operate with a business model in which they provide a digital platform for others to use for diverse purposes. Platform companies do not produce and publish content themselves, and thus do not define themselves as a publisher, but instead facilitate for individuals and institutions to communicate and publish information (e.g. Gillespie, 2018). They are oftentimes referred to as digital intermediaries because they succeed in establishing themselves between citizens/consumers/producers and diverse organizations. More specifically, dislocation of news journalism includes a displacement of power for news producers having less control over publishing contexts when news stories are detached from the context in which they were originally embedded by the news organization (Carlson, 2017, p. 65). The article certainly acknowledges the crucial importance of more general shifts in revenue from news media firms to platform companies, and more specific shifts such as distinct actors having gained power concerning gathering, analyzing and selling data and analytics that become interwoven with how editorial decisions are made (c.f. Carlson, 2018a; Zamith, 2018). However, this article will focus exclusively on dislocation aspects that carry key implications for news epistemology.

By introducing the conceptual framework *dislocation of news journalism*, we intend to make a scholarly contribution to research into journalism studies (Carlson, Robinson, Lewis, & Berkowitz, 2018; Steensen & Ahva, 2015), and more specifically to the emerging field of digital journalism studies (e.g. Eldridge & Franklin, 2017; Eldridge & Franklin, 2019; Robinson, Lewis and Carlson, 2019). Digital journalism studies has dwelt with many different areas of research, but have also repeatedly failed to properly build on theoretical- or conceptual frameworks already established (see review in Steensen, Larsen, Hågvar & Fonn, 2019). Doing so certainly is important for the field, as scholarship wrestles along continuums involving “change” and “continuity” as well as “digital” and “journalism” (Eldridge, Hess, Tandoc & Westlund, 2019).

There are various related research publications dwelling with epistemology in one way or another (see review in Ekström and Westlund, 2019). There are indeed examples of thematic coordination of such research (e.g. Van Leuven, Kruikemeier, Lecheler, & Hermans, 2018), but sometimes research contributing to contemporary knowledge about epistemology actually presents its major contribution as something else than epistemology. This article posits that there is good reason to consider much of this research as contributing to an emerging sub-field of journalism research that we choose to call “Epistemologies of Digital Journalism”. We write “epistemologies” with the explicit intention to connote plurality; there are several different epistemologies for different genres and forms of journalism. Classic tv-broadcasting journalism has its epistemologies (Ekström, 2002), while live blogging is distinct from traditional news reporting (Matheson and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Thorsen and Jackson, 2018), and also different from the epistemologies of participatory journalism (Anderson and Revers, 2018; Kligler-Vilenchik and Teneinbom, 2019), data journalism (Lewis and Westlund, 2015a) and its more distinct forms such as structured journalism (Graves and Anderson, 2019) as well as emerging forms of automated journalism employing automated judgment (Carlson, 2018b). Importantly, “news journalism” refers to reporting of so-called hard news, and this is different from sports-, cultural-, financial- journalism etc. Having said this, journalism also comes with important similarities across its genres and forms, in working towards reporting worthwhile and verified information about important events. All in all, this article thus attempt to contribute to emerging research into *epistemologies of digital news journalism,* by proposing the conceptual framework *dislocation of news journalism*, and discussing epistemological implications in three key areas.

In line with classical works on power and dependence (Emerson, 1962), we distance ourselves from exercises treating power from the perspective of being an attribute of a person or company. Instead, we share the view that “power is a property of the social relation; it is not an attribute of the actor” (Emerson, 1962, p. 32). Emerson has proposed a theory of power-dependence relations, originally growing out of relationships between social actors and groups, but which can also be applied to how we understand industry actors (i.e. companies). Emerson argues that a salient indicator of power concerns how actor I depends on actor II for achieving their set goals. This article commands attention to the more general dependencies between the news media organizations and their proprietary platforms on the one hand, and social media companies and their platforms (non-proprietary to the news media) on the other hand (c.f. Westlund and Ekström, 2018). Such dependencies apply to audience reach and revenue as well as to the epistemic goals and claims news journalism set to achieve. The article suggests it is essential for scholars to study contemporary processes of dislocation from publishers to platform companies, and also publishers’ attempts to counterbalance those processes by strategic initiatives intended for regaining control and power.

Research into epistemologies of digital journalism over the past decade has suggested that the authority and democratic role of news journalism pivot on claims that it regularly provides accurate and verified public knowledge (Carlson, 2017). Truth claims are manifest in the professional norms of truth-telling (Karlsson, 2011) and in the discursive constructions of factuality in news texts (Montgomery, 2007). They also rely on meta-discourses and narratives about journalism (Carlson, 2017). Truth claims are justified in the practices of professional news production and evaluated, accepted or rejected in the practices of news consumption. Nonetheless, how are the epistemic claims of news journalism and the practices of justifications affected by news journalism’s increased dependency on social media platforms?

The democratic role and authority of news journalism also depends on being able to reach out to the citizens who engage in news consumption to become informed. However, transformations within professional journalism and how the news media and news consumers depend on social media has resulted in an increasingly complex situation; social media have exercised complementary, displacing and even replacing effects on various aspects of journalism. The changing situation has affected diverse aspects of journalism, notably the business and epistemology. Ultimately, the different forms of power gained by social media platforms extends far beyond securing a strong position in global markets, stock exchanges, becoming a “normalized” part of the operations of diverse companies and the everyday life of citizens worldwide. Social media platforms have indeed gained significant influence as to the overall role journalism and news play in democracy. Social media platforms have converged with the news media’s digital platforms and operations. Social media are both partners and catalysts to the news media (enabling new epistemic practices such as sourcing, new distribution techniques and analytics, and new context for audiences’ verification and authorization of news), as they are fierce and harmful competitors (encroaching on “attention time”, data, and advertising expenditures).

Over the past decade, thousands of scientific studies have addressed the intersection of social media and journalism (e.g. Lewis & Molyneux, 2018). The Web and social media have enabled the production of news that may contribute to richer knowledge and more diverse perspectives, as well as provide distributed fact checking. Researchers initially approached the Web and social media with a high level of optimism about its potential for participation and enhancing democracy (Borger et.al. 2013). However, many have taken a sharp turn in recent years, emphasizing how “dark participation” such as misinformation and media manipulation have been gaining prominence (Quandt, 2018). Social media may serve as an infrastructure for disseminating rumors, unverified facts or even fraudulent news and political propaganda. Many have worked under the faulty assumption that social media will be a “net positive” that “reflects reality” and “matters over and above other factors” (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018). To date, the news media and much research in journalism studies have largely approached social media platforms in positive ways, taking as an uncritical bar of reference that the successful companies are those whom succeed in achieving much traffic and engagement on social media platforms, and possibly routing some of this success back to their proprietary digital platforms. Importantly, scholars should also study and make salient how social media platforms may disrupt and challenge the news media industries (e.g. Westlund & Ekström, 2018). The next section further discusses and problematizes the dislocation from news media to platform companies, addressing production, distribution and consumption aspects. Thereafter, the article turns to discussing epistemological implications within three key areas.

**2. Dislocation of news journalism: shifting dependency on platform companies**

Dislocationrefers to a fundamental transformation and thedisruption of an established order. This article posits the *dislocation of news journalism*, which involves parallel processes of power redistribution from *the news media* to *platform companies*. Power dependencies form the key issue in the transforming relationship between these two industry actors, each of which represent many companies. In the previous mass media era, journalists in few news media organizations produced and published news material in a medium the news publisher they worked for owned and controlled (i.e. proprietary). The news was also accessed by many. The contemporary digital mediascape involves numerous news producers, some of which switch between human and computational ways of producing and distributing personalized news content for their own proprietary platforms (Westlund, 2011; Lewis & Westlund, 2015b) as well as algorithmic-oriented curation on non-proprietary platforms such as Facebook (DeVito, 2017). Institutional news publishers used to control the production and distribution of news for their media outlet. The Web has disrupted the media industry, substantially reducing barriers for new entrants to publish themselves (albeit few manage to become significant players). As Bell et al. (2017, p. 9) note, “technology platforms have become publishers in a short space of time, leaving news organizations confused about their own future.” Many news publishers have since long broadened their portfolio of proprietary platforms, and extended to non-proprietary platforms like mobile ecosystems and social media platforms (Westlund, 2011).

There is thus a general shift from a monopolistic situation involving institutional news producers, claiming journalistic authority in the provision of everyday news (Carlson, 2017), to a situation in which news and other forms of information is produced and distributed by a larger diversity of actors, including ordinary citizens (Deuze & Witschge, 2017). Some “news” producers deliberatively skew the news according to specific political and/or economic interests (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2018). There are also diverse sets of “alternative media” applying somewhat similar and somewhat dissimilar news production routines (Holt, 2018). Such social actors do not depend on being published within the realms of news publishers, and the way they control and restrict participatory journalism (Lewis, 2012). They can publish via news sites, responsive mobile applications etc. Journalism and its boundaries are being contested in different ways, and defended through professional control (Lewis, 2012), various forms of boundary work (Carlson & Lewis, 2015) and meta-journalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016).

Ultimately there are a plethora of actors who can reasonably qualify as being journalists or news organizations. This article focuses exclusively on news media producers that are organized as a company employing several journalists, producing and publishing news on a daily basis, taking legal and editorial responsibility for the news content, and which operate with at least one proprietary platform (i.e. television, radio, newspaper, news site, news application).

In the broadest sense, dislocation encompasses numerous fundamental transformations involving a shift in power from the *news media* companies(and their journalists) *to platform companies*.). There is a good reason social media companies are known as platform companies, since these have developed a computing architecture that sets the stage for different social actors and audiences to engage in communication, information exchange, business, etc. The most powerful social media platform is Facebook, which also owns companies such as Instagram and WhatsApp, acts as an intermediary between its massive user bases and a plethora of companies which have become increasingly dependent on them. A Tow center report eloquently discusses how the news media have become a “platform press”, writing that platform companies “have evolved beyond their role as distribution channels, and now control what audiences see and who gets paid for their attention, and even what format and type of journalism ﬂourishes” (Bell et al., 2018, p. 9).

Platform companies operate with a different business model and technological architecture than news media. Social media platforms offer a multitude of affordances, including different forms of one-to-one and one-to-many communications, as well as producing, publishing, accessing, sharing, and engaging with different kinds of information and news such as text, video, audio or data. Social media platforms typically offer these without a monetary charge. Instead, they build on a revenue model in which the platform companies collect and analyze data on users’ digital footprints and then subsequently sell them as a commodity to advertisers. News publishers are also engaging in such practices and use data for data-driven journalism. The dependency of platform companies is evident in news publishers’ use of algorithms to facilitate personalized news delivery. More specifically, news is increasingly distributed in social media platforms that employ algorithms to enhance personalization in the story selections of the news feed (DeVito, 2017).

Social media platforms have built a successful business model; altogether, they have attracted billions of people to visit their platforms for various purposes, gaining highly desired attention spans and advertising expenditures from their competitors, including institutional news media companies. The shift in revenue streams is a disruptive and very central aspect of the existing power dependencies. The news media industries have lost tremendous revenues in competition with platform companies, mostly to Facebook and Google. These platform companies clearly have more massive user bases who engage more frequently and extensively with their services. With superior skills, methods and systems for measuring their users and for personalizing advertising, the platform companies have outcompeted the news media in the advertising market; they are making the most of their attention spans and have also started competing in the previously important classifieds market. News publishers are struggling with the business of journalism (Picard, 2014), and the competition for advertising from platform companies have added significantly to this struggle (Ohlsson & Facht, 2017). There are many ways in which the power-dependence between news media and platform companies have become salient, such as with the Apple ecosystem in which Apple controls applications and takes nearly one-third of the revenues, but also in partnerships with Facebook, such as Instant articles in the past, and building paywalls for news publishers inside Facebook in the present.

Research into how news publishers relate to and depend on platform companies have begun emerging in recent years. AMoreover, Myllylahti (2018) concludes that Facebook has created an “attention economy trap” where Facebook indeed has helped generate traffic, but limited revenues.

Ultimately, the social and networked infrastructures of some platform companies have become interwoven with the operations of several news media (Bell et al., 2017; Bruns, 2018). Many news media have felt pressured to develop a social media presence, albeit their approaches to social media vary between different companies and over time (Chua & Westlund, 2019; Nielsen & Ganter, 2018). Social media platforms are commercially driven enterprises, traded on stock exchanges, and striving towards goals such as expansion, higher connectedness and increased profitability. Such companies have become very successful in developing a platform onto which a multitude of actors want to have their information published or shared (including news media firms), and to which citizens turn to access information. Bruns argues that professional journalism nowadays is being normalized into social media platforms (controlling the numerous ways in which the public can engage with the news) instead of the other way around (Bruns, 2018). News media firms have turned to platform companies to increase their overall traffic. Many news media firms have appropriated functions that enable users to share news on social media platforms and interact with the news on these non-proprietary platforms via comments, tweets, likes and so forth. They have engaged in social media optimization (SMO), similar to practices for having their news content found by search engines through search engine optimization and developed practices for generating as much traffic volumes as possible (measured as unique IPs, page views, etc.). They celebrate when their total weekly/monthly traffic has increased. Furthermore, news media firms have hired social media editors who actively adapt their news content and publish it for a diverse set of non-proprietary platforms, most notably Facebook, but also Snapchat, Twitter, etc. For example, social media editors continuously oversee the flow of news being published, and then selects articles, videos etc. they consider appropriate for publishing on their accounts on non-proprietary platforms. A social media editor may thus edit and publish an article on a Facebook group for the news media company, when believing the article holds promise to be “sharable”.

The volume of referral traffic comprises a strong indicator of the role platform companies play. For many years, Facebook gained significance as a source of referral traffic to the news media. However, since mid-2017 and in early 2018 the company has shifted its strategy and instead tried to offer a platform that keeps its users on their site and applications. Consequently, the relative proportion of referral traffic from Facebook has decreased substantially (Benton, 2018).[[1]](#endnote-1) What does this reveal concerning dislocation and power dependency? For several years, the news media developed activities aimed at achieving increasingly more traffic (referrals) via social media platforms. A mutual dependency evolved, albeit increasingly marked by tens of thousands of publishers becoming more dependent on one platform company (i.e. Facebook). For Facebook the dependency is salient in cases where users expect news from their platform to be satisfied, and when other forms of similarly appreciated content do not flow in. With these changes Facebook has reduced their already relatively small dependency on news publishers even further, which came as a massive blow to news industries and their preconditions for succeeding with advertising. As a result, news media firms need to reconfigure their business model and work towards becoming less dependent on non-proprietary platforms, yet maintaining a balanced presence.

Moreover, the news has become increasingly detached from the context of its original producer and production processes (Carlson, 2017, p. 65). News may travel to a multitude of platforms that also contain a mix of other content and voices. The travelling of news from its original context of production is not a new phenomenon. The processes of quoting and rewriting in journalism, and the circulation of rumors among readers, are intrinsic to news as a public knowledge. News logics are, however, added to the traveling of news when news is distributed across diverse platforms. So-called “ambient journalism” (Hermida, 2013) has become prominent in an age of social media. This has resulted in diverse kinds of news travelling quickly between news producers, platforms and publics. When the news is tailored for and distributed to diverse non-proprietary platforms, the news media transfer their content to someone else. While remaining editorially responsible for the content itself, and in contrast to a situation where news media successfully run their own proprietary platforms, these are now losing control, attention spans from news consumers on their own platforms, critically important data, and revenues.

The shifting power dependencies for distribution naturally extend to news consumption. Over the past decade, a handful of platform companies have gained significance as key gateways for how people access the news (Newman et al., 2018). So-called incidental news discovery via social media has become a salient characteristic of the public´s contemporary news consumption (Kim, Chen, & Gil De Zúñiga, 2013; Newman, Fletcher, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017), although patterns naturally vary between different groups in society. However, different news consumption patterns mean very different dependencies on social media. Individuals may stumble upon a relevant news article on the news feed, and digest what is immediately available on their platform. They may click on a link and be directed to a news site, and then immediately return. A third scenario involves having the user redirected from social media to a proprietary news site, upon which the individual discovers other relevant news articles, and thus becomes more engaged with the news content from the proprietary platform. When people are gratified from their experiences with a news site, they are presumably also more likely to return to this news site to discover and digest news. This means building loyalty and an inclination towards paying for the news, whilst reducing dependency on platform companies.

Emerson (1962) argued that a critical aspect of power concerns actors’ dependency on another actor for achieving their goals. Facebook and the news media have developed a sort of dependence on each other in building traffic around news content. As a result, many citizens have developed routines of accessing their news via social media and displacing some of their former news consumption routines. With Facebook diversifying its news feeds, the company thus reduces its dependency on news content and news publishers. Consequently, news publishers who depended a lot on social media for their news to be widely accessed are now facing problems. Members of the public counting on being fed news via their Facebook feed will consequently also be less exposed to news in such a way.

**3. *Dislocation of news journalism*: Epistemic implications**

The dislocation of news has considerable implications for news epistemology, that is, the forms of knowledge news journalism claims to provide, and how such knowledge is produced, validated and justified (Ekström & Westlund, 2019). To discuss how news, as relatively authoritative knowledge about the world, is changing in the context of social media, we hereby propose and discuss three central dimensions of news epistemology. The first dimension focuses on the articulation of truth claims in news texts and meta-discourse, the second how news is produced, validated and justified, and the third how news is received and validated by audiences. Related distinctions have been suggested in the literature on journalism culture and epistemology (Hanitzsch, 2007). Our conceptualization of epistemologies is distinctive in its discursive and sociological foundation, focusing on the actual articulation of truth claims in news discourse and the validation of news in social practices, rather than general ideas and philosophical debates on objectivism, subjectivism etc.

*3.1 The articulation of truth claims*

A significant aspect of news as a form of knowledge is the articulation of truth claims. The claims of providing verified and reliable news on a daily basis have discerned professional journalism from other forms of public information. This is what most news organizations promise to achieve. Such epistemic claims are articulated in meta-discourses as well as in the conventional forms and language of news (Ekström, 2002). As Carlson (2017, p. 73) argues, “News forms are laden with epistemological premises that shape the type of knowledge they communicate and, by extension, contain an argument for their legitimation.” In news discourse, truth-telling is typically shaped by the discursive constructions of factuality, constructions of out-there-ness, disguise of uncertainties, visuals indexing a reality to be taken for granted, the representation of reliable sources of information, forms of quoting and the formal neutral voice of news presenters (Ekström & Westlund, 2019; Montgomery, 2007, pp. 33, 64). This is not to suggest that the epistemic claims of news are homogenous. They vary across sub-genres of news journalism. Interpretive, speculative and explicitly partisan news reporting — challenging the restrictions of impartiality — have, for example, been analyzed in several studies (Hutchby, 2011; Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012). Ultimately, how do the processes of dislocation affect the articulated truth claims of news journalism? Without claiming to be exhaustive, we identify three significant ways.

*First*, the knowledge and truth claims of news are *refashioned* in the context of online and social media. A key mechanism concerns the speed of which news is distributed and sometimes goes viral via social media, often in the form of “decontextualized snippets of information” (Nielsen, 2017). This puts pressure on journalists and the news media to continuously keep up to date with how events are unfolding. Typically, they consider it important to act quickly to publish the first version reporting on the news, and to distribute it on both proprietary and non-proprietary social media platforms. The general claims in news journalism of being fast and first are adapted to the temporalities of online and social media (Usher, 2018). Furthermore, social media have enabled the entry of new forms of journalism articulating different knowledge claims. In live blogging, the authoritative voice of the journalist is, for example, reformulated into the role of a “curator” prioritizing and disseminating “bite-sized” and frequently updated information from different sources (Thurman & Walters, 2013). To some extent, the dislocation of news in social media platforms might contribute to a shift in truth-telling towards more provisional, corrected and even contradictory facts. However, at least as important to consider is the renewal of evidence and constructions of factuality such as when screenshots of Twitter and Facebook accounts are provided to show what actors actually say and do, instead of the news referring to sources in quotes and reported speech (“The president said that …”). How these various tendencies are manifest in different cultural contexts remains to be investigated in systematic comparative research. The distribution of news in social media is characterized by, not only, a diversity of genres and voices, but a crossing and blurring of boundaries between marketing, personal opinions, professional commentaries and impartial news (Lewis & Molyneaux, 2018). This can result in role conflicts for news journalists articulating opinions on personal profiles, adapting to the discursive norms in social media. However, most likely this also results in the truth claims articulated in the reporting and commenting on specific news events becoming increasingly mixed.

*Second,* there is a tendency towards *obscuring* truth claims. Claims refer to the authority of the principal behind the news and the context of production indicated through diverse institutional markers. The *dislocation of news journalism*, however, means less control for news producers over the publishing context, and published news becomingly increasingly detached from the original principal and context of production.To explicate, when institutional news media firms publish news for a proprietary platform, they can set the context of specific information through markers such as their overall brand. They also determine whether it is an analysis, breaking news, editorial, chronicle, and so forth. Such contextual information may be lost when news is published or redistributed for social media platforms. What the news claims to provide in terms of verified knowledge risks being obscured. Many researchers, practitioners and managers have dismissed the plain repurposing of news content between different proprietary platforms. They have stressed that journalism must be developed and customized in harmony with the affordances of the distinct medium or platform for which it will be published (Westlund, 2013).

Contemporary news producers face the possibilities of publishing for a multitude of both proprietary and non-proprietary platforms; large investments are required to successfully customize their news content and services for all platforms, and thus it can make sense to step back and produce platform-agnostic news. This means that the information produced is not dedicated to one specific platform, but instead harmonizes with as many platforms as possible: from proprietary news sites and apps, to voice-driven smart speakers, car instrument panels, and so forth. Few have the resources to do so. Moreover, publishing news for non-proprietary platforms involves a loss of control. With social media, the news producer cannot control the publishing context: how the news material is presented, the type and quality of potential adjacent information, and the potential engagement that develops around it (i.e. clicks, comments, re-tweets, sharing). News published online can be shared across several social media platforms and may transform in the process, making the principal behind it invisible. Consequently, anyone or anything producing news for social media may want to include embedded meta-communication indicating the truth claims, information on the nature of the material, the journalistic process, and who the producer is (company, journalist, robot, etc.). With increasingly sophisticated methods and tools for creating and publishing mock news, it is important for producers of journalistic news to develop clearly recognizable meta-communication embedded in the news material. For videos, this includes font, angles, introductory music, watermarks, logotypes, etc. For news texts, this may involve setting the context by embedding key clarification in headline or preamble.

*Third*, while social media facilitate the communication of opinions, personal voices, or even speculations indicating lower commitments to factuality, they also contribute to the effective dissemination of “fake” or “mock news”, and the related *deception* of truth claims (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). Mock is a concept connoting being artificial, mimic and imitated, as well as fake and bad. Thus, it encompasses the practice of imitating the tone and appearance of journalistic news material, but embodying it with artificial content that is intentionally fake. Characteristic of these is the exploitation of the conventionalized forms of news, and the related discourse of factuality, to disseminate fabricated news and false information. The principle behind the information is masked. The purpose of doing so is often linked to political and/or economic interests. Since “fake news” simply connotes something being fake, we therefore propose the concept of “mock news” because of its two-fold meaning also involving the imitation of how news material is presented. Metaphorically, mock news is like a chameleon, successful in camouflaging and blending into their context through skin coloration that imitates their surroundings. So-called “deep fakes” have emerged, referring to sophisticated techniques for manipulating voices and faces, making it possible to give the impression that a specific person says something, albeit not true at all. To conclude, the dislocation of news in social media and the traveling of decontextualized news between different platforms involve a refashioning as well as obscured and pure fraud regarding truth claims. This implies a destabilization concerning the authority of journalism and news as a form of knowledge (Carlson, 2017), which creates challenges for professional journalists and news organizations promising to provide reliable news, as well as for audiences who ultimately have to decide what to trust.

*3.2 Production of knowledge and the ‘contexts of justification’*

The *dislocation of news journalism* in social media has significant implications for the knowledge-producing practices within journalism and the related processes of justifications (Ekström & Westlund, 2019). It is pressing for research to reopen the critical epistemological questions of “how journalists know what they know” and what qualifies as justified facts in particular contexts. Ettema and Glasser (1985) formulated this in their seminal comparative study of daily and investigative reporting. From their sociological approach, with references to classical studies by Tuchman and Fishman, epistemology refers to knowledge-producing practices, the norms, standards, methods and classifications enacted in the processing of facts and the justifications of truth claims (Ekström, 2002). The primary question posed is therefore not whether particular news is true or not, but what characterizes the practical ways of dealing with knowledge and facts in news production (Godler & Reich, 2013). How do journalists decide what is sufficiently justified to publish in concrete situations?

This sociological approach understands the processing of facts and the justification of news as practical matters handled through norms and standards developed within a particular context; this has been defined as “the context of justification” (Ettema & Glasser, 1985). This social constructivist position does not imply a radical form or constructivism and relativism (Godler & Reich, 2013, p. 674; Ekström & Westlund, 2019). It is a moderate form of constructivism (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 8, 230). News is dependent on how journalists collectively understand and produce knowledge about a world, one which exists independent of journalism. All news accounts are not equally true or fallible. Collective norms and standards are important objects of inquiry solely because they effect news journalists´ validations of facts and their justifications of truth claims.

With the transformations of news production in online and social media, the contexts of justifications, and the related norms and standards, are changing and vary far more than the seminal studies on daily news and investigative reporting capture. A critical aspect concerns the processing (selections, evaluations and authorization) of sources. Established journalist-source relationships and the relatively shared understanding of sources within the news rooms are central to the epistemology of news. With numerous social media platforms readily available, journalists can now engage in the practice of lurking in personal accounts, groups, pages and so forth. Sometimes they utilize the information found in the news. On other occasions, journalists may identify relevant sources or ideas for investigations through social media, and then take this with them in their subsequent news work. With the regular use of social media sources, routines in the assessment of sources, and the categorizations of sources providing either pre-justified facts or facts that require careful cross-checking are potentially destabilized. Journalists have to update their standards and skills in assessing different voices in social media. It is a particular challenge for journalists to verify the identity and credibility of the voices behind potentially newsworthy information. As Duffy and Tan Rui Si (2018) note, there is a contradiction in journalism between the potential benefits of using the diversity of non-elite voices in online and social media to enrich journalism, and the “practicalities of the demand for speed, accuracy and validation” that hinder this. Their empirical study based on interviews with student reporters in Singapore shows a tendency of favoring official elite sources; the identity of non-elite voices is considered more demanding and time-consuming to verify. The ever-faster news cycle not only increases the risk of incorrect data being published (Karlsson et al., 2017; Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016), but also necessitates an adjustment of shared verification standards. The validation of news tends to be reduced to the accuracy of bits of information, individual facts and quotes (Undurraga, 2017). The expectations of fast publishing also shape the already challenging sourcing practices (Eldridge & Bødker, 2018), and reduces the time for cross-checking.

There has been much hope and hype around the potential of social media for how journalists can further develop news work, for instance, by turning to a much larger pool of sources (for a critical review see Lewis and Molyneaux, 2018). Research indicates that the standards and practices applied in the verification of social media sources differ significantly between the newsrooms and different forms of reporting (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016, c.f. van Leuven et. al. 2018). While journalists in some contexts publish tweets without any forms of verification, there are also contexts in which journalists are generally reluctant to use social media sources (Broersma & Graham, 2013, p. 461). The dominance of elite sources, and the related hierarchy of authorized sources in news journalism (Belair-Gagnon, 2015; Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016; van Leuven et al., 2018), is reproduced in the more frequent use of Twitter (compared to Facebook), the platform typically used by politicians, celebrities, etc. Thus, they provide a constant stream of newsworthy and quotable utterances (von Nordheim et al., 2018). Some exceptions occur, such as with live blogging, in which journalists turn to a larger and more diverse set of sources (Thorsen & Jackson, 2018). Moreover, journalists may also use messaging apps like WhatsApp to successfully invite people to participate in the news production processes (Kligler-Vilenchik & Tenenboim, 2019). At the selection and filtering stage, journalists have typically maintained control, rarely allowing others to participate in or influence the news production processes.

What we have defined as the dislocation of news also has significant implications regarding the context of justification *external* to the news room and news journalism. News is increasingly distributed in the form of decontextualized pieces of information on different platforms (Nielsen, 2017); it is detached from the original context of production and justified in a new context. A basic principle in the latter context of justification can be summarized as follows: what is published in authorized media or by authorized voices is sufficiently true to be distributed, in pieces, if there are no obvious reasons for not doing so. In these republishing processes, the responsibility for verifications is blurred and the risk that problematic truths are circulated increases, not least because this circulation often occurs at a fast speed.

Platform companies offer their platforms to house the distribution of news of various quality and truthfulness. Various actors can produce and publish news on a recurrent basis, or as random acts of journalism. They can turn to a variety of media and digital platforms when publishing their news material. The platform companies do not take the same responsibility for the content published as news media companies. It has been widely acknowledged that Facebook has significant power and control over what people see and are influenced by. Thus, the company acts in an editorial way. Yet, Facebook has largely avoided the expenses of manual editing and curation, only tweaking its algorithms. Over time, the company has started curating content and is now engaging external fact checkers as well as the public in notifying about possible disinformation. The rise of fact-checkers has added new contexts of justification to news journalism (Graves, 2017), in which facts are validated both before and after publishing. However, a series of scandals has increased the pressure on Facebook to take greater responsibility for how their platform and the data is used by diverse stakeholders. To what extent this process of accountability will result in any changes of significant implications for the validation and justification of news in social media is still an open questions.

*3.3. Audiences’ acceptance/rejections of knowledge claims*

In the examination of news as knowledge and justified beliefs, one must also ask what makes particular forms of news justified from the audience’s point of view. The justification of news as valid knowledge includes audience activities on three aspects: *general trust*, *patterns of consumption* and *critical evaluations*. Audiences attribute different levels of trust/distrust to different news providers, with implications for their news consumption as well as their inclination to accept the truth claims of individual news items. News consumption is typically embedded in everyday practices. Forms of news are accepted or rejected as valid (reliable, interesting, relevant) knowledge about current events, in the way they are actually consumed and prioritized. The patterns of clicking and sharing digital news, for example, validate particular forms of news, whether intentional or not. Taken together, audiences’ preunderstandings of the principals behind the news and their habitual forms of news consumption mean they do not need to critically assess individual news, if they do not have particular reasons to doubt its veracity (Tandoc et al., 2017, pp. 3–4). How the three aspects of *trust*, *patterns of consumption* and *critical evaluations* are interrelated is a key issue in current research (e.g. Fletcher and Park, 2017). Schwarzenegger (2019) propose the concept “personal epistemologies” to analyze how individuals navigate their media use and interact with the news based on perceived credibility and conceptions of knowledge and knowing.

Critical evaluations include the more specific activities of assessing the veracity of news and identifying biases and misinformation. The critical evaluations of news in social media have been explained in relation to internal activities (judgments based on their own knowledge and interpretation of the news) and external activities (checking with trusted people and other sources) (Tandoc et al., 2017, see also Edgerly, 2017). Not surprisingly, audiences’ perceptions of, and abilities to detect, fake or mock news in social media have attracted increasing scholarly interest (Newman et al, 2018; Schwarzenegger, 2019). Zubiaga and Ji (2014) suggest that the verification of information in social media and the identification of fake news is dependent on interpretations of the authority of the author behind the information, plausibility, how information is presented, as well as the processes of independent corroboration. Audiences’ critical evaluations are conditioned by several aspects of dislocated news discussed above, such as the sometimes obscured principal behind the news and the diversity of actors producing news with both sincere and dark intentions for their participation (Quandt, 2018). When news is detached from the original context, it may become more difficult, and sometimes even impossible, for audiences to evaluate the news based on the trust and authority of the original producer. Clearly, many news publishers do their best to ensure their brand remains visible in conjunction to how a piece of news is published. They still succeed in doing so for the Facebook news feed, for example. They are, however, not in control of how social media platforms choose to display content and brands, and they may have little influence over this unless they pay them.

Important to note, audiences’ justification of news — acceptance or rejection of knowledge claims — involves cognitive, discursive and social dimensions. Regarding the latter, the dislocation of news has significant implications for the social context and practices in which news is justified. Research has analyzed mechanisms with potentially counteracting effects on the critical reading of news. Mechanisms for the selective exposure of news in social media, on the one hand, tend to increase the effects of well-known biases in justifications related to beliefs and values. Sophisticated and continuously evolving algorithms are employed to personalize content delivery on social media platforms. News are authorized as relatively reliable and valuable knowledge in peer networks, political groups, etc. On the other hand, social media platforms have contributed to more distributed and collaborative processes of justification in which audiences can compare information from different sources; produce and share supplementary and corrective information, critical readings and knowledge about false messages, to some extent also functioning as constructive feedback for news journalism (Hermida, 2012).

The role of the audiences in the justification of news is not restricted to the assessment of individual news items. News is also accepted or rejected in the acts of sharing on personal networks, sometimes with the effect that news goes viral. Social media platforms have enabled and spurred audiences to actively participate with the news in different ways such as linking news articles to their Facebook news feeds or tweeting about the news. Audiences also use social media platforms to engage in discussions about the news, by commenting on articles and responding to other people’s comments. Consequently, interpersonal relationships have become increasingly important in the validation of news. “Personal influence” (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) of the individuals publishing or sharing news is increasingly integrated into the news as a form of authoritative knowledge, worth listening to and trusting in.

**4. Conclusion**

Institutional news publishers have long comprised the producers of journalism. They have also published and distributed their news via proprietary platforms. Social media platforms act as intermediaries. Consequently, they have caused disruption, increasingly dislocating the news producers and their news production processes from the platforms onto which the news material is published and accessed. Ultimately, a *dislocation of news journalism* is occurring in which news publishers have become dependent, to varying degrees, on platforms non-proprietary to themselves, provided by social media companies, to achieve some of their goals. As discussed, and originally forwarded by Emerson (1962), a situation in which actor I depends on actor II for achieving the goals they have set is a strong indicator of power. News publishers depend on such platform companies in many different ways; for gaining wide reach and engagement with the news they publish, building and sustaining revenues, implementing analytics to gain metrics that are useful, improving different forms of digital journalism, and so forth. While *dislocation of news journalism* mainly has involved a process of dislocation from news media organizations to platform companies, this conceptualization also covers processes in which news media organizations work towards reducing their dependence and developing the significance of their proprietary platforms again (Newman, 2019; Chua and Westlund, 2019). It is worth considering that news organizations struggling to finance their operations may establish fruitful partnerships if they can offer digital platforms of their own, and these can also serve as the most important appeal for potential buyers who may have to come to their rescue in the future.

The *dislocation of news journalism* has important implications for how news journalism achieves the epistemic goals of providing reliable public information. Challenges and disruption of the truth claims of news and the authority of news journalism have been discussed most intensively in relation to the discourse of so-called fake news. However, the transformation of news in the context of social media has also spurred an increasing amount of research focusing on epistemology related issues. Researchers have, for example, analyzed the competing and obscured knowledge claims in the distribution of news in social media, the shifting processing and justifications of sources in journalism, and the role of social media in restructuring the social contexts in which audiences assess, interpret and validate the news.

With ambitions toward making a contribution to the numerous studies connected to the emerging sub-field referred to as “epistemologies of digital journalism”, this article has presented a broad perspective of the epistemological implications regarding the dislocation of news journalism. The approach proposed differentiates between (1) articulated knowledge and truth claims, (2) the production and justification of knowledge in journalism (3) the acceptance/rejection of knowledge claims in audience activities. This comprehensive approach helps to systematically analyze key aspects of epistemology, and integrate current research on various epistemological practices.

A general argument proposed in this article concerns how truth claims and practices of justification, and ultimately the authority of news and journalistic knowledge, must be understood in relation to how non-proprietary social media platforms disrupt the distribution, production and consumption of news. What also becomes clear from the analyses is that existing mechanisms pull in different directions; this results in upgraded *and* downgraded truth claims; increased transparency and obfuscation of production principals; sophisticated and limited practices of justification in news production; collaborative activities that shape audiences’ critical assessments of news and network-based audience activities that tend to uncritically reproduce unverified and false news. However, the dislocation of news journalism seems to imply that the justification of journalistic truth- and knowledge claims is increasingly dependent on activities beyond the control of the news media. An important challenge for future research is to further investigate how the various epistemological practices in news production and news consumption are related to the more general authority and legitimacy of news journalism as forms of knowledge, in the context of the ongoing transformations of digital journalism and platforms.

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1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)