From clickbait to independent journalism? Media startups as a new entrant in the journalistic field

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From clickbait to independent journalism?

Media startups as a new entrant in the journalistic field

Matthew Chew Chee Han

Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information

2020

**From clickbait to independent journalism?
Media startups as a new entrant in the journalistic field**

Matthew Chew Chee Han

Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfilment of the
requirement for the degree of Master of Communication Studies

2020

Statement of Originality

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research, is free of plagiarised materials, and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

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The contributions of the co-authors are as follows:

- I prepared the manuscript drafts and conducted the research.
- A/Prof Edson C. Tandoc Jr. provided overall guidance and edited the manuscript drafts.

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Summary

The journalism industry is evolving. The rise of produsage, where individuals are both producers and consumers of media, has changed professional practices in newsrooms and allowed independent media startups to sprout. These digital-born organizations often take advantage of lower market-entry barriers to technology and tools that aid production and distribution to gain market share, but now face the same monetization problem as legacy newsrooms. Media startups also tend to stretch the boundaries of the profession through innovations, but are still guided by values and ideas from legacy journalists. Guided by Bourdieu's field theory, this study will utilize in-depth interviews to understand Singapore-based media startups.

This study focuses on the new rules, routines and emerging habitus of media startups. It also investigates what the startups consider to be capital, and through these, attempts to get a better understanding of what the journalists think of their work and how they deal with upcoming advancements in the field. Through 20 in-depth interviews with individuals working in and with media startups, the study found that the new entrants will adopt certain existing journalistic rules and routines but also differentiate themselves from the incumbent. This study suggests that both differentiation and dedifferentiation will occur concurrently, and the agents will don a *media startup habitus*. To become the new incumbents in the field, media startups iterate and adapt, and grow their capital in a more fluid manner compared to traditional organizations.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The journalism industry is evolving. The sound of newspapers rustling has been replaced by clicks and notification alerts on digital devices, heralding a change in how journalists report the news. Most print news outlets have moved to digital platforms, and news video content is now increasingly consumed on mobile phones. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's Digital News Report found that two-thirds of respondents across the globe now consume news on smartphones (Newman, 2019). These new consumption habits have been attributed to digital convergence and technological breakthroughs, which allowed media to become what McNair (2009) predicted as “networked, globalized and participatory” (p.347). Individuals with limited resources can now participate in producing and transmitting news to a large audience, sprouting more citizen journalists, media startups and even more media innovations. Some of these media startups now hold a similar amount of public trust and readership as legacy newsrooms (Newman, 2019; Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris & Eisenegger, 2019) and are seen as a disruptive force in the journalistic field.

Using Bourdieu's field theory as a framework, this study seeks to examine these media startups and the disconnect between them (the new entrants) and legacy newsrooms. Bourdieu's field theory sees journalism as an autonomous field governed by its own unique set of rules; different agents within the field exert influence over one another (Bourdieu, 1988). As the field embraces technological innovations, a hysteresis or disconnect in the field emerges, requiring journalists to deskill and upskill to reconcile their best practices with the changing power dynamics and technological developments.

With new entrants in the journalistic field and a pool of diminishing advertising revenue now split between more players, legacy newsrooms are no longer as profitable as before. This resulted in newsroom closures and layoffs in the journalism and media industry (Kare, 2020; Seow, 2017). This thesis will help to understand why some new entrants are more successful than others. The thesis will help inform industry leaders on the evolving journalistic rules, practices and routines. The editors and industry leadership can provide journalists with some leeway in certain traditional rules, so that they can better relate to the audiences and editors can make better newsroom decisions to ensure sustainability. Furthermore, the study will understand what the new entrants focus on during their different phases, and can help inform industry professionals, budding media-startup owners, investors and journalists in their media growth strategies. Understanding the “media startup journalist” will also help recruiters and editors think more interdisciplinary and hire better talents. The editors can better decide how they can upskill certain legacy employees and re-skill individuals coming from another field. Journalists are often unable to reconcile business and monetization models with the work that they do. By applying startups’ iterative and agile mindset, the study hopes that more industry professionals can be more conscious about the changing elements of their work and be cognizant of how their work keeps the lights on.

Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher will speak to individuals working in media startups in Singapore to obtain a broader professional and social-contextual understanding of these new organizations, the journalists they employ, and their work practices. The paper will also attempt to understand how journalists view these upcoming technological developments, and how they impact work in a startup newsroom. The study is focused on Singapore media

startups, and the Singapore media scene is a unique locale as it has tight media regulations but also serves as a media hub for Southeast Asian English-speakers. Existing studies on media startups have focused on the Western countries, and this meaning-making study attempts to provide a Southeast Asian perspective, providing the existing scholarship with nuance and a multi-faceted understanding of the rise of media startups. By understanding how the media startups function and how they came about, it will better inform some of the changing work boundaries, norms and audience consumption patterns.

Thesis Outline

In Chapter II, the study examines the existing literature on produsage, startups and online journalism. This section will closely examine Bourdieu's field theory, and detail how scholars have applied this framework to the journalistic field. We look at how existing research has examined the concepts of doxa, habitus and capital in the context of the journalistic field. Chapter III provides the methodology for the research, which explains the rationale behind choosing a semi-structured interview for the study. It will also explain certain pandemic research considerations, sampling strategy, the research process, and how the study's data was analyzed.

The next three chapters present the results of the study, structured according to the research queries posed in Chapter II. Thus, Chapter IV reports on the rules and routines of media startups that constitute their doxa. Chapter V focuses on what constitutes media startup agents' individual dispositions, referring to how their habitus, and how individual agents deal with the changing circumstances of their work. Then, Chapter VI examines the forms of capital that media startups consider as important.

Finally, Chapter VII discusses the concepts surfaced by the respondents, provides conceptual and practical takeaways, and situates the study's relevance within the existing journalism scholarship. It will also evaluate the limitations of the study and suggest future research possibilities.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Technology and Produsage

Digital convergence and technological advancements, such as better network connections and more accessible creation tools for consumers, have led to a series of transformations in the media industry, such as a shift in user consumption habits, rise of *produsage*, and the increase of independent media startups.

First, digital convergence has led to a shift in consumption habits where users turn to non-mainstream media for their content, and also consume more content on their mobile phones (Ling & Donner, 2013; Molyneux, 2018). This shift is linked to audiences now preferring bite-sized and shareable content, and their new consumption habits are likened to the act of ‘snacking’ (Dessauer, 2004) where one consumes smaller pieces of information online on their mobile phone. Users now spend less time with their news sessions, but use their mobile devices throughout the day (Molyneux, 2018). Their news consumption tends to be either more incidental or self-directed, where users either explore their social media feeds and obtain news information incidentally as part of their recreational connection to social media platforms (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2018), or obtain personalized content through aggregator sites and applications like Google News. The change in consumption habits created a heightened demand for social media content that legacy newsrooms were unable to fill fast enough (Cottle & Ashton, 1999; Boczkowski, 2005) and users consequently turn to non-mainstream media for new information and content.

Second, the media have become ubiquitous and are utilized in an interconnected manner (Jenkins, 2001), along with accessible creator tools like camera-equipped mobile phones and editing software. Thus, the media industry has seen the rise of ‘the cult of the amateur’ (Keen, 2007) and ‘*producers*’ (Bruns, 2006), where individuals are both users and producers of content. For instance, users now have the ability to participate in the newsmaking process, reach mass audiences, and contribute to the environment of news. They are also able to collect, communicate and share information freely (Hermida, 2010), especially during times of crisis. They utilize mobile phones to document and report events from the perspective of eyewitnesses and the individuals involved (Gordon, 2007). Producing content for audiences used to be exclusively done by media professionals, but collaborative producers are now able to create shareable, high-impact pieces for other users as well.

Traditional newsrooms have varying responses to the rise of producers. Boczkowski’s (2005) study of newsrooms suggested that if the organization views readers as passive consumers, they are unlikely to provide opportunities for users to participate, while those that treat readers as new entrants into the field will allow them to contribute content, expanding the legacy newsroom’s information input and sources.

The rise of produsage has impacted newsrooms’ input and sources but, more importantly, also changed notions of gatekeeping and enabled the sprouting of independent media startups. By allowing anyone to contribute to newsmaking, it has left traditional journalists confused about their ability to act as the gatekeeper of information (Papacharissi, 2009) and has removed powers from legacy newsrooms and journalists (Ling & Donner, 2013). Studies have detailed the impact of produsage, and suggested that due to user-generated content, information can be

disseminated directly to the audience. As such, the traditional notion of gatekeeping, which describes how news is constructed through a series of processes traditionally controlled by journalists acting as the sole gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), has somehow shifted toward gatewatching (Bruns, 2005), where users collectively decide if a piece is worthy of passing through the metaphorical gates to reach other users. Traditionally, editors and journalists were the exclusive gatekeepers of newsworthy information, and they decided what should and should not be published. This is no longer the case. Consumers now form a collaborative, user-led filtering process of information. Goode (2009) proposes that when producing journalistic pieces, individuals in the newsmaking process become an interdependent gatekeeper with a varied level of influence (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) where the user — along with other individuals — is now responsible for the distribution and repackaging of the content.

The rise of produsage was largely due to changes in technology that led to a shift in consumption patterns and new media tools that made it easier for the ‘amateur’ to use. Produsage can be seen as the precursor to media startups, as the individual producers started coming together to determine if a piece of information should pass through the metaphorical gates or not. They banded together in an iterative, organized and cohesive structure to produce content and seek financial opportunities. At the same time, changing news consumption patterns created a gap in the media industry, and low barriers to entry have contributed to the growth of independent online publications across the globe (Hanitzsch et al., 2019).

Rise of Startups and Media Startups

News media users have become the ones to amplify conversations and distribute information online (Papacharissi, 2010) and some of them have even started their own online

media enterprises (Naldi & Picard, 2012). These users banding together gave rise to media startups, which refer to digital-born organizations that took advantage of lower market-entry barriers to technology and tools that aided in production and distribution to gain market share (Sehl, 2019).

The term startups have been used to describe young and small entrepreneurial companies. However, recent years have seen decade old companies like Yahoo calling themselves “the world’s largest startup” — the age of the company is no longer a key attribute. According to Steve Blank (2010), a startup is an organization that strives for a monetizable, repeatable and scalable product. For others, what embodies a startup is the startup culture (Ries, 2017) where the organization often advocates for efficiency, open communication and operates with a flat hierarchy. The startups tend to work toward being flexible, creative and they utilize a lean strategic approach (Blank, 2010) toward their work.

The lean startup approach is used to shorten development cycles so as to achieve a scalable product with the least amount of time and financial resources. The approach distills creating a product almost into a scientific method, and it advocates the use of validated learning, experimentation, measuring success metrics and acquiring feedback from users to create a product (Ries, 2011). The term startup has also become synonymous with early Silicon Valley technology companies, and have been associated with companies with high potential of growth and innovation like Facebook, Amazon and Google. These companies also have a unique relationship with their finances. They are either bootstrapped or are backed by an investor (Auken & Neeley, 1996). Bootstrapped companies are often started with the founders’ own limited resources and they tend to capitalize on grants, incubators and accelerators while

investors-backed companies have a financial support, network and advice of the investor but with the added responsibility of providing the investor a return of his/her investment. While most small businesses seek profitability almost immediately, startups tend to play the longer game, that they can create a product for an “exit.” A startup’s exit occurs when the company is acquired by a larger organization, e.g. when Yahoo was acquired by Verizon in 2017 for 3.38 billion dollars (Kharpal, 2017). Alternatively, the exit strategy can also be when the product starts to scale and achieve mass adoption, generating profits for the investors. Startups have also begun to innovate on social media-based solutions to disrupt and stretch boundaries of their respective profession. Studies have shown that these social media startups have attempted to solve problems in social recruitment, social media management and social commerce, to list a few (Ghezzi, et al. 2016).

Media startups also tend to stretch the boundaries of the profession through innovations, but are still guided by values and ideas from legacy journalists (Usher & Kammer, 2019). Taking advantage of technological tools and a collaborative atmosphere, these media startups are often smaller in organizational size, and tend to report only on a few selected topics. For example, studies on media startups like Vice and BuzzFeed (Tandoc, 2014; Tandoc & Jenkins, 2017; Stringer, 2018) suggest that journalists from these websites started by reporting on niche topics, created bite-sized, clickbait content that still offered value to readers.

These startups have since extended their coverage onto news and public affairs, and thus face the same monetary challenges as legacy media. Sehl’s (2019) study on digital news startups suggests that despite their editorial strategies, organizational structures and use of technology, digital startups still have problems with monetization and rely on either advertising or venture

capitalists to fund their journalism (Usher, 2017). Usher & Kammer (2019) suggest that media startups can be typologized into five main groups: non-profit startups funded through donations and grants; government funded startups to spur on innovation in journalism; venture-backed startups that are made for scaling through regions and for profit through eventual acquisition or scale; for-profit startups that operate as traditional businesses; and ideological-advocacy startups that are made to advance a particular stance.

Studies on the rise of these startup newsrooms have found that they have democratized and complicated consumers' notion of news gathering, with citizens becoming more skeptical toward institutions and legacy news media (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). The collaborative nature of news-making has also made the journalism environment more transparent and open (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001), and representative of what the audience and community wants (Bruns, 2010), akin to studies on produsage.

The rise of these media startups have posed challenges to the media industry and has largely been studied through the lens of professionalism, boundary work and field theory (Usher & Kammer, 2019). These media startups challenge traditional journalistic boundaries, specifically in the areas of occupational ethics, norms and their identity, and what they know of their role (Singer, 2005). Studies on startups have discussed what constitutes journalism, and scholars have discussed whether it is even possible to have a clean divide between editorial and advertising content in this day and age (Coddington, 2015). Studies on media startups also tackle the issue of professionalization and how it challenges traditional conventions, and investigate if journalists need to develop other professional skills like data analytics (Usher & Kammer, 2019), algorithmic reporting (Anderson, 2013) and programming robo-journalism (Clerwall, 2014).

Studies on produsage thus far have detailed the changing notion of gatekeeping, while studies on media startups focus on the boundaries of journalism and the success factors of media startups (Bruns, 2005; Tandoc, 2014; Tandoc & Jenkins, 2017; Stringer, 2018). Studies in the Asia Pacific region, however, are lacking, and to understand how these new entrants impact the journalism industry and incumbents, one can utilize Bourdieu's field theory.

Field Theory — New Entrants and New Rules

Bourdieu's social topological interpretation of field theory (Benson, 1999) allows a broad mechanism of the industry to be studied and understood. It can address key issues in journalism, from how new entrants enter and dominate the field's power hierarchy, to how industry transformations happen (Benson & Neveu, 2005). For example, studies have used field theory to examine how new entrants like media fixers impact correspondents and the field (Murrell, 2014). They have also considered religious sources as new entrants, and — through the lens of field theory — explained how journalist-source relationships between journalists and Muslim religious leaders can impact the sources' reputations in their own field (Munnik, 2018). It has also guided scholars during newsroom ethnographies (Willig, 2013) to examine interpersonal relationships, journalistic rules, structures and emerging challenges (Schultz, 2007; Ryfe, 2013).

This mezzo-level theory encompasses four key concepts: *field*, *habitus*, *capital* and *doxa*. Projecting the metaphor of a field on journalism allows the researcher to think about what moving parts belong in the field, and how individuals (or agents) have power relationships (capital) with one another. The field is governed by its own set of rules (doxa) and the agents in the field have their own "feel" of the game (habitus). These agents include anyone involved in the newsmaking process, including editors, journalists, social media personnel and even the

media organizations themselves (Schultz, 2007). Studies have detailed and debated what constitutes being a journalistic agent, as media startups and bloggers might not abide by the same rules as traditional ones (Hayes, Singer & Ceppos: 2007; Vos, Craft & Ashley, 2012; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). However, in Bourdieu's sense, he considers anyone that exerts power over another as an agent or actor in the field.

The agents are governed by journalistic doxa or rules like journalistic gatekeeping, objectivity and newsworthiness (Shoemaker, 2006). However, for media startups and digital new entrants, agents now consider virality and audience-driven rules (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017) including the number of clicks and community contribution of content. This can impact their standing and position in the field. The doxa has also shifted to include the use of social media analytics, increasing audience sizes and viral content (Christin, 2014), as well as incorporating technology into reporting processes (Lewis & Usher, 2014). These are elements that media startups excel at. In his studies on emergent newsrooms, Boczkowski (2005) suggested that with digitalization, journalistic rules like gatekeeping are also altered, and editorial decisions deviate from the traditional concept of gatekeeping.

When new entrants like digital media organizations attempt to enter the field, they will attempt to wrest power from existing agents and either transform or conserve the field (Benson, 1999). For instance, BuzzFeed News followed the traditional rules of journalistic objectivity and newsworthiness instead of altering existing structural relations, but also challenged the occupational norms of traditional journalists (Tandoc, 2014; Tandoc & Jenkins, 2017). Stringer (2018)'s study on BuzzFeed and Vice suggested that these two new media startups reinforced existing journalistic ways of ethical, objective and accurate reporting to get legitimacy in the

field, but challenged traditional notions of audience by focusing on augmenting their public reputation and growing their audience size with specific niche topics. These digital new entrants adopted a hybrid approach toward journalism, where they followed new guidelines that lean toward the workings of digital media and culture (Lewis, 2012), but also retained some traditional journalism rules.

As new entrants enter the field, they either challenge old rules or suggest new ones. For example, Bruns (2005) suggested that the doxa of gatekeeping is now replaced with gatewatching, and Tandoc (2013) suggested that the use of web analytics can be considered a new rule in newsrooms. With media startups becoming more prevalent and even considered one of the main sources of information for users, this current study sought to understand what other rules have been altered or preserved by these organizations.

RQ1: What set of rules (doxa) guide media startup agents in Singapore?

Through understanding the new rules and routines that guide media startup, one can better understand the boundaries and norms shaped by the new entrants. The quantity, quality and type of news media content posted on digital and social media space have been influenced by producers, with news content shifting toward memes, clickbait articles and short form video. Understanding the new doxa can help explain why media startup journalists pursue certain topics and produce them in a particular content format. Furthermore, the changing doxa can inform the compromises that legacy newsrooms can make with their traditional values and routines so as to match the efficiency and frequency of media startups. The doxa (if changed) can also explain why some media startups are more efficient and streamlined than others, as well as why some startups mass produce clickbait articles while others go into in-depth reportage.

Habitus and Hysteresis — A Misalignment of Existing Structures

Bourdieu's (1973) concept of *habitus* refers to a “structuring structure” (Wacquant, 2005) which divides individuals into classes based on the social world. In the journalism field, it can be understood as the journalistic feel of the game (Willig, 2013) and accounts for how journalists from newsrooms perform their roles. Bourdieu suggests that habitus is something that is acquired, and is the “history turned nature” (Bourdieu, 1997, p.78) of an individual — encompassing the social environment, relationships and background of the person. In the context of journalism, it refers to the media professionals' upbringing — from education, experiences and understanding of journalism (Maton, 2014). There is no singular or fixed habitus among agents (Schultz, 2007), and it can be changed during certain misalignments in the field (Wacquant, 2005; Bourdieu, 2000).

Habitus can differentiate the stories reported by legacy newsrooms and independent media startups. A citizen journalist without a journalistic habitus will report news with more populist values (Goode, 2009) by taking into account audience feedback (Robinson, 2010), while legacy newsroom journalists will emphasize the use of verifiable, elite sources (Ornebring, 2013; Bennett, 1996) and strong gatekeeping processes (Boczkowski, 2004; Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasorsa, 2010).

Journalism is undergoing transformation, with digital technologies spurring the development of other news providers like startup newsrooms that threaten the media organizations' traditional monopolies. The digital technologies that are implemented have also made newsroom routines more complicated, and contradict existing journalistic norms and their

feel for the game (Hanusch et al., 2019). This signals a misalignment between the field and habitus of its agents, a concept Bourdieu calls *hysteresis*.

Hysteresis is “the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.83), and can make traditional journalists feel like a misfit in the field. Dumenden and English (2013) explain that the values and experiences of the agent will be misaligned in the surrounding context due to fluctuations in the field, an example being when media professionals become out of sync when required to tap on new technology like computational and algorithmic-journalism (Anderson, 2013) or distributing news on social media and WhatsApp (Newman, 2019; Tandoc & Vos, 2016). When there is a mismatch in the field, new opportunities present themselves and can allow for the field to be altered (King, 2000; Grenfell, 2014); be it an introduction of new agents and roles, changing norms, or even merging with another field.

It is often implied that actors with an outdated habitus will adapt and adjust to the new structure after being exposed to it (Schindler & Willie, 2015), but Bourdieu left it ambiguous on how individuals react when their background or habitus does not sync with the new expectations and structures. For some, it has been to ‘deskill’, ‘reskill’ and ‘multi-skill’ to eliminate workflow redundancies and become more proficient in their jobs (Ford, 1922; Bro, Hansen & Andersson, 2016; Ornebring & Mellado, 2018). Newsrooms now break down complex processes into smaller tasks, and these tasks are completed by someone more unskilled and inexperienced, or even automated. This is a process Braverman (1974) called deskilling — where journalists lose some degree of autonomy but have a larger authority in specific areas (Bro, Hansen &

Andersson, 2016) — and some journalists are left with fewer responsibilities than before due to streamlining of processes (Ornebring, 2010).

On the other hand, there is also an increase in multi-skilling, where individuals are in charge of more elements of the newsmaking process due to budget cuts and downsizing of media publications (Nygren, 2014; Grieco, 2019). According to Domingo, Salaverria and Aguado (2007), journalists produce content for different mediums, report on different subjects and handle most of the technical production tasks. The process of deskilling and multi-skilling can occur simultaneously in news organizations (Nygren, 2008), and is often done due to technological developments (Cottle & Ashton, 1999). The journalists are also under additional pressure, as they have more responsibilities such as reporting on social media and need additional skill sets (Hanusch et al., 2019) that were not taught to them. This can also be seen as a form of misalignment of work, where the hysteresis occurs due to individuals being forced to handle multiple scopes of work, and the increased pressure on journalists tends to negatively impact news output and quality (Cottle, 2003; Ursell, 2001), which can result in burnout among journalists, and misinformation being spread. On an organizational level, newsrooms might then suffer from economic and social consequences by losing advertising dollars and credibility.

The digital transformation of newsrooms have taken different paths: for newsrooms that continue to produce a print edition, journalists often replicate their print workflows for their online operations. New entrants or digital-only publications, on the other hand, tend to take better advantage of digital technologies and social media tools (Boczkowski, 2004, 2005; Zion et al., 2016) to interact and build a relationship with their viewers (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012), reinforcing the structural changes, or hysteresis in the industry.

Most traditional journalists have to ‘upskill’ or ‘reskill’ to learn social media tools, video production and adapt to a climate of produsage, whereas independent journalists tend to be younger and were raised in the climate of produsage, thereby possessing the habitus of a produser. Quinn (2006) called journalists who are able to do all forms of journalism ‘platypuses’ though not all of them can do it or can do the job well. This has even resulted in animosity and anxiety toward future journalistic work, and has seen some journalists leaving the profession to enter another industry (O’Donnell, Zion & Sherwood, 2015).

Hysteresis can also cause a loss of economic, social and cultural capital (Hardy, 2014), and this has caused budget cutbacks and a loss of cultural standing for many newsrooms. Researchers have called this a “crisis in journalism” (Franklin, 2012, p.665). The field of journalism is in hysteresis, and studies have focused on legacy media professionals who are in this mismatch. This study proposes a better understanding of agents in new media startups instead, and the habitus that they have. Hence:

RQ2: What constitutes the habitus of media startup agents in Singapore?

RQ3: How does this habitus align with what they perceive to be the changing requirements of their work?

These research questions investigate the professionalization and identity of media startup agents by understanding their skills and experiences. They also seek to understand the reasons certain individuals thrive in a media startup, and the competitive edge that media startups have over legacy newsrooms and other media publishers. By identifying why some individuals thrive in a media startup, as well as the qualities that constitute a good media startup journalist, the study can help future recruiters or editors hire better. They can inform existing journalists on

how and what to reskill, deskill and upskill. By understanding the habitus of media startup agents, it will explain their “gut feel”, or why individuals take certain action during their newsmaking process. For instance, why do some journalists make cost-cutting measures at the expense of traditional journalistic integrity.

As mentioned above, hysteresis is “the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.83), and existing literature suggests that an outdated habitus will evolve after being exposed to the changes in the field. This study, through understanding the habitus of media startup journalists, can explain how some journalists adapt to the hysteresis while others are retrenched. The habitus of a media startup agent also serves as a preface on the direction that the journalism field is heading toward.

Lastly, understanding the new habitus allows journalists struggling with the changing requirements of their work to reconcile their new work identity — a blend of content creation, advertising and journalism.

Field Theory — Capital

The societal shifts and mechanism of influence in journalism have been understood through the lens of Bourdieu’s concept of capital, and this has also helped researchers understand why lobbyists, citizen journalists, and startups take certain media actions. Capital in the context of field theory refers to the economic, social, cultural and symbolic resources that the agents hold. Bourdieu contends that capital is the “same thing as power” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.47), and in the journalistic field, researchers have largely discussed economic, social and cultural capital.

Economic capital refers to advertising revenue and profits that a newsroom can dictate (Benson, 2006) as well as the “assets that can be transformed into money” (Tandoc, 2018, p.

204). Traditional advertising revenue has changed with the advent of digital news. The traditional indicators of economic capital are print circulation rates and audience sizes, and the industry functioned in such a way where the media companies produced content for the audiences and sold audience attention to advertisers (Pettegree, 2014). However, media startups and newsrooms now offer content to advertisers that can reach the same number of audience and clicks as those produced by mainstream news organisations. Furthermore, media startups can also earn revenue from the social media platforms when advertisers buy ad-spots within their content pieces. A larger pool of audience, engagement and reach meant more ad revenue from these platform sources. Thus, traditional newsrooms have been suffering a loss in economic capital as advertisers spread their dollars between traditional newsrooms and media startups.

Social capital, according to Bourdieu, refers to the journalist's social network and the benefits that come from the social bonds. It refers to the people, groups and communities (Bourdieu, 1984) that the journalist has connections to. Traditionally, social capital refers to the journalist's network and sources (Benson, 2006). In recent years, research has proposed that citizen journalism and users' contributions to legacy newsrooms can be seen as a form of social capital (Goode, 2009) and has started to see online communities and their involvement in the making of news as a form of social capital. Studies have argued that social media can either enhance or diminish social capital (Siapera & Spyridou, 2012), as it is harder to sustain close social links but is also easier to connect with other individuals.

Finally, cultural capital is attributed to prestige and recognition in the field (Sterne, 2003). Journalistic prizes like the Pulitzer and Peabody awards (Benson & Neveu, 2005) are seen as measures of the cultural capital of traditional newsrooms. New publications can garner high

levels of economic capital from viewerships and clicks, but cultural capital takes on a different meaning for online journalism, and does not necessarily hinge on traditional awards. Cultural capital now comes from positive online credibility and reputation (Marchi, 2012; Bourdieu, 1986) and the work they do must also be seen as a socially valued area (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007). These are all elements that media startups like BuzzFeed and Vice have fulfilled, where they reported on niche topics with new aesthetic sensibilities and a stronger editorial voice. Lewis and Usher (2014) suggest that cultural capital could also shift from traditional prizes and qualities such as in-depth reporting to better technological implementation for the users, where newsrooms provide consumers with accurate news curation and personalization. In certain situations like business journalism, the two capitals are not mutually exclusive (Duval, 2005) and can grow simultaneously, and for the case of media startups, it has been suggested that the amount of cultural and economic capital can determine the success and longevity of the new media publisher newsrooms (Vos & Singer, 2016).

A field of power like the journalistic field often emphasizes the agents, who have high volumes of capital (Benson, 2006) and are viewed as incumbents. For them to be viewed as incumbents, other agents have to first recognize their accumulated economic, social and cultural capital in the field. Traditionally, other agents and advertisers recognize the cultural capital of journalistic reliability and excellence. However, this is no longer the case, as the advertisers now go for organizations that can get them the clicks and engagement that can also grow their own cache of economic capital. The capital traditional media previously had is no longer recognized by other agents or advertisers.

But what about media startups? As new entrants into the field, how do media startups perceive the forms of capital they need to exist within the field. Thus, it is also important to understand the following:

RQ4: What do media startups in Singapore consider to be their social, cultural and economic capital?

By making sense of what media startups consider to be their capital, it can inform newsrooms (both legacy and startups) on elements to focus on during their different stages of growth or digital transformation. Certain startups and media organizations have a particular focus, and a deeper understanding of capital in the media startup context can help explain the rationale behind their focus as well as their media growth strategies.

Research Framework

In summary, digital convergence and a change in user's consumption habits has led to the rise of media startups, and the research queries attempt to understand how independent media startup agents behave in the journalistic field. This is guided by the framework of field theory, and each query will address specific elements of Bourdieu's concept of the field — the new rules in the field, the habitus of the independent journalists, as well as the media startup's notion of capital.

The technological, economic and cultural changes, or this “crisis in journalism,” can be further understood in the context of new entrants competing for economic and cultural capital with the incumbents. The study's focus on capital will show how media startups monetize their news, build their social network and increase their cultural reputation — or if those definitions have already been altered by the new entrants.

Newsrooms now compete with other new entrants for advertisers and are also trying to innovate, despite suffering from budget cuts and struggling to produce more in-depth or technical pieces. They face additional pressures at work, needing to adopt and report the news for social media (Newman, 2019) and also adapt to upcoming media trends of data-driven, algorithmic reporting (Anderson, 2013) and robo-journalism (Clerwall, 2014). The journalists in legacy newsrooms are trying to adjust their habitus to sync with the mismatch in the field, and are constantly caught between a catch-22 situation of cost-cutting and innovation. Thus, the focus on habitus will help understand the skills needed to thrive in a field that they now share with media startups. Furthermore, independent media startups tend to either challenge or conserve the field by obeying existing doxa or suggesting new rules respectively. By focusing on the rules that guide media startup agents in their work, this current study seeks to understand the priorities of startup journalists and where journalism as an industry is shifting toward. Figure 1 summarises the overarching theoretical framework being applied onto the study of media startups.

Figure 1. Field Theory Framework

The Singapore Context

Singapore's media scene is a unique locale, as it has a climate of tight media regulations that also serves as a media hub for Southeast Asian English-speakers. Singapore has a dense population of 5.8 million with a high internet penetration rate of 84% (Newman, 2018, 2019), and users mainly consume news and content through digital platforms and social media. In Singapore, news has largely been controlled by two media companies: Mediacorp and Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), both of which have close links to the state and ruling government. SPH publishes national broadsheets in four different languages, Lianhe Zaobao (Mandarin), Berita

Harian (Malay), Tamil Murasu (Tamil) and The Straits Times (English). MediaCorp, on the other hand, operates all of Singapore's local television channels, several radio stations and digital news publishers Channel NewsAsia and TODAY.

Both media companies have experienced challenges in the advent of digitalization, with Mediacorp ceasing the print edition of the TODAY newspaper from October 2017 after 17 years (Mokhtar, 2017), turning it into a fully digital outlet. SPH faced a 13% decrease in profits in their media businesses in 2017, and also saw a 23% decrease in net profit across portfolios in 2019 (Seow, 2017; Singapore Press Holdings, 2019). Furthermore, SPH also underwent several rounds of retrenchment, letting go of 130 employees in both 2017 and 2019. In recent years, Singapore has seen a decline with mainstream legacy media and a rise of startup newsrooms and publications. Digital media startup Mothership.sg became the fourth most used news site in 2019, increasing their readership from 23% in 2018 to 29% in 2019. It is known for its bite-sized articles that have been sourced from viral social media posts and reports an average of 9.2m visitors per month, with 60% of them being between 24 and 44 years old (Tandoc, 2019).

Furthermore, Singapore has tight media regulations on media companies and individuals, having recently implemented a fake news law (POFMA Office, 2020) and a licensing scheme for websites with more than 50,000 unique visitors each month, making it an interesting location of study. Singapore's Info-communications Media Development Authority requires broadcasters and publishers to pay a performance bond of SGD\$50,000, and sites that breach content standards will have to remove the offending content within 24 hours. This means that materials that the government deems as against the public interest, public security or national harmony can undergo a forced removal. In 2019, Singapore also passed the Protection from Online Falsehoods

and Manipulation Act (POFMA) allowing government ministers to order the publisher or individual to issue a correction or take-down the falsehood, with uncooperative parties facing a maximum fine of up to SGD \$50,000 or a maximum jail sentence of five years. Due to these laws and media regulation, Singapore has obtained a low level of press freedom — ranking 151 out of 180 countries on the 2019 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.) — but despite all these it has still seen a rise of media startups and publishers.

The increasing trend of media startups has been seen throughout the globe, but funding remains a looming concern with these startups, and they seek to fund their work in different ways. Media startups like the Hong Kong Free Press have increased their readership due to the 2019 Democracy protests, and have also found innovative ways toward sustainability by crowdfunding for their operational costs.

In Singapore, media startups sought to produce branded content, conduct fundraisers or implement membership models to fund their work. The branded content model seems to be working best for Singapore media startups, with HEPMIL Media Group — the Singaporean startup which owns media publishers SGAG and MGAG — achieving sustainability and managing to raise S\$1.3m in a 2017 pre-Series A funding (Tan, 2017) with the intention to expand into other countries across the region. Singapore also serves as a strategic media hub for English speakers of Southeast Asia, with companies expanding to other regions from Singapore. For instance, VICE Media group, originally a magazine publisher, kickstarted their Asia Pacific (APAC) expansion with new headquarters in Singapore (Hew, 2017) in an attempt to appeal to the English speakers in Asia.

These new companies have appeared because content creation is now easily accessible and “everyone is a media outlet” (Shirkey, 2013, p.67) with or without journalistic values. A greater understanding of the startup industry and media specifically in Singapore could possibly explain why some legacy newsrooms took drastic measures to conserve their resources like hiring freezes and retrenchment, while others took active steps to create their own startup offshoot within their legacy newsrooms to compete with the new entrants. The study on media startups will help inform why the new entrants were more efficient and effective vis-a-vis the traditional newsrooms as well as why some of the traditional journalistic rules and routines have changed.

This study can also provide recommendations to these media startups, and address future media industry trends especially when they become the new ‘legacy newsroom’ in the coming years. The research will attempt to provide more diversity and nuance to the existing pool of media startup research, as Singapore has a unique combination of factors, stringent media regulatory policies, a high internet penetration rate and its role as a media hub for Southeast Asian English language speakers.

CHAPTER III

Method

This study focuses on understanding Singapore's media startup ecosystem by examining its doxa, habitus and capital. The study sought to understand the rules and routines of media startups, what constitutes their agents' individual disposition, how individual agents dealt with the changing circumstances of their work and what the startups consider as important capital. The researcher chose a qualitative research approach as it allows for a broader professional and social-contextual understanding (Tracy, 2019) of the new entrants. Thus, the researcher conducted 20 virtual, semi-structured interviews with individuals who worked in and with Singapore media startups. These interviews were initially planned to be conducted face-to-face with the respondents, but had to be conducted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study sought to get an understanding of Singapore media startups. Most of the media startups in Singapore began as sites producing clickbait listicles, but have since moved to reporting news in short bite-sized articles, covering both viral social media posts and current affairs in the region. Media startups like Yahoo News and Mothership.sg have also started to gain mainstream legitimacy, by recently gaining media accreditation and access to official media passes where their journalists can now enter parliamentary proceedings and report on government press conferences or events.

The researcher chose to utilize a semi-structured interview as this method has been largely used on cultural studies, and is suitable for journalism studies as it allows the researcher to examine the meaning that individual journalists attach to their own behavior as well as to their interactions (Creswell, 1998), how they react to newsroom transitions (Jenkins, 2006) and also

their journalistic perceptions (Singer, 2008). Using semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to ask incisive and open-ended questions about the respondents' thoughts on their work. It can probe into their work practices of how content is produced in media startups and the mindset of these new agents — answering the queries based on Bourdieuan field theory framework.

Research under Lockdown

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research had to shift from an face-to-face interview study, which required in-person field work, to an online and remote approach. During the pandemic, the researcher, along with the majority of Singaporeans, adopted social distancing measures and avoided social contact as much as possible. Companies in Singapore also shifted to working from home, and there was no way to conduct face-to-face interview studies responsibly, ethically and safely.

The Singaporean government implemented a stay-at-home order, and the country went into lockdown from 7th April - 1st June 2020. This meant that all non-essential workplaces, schools and religious places of worship were supposed to be closed for the duration (COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act 2020, 2020). Even though newsrooms were considered essential workplaces, they adopted a work from home system and split the newsroom teams into different shifts so as to prevent inter-mingling. Some cases of the COVID-19 virus were also asymptomatic, and this meant that the researcher or participants could unknowingly be infected if uncareful. When restrictions were eased, companies continued to work from home, operated in different shifts and conducting a face-to-face interview would have been both impossible and

inconsiderate. The pandemic also became protracted, and there was no way for the timeline of the study to be delayed as well.

Semi-Structured Online Interviews

According to Lupton's (2020) crowdsourced document on doing fieldwork in a pandemic, scholars suggested collecting qualitative data online and looking at available sources of data for research.

To better understand journalists' thoughts on other new entrants and their work, the study utilized synchronous, online interviews on Zoom or Google Hangouts, as the tools help facilitate real-time co-presence and interactivity (Lupton, 2020). The interviewees were encouraged to turn on their cameras, so that the researcher can gauge non-verbal cues. The interviews were also recorded through Zoom and Google hangouts, and this managed to preserve the interview's audio quality.

Studies have suggested that journalists are also more comfortable with doing interviews (Singer, 2006) and this can provide researchers with an outlet to address queries about their journalistic choices. Lupton (2020) suggests that online, synchronous interviews can give interviewees a better sense of anonymity and both participants can be in different spatial locations and contexts. The anonymity was preferred for some interviewees, as they were afraid of being singled out for misrepresenting their organizations or offering negative examples on their startup. The spatial and time convenience was also important during a pandemic, when journalists had extra stress and responsibilities. They could better fit the research interview into their schedules and could also reschedule when they needed to.

The interviews were semi-structured, guided by a set of prepared questions on the media startup and their thoughts on social, economic and cultural capital. The question guide also included queries about what agents perceive as rules, as well as what kind of skills were needed in a media startup. It was guided by a question guide that is flexible enough to be adjusted according to the interviewee's responses (Green & Thorogood, 2004) and also allowed the researcher to pose follow-up questions that can encourage alternative viewpoints and a deeper understanding of the interviewee's perceptions (Tracy, 2019).

During the participant interviews, the researcher asked about the content creators, social media managers and the business team about their workday. Questions also revolved around their daily pitch meetings to understand how the media startup operates and functions — from newsmaking to business branded projects. The researcher also sought to understand the journalists' news making process from researching, news gathering, interviewing profiles. Lastly, the researcher also asked about their interactions in the media startup, understanding the organization's hierarchy and how they work with their superiors and colleagues.

Reflexivity and Challenges. The researcher has ownership of another media company in Singapore. The media startups' scope of work is largely different from the sample, but some content overlap exists. The researcher's media company specializes in multi-media content, producing editorial and branded documentaries, animations and podcasts while the respondents mainly produce written news articles and short, bite-sized video content. In terms of content and format, the startups also focus more on news articles while the researcher's company produces audio and visual content featuring different profiles.

His ownership of a media company might also impact his role as an interviewer and researcher. Cottle (2003) has suggested that such a crossover from academia and media is unavoidable. Self-reflexivity is often suggested, and is referred to as the researcher's self-reference, where they will explicitly reflect inwards, toward their own assumptions about the world. This also includes the researcher's experiences with journalistic practices and their emotions during the data gathering process (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999).

Furthermore, self-reflexivity also benefits from the researcher's own professional knowledge and research expertise, as it allows for quicker insights and a better understanding of the field. The researcher's expertise ensures better comprehension of existing data, texts and contexts (Sullivan, 2004). Furthermore, reflexivity has often led to a refined and detailed examination of the researchers' motivations, biases and it also questions the ethical representation of the subjects. This reflexivity allows for better data to be gathered and understood, but also ensures that the subjects are represented justly and objectively. Studies have also suggested that self-reflexivity can produce better data from the respondents, as it can elicit more detailed narratives due to the researcher's sensitivity of the topic (Pezalla, Pettigrew & Miler-Day, 2012). The researcher's use of self-reflexivity is particularly apt as Bourdieu's field theory has been seen as a form of reflexive sociology (Schultz, 2007) that is used to investigate the ecology of fields rather than a single newsroom or media startup. Bourdieu also argues that the process of producing truth claims and facts need to be made transparent, and researchers need to pay attention to how the practices and discourse of his/her own field will affect the study itself.

Any conflict of interest with the researcher and the subjects was mitigated on two fronts. First, the researcher applied for IRB approval from Nanyang Technological University, and the application was approved on 3rd April 2020. Second, during the recruitment process, the researcher clearly disclosed his ownership of the media company to the prospective participants. The researcher's study request was turned down by a few journalists as the author was perceived to be from a competing startup. However, this was not a major concern for most of those invited to participate. Some prospective participants turned down the interviews mainly because they were affected by their scheduling and work commitments.

The participants were required to sign a consent form, which details the confidentiality and anonymity of their involvement. The consent form also mentions how the information will be treated: The data collected will be stored securely and only communicated with the thesis supervisor. The information will only go toward the manuscript, with the participant's names and companies anonymized and redacted.

Sampling Strategy. The researcher interviewed 20 media professionals that have worked in and with media startups (see Table 1). The sample includes founders, editors, social media managers and content creators, so as to have a complete understanding of their roles and hierarchy. The researcher chose to interview individuals across the whole editorial hierarchy to get a better theoretical saturation and understand how these roles interacted with one another. The sample also included individuals who have worked with media startups, as some startups heavily functioned on freelancers and long-term collaborators, while a few were now defunct. There was also a conscious effort to choose individuals who worked in different media startups so as to show a diverse point of view about the field; only two of the interviewees were currently

working for the same company. The interviews from the different companies will provide researchers with a more robust understanding of the phenomena and allow them to construct better theories (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Furthermore, the purpose of this study is not to form a representative view of journalism as a whole, but rather to understand the media startups within the journalistic field through their culturally unique patterns and work practices (Stake, 2005).

The researcher utilized snowball sampling (Noy, 2008), starting with his own pool of industry contacts who were working in media startups. Within the researcher's professional network, there are individuals working at media startups and he has already forged connections through guest speaking engagements. At the end of the interview, the researcher asked participants to recommend other individuals who might be suitable for an interview. The researcher then reached out to the appropriate interviewees through email, and if they did not provide an email address, the researcher reached out through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

The virtual interviews were conducted between May and August 2020 and yielded sufficient data for theoretical and data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). The lengthy timeline is attributed to the journalists' lack of availability, an overall small sample size of media startup agents as well as the homogeneity of the field. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many journalists had more press conferences and worked longer hours, making them less available, making the recruitment process tougher. Even though studies have suggested to keep to a limit of 20 minutes (Irvine, 2011), the researcher requested an hour of the participant's time, and most

spoke for an average of 78 minutes. The longest interview lasted for 94 minutes, while the shortest lasted for 59 minutes.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents

Sample Characteristics	Number (<i>N</i> = 20)
Type of Startup	
Venture-Backed	5 (25%)
Bootstrapped	15 (74%)
Gender	
Male	11 (55%)
Female	9 (45%)
Work Experience	
Journalism Experience	15 (75%)
Education Background	
Journalism	13 (65%)
Others	7 (35%)
Job Position	
Editor	6 (30%)
Mid-level Employee	9 (45%)
Entry-level Employee	5 (25%)

It is also interesting to note that 13 of the interviewees had formal journalism education while the other seven came from science, business and humanities education. Furthermore, five out of the 20 individuals came from jobs and industries like music, sports, business, tech and advertising before entering the journalism field. Out of the 20 interviewees, six of them were

editors and three out of the six were founders of their own media startup. Nine out of the 14 remaining interviewees were mid-level employees, and had more than 5 years of work experience. The remaining five interviewees were entry-level journalists. Also, not all of them were comfortable disclosing if they hold shares of the company, but five of them mentioned that they owned shares of the media startup.

Data Analysis

The interviews were natively recorded on the Zoom and Google Hangouts application, and were transcribed by undergraduate students from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information. The interview transcripts were manually coded line-by-line with a constant comparative approach (Glaser, 1965) using in-vivo coding. For the first level of coding, the researcher assigned labels to specific words and phrases. The researcher used a general inductive approach for concepts to naturally emerge with their “core meanings” (Thomas, 2006, p.241). According to Thomas, the inductive qualitative approach is a convenient way of analyzing qualitative data, and through this approach, themes most relevant to the research questions will emerge. The researcher was also guided by the existing literature and his own self-reflexivity when coding the transcripts.

During the second level of coding, the researcher used descriptive codes to categorise the concepts and placed them into larger conceptual bins. Thematic analysis was used as it allows one to focus on identifying, systematising and analyzing topics, their subtopics and how they link with one another (Kuckartz, 2014). The codes and conceptual bins were approached in an iterative manner, where they were constantly reviewed, revised and refined. The researcher then

structured these themes according to his research queries, and grouped relevant quotes and exemplars into a coherent narrative.

CHAPTER IV

Results

Entering the Media Startup Scene

This study attempts to understand the evolving journalism industry, and focuses on how media startups in Singapore are contributing to both the preservation and transformation of the journalistic field. The queries posed to the interviewees were guided by Bourdieu's field theory, hinged on the concepts of doxa, habitus, capital and new entrants (Benson, 2004).

Before discussing journalistic transformation of the field, however, it is crucial to contextualize “startups” in the media industry. This helps to provide a rationale behind why these new entrants behave drastically different from each other, despite being in the same field and provide services of a similar nature to the same pool of audiences.

Life Cycle of Media Startups. The term “startups” has traditionally been used to describe budding and uncertain businesses (Blank, 2010), but in recent years it has been co-opted by the tech field to describe companies utilizing technological elements to disrupt industries and bring scalable products to the masses (Ries, 2017). These tech companies follow a similar life cycle which starts from the formation of their companies, where the entrepreneurs focus on the mission, vision and the ideas behind their startup. The next stage is the validation stage, where the founders push their minimum viable product — this will only have minimum features, enough to satisfy early adopters and gain feedback. The product is iterated, and upon obtaining a product or market fit, the company commences the growth phase. During this phase, the company scales their product to different regions, expands their user group and develops more features to satisfy the increased user base. Lastly, it reaches the maturity stage where profits and

users have plateaued, or reached their market capitalization ceiling. A matured company's organizational structure is often structured, with well-established legal, financial and product departments, for instance. The employees that initially had to don multiple hats are now more specialized in their work as well. In due course these companies will either go into decline, or will adapt to the pressures of the market and continue being sustainable.

Figure 2. Startup Life-Cycle

These phases — formation, validation, growth and maturity — surfaced during the semi-structured interviews. In particular, many respondents stressed the importance of the formation stage. For example, some participants highlighted the need for a clear mission and vision to grow and become a successful enterprise. A journalist from a now defunct, venture-backed media startup reflected that “if from the get go, there were some Key Performance Indicators (KPI) or game plan, at least we can develop an identity.” He also said that if he were to do it all over again, he would “focus on having a strong idea, really have faith and go with it.” A founder of another media startup started out by “going to knock on doors, to

introduce myself and share my vision and what I'm trying to do with marketing managers,” and after several years this startup is now established in multiple countries in Southeast Asia. A founding editor of yet another startup suggested that his publication lacked a unified purpose, and “during the most bloated time, everybody was coming in for different motives, different purposes and the non-paid product that the company exists for became a second thought.” Having a strong mission and vision can allow the budding startups to convince users to become involved in their media processes and convert them into loyal supporters of their product:

“A subscription model is like The Straits Times, where you pay and you get the product. You pay to get over the paywall, whereas membership is not just transactional ... you're paying me to be part of the mission and values of the platform.”

A respondent also mentioned that media startups need to “fill a gap in the market that is not being filled by current media companies.” A venture-backed journalist explained that they spotted a market need for news related to tech startups, as they realized that there was “a lot of funding in both private equity and venture capital” and that “it's not just Singapore-focused, it is regionally focused with global implications”. A co-founder of another media startup also said that she started her media publication because there was “this gap between what the local media and Southeast Asia can't report on because press freedom is a problem in so many countries.” Respondents stressed that having a clear mission, vision and value system during the fledgling stages gave early employees clarity, where they were “aligned with the goals” and could work toward the next stage with the limited resource that they had.

Produsage and Blogs. With a vision or market-need to fulfill, founders often start their enterprises as blogs, passion projects or individual social media pages. For example, one

particular media startup began “as a blog to cover social media and marketing at first ... but found a better niche in covering tech startups” while another “started from a school project.” The founders created blogs or web pages as a collective of individuals with the same vision, enabled by the ease of publication and availability of creation tools. One journalist observed that it was easy to compete with mainstream media as the quality of content “does not really matter, you can shoot with a ‘potato’ phone and if it is important enough, it will run.” A founding editor mentioned that the only cost they needed was to “pay for the domain hosting and to be registered as a LLC (Limited Liability Company).” They were able to function as producers — users of the content and producers at the same time — due to the low entry barrier for both media production and distribution.

Furthermore, the founders were able to create their own blogs and newsletters, and produce videos while they were freelancers, students or when they were being employed elsewhere. One respondent said: “I was running it as a hobby before, so every Saturday I sent out an email on what happened this week.” Another respondent shared that their founder started the publication while having a full-time job in the nightlife sector, while another was a marketing manager for an international sports brand before eventually hiring more people to run his startup. But some media startups are also created and backed by big organizations or even traditional newsrooms, recognising the increasing influence of independent media startups in the country. These startups have been described as an “experiment”, where the traditional newsroom superiors were not deeply nor routinely involved. A journalist recounted that his editor’s involvement comes only when he “would basically sit down with us on a Monday morning to go through ideas.” Another explained that their startup was created “to see what we can do when we

brand the product as a separate project from what we have been doing.” Most of the interviewees suggested that their media startups were low-commitment projects, where they were seen as newsroom experiments, passion projects, or hobbies.

One participant observed that “the founder’s personalities will quite strongly determine the nature and character of the startup,” and these qualities will shape the culture and the tone of their product. They tend to sharpen this tone of voice when they progress into becoming a full-fledged media company as “you’re not a blog when you start speaking in a more impersonal way, whereas a news company you need to speak for the people.” A blogger is seen as a personality, while media publications have multiple writers and “they have a brand voice, not a single personality voice, so they can cover a range of topics and seem on point.” An editor-in-chief also mentioned that there is no clear dividing point where a blog becomes a newsroom, but for these new entrants it is when they have “more than one person other than the founder writing” and “when we start to implement proper ethical guidelines that are journalistic.”

Entering the Journalistic Field

The Media Startup Doxa

The first research query (RQ1) sought to understand what set of rules (doxa) guide media startup agents in Singapore. Some respondents suggested that as blogs and projects become startups and independent publications, they tend to adopt traditional newsroom rules, workflows and organizational structures. However, how closely they follow existing doxas are largely dependent on the startup’s funding and life cycle. Startups that have limited funding tend to place more emphasis on some rules such as virality, while venture-funded companies seek to provide value to their users and stick with traditional journalistic values.

The rules, routines and organizational structures have to be closely examined in the context of the validation and growth phase of the media startup, where the companies tend to be limited by their funds and are trying to achieve a “minimum viable product.” The lack of funds will either streamline their workflows and flatten their organizational structures, while the need for a minimum viable product also means that they have to iterate their product based on audience feedback. In documenting the doxa of media startups, this study found that companies both adhere to journalistic doxa and also follow their own. First, in terms of workflow, startups tend to have a flatter hierarchy and implement a more casual working style to ensure that they can move fast. Second, when it comes to norms, their journalists also adhere to traditional norms of objectivity and transparency. Third, when it comes to news values, media startups also focus a lot on timeliness (Harcup & O’Neill, 2018), but they also have a strong focus on virality.

Routines and Workflows in Media Startups

Flatter Hierarchy. Traditional newsrooms operate with a flatarchy (Morgan, 2014): a combination of flat and hierarchical organizational structures. Their newsmaking workflow starts from journalists pitching the stories to their editors during a pitch meeting. The stories can also be assigned by the editors to journalists, and after the journalists interview the relevant newsmakers and write the story, the copy will be passed on to a sub-editor for language, content and house-style checks. If there are any issues with the story, it will be flagged, the editors will raise queries, and the journalists will revise their articles accordingly. After a copy is cleared, a social media manager in a digital newsroom will schedule or package the article for online and social media distribution, while a print editor will layout the copy and still images before sending the pages for printing. In recent years, due to budget cuts, legacy newsroom journalists have also

had to take photos, videos and create social media content themselves to accompany their articles.

While this series of steps has remained largely unchanged in media startups, the organizational hierarchy in media startups is flatter. Most startups see reporters reporting directly to editors, removing the middle layer of having sub-editors. One journalist described their organizational structure as “not completely flat, but at least not having to answer to many layers of people ... it is just one or two, so for me, that’s one advantage.” Startups also tend to be smaller in size, and are able to agree on logistical, style or website changes in an expedited manner. Thus, a flatter hierarchy can speed up processes. For example, a participant said: “We just need to tell our backend IT executives, because we’re just three reporters, we agree among ourselves and get permission from our editor. Then, we can go ahead. But for legacy newsrooms, that process is a lot slower.” Furthermore, they can also work with their foreign counterparts and collaborate better when producing regional stories: “even though I’m from Singapore, even among geographies, like Indonesia and Singapore, we talk all the time.”

The participants all viewed a flat hierarchy positively, as it allows them to cut down on the number of revisions and speed up their publication timeline. Having a lean organizational structure is clearly part of streamlining, but doing so also leads to unintended consequences. For instance, one respondent had to cut down on “teaching young writers ... as it was taking up a lot of time ... and was affecting the quality of content,” while another had to create a stronger separation of roles where “you can basically just focus on one thing, if you are writing you can just focus on that, if you’re doing photos you can just focus and exist in a bubble.” Another company chose to streamline their operations by “only having editors and a few regular writers”

so there are fewer team members to manage. They also noted that the organizational structures were often iterative, and changed according to the situation and feedback from the journalists. An editor-in-chief of a media startup found herself doing line editing work instead of handling the strategy and direction of the publication, but managed to “shift things around, so that the other editors will look at it first ... and I would just look at it when it was as close to ready as possible.” Another founder of a media startup recounted:

“Over the years, we changed it to include more checks ... because as the team grows bigger, the same person who shoots cannot edit, and it is not as efficient as a team of people shooting and a team of people editing. This is our learnings and all these came along as a result of a lot of mistakes that people were making.”

These workflows had to be adjusted as their product offering increased, or as they expanded to include more parties across the region. Another media startup created two teams — one doing breaking news “which is fast-paced” like traditional newsrooms, while another team solely “created premium content for the subscribers” where the cadence is much slower compared to breaking news. Similarly, one journalist working in a media startup also surfaced the two separate workflows and called it a “bad mix between a newsroom and a magazine.” This particular startup had a newsroom workflow where journalists are required to pitch current affairs stories every other day, but at the end of the month they met for a content meeting where they explored longer, magazine styled investigative features.

More Casual Workflow. Startups also tend to be more collaborative and casual. An intern-turned-full-time journalist said that the flatter hierarchy meant that anyone could pitch stories and “as an intern, I get to pitch one or two stories, it is a little bit more democratic than in

legacy newsrooms.” Some news startups also have a higher number of interns, and rely on “the interns to pitch three stories in the morning ... and after lunch, the interns may pitch another three.” The interviewee suggested utilizing more interns is not just a cost-saving measure, but is a product of the startup organizational structure, where “their relationship with their supervisors, are not like a boss-subordinate, but more of a senior-mentor.”

The media startup’s workflows and quality demands also tend to be less stringent, where “the brief is a lot more broad ... I don’t worry that I need to shoot it in a specific way, because I know the editor will like the picture.” They also tend to work with more freelance journalists and collaborators, as it provides the company with flexibility with their financial resources — hiring a full-time journalist meant needing to spend a fixed amount of sunk cost, while commissioning stories on a freelance basis meant that the startup could do so when they could afford to or when the startups needed to “newsjack” and stay relevant for a story they missed.

However, some freelancers have mentioned that the pitching process has been confusing, and further pointed out that the “biggest problem is pitching, and trying to break into new publications, sometimes they’re unresponsive.” The collaborators also had to understand the publication by themselves as there were no creative briefs or guidelines that were given to the writers, and had to figure out on their own what the startups wanted. One freelancer, for example, said: “The easiest thing is just read their stories ... you kind of understand the kind of angles they go for.” Another freelance journalist recounted that they “used to attend their pitch meetings” but ended up “working directly with the journalist” because it was faster, provided a more ad-hoc workflow, and “they trust me enough to pitch stuff to them.” Startups that were aggressively commissioning these stories also noted that they had to strike a balance with

sustainability and creative new content, and they eventually iterated and tweaked their workflows:

“We had to become more organised about it because we were concerned about over-extending or over-commissioning. So we changed to a system where the pitches would come in and then we would kind of set them aside.”

Even though traditional newsrooms are often regarded as a fast-paced environment, respondents have suggested that the pace of a media startup is accelerated because of the flat hierarchy where they “try to work in the most efficient way possible.” Startups have also had to trim their workflows and cut certain steps to be competitive enough, as “sometimes even speed-wise, there’s no way we can match up to mainstream publications with live cameras.”

Journalistic Norms in Media Startups

Reconsidering Objectivity. Journalistic objectivity is an enduring norm in the journalistic field, which refers to providing users with a truthful and unbiased account of an event. One participant said: “They (the rules) are similar. I mean, we can’t report mistruths, we try to be as objective as possible, we also try to make it a bit more entertaining, I guess.”

Objectivity is one of the main tenets of journalism. In the interviews, the participants also agree that they need to be seen as an objective source, so as to become credible in the eyes of their newsmakers, advertisers and viewers. One participant said: “the moment that we are seen as being biased of some sort, it’ll be quite detrimental, because we cover listed companies ... if we can’t be trusted as a source ... then we can’t really inform these people and their decisions.” Some of the journalists interviewed suggested that the mainstream publications were more restricted by story angles and content topics as they are bound by “out of bound (OB) markers”,

which are used to denote topics that are unsuitable for public discourse. A journalist who used to work in a mainstream media company called the reporting that they do “national service”, where the stories covered are “things I wasn’t really passionate about, but for public record.” They agreed that traditional journalistic values are a fundamental characteristic of being a journalist and it should never change: “whether it is timeliness, accuracy, fairness ... everything should still be the same regardless if you are from legacy or media startups.” These journalistic standards established by the incumbent also create a source of stress for the new entrants of the field as they had “to make sure whatever the reader is reading is truthful and accurate” and they attributed the stress to a form of “journalistic perfection” where they had to be consistent, fast and accurate.

The norm of objectivity has become a basis for new entrants to differentiate themselves from mainstream media players. Due to the “OB markers” and close links to the government agencies, mainstream publications are seen as pro-government, and some media startups felt that they could be more objective and balanced in their reporting compared to mainstream media. A respondent said: “I think people look to us for a more objective voice, not that we set out to be contrarian, but we don’t face the same constraints that they do, so we can be a little bolder.” For others, abandoning objectivity altogether is also used for differentiation. Some startups do not follow this traditional journalistic doxa, and “threw all objectivity out of the window.” “That is not the quality that we want to have in our stories,” a participant said. The reason? “Pieces that were a bit more balanced did not do well.” The journalist went on to explain that their readers came to them because they wanted to hear a point-of-view, and appreciated the “bravery and

courage to stand up for a certain point when you really felt it, instead of presenting two different sides of the coin and letting readers make up their own mind.”

Another media startup agent expressed a similar perspective, and felt that for traditional newsrooms, “whatever is your personal belief, you cannot let it leak onto your work” but if you are working in a media startup it does not need to be like that: “I can say that my startup is conservative, we are libertarian.” The rationale behind this is that these media startups are often smaller players and are “part of an ecosystem,” whereas mainstream publications are the “centre part of the ecosystem, and playing a bigger role.” This can be tied back to the mission, vision and funding nature of the startup, one that is shaped as early as the formation stage. If a media startup aspires to compete directly with the mainstream incumbent, they will have to establish themselves as an objective and credible source. However, if they are looking to offer an alternative perspective and provide commentaries, they tend to be less balanced: “The Online Citizen strived to be alternative, so they have a lot of coverage about the opposition parties, about what they are saying.” In a peculiar media system such as Singapore, some media startups stick to objectivity as a way to differentiate themselves from traditional news media, which are widely perceived as closely allied with the Government. But other startups broke away from objectivity, by having a point-of-view in their writing, as a way to differentiate themselves from mainstream players and other startups.

Transparency — The New Norm. One startup journalist explained that true objectivity is unachievable in journalism as there will always be some form of bias in the reportage: “We didn’t think that objectivity was something that could be done in journalism. We wanted transparency more.” The solution to this was to be transparent, where “you need to hold yourself

to higher standards of transparency, which means if you are funded by something, you need to disclose it, you need to follow the ethical rules of journalism.” The reporter suggested that transparency was a better guideline to follow due to three main reasons: (1) the nature of funded jobs on online media platforms, (2) startup publications with inclinations to advocate about certain social causes and (3) the gig-economy where collaborators and freelance writers can also be experts and thought leaders in their field.

The conventional approach to monetizing news has always been to sell advertisements that appear adjacent to the news articles, provide regular subscription packages, and supply footage and articles to other news agencies across the globe. With the advent of digital media, however, there has been a rise of alternative media funding methods. One common approach would be to provide branded and sponsored content services, where “companies commission us to produce a sponsored article, which is something mainstream media doesn’t do.” Advertisers will get media companies to produce a piece of content that looks organic and matches the tone and feel of the publication. For instance, “You write a Top 5 Favourite Food and one of it is McDonalds, and at the end you read that McDonalds is a sponsor.” This form of native advertising might compromise the editorial integrity of the publication, compared to legacy newsrooms where their advertisements exist as banners or side-columns. A respondent recognized this problem where the startup was meant to be “very critical, and a lot of times what the brands want us to say often contradicts a lot of the editorial stuff, so that is quite problematic on that front.” Sometimes, it might also seem as though it is cheating the viewers. Some journalists felt that this was an uncomfortable situation where “you’re receiving money from this

company, so you can't really report the truth about it" but is part of "something that we (journalists) need to accept as a brave new world."

Media startup companies have found different ways to mitigate this. Some require more stringent journalistic qualities and will employ a separate branded content team, so that "the editorial team operates independently from the branded content team ... but share copy-editing functions." More commonly, they will transparently mention their dealings, so that "if you have links to certain industry people, you also need to disclose that." Most publications will attempt to place an early disclaimer before the article where it says "in partnership with (the brand name) right at the top". A respondent from a venture-backed media startup mentioned that the startup company is "definitely okay with not proceeding with a deal or even suspending the talks with the advertiser if we are working on a controversial story about them." However, this might not be the case for media startups that are self-funded and require the monetary funding.

Niche media startups also tend to cater to a particular political spectrum, and will advocate for a particular issue, so that the stringent objectivity norm does not make much functional sense for them. For instance, one editor-in-chief mentioned that "we aren't going to run an 'objective' LGBT story and have a paragraph criticising gay people." The company had always been clear with their stance and "come from a perspective that 377A should be repealed." Section 377A of the Penal Code of Singapore is a law that criminalises sex between mutually consenting male adults. Some startups also have a workflow that involves more collaborators and freelance writers, and tapping the gig economy meant that on an individual journalist level, the writers are from diverse backgrounds and have differing political and social inclinations.

“While I was editor-in-chief, we had freelance journalist writing about women’s issues, who themselves were feminist and run their own feminist NGOs. They should then flag it to the audience, it should be in the bio or in the story. So I try to deal with the possible conflicts of interest in this way.”

The editor suggested that they emphasized transparency more, which allows viewers to form their own judgement about the articles that are published. But aside from differentiating themselves based on norms, media startups also rely on traditional news values to be able to enter into the journalistic field.

News Values for Media Startups

Focus on Timeliness. News has always been about “getting the scoop” over other competing publications, and such stories are often current, developing or controversial. This particular news value of ‘timeliness’ has become more crucial due to social media distribution, where an article can reach a mass audience without going through the usual and time-consuming print process. Increased competition also means for media startups that “every time we have to cover a press conference, it’s like trying to be faster and faster.” This stress may also come from an internal team, who are able to monitor competitors on social media “because they will say things like ‘faster, that news outlet already pushed out their story’.” To be fast and efficient, journalists have to work in the most efficient way possible. A photojournalist working with media startups observed that cameras are now “attached with a dongle, and with a press of a button you send it straight to the editor in the newsroom.” This is to ensure that the photos can also be published at the earliest moment.

The journalistic field's need for speed has been largely unchanged for media startups. In fact, timeliness has become even more brutal and sought after due to social media and publications becoming "more digital focused, in the sense that we break stories first online" and "packaged so that readers reading on digital platforms will be able to consume it easily." News stories also tend to develop quickly and "there are things that happen at the last second, then you need to be able to quickly adapt." These stories also tend to do better in terms of their likes, shares and views, according to a venture-backed journalist, "when we reacted to news, like a video on the Trump-Kim summit, that was one type of content that did well because it was timely." Another journalist cited the COVID-19 stories and infection numbers where "you want to put it out quickly because everyone was in competition ... the number of shares would go crazy, within 10 minutes you can get a few hundred shares."

Startups, however, sometimes lose out on acquiring some timely news stories due to their lack of established contact with statutory boards, ministries, and other gatekeepers of restricted information. These establishments provide crucial information to news stories, and "in legacy newsrooms, you would have contacts with the police, fire department that allow you to get the news faster." The direct line of contact also allows journalists to ask follow-up questions and get more details for the story. Some journalists suggested that the approach of the startup journalist is not to provide these details, but to further amplify the breaking news. One editor working in a media startup cited their lack of resources, and had no support from wire syndication agencies such as Reuters and AFP. He mentioned that they are unable to "copy and paste stories from there, change a headline and it goes through," and have to rewrite or get reactions from social media users. Furthermore, due to their lack of a direct line of contact and pressures to be faster

than other publications, some startups do not integrate the rule of fact-checking. A respondent described the work of media startups in a third-person point of view, that “They (media startups) don’t have all these processes to call to check quotes so naturally, their working timeline is shorter and in that sense, they also can create the content very quickly.”

The counter-argument raised by some journalists is that these startup journalists do not need to verify such content, and “would not need those contacts” as “the audience just needs to see there’s a fire and upload a video of people putting out this fire.” A journalist suggested that only when a startup is big enough “it gets pulled into the fold of the establishment,” and will eventually gain access to these contacts and compete with mainstream publications. Some journalists also argued that the news cycle and strategic focus for such publications were about viral moments that happened. One reporter who used to work at a media startup suggested that for “Mothership.sg, the news cycle for them was much faster ... if it is something that is late by a day, it's most likely going to be forgotten.” Several other respondents pointed out that such reporting of news is detrimental to both newsmakers and readers, as one can “miss the stories behind the viral moments” and even though “it is good that you (the journalist) break the news early, but if don’t engage the readers, if you don’t give context to your readers, they are just going to have a certain impression of what happened.” This particular journalist suggested that by amplifying some viral video or breaking news without providing adequate context or fact-checking, the story might turn out biased or inaccurate, but admitted that it can be “ok for some types of news.” Another journalist suggested that the effect of playing “fast and loose” meant that they “tend not to think about how these stories affect people.” This startup journalist neglected speaking to stakeholders as he/she wanted to push the story out quicker, and did not

consider the ethical intricacies behind a story where “regular people find out that their relative died and you wrote about it,” which can get “tabloidy”.

One journalist summed it up by saying “it’s a race to see who goes first, and you aren’t the only one doing it ... there are people with much bigger resources working on it” so there is “probably a fire under your ass.” The pressure of losing out and having limited resources to do their own fact-checking and groundwork also forced some startups to get their information online, where they “cut and paste from social media posts.” A particular journalist suggested that “that’s not journalism, that’s just rubbish ... you need to get out there, you need to pound the beat, you need to talk to people” and he does not think that “putting some random netizen’s comments qualifies as legwork as it does not add anything to the conversation.” Even though it is not exactly quality journalism, the source is “open to everybody” and can be a lifeline for startups who are struggling with journalistic access and resources.

The increased focus on timeliness has forced changes in traditional gatekeeping standards, for better or worse. One particular media startup that emphasizes on “distilling information in a timely manner” created a separate team “for breaking news so that anything that is time sensitive can go out as soon as possible” but with the appropriate gatekeeping and checks. However, they also mentioned the expectation to be both fast and accurate is not exactly sustainable. “I mean, if it gets faster than that, then I don’t know, maybe I’ll just disintegrate.”

Pursuit of Virality. For media startups in the validation and the growth phase, their primary objective would be to refine or validate their “minimum viable product”, perfecting and expanding on their product’s features. In this case their media product is the content that they produce, and they acquire feedback from the audiences while simultaneously trying to grow a

larger pool of subscribers/followers on their web or social media pages. They have created a feedback loop based on their users; if a piece goes viral, it means that the audience prefers that particular piece of content. One journalist explained that the ultimate hope is to engage readers, but due to media startups distributing their media products on digital platforms, the easiest way to “equate success to your stories is by how many people are sharing/liking it.”

Virality is now the “rule zero” of media startups, and has become a guideline for them: “a lot of our (the journalist’s) success was decided by how viral or how many deals your articles had, it was a very tangible key performance indicator (KPI).” One particular journalist recognized that when a story becomes viral, their editor will make it known to them by saying, for example, that “hey your story went on BBC and got 3 million views.” Such virality “helps us know what people want to watch.” For some journalists, the news value of virality has been integrated into workflows where they “will go and see who shared it”, and would even ask my interviewee to share the article and “if there’s a lot of shares, I’ll think that’s good because people are actually reading it.”

Some respondents have suggested that virality is born out of a business need, as newer and smaller companies have to chase the numbers because they need the “traffic in order to justify advertising fees when companies come to you” and show that they have a substantial base compared to the other competitors or mainstream counterparts. The business model of media startups is now largely based on “when companies come to you, you tell them that this price (you are quoting them) is because you can deliver this amount of viral” for the advertisements that they put on your platform. One particular journalist who moved from a media startup to a mainstream legacy newsroom pointed out the difference between the two companies: “Success is

driven by your clicks and views, but is less emphasized here (in the mainstream newsroom) so it doesn't feel as much pressure is constantly breathing down your neck." The mainstream legacy newsroom could focus less on virality as it was already established as a company with large audiences and credibility, while a startup still needs to validate or "prove" its product. A co-founder of a media startup suggested that at the end of the day, chasing virality is still a very business-driven decision that only established companies can neglect doing:

"They (media startups) just want the hits, they want to know that people are reading their stuff, they just want the numbers, the pure numbers, but I know a lot of the journalists working at newspapers, and to them, they don't really care. I don't know if they know (the numbers) but they don't care about the story like if it went viral. They actually feel like that doesn't really matter."

Several journalists also echoed the view that virality is more of a business need, as it could drive purchases and even get investors on board. For instance, some startups earn their revenue through affiliate links, or when users click on links to a particular product. A viral article means that more users will click on these links, and they are then able to "measure the call to action in terms of clicks, how many did we send across." It helps the startups tell the client "how many multiple times return we can generate" for their products or events. Another media company also mentioned that the viral pieces can be seen as a proof of concept, and their "first few videos going viral even attracted an investor."

Chasing virality, however, might not necessarily be beneficial to the readers. One particular journalist felt that it made journalists ask inappropriate questions during critical moments. He cited an example during a press conference for the COVID-19 measures where

“there was this reporter that asked about McDonalds” and this meant that one less question could be asked during the press conference. The focus on virality also gave unwanted attention to the newsmakers, “when it went really viral, people even went to look for her at her workplace to harass her.” The quest for virality often also borderlines on sensationalism and clickbait. A respondent said: “Hot dog bun crawling with maggots, two uncles fighting at the void deck, it is predictable but it always goes viral... but I dont know whats the value of such content is.” Even though clickbait and sensationalism have been looked down on within the field, one journalist mentioned that these are something everyone still aspires toward: “At the end of the day who doesn’t want that (going viral), even the mainstream media is not above that.” He further argues that viral content is just fulfilling a demand of the market, and “it is the people who want to read this type of news ... that’s why companies are doing it.”

Some interviewees pointed out that sensationalism and clickbait are one way to go viral, but also recognized that there is no sure-fire way of doing so. These journalists were unable to explain or replicate virality, and suggested that it is still a “guessing game” where they “just try and see if it works, let’s just get the eyeballs first, create some waves.” They suggested various ways to get more clicks, from increasing the number of writers to improve the odds of having a viral piece: “the more writers you have, the more chances you have on hitting that viral note.” These journalists also noted an increasing focus on social tropes like “issues that haven’t been done before” and a particular journalist recounted that she “got those stories on female empowerment, they (startups) will go for obvious tropes ... but when it sounds so deliberate, you’re only doing it for the clicks.” One particular journalist also suggested that due to the increased focus on virality, there needs to be more stringent gatekeeping and it is “why you still

need editors, because they know the boundaries that you shouldn't cross, because there will be repercussions in terms of, for example, covering protests."

Some journalists, however, suggested that "virality" is not sustainable, and that companies should not "chase the rainbow over and over again" because social media changes too quickly. Chasing it mindlessly will force the startup to deviate from their original goal, causing them to "spiral down this hole and have an identity crisis." On the flipside, if a startup does not care about any viral trends at all, they will be inclined to "end up being like a dinosaur." Some journalists suggested that "virality" is synonymous with being "news-worthy", and that a good story will naturally do better and journalists should continue doing whatever feels right, focusing on their mission and values. "I mean if things go viral, we're happy ... but what we're trying to do is to bring a slightly different perspective on the issue," said one journalist. Another approach that some journalists discussed was to strike a balance between newsworthiness and virality:

"That is a confluence of a story that they want to actually know about. It is a balance between things they should know, but people don't necessarily want to know and things that people want to know but frankly have little to no meaning to anybody's lives, then there are stories which are both."

For the journalists themselves, they felt that virality was more important for their editors, while they focused on producing impactful stories: "I would feel that if it is an important enough story, it is worth it, it doesn't matter if it is viral or not, it has to be good quality." A journalist also went on to explain that what matters is the impact of their stories, and how it helped readers: "it is nice when people read your stories, but it's even nicer when someone emails you and tells you that this was something that meant a lot to me."

One journalist also suggested that “to want something viral, but also informative ... and have a different perspective that the mainstream media have not done” is something unachievable as media startups are constrained by resources, and their selection process is determined by the audience statistics:

“We have no manpower. We have to choose the story that has the most shares. A writer here has to do 4 stories in one day, but a writer at a mainstream outlet does one story a day will have more time to find out more information, talk to people ... ”

The editor of this media startup suggested that they are trying to perfect their media product with limited resources, and had to prioritize certain elements over others. He recognized that there is a drawback if one focuses on clicks, as the startup will miss out on stories that “people should know about, but won’t necessarily go viral” and “maybe lose a bit of credibility.” However, he cautioned that having a perfect balance is a “very idealized way of thinking from the old days” where newspapers were “telling people stuff,” but now the tables have turned and “we see what people are looking at and we report on that.”

Startup companies take both an iterative and incremental process with their media products. They take incremental steps to increase their media product offerings, and also iteratively improve on their product based on audience feedback and how “viral” it gets. Through the interviews, we see that virality has become one the main guidelines for the new entrants, but it comes with a set of difficulties and challenges as well.

Timelessness and Value — New Guidelines. As media startups are either unable to compete directly with mainstream media publications in terms of timeliness or unwilling to be stuck in the rat race for viral media content, some media startups attempt to stand out by focusing

on “timelessness” rather than timeliness, and “value” over virality. This means that they focus on creating stories of a time-independent niche, providing alternative voices and delivering information that serves a higher purpose.

One particular editor-in-chief suggested that startups have to identify a market niche where they can provide value in. He recounted that they had previously “done content that’s geared toward virality and views,” but an emphasis is now placed on providing value to a specific target audience. They now cater to a niche of “business users, business companies, tech executives, that crowd,” and their content is now more focused on “business reporting, the business of tech ... and shifted more toward long-form articles and longer stories.” Through this change in strategy, they focused on providing timeless content for a specialized group of audiences and started reporting on more in-depth pieces. One journalist working in a media startup even explained that by reporting in a niche area, they are able to have an advantage over some mainstream publications: “there isn’t any publication that is able to produce the kind of content that we do. Not even Bloomberg or CNBC ... we pride ourselves very much in being able to identify this particular niche and hone in. That’s really our value-add.” The rationale behind this is also due to the saturation in the media industry, as “if you are going to talk about the usual stuff ... that doesn’t set you apart” and only by being different will startups set themselves apart from their competitors.

The journalist explains that having a “product market fit ... whether it’s adding any value to the readership” is more important, and only after finding a market fit can “we can talk about virality.” Similarly, a co-founder of another publication emphasized on identifying a need for the media product, and mentioned that startups need to be “clear that you are filling a need, a real

need ... not a ownself feel good kind of need and to be very honest about what your budget is.”

This co-founder also suggested that apart from understanding the needs of the audience and market, one needs to be self-aware of the resource and budget limitations as well. Another editor-in-chief had to “take a step back”, and iterated their media product from something that is “general news” to “things that do not need to be published right now and can take a bit more time to craft ... but still using news facts to show why the story is important.” He further explained that it was because doing general news and chasing virality was too resource-intensive and time consuming for the team to keep up.

The doxa of providing value is nonetheless driven by business needs, as companies focus on providing value to customers in hopes of monetizing their news or creating new business advantages. For instance, one startup monitors the number of paid subscriptions that they can convert: “for every article that comes in, that we publish, we track how many (subscriptions) that they generate.” The concept of providing value is not geared solely to the readers, but also to the company where “it doesn’t have to be that this product in particular is bringing in revenue” and the value of the new media product is instead “what it can do for the rest of the organization.” This interviewee also suggested that media startups can also give more visibility in terms of regional readers and getting partnerships, but this is a situation unique to venture-backed media startups as “we are not so much touched by the finances yet, but are seeing signs of wanting to bring this to the next level in terms of monetisation.”

Furthermore, focusing on value and providing alternative voices can build a loyal fanbase for startups. One particular startup that focuses on a sports related niche, mentioned that their readers are more involved in the process, and will directly message their social media pages and

ask “can you cover this” or “I saw you at this match”, and they see this as a byproduct of producing value to your readers and perceive a single loyal fan to be better than having a few strangers sharing the post. Another journalist involved in the inception of a media company also suggested that a loyal subscriber base can help grow the business as well: “I mean, it doesn’t have to be good for everyone, but it has to be good for a very dedicated niche.” Having a cult-like fanbase meant that models like crowd-funding, memberships, events and subscriptions are more likely to succeed. The media startups interviewed cited alternative funding models like “creating a yearbook that was supposed to launch on kickstarter” , “institutional membership programme” and “event summits.” The interviewee suggested that it was not about paying for the product, but paying for it as a loyal fan or niche audience:

“When you survey them and ask why they are members, most of them don’t do it for access to content, in fact there are membership models where there are no paywalls but people still pay to be members. So they found that people actually do not subscribe for exclusive content, people subscribe for values.”

A co-founder of a niche publication also suggested that keeping to their niche could help in their regional expansion: “We keep our niche to music, a lot of times people ask us to expand to gaming, to expand into lifestyle, but so far we resisted that urge” and by focusing on a niche, they were able to appeal to audiences outside of Southeast Asia and have more diverse categories within the niche. This eventually led them to becoming more recognized on a global scale; he recounted that they were “invited to exclusive interviews with music artists like John Legend,” included in communities with leading figures like the “ex-editor of Pitchfork”, and were able to attend webinars that only hosted 40 people.

The journalists also mentioned that it is hard to quantify value, as virality in comparison has clicks and shares as a metric of measurement. One respondent suggested that value is not as straightforward, but can indirectly benefit the publication: “How do you track freshness, because sometimes we take a unique spin on something, that can help to get subscribers.” One editor-in-chief suggested that even though they calculate the article conversion rates, they recognize that there are other factors such as the publication’s reputation that cannot be measured in dollars and cents. He recounted that:

“If it takes half an hour to write an article that generates one subscription, is that more worthwhile than, say, spending a week for an article that just generates 5 subscriptions? So there are calculations involved, but of course, there are some factors that are hard to track, maybe you know an investigative piece might take a long time, but there's the prestige factor, like that makes a publication journalistic, I think those factors can't be measured.”

As such, some journalists suggested that they should simply focus on producing good content pieces based on their preconceived notion of quality journalism. One particular journalist mentioned that they had the responsibility to produce quality journalism “if the local media is not covering certain issues or producing long-form journalism,” media startups should step in to fill the gaps because “who else can write about Southeast Asia apart from the people who have a connection and a rootedness to this region?” They also suggested that focusing on value will make them consistently improve their media products and distribution: “it's being a better version of ourselves, providing more value to our customers than we can today, providing more

compelling content to our readers than we can today and embracing technology to help us make that leap.”

Synthesis

The first research query sought out to understand the set of doxa that guide media startups in Singapore. The interviewees agreed that structurally, startups are leaner, more efficient and driven by a particular mission or vision. The rules of the game have largely been unchanged, and the new entrants adopt traditional values like objectivity and timeliness. However, startups are often limited in their resources, and have to seek out certain areas where they can compete with the incumbent. They do this by publishing viral content that can get them the same amount of eyeballs as their mainstream counterparts, demonstrating to advertisers that they can advertise the products in the same capacity albeit with limited resources. Some startups have also used virality as a feedback loop to validate and improve their product, hoping to produce a “minimum viable product” that can scale to different regions or a larger demographic. Other startups noted that this approach might be detrimental, and instead chose to produce timeless content for their audience. As such, the journalistic field has seen competing rules between timeliness and timelessness, as well as value and virality.

The new agents engage in processes of differentiation and dedifferentiation: They obey predominant rules in traditional journalism while also differentiating themselves from the incumbents by adhering to another set of rules. Table 2 summarises the set of doxa that guide the work of media startups in Singapore, based on what emerged during the interviews. These doxa represent differentiation and dedifferentiation strategies:

Table 2. Media Startups's Doxa

	Dedifferentiation	Differentiation
Work Processes	Flatarchies Specialized Beats and Roles	Flat Organizational Structure Streamlined Workflows
Norms	Objectivity	Transparency
News values	Timeliness Value	Timelessness Virality

Media startups differentiate and dedifferentiate themselves as a pragmatic way to gain an advantage over the traditional incumbents. They differentiate by working in a flat organizational structure with streamlined workflows, and do so to ensure that they can keep their costs low and produce content more efficiently at the expense of some journalistic quality and integrity. This is compared to traditional journalism where journalists have a specialized beat and have sub-editing support. The media startup structure limits the type of topics that they can cover, and the content they produce is often “churn-and-burn”. This contextualizes some of the changing social media consumption habits as well as the emerging media problems, like misinformation and viral echo chambers. The streamlined workflows also help explain some of the journalistic stress that existing journalists face, as they are now expected to be fast while maintaining pre-existing traditional values.

But why do media startups in Singapore and their agents engage in various differentiation and dedifferentiation strategies? For example, while some particular journalists chase virality, others choose to provide value. Understanding this requires delving into the habitus of individuals working in these media startups. This is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

Habitus — Journalism and Tech Startups

The second research query sought to understand what constitutes the habitus of a media startup agent. Habitus is defined as a “structuring structure” (Wacquant, 2005), something that guides the individuals without them being aware about it. Through the interviews, elements of a tech startup habitus have surfaced, and this seems to coalesce with the existing journalistic habitus. The degree where this tech startup “disposition” occurs within the journalist is largely based on what role they play in their organization, and their career trajectory as well.

Journalistic Habitus

Habitus refers to the “structuring structure” and it “organizes practices and the perception of practices” (Bourdieu, 1984); it is the habits, skills and unique disposition that individual agents have toward their work and life. For agents working in media startups, this refers to a “gut feeling” that guides their editorial choices and helps them determine what stories to pursue and how to tell these stories through social media. It is an instinct that guides their understanding of the field’s doxa and their decisions at work, which is similar to how habitus has been operationalized among traditional journalists. One journalist pointed out that “I don’t think we have a coherent method to do these things, a lot of time is just by instinct.” Other journalists also supported this concept of a journalistic gut feeling, and when asked about how they determine what stories to pick up, one explained that it is through “conversations with friends, conversations with families and if they are interested in the subject, it might be indicative of a larger interest.” Another journalist was also asked to describe his thought process when selecting stories, which was a reflective process where “I think whether it is going to be interesting for a

wide audience, if it is not interesting to me firstly, then I would not think of doing it, and I wouldn't even think people would find it interesting.”

Journalistic Gut Feeling

The journalistic habitus revolves around anticipating “What’s next?” in the news cycle. One interviewee mentioned that “it is just the media sense and the media instinct, you’re always anticipating in an unfolding situation ... trying to find that next story ... we don’t always know, we always guess.” Another journalist suggested that they had “media guidelines and used to base it off the newsworthiness values,” but when they tried to apply these values “you need to use your instincts to judge which one you want to prioritise.” Overall, the journalists suggested that their process “is not a very scientific thing,” and is “totally incoherent, but that’s really how it works.”

The journalists reflected that this disposition is refined and influenced by what they consume online and around them. A journalist suggested that “for a lot of other things that I want to do ... it is perhaps what I see on social media, what things do well” and to get that instinctive gut feeling, one would have to read more, watch more, and absorb different types of content. The journalists often mentioned that they are inspired by content from other channels around the world, and “will keep a lookout for his (a Youtuber) videos and his style of editing and see what works, and what doesn’t.” They also mentioned that their traditional news values have also changed based on the social media platforms that they are on. The journalistic rule of being “timely” is not just toward news anymore, but also toward the medium where “we are probably able to react faster to things, suddenly a new social media platform comes out, we are usually able to get on to these things faster than a traditional newsroom.” The journalists attribute this to

“everything being online”, and having their dispositions changed by the constant barrage of media products they consume.

They suggested this journalistic gut feeling also comes from experience: “you can’t really teach and speed up the process, but the more you do, the more you know.” They mentioned that by working in newsrooms or “being thrown in the deep end,” one will develop “investigative kind of skills, information gathering skills” as a reporter. A few individuals working in media startups suggested that due to their previous work locations they were exposed to quality journalism, or a notion of what journalism should look like. They were previously freelance journalists, editors or had been “working at a newsroom for a few years.” This journalistic disposition picked up from their previous work environment empowers them to pursue certain stories because “I know they’re going to get axed, but maybe if I work in a smaller company, I might feel like I have bit more weight, I can pull and push for certain stories to go out, maybe will feel more driven in that sense.” It also helps them be more efficient in their work, “the fastest people in my company are usually the more experienced ones.” Furthermore, it allows them to navigate any potential legal complications: “One gets a better sense of how to minimize the risk of those things (defamation, contempt of court) and also dealing with trolls.”

One study respondent summarised that everything is picked up “on-the-job,” from learning what stories work, talking to people in a tactful manner, and even the ethical guidelines were developed through working with editors and abiding to standards that “are enforced by editors.” Some journalists also argued that they picked up the journalistic habitus from “journalism school, you learn about media law, sensitivity about sexual harassment cases”, and from observing other players in the field to realise, for example, that “Mothership.sg basically

blurred these lines, some of their writers are not journalism-trained per se.” The journalist argued that people who have not been exposed to journalism — be it through on-the-job training or education — might be unaware of these things, and make questionable decisions that will have repercussions: “I think that is a form of responsibility that digital news outlets might cut corners in,” but these are the things that “only experienced journalists and editors can be aware of.”

Most of the respondents for this study had some form of journalism education and experience. Out of the 20 interviewees, 13 had formal journalism education. On journalistic experience, five of the 20 respondents came from fields outside of journalism. These five individuals came from industries like music, sports, business, tech and advertising, and mentioned that coming from fields outside of journalism allowed them to better report on niche issues and they had developed their journalistic gut feel along the way. The respondents have suggested that within their startups, the hirers often recruit broadly, as they want people to be able to work on specialized or create new opportunities for the startup. For instance, one journalist suggested that they should look for someone “with a degree in climate studies or geography to do the environment beat, or transport science to report on transport” as the journalists need to be deeply ingrained in their relevant fields so that they “do not lose things through translation.” One editor-in-chief also mentioned that they filled the startup with a range of individuals from different historical trajectories, “data scientists, engineers and product managers” to bring in expertise that journalists do not have “to build products useful for our readers.”

The respondents acknowledged that their journalistic gut-feeling is shaped by a number of factors — where they worked at, their education background, interactions with people as well

as their online content consumption. These are consistent with the literature on habitus in the journalistic field, which states that habitus is shaped by the historical trajectory of an individual and their personal and professional experiences (Wilig, 2013; Benson; 2006), and this also shapes how they manage their work and view their professional identity. The habitus of a media startup agent is shaped by their understanding and experiences with online journalism, but is altered due to the changing requirements of work.

Journalistic Identity

It is interesting to note that out of all the respondents, a large majority did not consider themselves journalists despite having journalism experience and degrees. Even though these individuals working at media startups came from a journalism background, they expressed that they do not consider themselves as a journalist. One particular journalist mentioned that “I perceive myself as a content creator.”

Most of the other interviewees have echoed this sentiment, where they call themselves different titles like “content writer” or “content producers” as they produce content that entertains, enlightens, or perhaps a combination of both. When asked about why they do not consider themselves journalists, they felt that a journalist is someone that has higher standards: “I mean if you ask an old-school journalist, there’s a certain standard and method of doing things which I very rarely adhere to.” Some of the respondents pointed out that some startups tend to indulge in “armchair journalism” — where their journalistic legwork is done by combing through social media — and to be considered a journalist you should not be “taking content or paraphrasing from other online sources.” They also suggested that being a journalist meant needing to do more “in-depth research to cushion or create your story.” Another respondent

explained, “I don't think I'm a journalist because I don't sort of adhere to many of the journalistic standards that have been passed down.” This form of conceptual distancing, where media startup agents performing acts considered as journalism consciously distance themselves away from the label of being a journalist, seems to be a way to manage stress, as their new identity as a “content creator” meant they had less ethical and societal obligation to produce “useful pieces”. One content writer said: “I was just very involved and attached to my stories ... if it did terribly I would see it as a reflection of being a terrible journalist.” This new identity was also a way for them to reconcile producing clickbait and advertorials, as well as their way of dealing with less stringent editorial standards:

“I don't think a journalist would dabble in sponsored content. That takes out the fairness and balance, the narrative is controlled by the highest bidder. I am a glorified ad man and I create content. That's very dangerous ... Traditionally we're known as someone you can trust or a thought leader in the field, but now you're paid off.”

The journalists mentioned that individuals working in media startups need to be “very aware of their identity ... and it applies to all news outlets” so that they can understand how they are going to report differently from their competitors and who they are trying to serve.

The issue with a traditional journalist's habitus is its inability to reconcile business models with the changing requirements of work. Traditional journalists tend to have “the tendency to absorb pain yourself, underpay yourself, work longer ... It is the sort of instinct, particularly journalists who don't like to ask for money.” This creates an unsustainable environment for the team because everyone is “overloaded, underpaid and suffering from burnout.” One media startup co-founder mentioned that having an enterprising mindset is

something lacking in journalists, and the mentality has never been “Oh, there’s no money, then we make money!” but instead is “There’s no money, then I just take a pay cut.” She attributed this to journalists or writers being traditionally uninvolved in the selling of their media product, as well as journalists and marketers always being very separate entities: “So the only next solution is austerity right, and then it doesn’t work.” Due to the changing requirements of their work, journalists had to be faster and provide more value, and as such they have started to adopt a “tech startup” habitus.

This study will still refer to these individuals as journalists, as they are examined in the context of the journalistic field.

Changing Requirements of Work — And a New Habitus?

Most individuals working in media startups have a journalistic habitus, be it through education, past work experience or developing it through on-the-job training. However, knowingly or not, they have also developed the disposition of a startup employee due to the changing demands of their work. Tech startups aim to “move fast and break things” and often have a highly iterative and incremental approach to their work, focusing on being adaptable to market changes. These startups also tend to have a high failure rate, and reports have suggested that 90% of startups fail within the first year (Patel, 2015). Hence, most of them try to focus on optimizing their limited resources for survivability. Media startups are similar in these circumstances — they are focused on survivability, have limited resources, and are forced to have an iterative mindset toward building a product. Hence, many agents within media startups also develop the habitus of a startup employee, where they focus on being resourceful, multi-skilled (platypus) and a “hustler.”

Resourcefulness and Adaptability

Individuals working in media startups need to be resourceful and adaptable, as they often have limited resources. Journalists have mentioned that working in media startups meant needing to “pivot fast” and “try anything,” but they “will also kill it (ideas) quickly.” One journalist suggested that if a new medium comes up, the startup has to try it, “understand whether it works or not ...and if it doesn’t work, you also need to be ruthless enough to drop it.” Another journalist recounted that his startup had to create more videos as there was a demand for it, and has since moved on from only doing articles. The editor-in-chief of another media startup also suggested that even though there is a need to adapt and improve, “journalism is hard to copy and innovate on.” He explained that for instance, “investigative journalism, you kind of have to do the legwork.” For him, the way journalists can innovate is by collaborating more and “exploring interactive journalism ... working with data scientists, engineers, product managers to build content that is hard to replicate” by other media brands. When it comes to editorial content, journalists in media startups also had to be more innovative and adapt their brand to trending styles, “play more on visuals, packaging, like those edgy newsrooms ... and make it stand out.” They also had to find “new ways to tell stories ... in a cool style, edgy and hipster versus legacy newsroom which is very standardized.”

Another journalist suggested that the individuals working in media startups are able to adapt their content for new social platforms and create new content formats faster compared to the traditional newsroom journalist. A journalist suggested that adapting to new tools is second-nature to them:

“Journalists learn shorthand, because it allows you to get better notes, more quotes ... and nobody uses shorthand now, but we try to find tools. For example, transcription tools out there that allow you to transcribe while interviewing people. These tools that you gain, makes you a more efficient writer, producer, and everything.”

Some journalists felt that apart from adapting to new tools, mediums and social media platforms, they had to find ways to get things done even though they might have a particular skill set: “even if it is like a shaky iPhone camera, writers also have to do videos.” One journalist cited an example during Singapore’s General Elections, “the startups were working very hard ... they were doing videos in a smart way ... in and out, easy setup. No frills.” The journalist mentioned that the startups were “not bogged down with heavy cameras” as they mainly published on social media, compared to mainstream media that had to adhere to some production standards as they had to publish in print or distribute on television.

One particular journalist described this mentality of adaptability as “guerrilla-style journalism”, and was necessary for startups who are the “underdogs”. These startups do not have a following and clout, and are limited in funding and resources. “We have three media brands sharing one set of equipment,” said a video editor of a media startup. The editor mentioned that the startup was “frugal with their money” despite running multiple media brands, and he had to even rent or loan equipment to get the job done. Even media startups that were backed by venture capital or large organizations also faced this resource crunch: “I personally feel we weren’t given resources. We were seen as an experiment.” Even when resources were given to the team, they were either “a shared resource,” or the bosses were unclear about how much resources to allocate: “We didn’t have enough support and blessing from the top. There’s no ‘We

are going to give you X amount of budget’.” The journalists voiced their frustrations as they were “no more than five people at any given time”, and “kept asking for more resources... if we wanted to be sustainable we needed more.” In contrast, there were other venture-backed media startups that did not have that same resource crunch, and had the freedom to chase stories and “I have not experienced someone telling me you shouldn’t spend too long on the story because of resource constraints.”

The focus on being adaptable and resourceful also occurs in startup culture, where they focus on creating a minimum viable product with the least amount of resources. An editor-in-chief aptly suggested to “think of ourselves less as just journalists, but as product owners ... like how app developers build products, we try to build things that are useful for our readers.”

Being a Multi-skilled Platypus

A respondent recalled how, when she first joined the media startup, one of the co-founders told her: “This is your project, now go and do it by yourself.” Due to limited resources and lean teams, individuals in media startups tend to wear multiple hats and complete projects by themselves. In recent years, the term “platypus” has been used to describe someone who adopts multiple roles and has a wide array of work responsibilities (Quinn, 2006). Like actual platypuses who are as comfortable on land as they are in water and mammals who lay eggs, these journalists don multiple roles and can fit in wherever the company requires them to be: “Media startups are naturally smaller, you kind of have to do everything. The boss asks me to edit the video, I have to do it regardless or not if I want to.” The journalists interviewed

mentioned that it is never about who is the best fit for the job, but rather whoever is “available to do the job, does the job.”

The interviewees suggested that media startups value people who can do multiple things, rather than specialize in writing per se: “I’m multi-functional, these days there are very few specialist journalists, I take care of the Malaysian frontpage, I’m a reporter and I clear copy and do supervising for other reporters.” A journalist suggested that “you need to be able to do everything, be good enough at everything.” When specifically hiring or seeking out writers, they also focus on freelancers who can do multiple things apart from writing. The journalists feedback that newsrooms prefer people who can handle social media, and one even mentioned that “my unique selling point is that I can do photos with my stories, so they are quite happy because usually they have to pay extra, but everything for the price of one.”

A respondent said: “You are a big fish in a small pond, so the harder you whack a tail, the more waves you create.” He was explaining why multi-functional journalists can get things done so quickly. Some journalists suggested they are able to do this also partly due to the flat hierarchy, because “with fewer people involved, there is less inertia, less problems when you want to head something.” This also meant that the journalists had lesser guidance, and were thrown in the deep-end. There was no “backup or contingency,” and they did not know if “they are doing well enough or not.” As the journalists had no or little guidance, it was important for them to have a self-starter mentality:

“You have to be willing to roll up your sleeves and work ... It is the more experienced reporters or editors who joined us who struggled to stay in the company, because I think they were used to a certain way and stability you get in a traditional newsroom.”

There was also an element of ownership and trust: “We didn’t have an office, everything was virtual and spread out across Southeast Asia ... there was no way to check up on each other.” The individual journalists had a responsibility to ensure that everything was in order, “take initiative more, prove yourself more” and that “whatever you do stands out more.”

The interviewees suggested that being a jack of all trades makes you a master of none, and it is not the best way to produce quality content. It also distracts editors from performing important roles: “I was also the one uploading the articles, then all the small small tasks as well, basically we didn’t have people, so I would do all these things myself, even post on Twitter. So there was a lot of hands-on stuff that I had to do.” The co-founder eventually realized that she had to focus on growing the brand instead of the nitty gritty, and hired additional help. The journalists also mentioned that by handling multiple tasks in the workflow — even though one can “have more of a stake in the story ... and get to decide a lot more things,” — more mistakes were made in the process and it also “increases the stress on the reporters”. Furthermore, “if everyone has their own style, it is very hard to manage,” said one editor. As a result of these mistakes, some startups have designated specialized roles: “We had to add these roles in, and as the team grew bigger the process allowed it to be more organized.” An editor-in-chief suggested that growing specialized roles is the natural growth progression for successful media startups after they manage to validate their media product, and it shows that their business is actually sustainable without overworking their employees. He recounted that:

“Our writers are somewhat specialized in their roles. We don’t believe in forcing them to do videos, I think we probably have gotten more specialized over the years, at the start, everyone would just do everything, at the start we had purely writers, there were no

copy-editors, for editing, there was peer editing, writers would edit each other, then we brought in copy-editors who specialized in copy-editing, so that took away some of the editing workload from the writers, and then we're trying to specialise even further, we also segregated the team into news writers and long form writers. We are probably less specialized than a big newsroom right, obviously the bigger the newsroom, the more specialisations there will be, ours is still fairly small, but we still have these different functions."

However, another journalist argued that journalists in a specialised role might not "understand the nature of certain stories" as they are often passed around, but the contrasting argument is that newsrooms are generally more collaborative, "you don't really just suffer and rely on yourself for most things, you learn to communicate with other people about how you want to work."

One journalist sums up the dilemma of having specialized or platypus roles: "I think it's good to have a mix of both, to have people who come from a mix of both backgrounds." He argues that some situations require specialists: "people with degrees in climate studies" like handling the environment beat so that things will not be "lost in translation," but also generalists who can help tie the media product together with monetization, allowing the startup to survive.

Startup's "Hustle" and Business Models

One of the ingrained dispositions of people working in media startups is their ability to "hustle." Through the interviews, the element of hustling seems to revolve around the journalists being able to understand the media business models and focus on the survivability of the startup.

The journalists joked that one of the main traits of working in a media startup is “you have to be willing to accept low pay, no bonuses” and “you need to sell your soul.”

The journalists suggested that they need to have that disposition to “understand the business model of the startup that you are working for.” Only by understanding the business model, can the journalist proceed to “make an impact and help the startup grow” and “build your skills from there.” They felt that “money talks, having good colleagues, that’s a bonus” because it is not sustainable to get people who believe in the vision to do work for free. They cited that when startups begin, free-contributor models might work, but in the later years “everybody was coming in for different motives, different purposes.” The editor of one particular startup recounted that they were “doing things that other larger companies were doing, but without any money ... and we didn't really go anywhere.”

A respondent said: “I think one of the struggles of media startups is that they are founded by journalists since they are super bad at business.” One co-founder suggested that journalists did not have the ability to think of dollars and cents, and media businesses needed to marry the content work that they do with an appropriate business model. Some editors and founders interviewed in this study said they were building “new-age generation media companies” and that “technology was always the differentiator that pushed eras ... we need to identify the right areas and the right business model to take advantage of all these things.” In a sense, they are clarifying how being a media startup is not just about infusing journalism with technology, but also adopting an entrepreneurial disposition. One startup journalist recounted that he was struggling to find a business model that could disrupt the existing status quo:

“When my partners started leaving ... I kept thinking about the business model, how can I find a model that allows me to continue doing what I want to do, and grow. Growth doesn’t always have to mean more people, it can mean like the jobs I take are of a different calibre, my work quality gets higher, something that is scalable.”

By understanding the business model, individuals can help steer the company in the right direction. For instance, if journalists understand that they benefit from a subscription model, they would push out content that has a strong alignment of values, “take the initiative to promote your own stories, or nobody will know about you.” This could help garner support from the users, and in turn increase membership numbers. Similarly, if they understand that they survived on advertising dollars, journalists will help “utilize social media and the internet to grow out an advertising agency” or “use the employees they have who are good at storytelling work to spin-off to do advertisements”. Likewise, if the company thrived on viral clicks, good qualities of a journalist “would be to spot trends quickly, to know more about what people are talking about, what’s going on in the news.” Companies that survived on hosted videos also required the journalists to have that “willingness to put yourself out there ... because what’s on social media is based on a personality,” while startups that needed inside scoops and in-depth articles meant “going out to meet a larger variety of people, building a network of contacts.” There is no one-size-fits-all situation for media startups, but journalists suggested that by understanding business models, it can help individuals identify necessary skills to develop and improve their attitude toward their work and reconcile “why they do what they do.” A startup journalist summed up the situation:

“Working in a startup type of environment, you have to think more about product and monetisation ... it doesn’t influence how I write, but you are more aware of how your salary is funded... and you don’t get too fixated on a certain way of doing things, but just stay open to experimenting.”

When discussing business models, however, some interviewees mentioned that they were either not privy to their startup’s finance side of things, or were unwilling to think about it: “for me I just try to do the best job that I can, I honestly don’t want to stress about things like these. To put it bluntly, this is above my paygrade.” Another interviewee suggested that as a full-time journalist, one does not need to worry about where your money comes from:

“Because you’re salaried right, so you just have your KPI ... the government isn’t going to stop doing press conferences, there will always be stories for you to cover.”

This was a stark contrast to journalists that were willing to “hustle”, be a “self-starter” and put in longer hours for a vision that they believed in.

“Journalism is really a means to an end,” said one editor. When asked to elaborate, he explained that at the end of the day journalists were building a product that people need, and he drew links to the tech startup scene: “Developers have been charging money for software, and software is like content, it is a tool ...but there’s entertainment and utility. So anytime you create something that has utility, you can charge money from it.” He suggested that journalism is where someone is trying to uncover new information, and turn generating value for the readers and money for the company. As such, if a journalist has a disposition that could understand how the media monetisation works, he/she will be well-positioned for the future challenges and changing requirements of their work.

Synthesis

This section focused on understanding the habitus of media startup agents, many of whom come from traditional news outlets or have had journalism training, and thus come into the media startup scene with their journalistic habitus. The traditional journalism habitus helps define journalism as a field, and the role it plays in society.

However, this habitus has also been challenged and altered, as media startups have also taken in individuals from outside the journalistic field, and those agents possessing a traditional journalism habitus now work alongside these individuals coming from different historical trajectories. These new agents acquire the journalistic habitus while on-the-job; working on stories and interacting with other ex-journalists, their habitus confronted by, and eventually merging with, those of others. Since a media startup often has limited resources, the agents are put in an entrepreneurial circumstance. This required them to become multi-skilled platypuses that can adapt, improvise and “hustle.” They now don a media startup habitus, which is a blend of the entrepreneurial, startup disposition and the existing journalistic habitus.

Journalists used to play the role of the watchdog of the government and disseminate information for the public good, but many of them are now guided by a media startup habitus which is more entrepreneurial and for-profit. This forms a transactional relationship between them and the readers, as their feel for the game is no longer to solely provide news pieces for the public good, but also to balance advertising dollars, amass audiences and grow the reader's trust in them. The new habitus signals a shift in journalistic identity, where traditional journalists compromise on quality and integrity to take on sponsored jobs and when individuals who were from outside of the field include certain journalistic qualities within their work. The media

startup habitus helps legacy newsroom journalists understand their work stress and also reconcile what to make of their new “platypus-like” roles and increased demands of their work.

Media startup habitus is a less stringent one compared to traditional journalism habitus as it emphasizes pragmatism over journalistic quality. Individuals from other fields can enter the journalistic field and don a media startup habitus, producing and disseminating content pieces. There are more agents in the field with this media startup habitus, and therefore it is important to examine their disposition, as it shapes how these agents do their journalistic work. This shifting “gut feel” can aid in explaining the emerging problems with journalism. For instance, the changing habitus can explain why there has been a decrease in journalistic quality and hence a decreased trust in the mainstream media. This media startup habitus that focuses on survivability can provide more nuance in understanding the rise of misinformation, clickbait and online echo chambers as well.

CHAPTER VI

Capital — Economic, Social and Cultural Capital

Startups are usually funded in two ways — bootstrapping or ventures. Bootstrapped media companies are companies that are funded by the founder's own pockets, which provides them with more freedom to make decisions. On the other hand, media ventures are backed by large companies, organizations, and investors, giving them the finances to grow at the cost of founders having less leeway for decision-making.

The final research query sought to understand what startups in Singapore considered their economic, social and cultural capital. The respondents come from a myriad of media startups, and are in different phases of the startup life cycle, funded either by bootstrapping or through external parties and ventures. From the responses, financial and advertising deals were considered to be economic capital, social capital referred to their audiences, and cultural capital referred to their reputation in the industry. The journalists also mentioned that the “capital” that was important for them and their organization was dependent on the phase and nature of their startup. If it was a venture-backed startup, it often had a longer runway to profitability, and saw awards and recruiting star journalists as a priority.

The Bourdieian's concept of capital suggests that forms of capital can be transformed to another, i.e. economic capital converted to social capital. As such, if a startup was bootstrapped, they would grow their online relevance and reputation (cultural capital) and convert this to audience numbers (economic capital) as they needed to be able to be seen as a relevant, legitimate source while also sustaining their operational costs and overheads. On the other hand, a venture-backed media startup would already have economic capital through the investors, and

will convert the economic capital to audience communities (social capital) and in-depth reporting (cultural capital).

Economic Capital

For mainstream news media companies, economic capital refers to the advertising dollars and subscription rates, and media startup companies compete with the incumbent for advertising dollars and subscription revenues. In recent years, with the rise of native and programmatic advertising, audience size and web-clicks can also be seen as an important indicator of economic capital. Most media startups have to start from scratch when it comes to accumulating capital, and they do not have the ability to quickly acquire large advertising deals or mass audience numbers. While (Tandoc, 2018; Benson, 2006) argue that economic capital refers to assets that can be transformed into money, such as audience size, many of these assets are at most indicators of potential economic capital (i.e. audience size can be transformed into advertising revenues and subscription fees). This distinction, between actual economic capital and its industry-level indicators, is important to acknowledge, as some of these indicators can also be converted into other forms. For example, credibility in the eyes of audiences is also an indicator of cultural capital. Through the interviews, journalists have reflected that they looked toward alternative monetization methods such as membership subscriptions, ticketed events and selling merchandise, and some even considered investors as their economic capital. The inception of a media startup happens when a group of individuals band together due to a shared vision, and the interviewees suggested that “producers” came together to become more legitimate and seek out financial opportunities. They cited that by banding together, they managed to draw the attention of “marketing managers and Public Relation companies” who “introduced me to their boss, and

from there I can sell something.” A respondent also said that banding together allowed them to improve their visibility in the field where “the public relation companies were like, ‘we know who you are’.”

Subscriber and Audience Numbers

Respondents have suggested that they viewed their subscriber base and audience numbers as a form of economic capital. This is aligned with existing studies that consider circulation rates and audience sizes as journalistic capital (Benson, 2006, Benson & Neveu, 2005) and “assets that can be transformed into money” (Tandoc, 2018, p.794). As news media products have largely moved online, the media startups needed to acquire a large number of webclicks, social media shares and followers to convince advertisers of their worth, and hence, saw these as economic capital. A journalist said that to find more sponsors, advertisers and branded content, “you need to increase your clicks ... because branded content will only come to you when you tell them “We have 1 million unique visitors in a year”.” The journalist also mentioned that more mainstream media companies are also “doing stories for more clicks, because clicks are free, and they depend on it.” When asked about the startup’s relationship with their audience, an editor mentioned that: “It’s very numerical. How many people clicked on Facebook, how many people shared.” Another journalist suggested that the success of the company is when “we manage to gain a sizable audience.”

The journalists felt that with a large audience, their content can reach more people. A respondent said: “If you don’t have an audience, even if you do a good story, nobody will bother.” Another interviewee mentioned that with a larger pool of subscribers or followers, other metrics will also improve as the content has a “higher hit rate of success.” The piece of content

can find its way to an audience that enjoys it, and also drive “click-through rates, sell tickets ... sell products.” Another respondent also mentioned that metrics are now key, “everything must have a metric, if not it is just fluffy,” and with larger numbers media startups are able to convince advertisers, who are “buying eyeballs” and “want the reach and have more visibility (for their product).”

Similar to legacy news outlets in Singapore, media startups also consider audience and subscriber numbers as economic capital, especially online, where these metrics are quantified in terms of clicks, likes, followers and subscriber base. Another journalist suggested said:

“Now, it is super hard to just survive on digital advertising alone and subscriber revenue.

It is not so much about the format, but whether it can reach people, and whether it can eventually lead to money coming in to sustain the business.”

Alternative Monetization Methods

Owners and creators experimented with alternative or unique methods to fund their startups, as digital advertising and subscription alone is no longer sufficient. They had workflows that catered to new monetization methods like sponsored content. “Branded content only became a thing a few years ago,” said an editor-in-chief, “and is probably our biggest revenue stream right now.” There is again, no one-size-fits-all workflow, as some startups had a separate team that solely focused on producing branded content while another “had a middle man between the client and the producer” where they funneled the advertising briefs from the clients to the journalist/writer. Other startups also started selling merchandise and “wanted to launch it on kickstarter”, while others “had a subscription model, a membership program that offers exclusive content for members” and also an “event arm that does conferences and webinars and a jobs

marketplace.” A journalist remarked that due to the COVID-19, the organization had to “pivot to do webinars” from their usual “two summits in Singapore and Jakarta.”

Apart from finding means to directly monetize their content, respondents spoke about having a constant stream of financial deals to keep their lights on. A particular journalist crowdsourced her operating cost, and her audience could provide her cash through “tips on this website called kofi.com”, while another founder of a media startup was able start his business because of a contract which allowed him financial stability:

“I had a contract with them, and because of that contract, I could immediately open the company because I knew I had bouts of jobs coming in, and over the years, we have trimmed down our output for them. Now, they trust me enough to pitch stuff to them.”

Other companies seeking out a constant stream of income also took on “special projects” that were out of their editorial job scope, where they run specific campaigns like “a national movement that we are running for the National Arts Council to promote local music... which is more long term.” For other companies, they also took on “white-labelled” jobs like they were digital agencies or video production companies, which meant they produced content for clients without their editorial tone of voice and were natively distributed on the client’s platforms.

Clients and Investors

When discussing economic capital, the startups viewed their clients and investors as an element of their growth, and hence, they felt that accepting the appropriate clients and investors could impact their economic capital. Startups have the ability to draw investments from investors, venture capitalist or larger media companies. These investors often provide starting capital for the company to grow and function, hoping that in the long-term, it will generate

profits and a return of the investor's investment. However, the respondents suggested that it is crucial for the investor to be a "right fit" and be aligned with the mission and vision of the company. Similarly, the journalists also discussed the concept of "brand fit" and "quality of clients." A particular interviewee explained that:

"Financial growth might not necessarily mean growth in the quality of clients ... for me it is getting better clients, because better clients are more willing to push more experimental or bigger budgets. You can get a big budget project, but if the client is shit, having a lot of changes because too many cooks in the kitchen."

The journalist suggested that having a client that believes in the editorial vision of the company can allow the company to push more boundaries. For branded and sponsored posts, the journalists need to both "fulfill the requirements of the client but at the same time... make an engaging piece of sponsored content" but they recognize that this is often a "lofty aspiration." He suggested that some clients do not understand the sponsored content model: "I want this to be a watchable piece of content, but it (the client) often comes back with janky feedback that I would never say (in the video). But the clients just want these points hit, so that's where my hands are tied." Having a brand fit is important for sponsored content, as it helps the content seem native and natural, and can actually improve both the editorial and financial situation with the company. The journalist expressed frustration with this mismatch and remarked "I don't understand why they (the clients) didn't just pay a production house to do that, because they don't understand the whole objective (of a sponsored post)."

For media startups, investors and external funding can also be seen as a form of economic capital. The journalists discussed this in relation to other media companies that were funded by

large investors, as well as their editorial integrity. A media startup founder suggested that “we don’t want advertising and we wanted the company set up in a way that it could not be bought over.” The founder elaborated that “we saw in Cambodia that independent websites and newspapers had been forced to sell ... and months down the line it turns out to be owned by some crony.” The respondent suggested that with financial pressures and bad investors, the publication’s editorial integrity can be compromised. Another respondent spoke about the company’s image of their competitor, citing that “Mothership.sg — I’m not sure how it is perceived, it is called alternative media, but bear in mind it is funded by Philip Yeo (former Chairman of Singapore's economic development board)” and he suggested that with big pockets and establishment backers, it is hard to be fully neutral when reporting the news. Furthermore, another founder of a media startup recounted his experience with venture capitalists:

“I have seen term sheets, we’ve received them before, it is not all fancy, they can give you a lot of money, millions, but then again, their liquidation preferences are little, so basically a lot of the money you make, firstly goes out to them ... you can fall out with an investor which has happened many times.”

He suggested that when having an investor on board “they have to slave for someone else” and even with the help of investors, the founder mentioned that when he “viewed their (the competitors’) websites today, there’s not much improvement ... and I don’t feel that their (work) lifestyle changed much.”

Even though some startups suggested caution when dealing with financial investment, journalists suggested that seed funding or external funding is a necessary for startups, only then they can attempt to grow their editorial diversity from “explainer videos, or columns, or

infographics, same topics but in different formats or different areas using the same format, like writing about personal finance or food.” A few respondents brought up examples where media conglomerates were backed by big backers and cited examples like “Singapore Press Holding being owned by OCBC, Great Eastern, DBS, Singtel; Mediacorp is owned by Temasek Holdings”, “New York Times is publicly listed” and “Jeff Bezos owns Washington Post, Jack Ma owns South China Morning Post.” These remarks suggested that if one is to reach that stage, the company needs to have some form of external backing. Another editor suggested that a company’s advertising dollars will constantly be “in the spotlight” because of market forces and the lack of advertising revenues. Specifically, a news editor working in a startup owned by a large multinational conglomerate raised an interesting anecdote, suggesting that advertising demands were insufficient to fund editorial needs:

“During the pandemic, content views, unique users, have gone through the roof, and that is for every media board across the world, but correspondingly ad revenue has gone down, because nobody is advertising. If you used to have a lot of ad revenue from airlines for example, but nobody’s travelling so what’s the point of advertising, even the likes of the Guardian, you saw some months back they had layoffs, so that’s the irony, I think the demand for news has been greater, but you’re still seeing a lot of layoffs, especially in the US, the media industry there has not been doing well for the entire year, even without the pandemic.”

Other startups that were recently funded or acquired also suggested that with investments, they were able to “solely focus on things that we need and just focus on growing the business” as they no longer needed to focus on “the fund-raising aspect of it (running a startup).” The journalist

suggested that during early years, the founder had “a really tough time trying to juggle running business, doing editorial and fund-raising at the same time, it's very stressful” but now “we were majorly acquired last year, and that has helped us quite a lot, in fact I think my boss is always thanking his lucky stars that we didn't push the negotiations, because COVID-19 is creating a lot of stress.” An editor-in-chief of a media startup also reflected the harsh and practical realities of accepting funding, where on one hand, they were able to expand quickly, but they also had to scale back if they were unable to bring in revenue: “So we had layoffs over the years for different reasons, for example, the most recent one, we raised some money from investors to try some new ventures, didn't work out, then we had to cut costs, so mainly it's cost cutting and trying to reach profitability.”

Economic capital has traditionally been seen as the advertising dollars and subscription revenue of the media businesses, and this has largely been unchanged for media startups. However, startups seem to focus more on acquiring economic capital due to their bootstrapped nature, and can compromise on the editorial integrity. A respondent said: “It's an art I must say, to be able to write an advertorial and make it sound like a news piece.” The respondents suggested that having appropriate clients and investors is also important to them, and these could also be seen as a higher form of economic capital as it can be transformed into editorial growth opportunities that helps develop the brand and provides regional capabilities. As an editor aptly points out “when you have investors or seed funding, who'll say ... I would pay you guys until you grow into this brand ... or be the heroes who can never be bought and that would change the status quo, but that's a lofty idea.”

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the people, groups and communities (Bourdieu, 1984) that an agent (or journalist) knows or belongs to. Social media can either enhance or diminish social capital (Siapera & Spyridou, 2012). A startup co-founder, discussing communities on social media, said: “I think it is quite exciting that there are all these different interest groups — e.g. mermaid fans might pay to connect with other mermaid fans — I like the idea of communities coming together this way.” Social media have become a tool that allows journalists to connect with audience groups, grow their startup’s communities and expand their journalist’ network, and they view these as forming their social capital.

Journalist-Audience Network

The respondents expressed the importance of growing their own social media following, where they “are very proactive in promoting their own stories on social media.” A journalist suggested that working in a startup “really makes you more driven, you really need to take initiative to promote your own stories or nobody will know about you.” This meant that the journalist often used their own social media handles to promote and share their own article, generating a small following of specialized audience. A journalist suggested that “you’ve got to believe in your own hype, before other people do” and some companies have encouraged journalists to create their own Twitter handles so that they also “crowd source for user generated content.” The journalists were able to engage with audiences and have small conversations about their own stories as well: “in a way, that helped us to actually bring out product to people.” A founder suggested that because of social media he can use it to both amplify the content to his industry contacts but it also act as a form of affirmation to the staff: “I can just let people know

and have it out there, and sometimes whether people see it or not, I don't really care, maybe it's just to appreciate my staff, let her know that your boss appreciates you enough that he posts on social media about you.” The journalists also suggested that because they made an effort to interact and grow their own social media following, they sometimes received personalized emails thanking them for covering a particular topic of story.

Media Startup-Audience Community

As a byproduct of building their own personal brand, some journalists have also helped build a following for their own media startups. “It is not projecting out into this faceless mass audience, but also about creating little pockets of people who are like-minded and who like the same thing,” said a journalist. The journalist explained that she was able to create a newsletter distributing it to a small “liberal, politically engaged Singaporeans” and “a Telegram group, which I only advertised once In the end 250 people showed up.” The journalist went on to use this group to promote her own media startup and even provide some help for her audience:

“I don't moderate it and I don't always reply, but someone forwarded a screencap of WhatsApp messages ... fake news kind of stuff. She shared it and was like, “What do you say to things like that?”, and I ended up writing a post, where I clearly identified myself as a journalist who has reported migrant worker issues for years, and composed it as a message that people could just copy and paste and send back, and somebody else in the group translated it into Chinese.”

The same journalist also “invited our members to give feedback” on her media startup, and she recounted that “there was a small argument” during the meeting, where the members argued about if they should solely focus on Singapore content, or expand to cover other countries as

well. Through the use of social media and growing their communities, startups also managed to “direct feedback from members ... and hearing from lecturers or students who say they found it helpful” while other startups utilized “focus groups” to help know what audiences want. A journalist describes the audience of a media startup producing “clickbaity articles” as “very loyal” and “their audience loves it”, and he partly attributes this loyalty as being able to build a following and community around their media product.

Journalist-Journalist Circle

Most journalists utilize their professional networks for both media leads and production support, while some, due to a comfortable reliance on social media, have relegated to being “armchair journalists” where they take content from viral posts and repurpose it for their articles. A particular journalist suggested that due to COVID-19, she was unable “meet people in person... because that’s how you get exclusive stories usually and it takes a long time to build relationships to the point where people are able to share things on a call-basis.” Another journalist also recounted that “When we started covering startups, it was almost as if we were starting from scratch, because all of us were new reporters, so we spent a lot of time trying to walk the ground, establish networks, everything.” Other journalists also suggested that they emphasized on having “coffee chats” with their media contacts, and “attending networking events ... media briefings to meet people and enlarge my contact base.” The journalists mentioned that doing interviews in person helped build a rapport with the profiles, and they needed to be “going out and doing the legwork ... visiting sites or offices or contacts.” The journalists also needed to have contacts from relevant government agencies to obtain information

for breaking news and in depth pieces. An editor recounted that his colleague was a “true investigative reporter”:

“He would spend time cultivating contacts, meet people late at night, slowly build a relationship such that they were able to trust him and give him information. Because of that, we managed to break a scoop on the two SMRT trainees that died in an accident, as it turns out, the father of one of the trainees was among the rescue team. He got the scoop because of his contacts, he didn’t wait for the press release.”

The journalist contrasts this with individuals that summarize content, repost viral stories and he suggested that it is a diminished social capital where “it doesn’t add anything to the conversation, it simply dumbs down the conversation ... they think that putting some netizen comments qualifies as legwork, it doesn’t add anything.”

The journalists also considered the support within the journalism industry as a social capital. They suggested that the support can help them develop new skills, reach more audiences and improve their legitimacy within the industry. A journalist suggested that journalism communities allow them to grow and learn how to report on specific beats, “there’s a international journalist network where they have seminars about how to do business reporting, how to do organisational reporting ...” Other journalists also suggested that having support within the journalism industry allowed them to get more jobs in the early years, where “most of the jobs are through word-of-mouth, through friends who are in the industry,” a particular journalist also utilized online portals that “matchmake publications to freelancers, where they can pitch stuff and editors will pick it up.” The journalist elaborates that the creator of the platform even “added us into a Whatsapp group” where they could network and exchange ideas,

while others “joined Facebook groups like freelance Facebook groups ... creative at work where they organized some support schemes.”

Apart from professional growth, their industry networks allowed them to grow their media startup. A journalist who worked in a now defunct media startup mentioned that in hindsight, “we could have been more aggressive to do our own outreach. Try to look for these opportunities, link up with Telum (media resource platform), do a webinar with them. Try and talk to... Mumbrella (marketing resource platform).” Similarly, they also suggested having more collaboration between startups and producers. An interviewee mentioned that having “more collabs with existing brands” could help both parties reach more people. He likens this approach to YouTubers, and he would have “a list of dream collabs, and slowly tick my way through it. Slowly build up. And you know, how YouTubers do it also. They work with each other and they promote each other.” Another journalist relied on his social capital within his extended media company, and reached out to people from other departments for production support: “We did a video on books. So, we got the book correspondent to help us [and] I got my friends who were radio deejays and we did a couple of videos with them.” The journalist, by capitalizing on his own social capital, was able to tap on other established players in the journalistic field.

Cultural Capital

Literature on journalism studies consider journalistic awards and qualities such as in-depth reporting as a form of cultural capital for the journalistic field. In recent years, Lewis and Usher (2014) also suggested that utilizing technology in newsrooms, like implementing better user interfaces and providing a more accurate and personalized news curation, could be considered cultural capital. However, in the context of Singapore, media startups were largely

bootstrapped and even if they were backed by venture capital, they were limited by resources. The media startups interviewed do not have the technology to marry with their news product and seldom can they provide accurate and complex personalization. Through the interviews, it is noted that they also no longer view awards as a form of cultural capital, but instead they focus on “social media reputation” and “industry reputation” as a form of cultural capital.

Journalism Awards

When asked about their view toward journalism and media awards, the respondents suggested that they preferred to grow their own reputation “organically” and focused on providing quality content and keeping their lights on. An editor-in-chief explained:

“Awards, not really, we don’t really care much about awards, but at the end of the day, it is really about the bottom line, whether we grow our subscriber base, whether we can sustain and grow our operations.”

Another journalist also mentioned that “I think awards are important... but not a huge factor. We did win an award, it was nice, it was really nice.” The journalist also went on to explain that “it wasn’t a huge deal in terms of success” because she felt that the greatest validation comes from “the readers and the industry.” Similarly, another journalist echoed the importance of the intangible aspects of journalism “like how impactful is your story, and that cannot be measured easily, sometimes there are awards, that’s one like one benchmark.” The journalist saw awards as a yardstick for their performance and just “one KPI for them (editors) to be able to promote you to a higher role.”

A small number of startups recognized that media awards is a means to an end and could be considered as cultural capital. They saw that achieving awards was a way to get more media

mentions and in turn, get media contacts or improve their legitimacy in the industry. For instance, a journalist recounted that they were “Singapore blog awards, which was a big thing in our sector ... we won something for our Twitter page, but (getting) Public Relations companies, they are the still most important.” He explained that what his media startup needed was the industry recognition or media contacts that drove their businesses. Another startup journalist, when asked about how to increase his startup’s legitimacy, replied “definitely, definitely getting awards, getting covered by other media.” He mentions that “every time we were mentioned in another publication, we were very happy because that’s publicity for us.”

Legitimacy and Credibility

Instead of traditional awards, most of the respondents viewed audience and industry perception toward them as a form of cultural capital, as a journalist puts it across colloquially, a media startup is successful when “they have a good rep (reputation)” and seen as “legit.” Having a good reputation can help create more awareness for the brand, as “there was like zero awareness about us, someone even mistook us for the car section...” a journalist recounted.

Another journalist mentioned that:

“Legitimacy is a thing that happens with trust, so it comes with time. It cannot be something that is immediate, a lot of times, I think most media startups that have gone on, they no longer exist because they couldn’t get the trust, they couldn’t get the legitimacy.”

A journalist mentioned that with a lack of trust, startups might encounter trolls and audiences will also doubt their reporting, “I know that in the beginning when there were reports about food quality (in migrant dormitories), there were other people online saying that it was fake news.”

The journalist concludes that their objective is to “be a site that people can go to and trust.”

The journalists suggested that industry recognition is a form of cultural capital, and this is where other journalists want to work in or with the media startup. A freelance journalist explains that a good media startup will let “you feel shiok (good) when you flesh out what you envisioned and had in mind” and “would rather do it and make a loss, and depend on the quality of that work, to bring me more gigs that will kind of make up for the loss.” The journalist suggested that working with such a media startup will bring prestige to her own brand name, and in turn bring in future jobs. Another freelance journalist also mentioned that even though she “would ask what's the rate, and would factor that into my decision making”, this does not mean that when “one of them pays a lot better I would definitely work for them, because if the other one has a very poor reputation and my byline is going to be on it, then I wouldn’t want to be associated.” Similarly, a cofounder suggested that when journalists or collaborators want to work with a publication, it meant that they have cultural capital: “Success was that freelancers wanted to write for us and journalists were very enthusiastic about recommending us as a place to write for.”

Star Power

When asked about how to acquire more cultural legitimacy in the field, many of the respondents suggested two main ways — utilizing a journalist’s star power and by creating good content.

A journalist highlighted that “New Naratif had Kirsten Han” and “Breakfast Network had the support of Bertha Henson”, suggesting these two media startups had the backing of a “star journalist.” He explained that apart from a singular “star journalist”, the publications had “all

these different people who have their own brands, if you have a journalist that people know coming into your newsroom, into your media startup, that would help add to the credibility.” A journalist explains that having a seasoned journalist and editor allows them to pull more weight with their content:

“When they (star journalists) put out commentaries right, they have the gravitas, the experience and the knowledge to be able to say, “I can tell you this because etc.”, I look at them and I can tell that their opinions have weight, because they are veterans.”

Another journalist also argued that “one of the very important things for media startups is really to have good editors.” She cited that after a media startup hired her ex-boss “she could really see the difference in quality, the standard went up.” She also gave another example: “TechInAsia, Terence Lee, he’s like a brand of his own, so it shapes the direction of the startup.” A journalist also mentioned that having a good editor is something “legacy newsrooms have that media startups may not necessarily have, so they either need to actively poach from the legacy newsrooms or somehow find the right editors.” The journalist suggested that star editors were more important than hiring writers, “in terms of writers themselves, actually it's not very different from a traditional newsroom.”

However, media startups felt that to attract star power, they still needed economic capital. A particular respondent said: “I feel like bigger legacy newsrooms are definitely able to afford to pay producers or journalists more, and I feel like at the end of the day, people are attracted to money or people with talents are attracted to money.” The journalist also cautioned that if a newsroom is too reliant on a particular star journalist, “if the media startup loses the star editor, it would be a very huge loss for them.”

Furthermore, a respondent said that star power alone was not sufficient as “in terms of trust, in terms of credibility, this is something that needs to be done through time.” A journalist raised an example of The Independent which was started with the blessings of an ex-TODAY (mainstream newsroom) editor:

“People thought he was behind the thing, it should be trustworthy, but mismanagement and lack of content essentially made it crash, so now, it's backed by people who actually are alt-right members of other political groups.”

Doing Good Work

As such, they suggested that gaining cultural capital by star power alone is insufficient and startups also needed to spend time or have a track record in producing in-depth reporting and provide value to the readers. The editor-in-chief of a publication explains that “there must be value-add” and “there must be some differentiation ... from other publications who are covering the same topic, is there other exclusive information or unique analysis that we’re doing.” Only by consistently producing good work, then it will create the cultural legitimacy that audiences and industry players will look to. An editor mentioned that “the industry is going to get more saturated than ever” and to continue to survive, one needs to have a good balance of economic and cultural capital. A founder of a media startup summarizes the conflict between editorial and finances:

“Do good work. Do work that you are proud of. With the circumstances and the budget and the tools that you have, if you know that you put all in, I think it will show, I think people can tell that you mean business, even though they know there are better photographers, there are better videographers, but the effort put in and the sincerity you

do your work with, I think that will help with your reputation and to me it's the best thing you can do, even if let's say like you have to cut your profit margin a bit so that you can do the best work you can, it's still a worthy thing."

Synthesis

The final research query sought to understand what Singapore media startups consider to be their economic, social and cultural capital. The study found that the startups had a more nuanced view toward capital.

The startups acknowledged that traditional circulation rates and audience numbers have evolved into online numbers, and this can be seen as a metric of economic capital. However, as they needed whatever financial capital they could amass, they also saw alternative monetization methods and having good investors and clients as ways to grow their economic capital.

The agents still considered having social links as a form of social capital, but depending on the nature of their work, social media will either be used as a crutch or as a tool to garner more capital. The agents often focused on building their journalist-audience network, growing their media startup-audience communities and improving their journalist-journalist circle.

As there is a lack of accessibility toward journalistic awards in the online field, the startups saw having a good online reputation and legitimacy as cultural capital. To acquire a good reputation the agents would need to consistently put out good work and the media startups can accelerate the process by recruiting star journalists/editors.

The journalist's concept of capital has evolved with the changing requirements of the field. Bourdieu equates capital to power, and by understanding the different forms of capital we

understand how new media companies garner power as well as what forms of power they consider important during particular stages of their media startup. The media startups utilize capital in a fluid manner, converting one form to another as the situation dictates. Capital can explain why certain media companies succeed, and we now see that the fluidity of capital is situational and pragmatic. Journalism as an industry is no longer as impervious to outside factors as before, and has to constantly morph — and the shape of now dictated by their audience and market forces.

CHAPTER VII

Discussion and Conclusion

Producers and traditional media companies in Singapore have been forming media startups left, right and centre, and this phenomenon has saturated the journalistic field with new entrants. The respondents said that starting a media startup in Singapore is easy. One mentioned that it “does not take much in Singapore to set up a company” and the media industry is becoming saturated with niche and viral media startups. The media scene in Singapore is a small space, dominated by two mainstream media companies (Singapore Press Holdings & Mediacorp) and they often have less economic capital compared to their Southeast Asian counterparts. With an increase in media startups, the field seems more cluttered than ever. The respondents also highlighted that anyone can be a journalist and join the field — with mobile phones, one can capture their own footage and producers can use the Internet and digital tools to write, do legwork, reach a large audience and source for alternative funding. As such, there has been a steady increase in blogs, alternative publications and citizen journalism, with more than half of the respondents in 2020’s Reuters Digital News report using alternative providers as their source for news. Similarly, media conglomerates have also started focusing more on digital enterprises, either by acquiring media startups or funding startups within their organization’s ecosystem. For instance, Nikkei acquired Singapore-based media startup Deal Street Asia in 2019 (Russel, 2019) and Mediacorp has invested in over a dozen startups through their “Mediapreneur” programme.

Guided by Bourdieu’s notion of a field, this study examined the doxa, habitus and capital of media startups in Singapore. Benson (1999) suggested that if a new entrant enters the field, it will attempt to seize capital from the existing players, and either preserve or transform the field.

Through interviews with individuals working for media startups, this study attempts to understand what these media startups consider as economic, social and cultural capital. The study also looked at the habitus of media startup agents — their habits, skills and dispositions that “organize practices and perception of practices” (Bourdieu, 1984; Johnson, 1993), and how their habitus adapted to the new requirements of journalism on social media. Lastly, the study also attempts to understand the work processes of media startups, norms and news values, and how these compare with the traditional journalistic doxa.

Overall, the results suggest that the new entrants attempt to transform the journalistic field into something more efficient, iterative and value-driven, but the players still follow some existing rules, routines and norms. This is aligned with Bourdieu’s concept of differentiation and dedifferentiation (Benson, 1999); differentiation refers to the new entrants offering new capabilities and discerning themselves from the existing pool of players, while dedifferentiation is when the new entrants subscribe to the rules, logic and requirements set by the incumbent. Tandoc (2018) argues that these two can occur simultaneously as new entrants need to claim a place in the field by differentiating themselves, but also be recognized by existing players through dedifferentiation. This study proposes that engagement in differentiation and dedifferentiation can also be attributed to these new entrants’ *media startup habitus*, a disposition that merges elements from tech startups and the journalistic field.

Due to the lower barriers of entry into the journalistic field, agents can easily move between fields and bring with them their existing habitus, disposition and skills. Even though Bourdieu suggests that fields are mostly autonomous and self-governed, scholars point out that Bourdieu’s field theory compels scholars to examine how an agent developed in a particular field

would behave when moved to another (Buraway, 2012; McLeod, 2005). This study suggests that the new entrants brought over existing habitus from their previous fields, and as an individual's habitus is changeable (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), their existing habitus were further shaped by their very entrance to the journalistic field. Benson (2006) also mentions that to explain the attitudes and behaviour of the new agents in the field, one needs to consider how the agent arrived at the position and their current structural position within the field.

As such, this section will discuss (1) the differentiation and dedifferentiation of media startups and (2) how one forms a "media startup habitus." It will also attempt to explain the attitudes and thinking of these media startups by looking at (3) the structural position of new entrants in relation to the amount of capital or power they command.

Doxa — Differentiation and Dedifferentiation

New entrants tend to either preserve or transform the field, and with media startups, they attempt to differentiate themselves by focusing on providing either relatable, viral content, or reporting on an in-depth niche. They dedifferentiate themselves by following existing journalistic norms and routines, like providing objective and timely content. The media startups agents interviewed also belong to outlets at different phases of growth, and were limited by varying circumstances, and hence focused on certain rules over others. There is also tension between traditional journalistic doxa and new rules, as media startups attempt to transform and update existing rules to suit their circumstances. For instance, media startups would prefer transparency over objectivity, or attempt to beat the incumbents at being more timely with their content, sometimes at the expense of depth and accuracy.

Objectivity vs Transparency.

The journalistic norm of objectivity meant that the reporting needed to be balanced and neutral. Some media startups strive to be objective in their reporting to be seen as a credible source and to avoid unnecessary legal issues. This is similar to studies done on the media startups in the United States, where companies like BuzzFeed News and Vice have continued to report on news in an objective manner. McNair (2006) mentions that objectivity is more important than ever due to a fragmented digital sphere with a multitude of media providers, and media providers have that responsibility to provide accurate and truthful information to the general public.

However, being completely objective is a difficult ideal. Due to the amount of content online, users need to sift through a myriad of social media sources and determine if a particular piece is objective or not on their own accord — this is especially difficult when biased sources have started branding themselves as fair and balanced. Explicitly partisan news sources have also done well, such as Fox News in the United States. In Singapore, some media startup agents suggested that they “threw objectivity out of the window” as readers and viewers preferred to read about opinions and fresh takes about issues. Social media studies have also shown that teens tend to reject journalistic objectivity (Marchi, 2012) and they prefer opinionated and more authentic takes on the news. The media startups echoed Marchi (2012) findings, as they mentioned that they cater to younger social media users, and according to their data analytics, objective pieces tend to not perform very well. Instead, media startups focus more on the norm of transparency, where the journalists tend to be more open and hence more accountable (Deuze, 2005) and can write more opinionated pieces without being constrained by traditional newsroom

objectivity. Transparency is a shift pioneered by bloggers, who will often have disclaimers disclosing their motives, biases and sources. A few study respondents suggested that since reportage can never be fully objective, it would be better to provide users with transparency instead. Media startups employ freelance journalists, many of whom have their own social-political inclinations. By acknowledging their partisanship, these freelancers are also being truthful to the readers about their inclination and process.

Singer (2007) argued that transparency is better than objectivity because by giving audiences a way to examine the source materials and biases that shaped a story, readers now have the opportunity to criticize and be involved in the journalistic process. This is especially important as branded posts are becoming an industry norm. Through transparent disclaimers, readers will know that they are reading an ad and consider if they should trust the information or not. Furthermore, respondents suggested that news cycles are faster and some journalists “gatewatch”, pick up and amplify viral content. The increased pace of these processes also means startups tend to make more mistakes, but transparency means that ordinary readers can also call out incorrect information, or unfair and unethical practices. The significance of the shift toward transparency lies in it being a solution to some problems in journalism. Transparency is a stop-gap measure for mistakes that come from a churn-and-burn type of journalism that some media startups produce. It is also a method to reconcile editorial integrity with the need to take on native advertising and sponsored posts. Transparency is a step toward a middle ground where newsrooms can still have some form of ethical, editorial standards but answer client briefs and produce advertisements. The shift toward transparency is not necessarily negative, and McNair (2017, p. 1331) suggests that the concept of objectivity ought to be refreshed for the digital era,

and he echoes a similar view with some Singapore media startups that “journalists claiming objectivity must make even more visible and transparent the limitations inherent in their own process of truth and meaning making.” The shift from objectivity to transparency signals the shifting journalism standards and focus.

Timeliness, Timelessness and Virality

Media startups also followed the traditional news value of timeliness, where they produce content that are recent and/or seasonal. This finding corroborates existing research on media startups like BuzzFeed News and Vice, which also follow traditional news values (Tandoc, 2018; Stringer, 2018). However, timeliness has to be discussed in the larger context of the media startup’s organizational structure and their concept of timelessness and virality.

The rationale for providing timely news has traditionally been to supply readers with the latest information, like breaking news or reports on disasters. However, through the interviews, timeliness is a byproduct of a lack of resources as well as a factor for virality. First, media startups are often limited by financial resources. They tend to have a flatter hierarchy and a more casual working style so that they can move fast and cover more articles in a day. Generally, the media startups do not have sub-editors or specialized social media personnel, as their budgets are conservative and their teams are relatively small. The respondents directly reported to the editor, who acts as the sole gatekeeper for the startup. With fewer moving parts, pitches and editing of the content was also made faster. According to Boczkowski (2005), digitalization has altered journalistic rules, where traditional gatekeeping has given way to gatewatching (Bruns, 2005), where producers identify useful information and further publicize the existing material (e.g.

reporting on an already viral video). Due to modest budgets, the respondents were also unable to spend time to deep-dive into stories and were forced to publish and amplify the existing stories.

Second, media startups also had to focus on timeliness as it was one their strategies to go viral. The focus on virality is also echoed by Harcup & O’neill (2017) where they revisited news values and included the concept of “shareability.” Aligned with the traditional concept of journalistic scoops, journalists try to be as fast as possible so that their content can be more shareable compared to their competitors and legacy newsrooms. Virality and timeliness content meant that journalists have the tendency to make more mistakes, and also go for sensationalized news. The shifting journalistic yardstick have impacted audience consumption habits as well as what

As the content is published instantaneously on social media platforms, a split second delay can mean losing out in terms of likes and shares, and the algorithm will bump down the article that was published later.

Agile Workflow

Virality has also been seen as a feedback loop by the media startups. It is used as a metric to refine media startup products. Existing literature has suggested that the journalistic doxa has shifted to include the use of social media analytics, acquiring mass audiences and producing viral content (Christin, 2014). This is similarly reflected in this study’s results, but it is important to further understand what drove the respondents to look for this virality — the media startup’s need for a minimum viable product. The tech startup industry often uses an agile methodology to build their product. The characteristic of the agile process (Blank, 2010; Perkin & Abraham, 2017) is by breaking the product into smaller individual pieces, involving users in the process

and implementing changes according to their feedback. This process boosts efficiency as well as the startup's success rate on creating a monetizable and scalable media product. The alternative is the traditional waterfall process, which is structured, sequential and linear. Each phase can only proceed when it is fully completed, and one cannot revert back to the previous phase.

In the context of journalism, making a traditional print product is a waterfall process which starts from ideation, development and then implementation. A print product cannot be broken down into smaller individual pieces and released for reader's feedback. This is in contrast with media startups, where the product is an online entity (social media page, website, etc), and each piece of content can be used to get feedback, and improve on their media product. This explains why media startups also adopted a flatter hierarchy, as the teams needed to be quick and efficient enough to integrate audience feedback and push out new content products. They also had to work within their financial and manpower limitations. Donning the agile mindset, media startups can engage in differentiation and dedifferentiation strategies concurrently as part of the iterative process and either process can be dropped when the feedback deems it unnecessary. The goal is to develop a media product that satisfies users, and can also be monetized and scaled across regions.

Constantly iterating the media product with the help of audience feedback is one way to create a viable product, but some media startups have also looked at creating a product that fulfills a specific market-need or niche. Stringer's (2018) study on Vice and BuzzFeed suggested that the way startups sought legitimacy was by covering niche topics and owning certain beats. Stringer (2018) also suggested that these media startups play a double role of preserving and transforming the field, as they still use traditional news values, norms and routines but

differentiate themselves by providing their subject matter expertise and in depth analysis on a particular issue. The results of the study are consistent with these, as some startups in Singapore are also seen to be more established than their mainstream counterparts in certain beats, like technology and music reporting. For media startups, it is ultimately about finding a market for their media products. The product must be able to add value to readers or reach and appeal to a mass audience, and most importantly, it has to be something that people would be willing to pay for at a right price.

The agile methodology, using virality as a feedback loop moved journalism from a top down communicative process to a two-way street. Traditionally, the newsrooms disseminate information and the journalist can dictate the style and type of content based on existing doxa and habitus. However, with the agile methodology and yardstick of virality, journalists need to acquire feedback from the readers and acquiesce to their taste and demands. This shifts the field to one which is dictated by the audience and market forces, and no longer one as noble or as essential as before.

Habitus — Media Startup Habitus

Hysteresis

The study suggests that there is a “hysteresis” in the journalistic field, which is Bourdieu’s term to describe a disconnect between opportunities and the individual’s dispositions to grasp them (Bourdieu, 1977). Due to the lower barriers of entry, there have been more opportunities for individuals to create their own content, reach a large audience and obtain alternative funding for their work. The traditional journalist with the “journalistic habitus” tends to be unable to grasp these new mediums, formats and opportunities, and are unable to make

appropriate judgements about their work. Bourdieu suggests that agents in sync with the field are often aware about what has happened, what is happening and what should be happening next (Strand & Lizardo, 2016) and if these agents do not know the certain future, a temporal incoherence (or mismatch) will happen in the field. When this happens, individuals will “judge and act today according to dispositions previously acquired under different social conditions” (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p.10). For instance, some traditional journalists still scorn producing clickbait and viral content, they prefer to stick to producing old-school journalism with their traditional journalist’s guidelines and habitus. Unfortunately, these no longer appeal to audiences who now prefer bite-sized content (Molyneux, 2018), personalized news streams (Hermida et al., 2012) and news with the journalist’s opinions (Marchi, 2012). Traditional journalists also neglected the use of new monetization methods as their original journalistic disposition did not encourage them to think about their newsroom’s business models and how their salaries came about. They were also more unwilling to create sponsored content as their disposition prompted them to preserve the field’s rules and their editorial integrity.

The hysteresis or misalignment of work meant that the traditional journalists’ skills are either mismatched with the work they need to produce, or that they are now forced to take on more roles and responsibilities. They are required to deskill, reskill and multiskill. The results have shown that media startup agents are often “platypuses”, working on multiple projects, and having different roles and responsibilities. Some media startups have also moved toward deskilling where they get employees to specialize in specific roles to provide better value to the readers. This has resulted in employees feeling stressed and “feeling burnt out” from needing to work long hours due to more responsibilities and constantly “playing catch-up with the trends.”

The interviewees have suggested that the legacy newsrooms were “unable to keep up with the changing times” and are “dinosaurs who are resistant to change.” The legacy newsrooms were always “following trends” rather than being “on trend” and were starting to get out of touch with their audience. As such, there is indeed a misalignment between the changing field and the journalistic habitus, or as Bourdieu calls hysteresis. According to Strand & Lizardo (2016), when hysteresis occurs, it will be accompanied by some form of reflexivity, where the actors will try to realign themselves with their field of practice. During this realignment, it allows for environmental and institutional changes, and producers without journalistic habitus took up this opportunity to form their own media startups and enter the field, or even transform it from within. This can explain the increase in media startups in Singapore. The changing field, transformed by changing audience habits and behaviour toward communication, created a mismatch with its agents' habitus, one that traditional journalists were unable to realign to fast enough. Journalists who were unable to realign themselves to the field tend to have heightened levels of work stress, burnout and leave the industry altogether. It can help recruiters and editors hire better and can help journalists understand what qualities and skills to reskill, deskill and upskill as well as their new journalistic identity.

Hysteresis forces the traditional journalist as well as the new agents to adjust their habitus. The new agents will readjust to the journalistic field's habitus while the traditional journalist will attempt to realign themselves with the field. According to earlier studies, the habitus can indeed be changed during misalignments of the field (Wacquant, 2005; Bourdieu, 2000) and actors with out-of-date habitus will readjust to the new ones after being exposed to the field (Schindler & Willie, 2015).

Media Startup Habitus

This study proposes a *media startup habitus*, which is formed by individuals bringing their existing habitus from their field and amalgamating it with their experience and perceived understanding of startups and journalism. Bourdieu suggests that fields are largely autonomous and self-governed but studies have also suggested that individuals can move between fields (Buraway, 2012; McLeod, 2005) and the habitus can be changed by further experiences in the new field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The respondents came from a myriad of backgrounds, across advertising, public relations, nightlife, music and finance, and a few respondents also mentioned that their startups were founded by individuals while they were working in other non-journalism jobs. Furthermore, they also adopted habits, skills and dispositions from tech startup companies — albeit not by choice, but by the changing requirements of their work.

This is a natural adjustment and realignment of their habitus, as startup companies are often limited by budget and resources, and the goal is to create a scalable, monetizable product. As such, the agents were compelled to be resourceful and adaptable, they had to understand business models and have an iterative mindset while also becoming platypuses, working on multiple projects at the same time. Usher (2017) suggests that the journalistic habitus is challenged and changed by news startups as their focus is on solving media problems and creating scalable products. In Usher's study, the companies focused on "rapid experimentation" and often had a culture of a technology company, as their goal was no longer just to create news, but to create a disruptive and scalable product. Similarly, this current study's results suggest that the traditional journalistic habitus has been challenged and changed; the media startups have the

same limitations and similar goals as technology startups, and hence adopted elements of their habitus as well.

The earlier section discussed that new entrants have made newsroom routines more casual and they also contradict existing journalistic norms and now, they have also challenged and changed the journalist's feel for the game (Hanusch et al., 2019). With the introduction of new doxa and the media startup habitus, there is also some pushback within the field, or a form of cultural inertia (Benson, 2006). This cultural inertia meant that the new agents who entered the journalistic field had to synthesize their "startup habitus" with the existing journalistic skills, habits and dispositions. The results suggest that the new agents (from outside the field) will have elements of a journalistic habitus, which is picked up through their day-to-day consumption and interaction with journalistic and social media content. It is further refined and influenced by being on-the-job, gaining real reportage experience, and interacting with editors and gatekeepers that had formal journalism training. This allows them to also develop a unique journalistic "gut feeling" that merges both journalistic and startup elements. However, some journalistic lines have also been blurred due to these new doxa and habitus. The blurring of lines was due to journalists having to multi-skill and be more adaptable, and can no longer focus on fulfilling the editorial excellence that journalism once claimed to have.

Differentiation and dedifferentiation can now be further understood through the media startup habitus. The agents differentiate and dedifferentiate themselves concurrently, as they have the iterative and "agile" mentality of tech startup companies. They are also driven to create a disruptive scalable product and hence had to differentiate themselves, but due to the cultural inertia, they had to dedifferentiate themselves and keep specific journalistic qualities.

The media startup habitus can help explain why some agents multi-skill, execute different roles and are more willing to “hustle.” The results showed that individuals’ attitude toward their work were largely inconsistent, as some preferred to put in longer hours for a vision they believed in while others felt that thinking about business models and filling multiple roles were above their pay grade. To best reconcile this inconsistency, one has to draw links to startup habitus, where individuals are driven by stockholding options within a startup. For most startups, there exist three main stockholding roles — the founder, the share-vested employee and the regular employee. The founder is the individual who started the company, and will have a large amount of stocks in the startup and has vested interest in how well the company does. The founders are usually privy to the business elements and they set the tone and direction of the company. In the context of media startups, they are usually the editor-in-chief or the managing editor of the publication. The share-vested employees are usually the first few hires of the company — they are brought in at a phase where the company is not yet profitable and had to compensate the employee with stock options. These shares serve as additional motivation for them to contribute to the company; if the company thrives, so does the value of their shares. For media startups, the “self-starters” are usually individuals that were the first few hires, and had a larger sense of ownership and belonging to the company as compared to regular salaried employees. The media startup habitus, or their historical trajectory (Benson, 2006) of how they arrived into the company, be it as a founder or share-vested employee, can help explain some of the attitudes and behaviours of the media startup agents.

As some media startups began to thrive and progress toward the growth phase, these companies also started to behave like the traditional incumbents. The media startups will favour

deskilling over multi-skilled platypuses, and hire specialized roles in their organization. The interviewees argued that as their company grew larger, they could not afford to risk their online reputation and could not make as many mistakes as they could before. Furthermore, having specialized roles will make the team more organized and structured — creating a hierarchical flatarchy that is similar to that of the incumbents. A complete team, with specialized individuals without overworking their employees, is also proof that their business model is sustainable and needs no further iteration. However, most Singapore media startups have not reached this phase but we have started seeing signs where they recruit for more specialized roles to improve their organization's structure and capabilities.

There is also a need to update the profession due to the disillusionment with their role and confusion with their identity. Siapera and Spyridou (2012) suggest that if anyone can be a journalist, journalism will lose importance in society and they will become the “expendable cogs in the wheels of the entertainment-media industry” (p. 77). In a way, some interviewees showed that sense of cynicism in the profession, where some respondents mentioned that they were burnt out, stressed and underpaid, and considered themselves more as an advertiser, content creator or an “over-glorified ad-man” instead of a journalist. However, the contrary was also true where some individuals felt that media startups were born to fill a need, and they had to innovate, iterate, find a market fit and provide value to the consumers. The new media startup habitus can also help struggling traditional journalists reconcile their role and the stress they face at work. These journalists now need to work on multiple things (like a platypus) and also produce sponsored content, which is something traditional purists were unable to accept. By proposing a

media startup habitus, it means that these journalists no longer need to go by such stringent standards, and hence, will also decrease the stress and anxiety they feel toward their work.

Capital — Structural Position

Economic Capital

Benson (2006) posits that to explain the attitudes and behaviour of agents, one also needs to consider their structural position within the particular field, and this has to be viewed in relation to the amount of capital, or power they command. This paper sought to understand what media startups consider as their economic, social and cultural capital and how these vary between media startups and traditional newsrooms. An update to what entrants now consider as capital can help to explain the power dynamics between the new and the old players. By understanding the capital that startups focus on, we can get a more nuanced, contextual view of their position in the field. How the startups or newsrooms utilize and garner their capital can also inform future newsroom strategies and growth.

One of the main characteristics of capital is “transubstantiation” (Siapera & Spyridou, 2012), where any capital can be converted and transformed into other forms of capital. For instance, economic capital can become social capital, and cultural capital can be converted to other capital as well. This section will attempt to situate these new entrants within the field, and discuss media startup’s capital, how this capital transubstantiates into other forms in accordance to the phase of their development.

Traditionally, economic capital refers to the money and finances that a company holds, or assets that can be converted to money. It has traditionally been operationalized as the circulation rates, advertising revenue and profits (Benson, 2006). In recent years, with the rise of online

journalism and social media distribution, audience and subscriber sizes have also been seen as indicators of economic capital. Media startups in Singapore still viewed advertising dollars and audience sizes as economic capital, but as they were able to utilize alternative monetization methods, not all of them placed an emphasis on advertising revenue and audience numbers. Startups were able to offer exclusive memberships to their readers, sell merchandise and even source for monetary support via funding websites such as Kofi or Patreon. The startups also capitalized on their skills and subject matter expertise to offer services such as content marketing, video production, and even hosted webinars and ran campaigns for cash. This study suggests that startups are not just limited to selling audience attention to advertisers (Pettegree, 2014) and instead, economic capital is now more casual and all-encompassing, anything that brings the startup monetary benefits can be considered economic capital. The reason for the pragmatic but fragmented way of acquiring economic capital is due to the overall advertising dollars in the online journalism subfield (Siapera & Spyridou, 2012). Even though the subfield has seen more advertising dollars as a whole, it is also more saturated than ever, and advertisers are spreading their dollars among more players, forcing media startups to seek alternative ways of funding.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the human networks or groups that an agent belongs to (Siapera & Spyridou, 2012; Bourdieu, 1987). For media startups, mass audience numbers are considered economic capital, while loyal fans and members are considered social capital. Subscriber and audience sizes have often been seen as a metric of economic capital. However, social media and web analytics can never fully measure fan loyalty and brand trust.

Social media have since allowed media startup agents to connect with their readers and create a community around their media brand. Similarly, they are also able to connect with other journalists or agents to grow their economic and cultural capital. Scholars have argued about social media, if it either increases or decreases social capital (Siapera & Spyridou, 2012; Ellison et al.), and the results have suggested that this is dependent on the nature of the media startup and the phase in which they are in. If the media startup focuses on providing value (cultural capital) over virality (economic capital), it will tend to build networks (social capital) to get scoops, in depth articles and support with the news production. However, if the startup focuses on virality (economic capital), social media acts as a crutch and diminishes their social capital and their reportage is often more slipshod and speed is prioritised over accuracy. These agents are then more reliant on desk work or “armchair reporting”, do less field work (Deuze, 2003), and it is also harder for them to have a specific niche network as they cover very broad and general topics. These agents do not spend time fostering good relations with newsmakers or industry counterparts as their sources are from viral social media posts. Such startups often use the lowest common denominator to get virality and mass audience, and as such, they do not need a loyal subscriber base. Overall, media startups that are in their early formation and validation phase tend to require more social capital, as the journalist-journalist networks can help improve their competencies and credibility and a loyal community can provide pivotal feedback to improve their media product.

Furthermore, an agent with a deep social network with their newsmakers can obtain better information and hence, produce in-depth commentaries, analysis or even investigative pieces and scoops earlier than their mainstream counterparts. This in turn can help put their

startup on the map, allowing them gain credibility (cultural capital) or attract advertising dollars (editorial capital). Individual agents have also started using social media to grow their social capital and network. Studies have looked at journalist's Twitter use (Barnard, 2016), and found that readers will tweet or email the journalist questions and leads, and the journalist would also interact with the readers. The journalist would use Twitter to keep up with current affairs and also find sources, engage with the public or even use it to criticize bad journalism.

Cultural Capital

Traditionally, cultural capital is attributed to prestige and recognition in the field (Sterne, 2003) and legacy journalists tend to focus on getting prizes like the Pulitzer and Peabody (Benson & Neveu, 2005) to grow their cultural capital. Most media startups no longer view these awards and prizes as an important element of cultural capital, as the awards only improve their reputation within the industry, and readers often do not know or care about the prestige or legitimacy that comes with the awards. The diminished significance of awards can also be attributed to the fact the social media and online journalism field itself has very limited prizes and awards to be won (Singer, 2003), else the awards do not carry the same weight as Pulitzers and Peabody. They are also criticised as being very exclusive or print-dominant. This is similar in Asia, where the WAN-IFRA Asia Digital Media awards winners were often legacy newsrooms. The startups did not see the awards as a way to grow their prestige, but instead to attract advertisers' attention, acquire more media contacts and used as an appraisal mechanism by their editors or bosses.

The media startups instead focused on building legitimacy and credibility around their brand. Studies have mentioned that cultural capital now comes from having a positive online

credibility and reputation (Marchi, 2012; Bourdieu, 1986) and Singapore media startups mentioned that reputation and credibility need to be built with time and by consistently producing good work. A measure of this form of cultural success would be when freelance journalists or industry counterparts would be happy to have their bylines associated with the media brand, and would also enjoy producing stories for the brand albeit having a lower remuneration.

To grow the media startup's cultural capital, the work that the newsroom publishes needs to be seen as a socially valued area (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007). The results have also supported these findings, where we see media startups working on fulfilling a market need or niche. For instance, a Singapore media startup focusing on music reporting was able to grow their cultural capital and legitimacy by reporting on the Southeast Asia music scene. Despite their small newsroom size and modest budgets, they were compared to the large music publications like Pitchfork and Rolling Stone. Usher's (2017) study on venture-backed startups also mentioned that startups with better original content and information would be able to acquire more cultural capital than traditional newsrooms. The media startups also sought to grow their cultural capital by poaching good editors or "star journalists." This finding is similar to Stringer's (2018) study on BuzzFeed and Vice, which found that experienced journalists brought cultural capital to the startup. These star journalists were able to bring their skills and knowledge that they accrued over the years and help shape the habitus of other new agents.

Capital Conversion

One of the main attributes of capital is its ability to be converted to other forms, and media startups convert and emphasize different kinds of capital according to the phase they are

in. Media companies relied on investors and appropriate clients as a form of funding and economic capital. However, not all money is equal, and these startups preferred to have investors and clients that were aligned with their values and mission. For instance, media startups preferred clients that understood the concept of native advertising, providing them the editorial freedom to create and advertise the product in a genuine way.

The startups felt that by having an appropriate client, they obtain economic capital while also boosting their competence and credibility and hence, increasing their cultural capital as well. The media startups also preferred having an appropriate investor for their startup — they preferred long-term investors that were forward-looking and provided them the support for the growth and development of a media product. Amazon’s Jeff Bezos was one of such investors. He acquired *The Washington Post* because he believed that it was an “important institution” and he was able to provide his expertise and networks with the internet industry and the paper managed to see profitability after a few years (Denning, 2018). Media startups felt that an investor that had strict term sheets and wanted large annual returns would be detrimental to the media startup as it would provide unnecessary stress and disruption to their growth process. Ries (2011) suggested that by having a good venture capitalist or investor, the companies were insulated from traditional funding like selling advertisements and this allowed them to focus on innovation, experimentation and work toward the longer term goal of producing a scalable product. The media startups drew links to tech companies like Snap, Spotify and Grab, that have yet to make a profit as they were focused on growth.

Similarly, cultural capital can also be converted to social capital, as the star journalists have access to contacts and industry experts that they have built over the years. When a star

journalist joins a media startup, they can provide their human networks and introduce their contacts to other junior employees. This means that the startup can produce in-depth pieces or journalistic scoops. The star journalist can also provide industry links for the media startup and they can better acquire help from other industry counterparts, allowing for different startups to collaborate as well. Similarly, when a star journalist joins a media startup, they will induct audiences from the old publication to the new one. By bringing over a large group of audiences, clients and investors, the cultural capital is converted to economic capital while transferring a small loyal audience meant a conversion to social capital. An example would be Joshua Topolsky's now defunct *The Outline*, where he was able to raise seed funding (economic capital) through his reputation as a co-creator of Vox Media (cultural capital) and Ben Smith bringing his niche, Politico audiences (cultural capital) to BuzzFeed News when he became the editor-in-chief. Media startups utilize capital in a fluid and pragmatic manner, so as to ensure their own sustainability and winning edge over the traditional incumbents. Media startups serve as competition to the traditional incumbent, forcing the industry to innovate and adapt — ushering journalism solutions like automation, data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) reportage.

Individuals working in media startups have the media startup habitus, and are usually resourceful and adaptable. They also subscribe to an iterative workflow to refine their media product. This approach of iterativeness and adaptability can also be seen in how the media startups handle their capital and power in the field. Across the different stages — formation, validation, growth and maturity — a startup can convert and adapt their capital based on their own circumstances and to ensure its survivability in the field. A bootstrapped media startup that

is in its early formation phase will focus on acquiring economic and cultural capital as it needs to be seen as a legitimate source while also keeping their doors open. On the other hand, a venture-backed media startup in the validation phase would emphasize acquiring more social and cultural capital as they attempt to get more audience feedback and improve the media product's value. At the growth phase, media startups focus more on scaling their product and they utilize their established reputation to acquire more audiences, converting cultural to economic capital. As each media startup is unique in terms of its circumstances and product's nature, one can only "offer a probabilistic, not a totalizing explanation" (Benson, 2006, p.195) based on cultural rules such as habitus and capital.

The beauty of a startup is that it will never begin with an empty tank of fuel, as startups have part of themselves — their shares to convert into economic capital. They can poach a star journalist and offer them stock options, and this will in turn provide the startup with a starting pool of cultural and social capital. If the startup requires, it can also seek out investors and convert the shares into more economic capital. This unique form of capital can only be used to acquire talents and cash, but it can never be used to directly acquire cultural and social capital, one still needs to consistently put out good work and put in the legwork to build these human networks.

In a field of power like the journalistic field, agents who have high volumes of capital are viewed as incumbents (Benson, 2006). Media startups are currently the new entrants in the journalistic field, and for them to become the incumbents, other agents will have to first recognize their accumulated economic, social and cultural capital. At the rate the industry and

the field are changing, media startups becoming the incumbents is no longer just a pipe dream — they simply need to keep iterating, adapting and growing their capital.

Limitations and Future Research

Literature thus far, including this study, have viewed the media startups as a new entrant to the journalistic field. As startups begin to convert their capital to other forms and constantly grow and improve, scholars and researchers can soon reconsider them as part of the incumbents in the journalistic field. Some media startups like Malaysia's Malaysiakini and Singapore's Mothership.sg, for instance, are becoming players with substantial readership and financial capital, while some traditional newsrooms are going out of business. Bourdieu's field theory revolves around the concept of power dynamics and hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1984; Benson & Neveu, 2004), and research about the journalistic field has been on how new entrants change the rules and routines, or the subfields within journalism. Future research utilizing Bourdieu's field theory can consider startups as the incumbent, and explore how waning incumbents exit the field. In the same vein, the interviewees suggested that more journalists have started to migrate from traditional media to younger media startups, and future qualitative studies can also look at the reasons behind the move, and dynamics in these startups that have both experienced journalists and individuals with the *media startup habitus*.

Within this study, journalists emphasized the notion of "virality" (Singer, 2008; Al-Rawi, 2019), and despite having social media analytics, the process to replicate that virality is based on a degree of guesswork. Even though studies have detailed news sharing (Lee & Ma, 2012), and what makes content go viral (Berger & Milkman, 2012), the agents are still largely searching in the dark for the next viral piece. This suggests a mismatch between what the media startup

agents think the users want, as well as what the readers prefer. The readers are no longer passive viewers and can produce their own content to compete with existing media startups if they notice this incongruence. Hence, future studies can build upon this existing study to include audiences who consume news from these media startups. Future studies can seek to understand the reception of media startups' strategies from the audience's perspective. The study can better determine what audiences want and need, as well as what audiences now view as good journalism in a networked, globalized and participatory world.

This study focuses on Singapore media startups, and future studies can include media startup agents outside of Singapore for a more comprehensive understanding of the media startup phenomena. Such studies can help include broader professional and social-contextual understanding of the new incumbents, their strategies and work practices as well as their relationship with the audience. Finally, the researcher conducted virtual semi-structured interviews with the startups during a pandemic, and studies have suggested that it is harder to build a rapport through telephone and virtual interviews (Irvine, Drew & Sainsbury, 2013). Journalist roles are considered high-stress jobs and are especially so during a pandemic (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020), and hence, the interviewees may not have been in the best mindset for contemplative interviews. Lastly, the study was conducted by the researcher alone, and even with self-reflexivity in mind, the study could have benefited from more diverse perspectives to prevent any researcher bias (Berg & Lune, 2011).

Conclusion

Benson and Neveu (2005) posit that no sociological theory can “dispel every shadow”, and only through a combination of new theoretical additions can field theory then explain why

and how new entrants like media startups fit into the space. Benson (2004) posits that the journalistic field is a cultural space where journalists interact with one another, and is a form of ‘domination’ since traditional journalists control the means of distribution (Bourdieu, 1998). But this is no longer the case due to the disruption brought about by producers and media startups.

This study proposes that there is a hysteresis in the field, and this mismatch with opportunities and disposition set the stage for media startups to sprout and flourish. The startups are often started by individuals outside of the journalistic field, and these new agents don a *media startup habitus*, a blend of the traditional journalistic habitus and the startup habitus that is developed out of circumstance and as a response to the changing requirements of media and journalistic work. Though they possess a *media startup habitus*, these agents still tend to obey existing journalistic doxa, while also adhering to new rules. For example, the study found that they struggle between timeliness and timelessness, objectivity and transparency, causing confusion when creating content. The study suggests that differentiation and dedifferentiation can occur at the same time, and argues that startup concepts like agile workflow, shareholding options and iterative mindsets can help scholars and industry experts better understand the changes in the field.

Studies have utilized field theory on the subfield of online journalism (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2017; Stringer, 2018; Siapera & Spyridou, 2012) and have used it to investigate the changing practices and habitus (Usher, 2017; Stringer, 2018) but have mostly focused on the media organizations and startups in the United States. This study hopes to expand the existing literature on media startups by providing an understanding of media startups in Singapore, and through Bourdieu’s notion of hysteresis in the journalistic field, by explaining why these media startups

have been coming into power. For industry players in both legacy newsrooms and startups, the study provides deeper insights about the traditional rules that are co-opted and changed by startup agents, such as the new focus on transparency and timelessness over objectivity and timeliness. The media startup industry also tends to prefer a flatter hierarchy over the traditional flatarchy. The study also explores how startups utilize and grow their capital. Taken together, these insights can help realign the media startup agent's work practices and the organization's focus, for better success and survival rates.

Traditional media power in the field has waned, and the field is slowly starting to be taken over by media startups. But as a startup owner suggested, "You'll never know how the game is going to change." Like all new entrants, they will enjoy the status quo until it is shaken up by the next disruptor. The best way to survive is to continuously innovate and appeal to the demands of the audience, which the traditional incumbents have failed to do despite enjoying years of economic and cultural power. Media startups have focused on innovation and pragmatism; but as these startups advance into becoming the new incumbents, it will be interesting and important to examine how these startups are preparing for a new batch of entrants in a journalistic field that is still evolving. Like what a founder of a media startup said: "The day we do not make an impact or any difference, then that's the day we will stop, but till then, we will just continue as long as we can."

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Appendix

3 April 2020

WKWSCIRB Code: **DIS201920S2-003**

SUPERVISOR, Assoc Prof Edson Tandoc
Matthew Chew

WKWSCIRB Institutional Review Board Approval
Project Title: From clickbait to independent journalism?
Media startups as a new entrant in the journalistic field

I refer to your application for ethics approval with respect to the above project submitted on **31 Mar 2020**.

The school board has deliberated on your application and noted from your application that your research involves **Human Subjects**.

You have also confirmed that informed consents will be obtained from the participants and you have guaranteed the confidentiality of your participants' biodata obtained from them.

The documents reviewed were:

- a) IRB Application Form
- b) Epigeum Certificate of Completion
- c) Participation Information Sheet and Consent Form
- d) Survey Questionnaire

The board is therefore satisfied with the ethical considerations for the project and approves the ethics application under Exempted Review. The approval period is from **3 Apr 2020 to 2 Apr 2021**. Please use the WKWSCIRB Code **DIS201920S2-003** for all future correspondence.

The following protocol and compliances are to be observed upon WKWSCIRB approval:

1. All research involving procedures greater than minimal risk on minors (individuals who are less than the legal age of 21 years old) requires IRB approved written Parental Consent and assent from the participant to be obtained before any research protocols can be administered. Minimal risk refers to an anticipated level of harm and discomfort that is no greater than that ordinarily encountered in daily life, or during the performance of routine educational, physical, or psychological examination.
2. Only the approved Participants Information Sheet and Consent Form should be used. It must be signed by each subject prior to initiation of any protocol procedures. In addition, each subject should be given a copy of the signed consent form.
3. No deviation from, or changes of, the protocol should be initiated without prior written WKWSCIRB approval of an appropriate amendment.

4. The Principal Investigator should report promptly to WKWSCI IRB regarding:

- a. Deviation from, or changes to the protocol.
- b. Changes increasing the risk to the subjects and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the trial.
- c. All serious adverse events (SAEs) which are both serious and unexpected.
- d. New information that may affect adversely the safety of the subjects of the conduct of the trial.
- e. Completion of the study.

WKWSCI Institutional Review Board

On behalf of the Associate Chair-Communication and Information (Research)

(This is an auto-generated letter. No signature is required.)

Interview Guide

Introduction

Hi _____, once again, thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this research.

The purpose of this interview today is to explore media start-ups and how they entered and altered the journalism field, which is the topic of my Master's thesis.

Before we begin, I would just like to clarify that there are no right or wrong answers for this, so please feel free to share your honest thoughts and opinions.

This interview will be audio-recorded, but your response will not be identified in either the transcript or the final paper. Also, your participation today is voluntary, and you can opt-out at any time. Additionally, if you wish to expunge any of the comments that you made today, please let me know.

If you do not have any questions, we will begin the interview now.

Demographics/Background

- Could you state for me your name, your age, and how long you have been working in this media start-up (or where are you working at)?
- Could briefly describe your media start-up (in terms of product offerings)?
- How big is your media-start-up (in terms of manpower, subscriber base & readership)?
- How long have you been at your current position?

Routines

- Can you first describe what's your typical daily routine like as a journalist?
- Some people consider being a journalist as among the most stressful jobs. What is your take on this?

Work Processes

- How did your media start-up come about?
 - Possible probe: How did your media start-up become sustainable? Tell me more about growth throughout the years.
- How does your start-up produce content? Could you walk me through your workflow and processes?
 - Do you think it is efficient, what do you think can be adjusted or tweaked?
- What is the relationship like between your media start-up and your readers?
- How does your start-up know who your readers are/what your readers want/what your readers do with your content?
- What are the different teams you have in your start-up? How do they work with one another?
 - Possible probe: What is the workflow like when it comes to branded projects? How does it differ from editorial ones?

Roles (Habitus)

- Let's now talk about roles. In your opinion, what is the role of a journalist like you in Singapore? What made you say so?
- Would you say that it is easy or difficult for you to perform this role? What made you say so?
- What are some of the ideal qualities of someone working in a media start-up?
 - Possible probe: How do you think this is different with legacy newsrooms?
- What are qualities that are suitable for a specific role (i.e. social media producer, journalist)?
- How does one acquire these qualities? (Education, years of experience, etc)
- What do you think is the difference in responsibilities, if any, between a legacy newsroom journalist and someone working in a media start-up?
 - Possible probe: Do you think there's a difference in job scopes?
- What are some of the changes you foresee in the industry?
- What are some of the skills and qualities needed for media start-ups in the future?
- How does one become better at their work?

Rules and Practices (Doxa)

- What some of the rules and guidelines do you have in your media company? How does that guide your media production and distribution?
 - Possible probe: What kind content do you look for? What are your pitching criteria?
- What are some of the advantages and disadvantages that these rules and guidelines provide?
 - Possible probe: What makes you think so?
- What do you think are some of the characteristics you have adopted from legacy newsrooms?
 - Possible probe: In traditional newsrooms, there are news values like objectivity and timeliness. What are some of these that you emphasize on?
 - Possible probe: What are some of the organizational structures that you have adopted?
- How has some of these rules and changed throughout the years?
 - In traditional newsrooms, there's a gatekeeper, who is someone with the power to decide what information gets disseminated to the audience. Who would you say is the gatekeeper in your start-up?
 - What are some rules that has a bigger emphasis now? Why?

What is important for media start-ups? (Capital)

- How do you define success in your media start-up?
- What is a good day of work for you and your colleagues?
- What are some of the advantages that your media start-up has?

- Possible probe: More audiences, awards or financial deals.
- How important is it to have a large subscriber base?
- How does (specific measures mentioned; e.g. subscriber base/awards/circulation/analytics) affect your newsroom?
 - Possible probe: what is the effect of this on the content your start-up produces?
- What are some of the ways to boost your start-up's reputation and legitimacy?
- What are some of the problems that your start-up or the industry face?
- How does the finances affect your editorial processes?
- Are there any external actors that affect your decisions on which stories to pursue?
 - If yes, who are they? How do they affect your editorial decisions?
- What are some external actors that impact your editorial decisions? Or is this solely on the producer's instinct? Why?
- What do you think is your start-up's role in society? How does your start-up try to fulfil this role?

Misc. questions

- Who or what do you think are some of the most prominent competitors to your media start-up?
- What are your thoughts on 'media influencers' or 'producers'?
 - Do you think other independent producers are a threat to your media-start-up? Why or why not?
- How do you think your media start-up will change in the near future?
- What do you think are the steps your start-up needs to take to ensure its survival and success?

Conclusion

Is there anything I should have asked but I did not?

We have come to the end of the interview.

Before we end, do you have any questions or anything you want to add on? [wait].

Great. If you have any further questions or comments at any point in time, please feel free to contact me. Thank you again for your time.