The people have spoken (the bastards?): Finding a legitimate place for feedback in the journalistic field

Andrew Duffy, Rich Ling & Edson C. Tandoc Jr.

Abstract

Bourdieu's field theory presents a distinction between the autonomy of a field and the heteronomity of the fields that surround and potentially encroach on it. Journalism is one such field which attempts to maintain its autonomy in the face of change imposed from beyond its boundaries. This paper looks at how the field of journalism responds to two incursions in the form of feedback: quantitative web analytics and qualitative reader comments. Each offers an opportunity for the field to adapt to incorporate it—that is, turn heteronomous input into autonomous doxa—or to resist it. Based on an ethnography of eight digital newsrooms, it looks at when the voice of the people is accepted as legitimate input and internalised, and when it is resisted as illegitimate and kept external. The implications for further theorising on the relationship between adjacent fields, as well as autonomous and heteronomous aspects of field theory, are discussed.

Key words

Journalism, ethnography, field theory, Bourdieu, autonomy, heteronomy, web analytics

In 1966, Californian State Senate candidate Dick Tuck accepted electoral defeat with the immortal words "The people have spoken—the bastards!" It has since become a catchphrase for any unwelcome result of the democratic process, which makes it apt for a consideration of the way digital technology has opened newsrooms to the voice of the people. Reader feedback, indirect in the form of web metrics and direct in the form of comments on news articles, gives newsrooms immediate access to the voice of the people. And just like an

election, the winner will embrace what that voice has to say, while resistance to that voice—as with Dick Tuck—suggests failure. This paper uses Bourdelian field theory and related concepts of autonomy and heteronomy to examine why newsrooms accept the voice of the people in some circumstances, but resist in others.

Scholarship on how journalists see readers is varied: Gans (1979) says they write mostly for other journalists rather than for readers; Zelizer (2005) hopes they are motivated more by the ideal of public service; Graves and Kelly (2010) find they used metrics as a tool but insist that this did not affect news decisions; Singer (2011) observes that they tend to ignore reader feedback and go with their instincts; yet MacGregor (2007) finds that while journalists deny being influenced, web metrics *did* affect news. Petre (2015) finds that traditional newsrooms use metrics to corroborate earlier editorial decisions, while new, web-based newsrooms relied on them on their own merits.

Recently, in the wake of increasingly interactive digital communication channels, a fourth wave is examining newsrooms' interest in reader feedback, and scholarship shows a move away from dominant journalistic values such as independence and towards acceptance of readers as a group to be understood and responded to (Anderson 2011). And yet, digital feedback is far from universally accepted. Tandoc (2014) cites four reasons why. Newsworkers may dislike numbers (Gans 1979); they may prefer different things from their readers (Boczkowski 2010); they may be dismissive of readers because they don't understand them (Schlesinger 1978); and they may be committed to the journalistic ideal of autonomy (Beam 1995). Indeed, web metrics induce a cocktail of emotions among newsworkers, according to an ethnographic study in the United States which finds "Metrics inspire a range of strong feelings in journalists, such as excitement, anxiety, self-doubt, triumph, competition, and demoralization… disappointment, validation, and reassurance" (Petre 2015).

This happens at a time when news journalism's commercial rationale is being tested, adding another dimension: "journalists are trying to cope with rampant financial problems that have hit the industry, but are still unsure whether allowing deeper audience interference on their professional turf is the solution" (Vu 2013, 12). It can go both ways. Lowrey and Woo (2010) find that rational choice approaches—which involve linking reader metrics to collaboration with newspapers' business side—feature in news organisations. At the same time, institutionalisation—in which organisations under pressure attempt to protect themselves from the external market environment—is also a phenomenon. Vu (2013, 11), meanwhile, finds that "perceived economic benefits … was not a statistically significant

predictor for monitoring traffic." By contrast, MacGregor, studying UK newsrooms, includes two visits five years apart and finds that by 2011 "technology was much more now frequently conceived in association with finances", linked with a general feeling that the newspaper was in crisis (2014, 167).

Theorising journalism as a field which is largely maintained from within and consistently assailed from without (Bourdieu 1993, 1998), we look at how newsworkers either take digital feedback from beyond their accepted newsgathering ambit and internalise it into existing behaviours associated with higher journalistic ideals, or reject it when it conflicts with those. Willig (2013) notes that some structures within newsrooms, particularly political-economic structures which guide practice, are invisible. We follow her suggestion that field theory can illuminate these invisible macro-structures. As a result, we undertook an ethnography of digital newsrooms (i.e. those set up to deliver news online) in Singapore in order to explore when and why newsworkers resist or accept feedback. Singapore was chosen as it is a highly digitised society with high personal internet use of 84% (Infocomm Media Development Authority, 2017); and one in which the internet is a contested space for coverage of politics and society (George 2006).

We examine how newsworkers deal with web analytics and reader comments entering the newsroom. These represent indirect and direct reader feedback, as well as a dilemma for newsworkers: on one hand, they represent novel ways for readers to contribute to news and its communitarian ideals. On the other hand, the deterioration of the traditional media industry in developed economies motivates newsworkers to resist incursions into their field and instead fortify their professional ideals. The central question for this paper is how and when do newsworkers justify favouring the latter over the former?

Newsrooms and reader influence

Clearly, the arrival of digital technologies and the internet has changed the practice of journalism. It is quite clear that some journalists *do* encourage participation (Domingo et al. 2008), particularly when it improves their stories (Singer 2010); at the same time as eschewing it if it challenges the professional values of their field (Wardle and Williams 2010). In the early 21st century, there were plentiful studies of how journalism engaged with the internet (e.g. Boczkowski 2004; Deuze and Paulussen 2002; Paulussen 2004). One concern was journalism's civic or democratic responsibility to inform the citizenry, which expanded to include the idea that it could carry information *from* the citizenry into the newsroom, expanding journalism's remit. In 2008, O'Sullivan and Heinonen said that

"principal areas of discussion have centred on multimedia, format and convergence; newsgathering and relations with sources and readers; news political economy and institutions; and definitions of journalism, with associated questions around values, ethics and professional identity" (358). To this list, we would add feedback in the form of web metrics that allow media organisations to gauge the popularity of each story, and direct comments from readers. We take these two forms of feedback together, representing quantitative and qualitative streams of information flowing into the journalistic field.

Web metrics

Also known as web analytics, this is data that offers knowledge about web usage, patterns and site performance (Kaushik 2009). MacGregor (2014) looks at changing newsroom attitudes towards digital opportunities in one United Kingdom newspaper between 2006 and 2011 and finds that discussion of Web 2.0 interactivity in the early years of the 2000s centred on user-generated content and citizen journalism collaboration, and only later turned to web metrics; while recognising that different newsrooms move at different speeds in adopting technology.

Usher (2013, 336) says that, thanks to web metrics, "now, journalists can know everything, from how many people are reading a story, to how long a person read it for, to how the person found the story." Yet web metrics, for all their precision, are imprecise in meaning and hard to interpret (Graves and Kelly 2010). In addition, it is ironic that an unprecedented granularity of information on what audiences read has coincided with such a dramatic collapse in them reading it. Evidently there is disconnect between understanding what readers like, and delivering it to them, within the journalistic field as it is currently professionalised.

Further, web metrics are uncomfortably close to commerce, which can be disagreeable to journalists socialised into a separation between editorial and advertising. As Tandoc and Thomas (2014) point out, web analytics originally served online marketing. They identify three consequent dangers of web analytics: seeing the audience as consumer segments; loss of distinction between public interest and of interest to the public; and loss of autonomy due to romanticising audience choice as 'emancipation-through-consumerism'. The fear is that web metrics could be "harnessed into utilitarian and performative ideals, such as being seen as promotion tools to drive print sales … [and] generally subsumed into the more urgent narrative of decline and survival, an adjunct to a meta-story of fear whose end point was extinction" (MacGregor 2014, 171).

According to Tandoc and Thomas (2014) a tension is associated with web analytics. On one hand are journalism's communitarian ideals, that it exists to help the common good. The alternative—based on a pure submission to the market rationale of web analytics—would be to create a product that appeals to the majority so that they will buy; but such a click-based logic in journalism ends up withering away community as the majority are pandered to at the expense of minorities; the common good is not served. Given the choice, audiences will gravitate toward 'soft' news over 'hard' news (Boczkowski 2010; Boczkowski and Peer 2011)." This is not what, traditionally, the field of journalism has valued in itself, so feedback encouraging such reporting is likely to be resisted.

Reader comments

The second form of digital feedback entering newsrooms considered in this study is reader comments posted at the end of news articles to share their opinions and occasionally expertise on both the topic of the article and the manner in which it has been reported. Previous studies have shown that newsworkers are also divided on this subject. Some welcome comments, others think of them as 'chatter'. One journalist refers to the contributors as 'nutters' (MacGregor 2014). For example, a study found that while journalists conceived of commenters as merely fact-checkers, the commenters themselves saw a chance to "change the direction of the journalist-initiated dialogue" (Robinson 2010, 140). The traditional response to comments was that they represent a small minority of the readership and therefore should not interfere with the work of journalists who knew best (Gans 1979). This 'knowing best' has been socialised into newsroom norms to become an object of faith, a signifier of expertise and a marker of professional identity (Tuchman 1972; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). Some news outlets have even shut down their comments sections due to perceived low discussion quality (Ellis 2015).

An initial study of how newspapers invited reader contributions shows that newsrooms were more open to the public commenting on and ranking news stories once they had appeared in print than contributing to them before they were published (Domingo et al. 2008). Only interpretation *after* the stories were published was open for all the newspapers studied. Nevertheless, there were a few invitations to submit images and story ideas *before* reporting was done. After tip-offs were given, the journalist drew on their professional training and worked alone on the story without input from the contributor. Similarly, Singer et al. (2011) found that audience participation was more likely to be accommodated when it did not have much impact on journalists' sense of agency over a story. For example,

discussion and interpretation of a story in the comments section had little impact on the reporter's control over a story, so it was widespread; while direct input into a story before it was written disempowered the reporter, so it was less common. The core role of gatekeeper remained in the hands of the newsworkers—they decide what is newsworthy and how it should be reported.

The field of journalism

Field theory imagines society as a collection of differentiated, autonomous but overlapping fields which have their own internal rules, regulations and logics (Benson and Neveu 2005). Bourdieu describes a field as "an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force, its dominants, and its dominated, and so forth" (1993, 162-163) where "actors struggle for the transformation or the preservation of the field" (1998, 40-41). Many scholars were disappointed with Bourdieu's manner of extending his theory of culture into the realm of media, television and journalism as it lacked application to widely consumed mass media (Hesmondhalgh 2006). Yet while Bourdieu was vague on journalism, other scholars have applied his ideas to the field, saying for example that "as long as techniques such as the interview, writing conventions such as the rule of the five Ws, and professional beliefs such as objectivity or the Fourth Estate are not institutionalized and embodied as part and parcel of a professional identity, there is no journalism, nor a journalistic field" (Neveu 2007, 338). Numerous studies have applied field theory's framework in understanding issues in journalism. For example, Tandoc and Jenkins (2017) conceptualized media and entertainment site BuzzFeed as a new player within the journalistic field. Similarly, Barnard (2017) examined citizen activists' location in the journalistic field by comparing their tweets with those of traditional journalists. In examining how journalists used audience feedback in the form of web analytics in their work, Tandoc (2014) also conceptualized audience metrics as a form of capital within the field. Similarly, Craft, Vos and Wolfgang (2016) also examined audience feedback in the form of reader comments based on traditional journalistic standards which form the field's internal rules, or what field theory refers to as the doxa.

The doxa, which agents within a field share, refers to an understanding of the rules of engagement. That is, they share the ideologies and the boundaries that delineate it from other fields, "the unspoken, unquestioned, taken-for granted, understanding of the news game and the basic beliefs guiding journalistic practice" (Willig 2013, 374). Thus, agents playing according to doxa seek to keep their field stable. But fields overlap and are adjacent to others

which may challenge them (Vos, Craft and Ashley 2011). For example, Bourdieu (1993) argues that the field of economics encroaches on and dominates the field of cultural production, including that of journalism: "the increasingly greater interpenetration between the world of art and the world of money… new forms of sponsorship . . . and new alliances between certain economic enterprises . . . and cultural producers' (Bourdieu 1996/1992, 344).

He further writes about two opposing forces: autonomy and heteronomy. The former is a marker that a field has control over itself, and indicates the situations in which agents feel they have the power to set their own terms and agenda. The latter is a marker of external influences which the field has to consider when setting terms and agenda. "It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the idea of autonomy from the field of power in Bourdieu's sociology of cultural production" (Hesmondhalgh 2006, 214), although Bourdieu considered this mainly in terms of art and literature. Fields are unstable, and can be either autonomous of heteronomous: "in fact, fields are, to a large extent, according to Bourdieu's scheme, constituted precisely by struggles over these positions, which often take the form of a battle between established producers, institutions and styles, and heretical newcomers" (Hesmondhalgh 2006, 215-216). Bourdieu (2005, 33) describes the journalistic field as "weakly autonomous" and characterised by a "high degree of heteronomy", noting the strong influence of the economic field.

For Bourdieu, the battle was between economic and cultural forces; within newsrooms, that correlates to the division of church and state i.e. the separation of editorial and advertising to ensure the valued (and valuable) autonomy of the former. He saw the economics as external forces which attempt to dominate the field (Vos, Craft and Ashley 2011). Other scholars have also observed that the related, overlapping and conflicting fields of journalism and economics create a tension that merits study: "As in all other fields, the field of cultural production is partly constituted by its relations to the economic and political fields; this is also the case for the specific field of news media and news journalism" (Willig 2013, 373). Recognition of this tension led to two research questions: **RQ1** In what ways do newsworkers incorporate heteronomous feedback into their existing practice, *expanding* the borders of their field? And **RQ2** In what ways do newsworkers maintain autonomy and keep feedback separate from their existing practice, *maintaining* the borders of their field?

Country context: Singapore

Singapore does not conform to normative frameworks of journalism, as evidenced by its low position in global press freedom rankings of 153rd out of 180 countries (Reporters

Without Borders 2015). The relationship between state and press is encapsulated by a 1971 quote from the founding father of the nation, Lee Kuan Yew: "freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of Singapore, and to the primacy and purpose of an elected government" (Chua 1998). Today, the government maintains powerful influence over a largely compliant traditional media in multiple subtle ways (George 2007; Lee 2014). New, internet-based news sites are less circumscribed by state influence, but still subject to government scrutiny. While it is possible to view this as overbearing, journalists and readers alike can also view it as contributing to the economic and social benefits that have seen the country rise from third world to first in 40 years (Lee 2000). Such state involvement in the media can have two contrasting effects on journalists and readers: to drive them towards independent, web-based news sources; and to motivate them to support traditional media to maintain the benefits of a strong, largely benevolent state. Both are evident in Singapore, making it a valid case study in how heteronomous influences (in this case public rather than state) are met by journalists within the field.

Method

Field theory has already formed the basis for two such ethnographies: Willig proposes it as a framework to examine the context of newsworkers' values: "For the ethnographer, the concept of field is a useful tool for conceptualising context … overcoming the methodological inference problem found in earlier newsroom studies in which the ethnographers rarely investigated the political economy of journalism" (2013, 376). Tandoc (2014), meanwhile, spent weeks in newsrooms to find how web analytics alter the fabric of news, building his study around field theory. For this study a team of six researchers spent over 200 hours in eight digital newsrooms in Singapore. Newsrooms were selected to represent both the government-approved discourse of the traditional media and the emerging, 'alternative' discourse of online-only news sites. We contacted senior editors at these newsrooms for permission to observe and interview newsworkers. All were open to interviews, and only one turned down requests to observe activity in the newsroom. The dominant news organisation, Singapore Press Holdings, publishes in English, Mandarin, Bahasa Melayu and Tamil; our focus was on the first two as we were told that digital offerings in the last two minority languages followed newsrooms working in English and Mandarin. The researchers observed and interviewed 60 editors, reporters, designers, photographers and videographers, collectively referred to as 'newsworkers'. Interviews

ranged from 20 minutes to an hour; and observation was done in four-hour periods at different times of day to capture a variety of processes and activities.

Usher (2013) finds that institutional culture has a large role in the way journalists use web metrics. Following this principle, the ethnography included different types of digital newsroom. Four were linked to traditional print outlets (*Today*, the *Straits Times*, *The New Paper* and Chinese Media Group, collectively referred to hereafter as 'digital-traditional'); two were online-only newsrooms in legacy news organisations with no affiliation to a print title (STOMP and AsiaOne, collectively referred to as 'digital-only); and three were newly launched news websites (Yahoo, Mothership and Middle Ground, collectively referred to as 'digital-independent'). While independent, this last group still followed sufficient journalistic practice that they can be considered within the field.

The ethnography was designed to study the way in which news production processes were adapted for news consumption on personal portable interactive devices such as smartphones and tablets. Interviews and observations were transcribed and analysed by three researchers to observe emerging themes, which were then discussed and condensed. The texts were read a second time to isolate specific examples of these themes, and these examples formed the corpus of data for this paper. Therefore the results described below emerged organically during the ethnography rather than being sought, which we consider adds weight to their validity. The transcripts were analysed, concurring with MacGregor (2014) that "critical discourse analysis of the statements journalists is considered appropriate for opinion on motivation and rationales for action. It provides perceptions as to why certain actions were followed or abandoned and is effective to investigate how particular power structures and patterns were formed or maintained."

Findings

Among the newsworkers there as a broad acceptance that web metrics and reader comments could be a valuable source of information. The newsrooms used a variety of analytical software to gather information on readers, including Google Analytics, Echobox, Facebook Insight, Outbrain VR, Cxsense and Apanannie, as well as (sometimes) reading the comments section below news articles and Facebook posts. Each piece of software has been developed outside the field of journalism, so their focus has always been on the audience rather than the medium. Words such as 'share', 'click', 'virality' and 'feedback' were peppered throughout the interviews, to an extent that suggested they had become normalised into newsroom practice. Our main finding was that there was little of the resistance to

heteronomous influences seen in earlier studies (e.g. Hermida and Thurman 2008; Paulussen and Ugille 2008), which leads us to argue that web metrics have been internalised into the journalistic field in Singapore when they were used to support the autonomy of the newsworker (**RQ1**). At the same time, however, newsworkers also reacted to heteronomous feedback by rejecting it, to maintain the borders of their field (**RQ2**).

RQ1 asked how newsworkers incorporate heteronomous feedback into their existing practice, thereby *expanding* the borders of their field. This was observed when it was internalised by newsworkers as a form of autonomy, seen in five ways.

1) Changing professional practice.

The most common indicator that reader comments and web metrics had been internalised was that it had become established doxa to perform certain tasks. The changing demands of readers were reflected in professional practice, demonstrating how newsworkers use web metrics to establish autonomous control over each story. Stories were structured and packaged so as to be more suitable for consumption on smartphones, for example, based on the insight that this was how readers were accessing them. In addition, video had become a starting point for stories rather than a 'nice-to-have'. Further, the interviewees noted that the length of video clips had gone down from two minutes to 90 seconds and finally to barely a minute. This was in response to the newsworkers' examination of metrics showing how long they could engage reader interest using video. In addition, videos were created to respond to changing reader behaviour; and once again, this was identified by combing through web metrics and feedback on how stories are consumed on social media:

> My colleague who is in charge social media affairs just shared with us that 80 per cent of people who watch our videos on Facebook, they do not turn on the sound. It becomes quite important for you to be able to tell the story with just visuals and text. Not so much voiceovers. That's one thing I came to understand better. (Reporter, digital-traditional)

Text stories were routinely shortened, too, in response to data on how few readers scrolled to the end: "Most users come in via mobile devices, like around 70%. So, it must be quick, snappy, and visual … So keep it short, simple and sweet is always best." (Designer, digital-traditional). Even simpler, articles could be constructed as bullet points or listicles:

> [Web metrics] has a very big impact on how we write. Because if you look at how information is consumed, it makes a lot of sense to write articles in lists, and also to have things in point form. So reading one minute of this will give you a bit more than reading five minutes of longform prose (Editor, digital-independent).

Stories were also selected with a view to virality and how likely they were to be shared. A story about cat cafes—not traditionally a staple in respectable newspapers—found its place in digital news offerings for this reason. That meant looking for a talking point, often in an existing news story, and building a digital package around it to capture readers' imagination.

> Sometimes it's obvious what would go viral—something that is funny, or has a lot of visuals, or will be impactful. Helping those who are in need—we call it 好人好事 [*hao ren hao shi* / good person, good deeds]. When people see a good deed, they would share it and spread the word further. (Reporter, digital-traditional)

Changing professional practice based on web metrics included story placement on the news page or news carousel, so that stories which showed themselves to have been popular were moved up; until they became less popular, in which case they were 'de-selected' (Tandoc 2014).

Newsrooms' web metrics pointed to diurnal spikes in news consumption. As a result, the interviewees said, stories were released to coincide with these times. Here, web metrics quoted became specific, as one editor at a digital standalone offered that readers are aged 25–44, 60% are desktop users, and of the 40% using their smartphones for news consumption, 40% view the news site via Facebook; the highest level of activity is 8am to 1pm, 5pm to 7pm, and 9pm to 11pm. As one reporter in a traditional-digital newsroom said: "Analytics is definitely useful. If you know that at a certain time nobody is watching or consuming your news, there is no point in pushing out your content at this hour." Thus, rather than asking news consumers to conform to the schedule of the news organisation (Selberg 1991), the newsrooms were doing the opposite.

2) Commercial considerations.

The heteronomous feedback of web metrics were also internalised insofar as they were linked with income, notably among digital-traditional newsrooms which had a history of associating readership with advertising revenue. The link between readership and income was a repeated theme, and "clicks are where the money comes from" according to an editor at a digital-traditional site. "When you have the traffic and the page views, you can sell ads and make money" (Reporter, digital-traditional). Others used distinctively commercial language, tempered with professional journalistic norms as they balanced the need for income which leads to more populist content, with the 'informed citizenry' requirement of a serious newspaper:

> Things that go viral you get the branding; people will get to know the particular brand, the particular newspaper or media outlet. We want to use the digital product as a platform to reach out … so that's why we would choose something more likely to go viral, although we still need the journalistic ethics and standards you have to meet (Reporter, digital-traditional).

Interestingly, none of the new, independent standalone news websites, which are only a few years old, mentioned the need to attract readers to entice advertisers; possibly because they were still in the start-up phase of being funded by investors.

3) *Web metrics and feedback had been internalised into vivid conceptualisations of the readers as real people.*

An editor on a digital-only site held on to the insight gained from metrics and feedback that her readers were motivated to look at news because they wanted to join in conversations and share information with friends. Knowing this allowed her to tailor her news stories. Her colleague, meanwhile, visualised her readers reading during lunch hours and when commuting. More specifically, a reporter on a digital-traditional newsroom offered this character sketch:

> In a *kopitiam* [coffee shop] or at home. Someone who is a heartlander, who is about 40 years old and above. They are the uncles and aunties whose household income is probably $4,000 or below. So they care about the bread-and-butter issues, not those that pertain to defence. To them it's like, are the vegetable prices

going up? Are the coffee prices going up? Whose car and whose car *langga* [crash] today? These are what they care about.

4) Newsworkers' response to readers.

The informants also noted that they sought to reiterate the autonomy of their field by choosing when and how they responded to direct comments from readers. This was characterised by responding to the reader when they felt in control of the situation or when it was on their own terms; and not responding to a comment that was outside the journalism field. They used responses to reader comments to shore up their own doxa. For example, a digital product specialist, digital-traditional outlet said "the general policy is not to respond to trolls, but thank users who comment and point out any errors once something has been rectified." Mistakes in writing may be acknowledged; however, the would not engage in disputed judgment calls:

> We just ignore them most of the time. Unless it's a valid concern, like if we really made a mistake, then we'll acknowledge. Let's say people comment and say, 'Oh, you know, you've made a typo,' then we'll be like, 'Oh, sorry. Thanks, we fixed it. Thanks for spotting it.' Also, there could be people leaving comments and criticising us for being biased, but if we look at the article and we think we were being fair, then we won't agree (Editor, digital-independent)

Linked to this is the use of metrics to justify their own journalism. In some cases, management used metrics to motivate or criticise their staff (Bunce 2017). More commonly, the writers themselves used them to see how well they were performing, and to trace the success of their own stories: "When I write a piece of news, how do I know that somebody reads it? When somebody reacts to it, right? So conversations are very important" (Reporter, digital-traditional). Similarly, in a study of Al Jazeera English, Usher (2013) finds reporters use analytics as a marker of how well their story is doing as an indicator of personal success, more for personal pride than anything else. Yet one editor of a digital-only site observed that just because a story was not well-received does not mean it was weak. The search for clicks and shares was a trap that many of those interviewed were wary of falling into—because that would disengage their everyday practice from their journalistic identity:

> While we want to be constantly focused on giving readers the kind of news they want … as a newsroom we need to exercise judgment as well as to what you think is important for readers to know, even if it may not necessarily generate a lot of online talk or online engagement … There are certain things that you need to do that aren't necessarily always driven by the so-called statistical bottom line (Editor, digital-only).

5) Issues shoring up professional identity.

This was the fifth factor that demonstrated the extent to which metrics and reader comments had been internalised into the journalistic field, answering **RQ1**. Newsworkers repeatedly referred to traditional norms, the doxa of their field, as evidence that they retained their autonomy despite internalising feedback. As one editor at a digital-traditional newsroom warned "We must practise news sense even if there are awesome programs like Echobox helping us." Web metrics are a guide, but no more than that. That meant choosing news stories based on their own journalistic instincts: "[Web metrics] is just a tool for our consideration. We don't auto-share the content it gives us, although it gives us suggestion that we don't normally look at. A lot of it is our own discretion" (Editor, digital-traditional). Simplifying texts did not mean cutting corners, and timeliness, impact and prominence were mentioned as still being core news values. In addition, the siren song of 'frivolous' news stories was ever-present, as they knew these would generate traffic. But these must be balanced with 'serious' news:

> Many people would of course enjoy light-hearted stories, some gossip, some scandal … But those may not be the stories that are most important to your reader. Besides giving them the content that would entice them, I think it's also a responsibility of the media to give them content that you think is beneficial to them. (Reporter, digital-traditional)

In summary, web metrics and reader comments were accepted to some extent, while it was observed that they fed into traditional journalistic identity, even at the new, online-only newsrooms which did not have such a strong legacy of newsroom identity. It was almost as if the readers were there to serve their needs as journalists, rather than them being there to serve the readers' interests.

RQ2, by contrast, asked how newsworkers maintain autonomy and keep feedback separate from their existing practice, *maintaining* the borders of their field. Less frequently web metrics and reader comments were resisted by newsworkers. Rather than being internalised into doxa, feedback was kept external. And rather than being used to boost autonomy, feedback was associated with uncertainty and the heteronomy of multiple opinions, and hence was rejected. This was demonstrated in four ways:

1) Distinctive audiences.

First, interviewees characterised readers as disparate or too distinctive to be understood by metrics. Contradicting the point made above, two editors in digital-traditional newsrooms noted that imagining readers would be difficult because of the wide spread of genders, age and occupation. A graphic designer in a digital-traditional newsroom who had access to metrics about the audience, described them as "important but extremely elusive." Despite digital feedback, she found that sometimes ideas connect with readers and sometimes they don't. Knowing what they have liked does not translate into knowing what they will like. The amount of work put into designing a user-interactive feature was a gamble, and as much as they would like to engage with their readers it was, at the end of the day, very difficult to truly understand what they wanted.

2) Ignoring feedback and comments.

One reason given for this was that the readers were not seen as being rational. In the words of one editor:

> I have a very low opinion of public feedback. Based on my past interaction with the public … we have issues with keyboard warriors. My opinion is that why do I have to cater to them if they don't add value to the story? For every one troll, there are nine others that are passive. Why are we allowing others' opinions to affect the overall stories? So I removed all commenting function on news. (Editor, digital-traditional)

Even those who did engage with reader comments were cautious about their value. One digital-traditional editor said she rarely does so: "We step in once in a while to tell readers to keep comments civil, especially when there are articles pertaining to controversial topics like race." In other cases, the effort to engage was not seen as being within the purview of their

work. One journalist in a digital-only newsroom said they just let the readers interact among themselves, while an editor at a digital-traditional site said that they rarely need to challenge trolls because their own 'vigilante' readers do it for them. At best, this hints at a self-policing community developing on these news sites, more in keeping with earlier conceptualisations of democracy being enhanced by reader feedback. At worst, the reader comments degenerate into self-defeating flame wars.

3) The reader is just like me.

They also said feedback was hard to use, so they employed a common tactic of either personalising the reader as someone from their immediate social circle, or as themselves. This served as a form of control-by-familiarity over the feedback. This attitude dates back to Gans (1979, 230-231) and his finding that "journalists have access to formal feedback for their work, but they use it only rarely… assuming that what interested them would interest the audience". Thus, one graphic designer in a digital-traditional newsroom said it was hard to understand readers through hard data, and instead created interactive stories based on her own opinions: "Imagine yourself, what would interest you, how would you react to it?" Similarly, a digital product specialist in a digital-traditional newsroom said "So what I imagine our readers to be like, pretty much like you and me." And a digital-traditional designer who described readers as "elusive" and wished for more research data, keeps her own research circle intimate: "I usually send sample to friends to get feedback, meet up and get the opinions, but there's a limit to how much constructive criticism friends can give you." Similarly, the same designer allowed her own observations of readers' behaviour while commuting to override the web metrics data: "They check [the news site] while they are at work; in the morning when in transit…" she paused. "But I don't really see them doing that! Most people I see on the trains are on Candy Crush or WhatsApp".

4) Leaders, not followers.

The fourth reason for resisting feedback is that a newsroom is meant to lead rather than follow. Following was associated with commercialisation and market research, whereas news was associated with a higher purpose: "We always have to be one step ahead of what people are thinking. The online crowd might not be the majority, if you look at [the letters page], you can see how readers' opinions are sometimes similar to the article we publish" (Editor, digital-traditional).

Discussion and conclusion

We argue that, in Bourdelian terms, the doxa of the journalistic field has adapted to incorporate but also to manage the use of web analytics and reader comments. Nuancing this, we would argue that there is a distinction between the indirect, impersonal web metrics which were accepted and which represent heteronomity internalised to become part of the autonomy of the field; and personal, subjective reader comments which were resisted.

Reluctant use of web analytics.

Newsworkers used web analytics to see what stories were being read but not to direct what to write next—that was still their own prerogative. Analytics did help them choose which stories to elevate on their newsfeed, however, and to show how well individual reporters were doing. In other words, our interviewees suggested that they were going about the task of internalising analytics and fitting them into journalistic practice, expanding the field. Reader comments, however, were still more often treated with disdain than they were internalised into everyday newsroom doxa.

Something has changed, then. Previously, web analytics had been associated with market research which go against the journalistic ideal of independence (Rauch 2007). As Tandoc and Thomas (2014, 11) put it, "if journalism simply views itself as the conduit through which transient audience preferences are satisfied, then it is no journalism worth bearing the name." That did not appear to be the case in this study. Rather, newsmakers saw the value in writing stories to satisfy web metrics *alongside* stories that maintained traditional journalistic integrity. Further, Vu (2013, 12) suggests that "perhaps … because the journalistic occupational pride of sustaining autonomy against any kind of non-professional influences made it harder for editors to admit that their editorial decision-making is affected by audience metrics."

We suggest a different angle. They did not 'admit' to it—with the hint of confession to something unworthy which that word implies—because it had been internalised into doxa. This is the point at which audience influence on news construction becomes strongest, when the newsworkers scarcely notice it at all as it becomes embedded in doxa. This follows Willig's supposition that this is the point where they become all-but invisible: "Doxa are the conventions we do not question, the deeply rooted tacit understandings of the world which are difficult to express in words, or the everyday circumstances that are so naturalised that we do not see them" (2013, 377).

This paper suggests that newsworkers' reactions to web analytics' commercial associations can be illuminated by field theory. The field of cultural production—to which journalism belongs—is characterised by high levels of cultural capital and low levels of economic capital; in the field of power, those are reversed (Hesmondhalgh 2006). "Bourdieu's main concern in discussing changes in cultural production, including those in journalism, but also in literature and art, is marketization, and he sees audience research as fundamental to this process" (Hesmondhalgh 2006, 224). He associates audience research with the potential to cause a marketisation of cultural production, shifting it from its own field into that of economics. Ultimately, Bourdieu bemoans that "it is now possible to pinpoint the audience by the quarter hour and even—a new development—by social group. So we know very precisely who's watching what, and who not" (1998/1996, 27).

This is the change. In the past newsworkers favoured symbolic capital over economic capital preferring the prestige that accompanies rejection of tawdry issues as money and may be associated with journalism's noble, communitarian obligations over anything that can be converted into money. But they do this mostly when economic capital is more assured. That is not the case in today's news industry. Once money becomes tight, however, the balance shifts away from symbolic capital—unless it is, in turn, seen as a means to achieve economic capital. The acceptance of web metrics indicates a tacit approval of market research as an integral—if unspoken—part of the news industry as much as advertising has been in the past. The separation of autonomy and heteronomy that may be maintained in theory become less tenable in practice; as a result, external and heteronomous forces are absorbed into autonomous behaviour. It is an independently wealthy journalist who can live on symbolic capital alone (e.g. Usher 2013; Vu 2013).

Rather than drawing a distinction between the autonomy of one field and the heteronomy suggested by adjacent fields, this study indicates that heteronomy of the political and economic fields can be incorporated into the field of journalism to the point that it becomes part of its autonomy. Rather than seeing autonomy and heteronomy as conflicting forces—the one resisting the other—we conceive of them as points of intersection: a field is best revealed when heteronomous forces become internalised into it. The changes reveal the field as much as its attempts to maintain its boundaries do. Inclusion may be seen as expansion rather than dilution. Thus, before web analytics were incorporated into the field, they were seen as interference with the true work of journalism; once they have been incorporated, they become part of the autonomy of the field, almost unseen by those within it.

Distanced relation to reader comments

By contrast, the study showed that reader comments remain heteronomous rather than part of the autonomy of the field. In the words of one interviewee: "Why cater to keyboard warriors if they don't add value to the story?" More importantly, they do not add commercial value. As they offer neither symbolic nor economic capital, they can be safely held at arm's length. Reader comments were often characterised as personal—and irrational—and not internalised into doxa. Newsworkers preferred not to "waste time pandering to people whose opinions won't be changed." At the same time, however, they encouraged feedback as markers of their own value: "The 'Most Read' and 'Most Commented' sections have been designed to keep people on the site," said one editor. A recent ethnography of newsrooms by Wolfgang (2017) finds journalists struggling to have a conversation with the audience that does not interfere with their traditional practices. Similarly, here, when the new information stream helps maintain newsworkers' doxa (reflecting on past stories) it is incorporated; when it challenges their gatekeeper role (planning future stories) it is not. When it can be aggregated into an impersonal statistic that can contribute to economic capital, it is internalised; as long as it is seen as a single, personal comment which does not, it is not.

Conclusion

This paper offers evidence that newsroom ethnographies using field theory can usefully drive scholarship beyond normative theorising about journalism's *potential* for inclusivity and to incorporate empirically observed heteronomous influences from beyond the field which are nevertheless part of it. Such heteronomity, coming from the adjacent political and economic fields, lacks the moral high ground of an autonomous journalistic field, but offers a more realistic interpretation of the relationship between newsworkers and readers. Newsroom ethnographies, therefore, reveal less-than-perfect, commercialised, compromised realities. MacGregor has observed that "it might be predicted that server tracking data on numbers (how many hits), chronology (when hits happen), and geographical information (location of origin of hits), will also be understood in terms of market goals to 'serve' customers and expand markets" (2007, 282). That is the value of web metrics observed in this ethnography.

The study is, naturally, limited by being a single-country report. Like any other country, the Singapore media system is *sua generis,* and it is expected that other newsrooms with different commercial realities would react differently. It may be that, just as Singapore newsmakers have internalised government influence on the media which would not be acceptable in many other countries (George 2002), they are more open to web metrics. But as

the traditional advertising revenue for news dwindles in most developed countries, it may be expected that web-metric-driven commercialisation will appear in different guises as a factor on newsroom management and newsworker behaviour. Singapore media is not growing as it is in India, nor in decline as in the US (for example)—yet it is still in a state of flux. Hence it would be instructive to compare newsworkers' attitudes described in this paper with similar studies in countries where media is either waxing or waning, which may lead to different attitudes towards inclusivity, web analytics, and symbolic and economic capitals, as newsmakers' own fields and doxa change over time.

Champagne (2005, 50) notes that "the history of journalism could well be in large part the story of an impossible autonomy—or, to put it in the least pessimistic way, the unending story of an autonomy that must be re-won because it is always threatened." This study has suggested that there is greater acceptance for the voice of the people to the point that web metrics and reader comments are internalised as a legitimate—as opposed to the illegitimacy that Dick Tuck laid at their door—element of the newsroom. This may compromise the autonomy of the reporter and blur the boundaries between church and state, advertising and editorial, journalism and marketing, but given that the industry itself is in a time of such upheaval it would be naive to expect continued independence which, truthfully, may always have been a normative ideal rather than an empirical reality.

References

Anderson, Christopher W. 2011. “Between Creative and Quantified Audiences: Web Metrics and Changing Patterns of Newswork in Local US Newsrooms.” *Journalism* 12 (5): 550-566. DOI: 10.1177/1464884911402451

Barnard, Stephen R. 2017. "Tweeting #Ferguson: Mediatized fields and the new activist journalist." *New Media & Society*:1461444817712723. doi: 10.1177/1461444817712723.

Beam, Randal A. 1995. “How Newspapers use Readership Research.” *Newspaper Research Journal* 16: 28-38.

Benson, Rodney and Erik Neveu. 2005. *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.

Boczkowski, Pablo J. 2004. *Digitizing the News: innovation in online newspapers*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Boczkowski, Pablo J. 2010. *News at Work: Imitation in an Age of Information Abundance*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Boczkowski, Pablo J. and Limor Peer. 2011. “The Choice Gap: The Divergent Online News Preferences of Journalists and Consumers.” *Journal of Communication*, 61(5): 857-876. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01582.x.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. “Field of Power, Literary Field and Habitus.” In *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, edited by Randal Johnson, 161-175. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1996/1992. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. *On Television*. New York: New Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 2005. *The Social Structures of the Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bunce, Mel. 2017. “Management and Resistance in the Digital Newsroom.” *Journalism*, DOI: 10.1177/1464884916688963

Champagne, Patrick. 2005. “The ‘Double Dependency’: The Journalistic Field Between Politics and Markets.” In *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, edited by Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu, 48-64. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Chua, Lee Hoong. 1998. “Singapore.” In *Walking the Tightrope, Press Freedom and Professional Standards in Asia*, edited by Asad Latif. Singapore: AMIC, 142-155.

Craft, Stephanie, Tim P. Vos, and David J. Wolfgang. 2016. "Reader comments as press criticism: Implications for the journalistic field." *Journalism* 17(6): 677-693. doi: doi:10.1177/1464884915579332.

Deuze, Mark and Steve Paulussen. 2002. “Online Journalism in the Low Countries: Basic, Occupational and Professional Characteristics of Online Journalists in Flanders and the Netherlands.” *European Journal of Communication* 17: 237-246.

Domingo, David, Thorsten Quandt, Ari Heinonen, Steve Paulussen, Jane B. Singer and Marina Vujnovic. 2008. “Participatory Practices in Journalism and Beyond: An International Comparative Study on Initiatives in Online Newspapers.” *Journalism Practice* 2 (3): 326-342.

Ellis, Louise. 2015. “Is There an Online Public Sphere?” A Critical Analysis of Three British Mainstream News Online Comment Forums. PhD University of Warwick. http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/77357/

Gans, Herbert. 1979. *Deciding What’s News*. New York: Pantheon Books.

George, Cherian. 2002. “Singapore: Media at the Mainstream and the Margin.” In *Media Fortune, Changing Times: ASEAN States in Transition*, edited by Russell H.K. Heng, 173-200. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

George, Cherian. 2006. *Contentious Journalism and the Internet: Towards Democratic Discourse in Malaysia and Singapore*. University of Washington Press.

George, Cherian. 2007. “Consolidating Authoritarian Rule: Calibrated Coercion in Singapore.” *The Pacific Review* 20 (2): 127-145.

Graves, Lucas and John Kelly. 2010. *Confusion Online: Faulty Metrics and the Future of Digital Journalism*. Tow Center for Digital Journalism. http://towcenter.org/research/confusion-online-faulty-metrics-and-the-future-of-digital-journalism/

Hermida, Alfred and Neil Thurman. 2008. “A clash of Cultures: The Integration of User-Generated Content within Professional Journalistic Frameworks at British Newspaper Websites.” *Journalism Practice* 2 (3), 343-356. doi: 10.1080/17512780802054538

Hesmondhalgh, David. 2006. “Bourdieu, the Media and Cultural Production.” *Media, Culture & Society* 28 (2): 211-231.

Infocomm Media Development Authority. 2017. Accessed 11 August 2017 at https://www.imda.gov.sg/industry-development/facts-and-figures/infocomm-usage-households-and-individuals

Kaushik, Avinash. 2009. *Web Analytics 2.0: The Art of Online Accountability and the Science of Customer Centricity*. Indianapolis: Wiley.

Lee, Kuan Yew. 2000. *From Third World to First: The Singapore story, 1965-2000*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish.

Lee, Terence. 2014. “Media Governmentality in Singapore.” In *Democracy, Media and Law in Malaysia and Singapore: A Space for Speech*, edited by Andrew T. Kenyon, Tim Marjoribanks and Amanda Whiting, 25-44. Abingdon: Routledge.

Lowrey, Wilson and Chang Wan Woo. 2010. “The News Organization in Uncertain Times: Business or Institution?” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 87 (1): 46-61.

MacGregor, Phil. 2007. “Tracking the Online Audience: Metric Data Start a Subtle Revolution.” *Journalism Studies* 8 (2): 280-298.

MacGregor, Phil. 2014. “Siren Songs or Path to Salvation? Interpreting the Visions of Web Technology at a UK Regional Newspaper in Crisis, 2006-2011.” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 20(2): 157-175. DOI: 10.1177/1354856512472605

Neveu, Erik. 2007. “Pierre Bourdieu: Sociologist of Media, or Sociologist for Media Scholars?” *Journalism Studies* 8 (2): 335-347.

O’Sullivan, John and Ari Heinonen. 2008. “Old Values, New Media: Journalism Role Perceptions in a Changing World.” *Journalism Practice* 2 (3): 357-371.

Paulussen, Steve. 2004. “Online News Production in Flanders: How Flemish Online Journalists Perceive and Explore the Internet’s Potential.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 9(4). doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2004.tb00300.x

Paulussen, Steve and Pieter Ugille. 2008. “User-generated content in the newsroom: Professional and organisational constraints on participatory journalism.” *Westminster Papers in Communication & Culture* 5 (2): 24-41.

Petre, Caitlin. 2015. “The Traffic factories: Metrics at Chartbeat, Gawker Media, and *The New York Times*.” Tow Center. Accessed on 09 August 2017 at https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/the_traffic_factories_metrics_at_chartbeat_gawker_media_and_the_new_york_times.php

Rauch, Jennifer. 2007. “Activists as Interpretive Communities: Rituals of Consumption and Interaction in an Alternative Media Audience.” *Media, Culture & Society* 29 (6): 994-1013.

Reporters Without Borders. 2015. “World Press Freedom Index 2015.” Retrieved 30 March, 2016, from Reporters without Borders http://index.rsf.org/#!/

Robinson, Sue. 2010. “Traditionalists vs Convergers: Textual Privilege, Boundary Work, and the Journalist-Audience Relationship in the Commenting Policies of Online News Sites.” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 16 (1): 125-143.

Schlesinger, Philip. 1978. *Putting ‘Reality’ Together*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.

Selberg, Torunn. 1991. “Folks Vaner er Vonde å Vende. Dagsrevyens Rolle i Ritualiseringen av Vårt Dagligliv.” *Samtiden* 5: 53-59.

Singer, Jane B. 2010. “Quality Control: Perceived Effects of User-Generated Content on Newsroom Norms, Values and Routines.” *Journalism Practice* 4 (2): 127-142.

Singer, Jane B. 2011. “Community Service: Editor Pride and User Preference on Local Newspaper Websites.” *Journalism Practice* 5 (6): 623-642.

Singer, Jane B, David Domingo, Ari Heinonen, Alfred Hermida, Steve Paulussen, Thorsten Quandt, Zvi Reich and Marina Vujnovic. 2011. *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers.* New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

Tandoc, Edson C. 2014. “Journalism is Twerking? How Web Analytics is Changing the Process of Gatekeeping.” *New Media & Society* 16 (4): 559-575.

Tandoc, Edson, and Joy Jenkins. 2017. "The Buzzfeedication of journalism? How traditional news organizations are talking about a new entrant to the journalistic field will surprise you!" *Journalism* 18 (4):482-500. doi: 10.1177/1464884915620269.

Tandoc, Edson C. and Ryan J. Thomas. 2014. "The Ethics of Web Analytics." *Digital Journalism* 3 (2):243-258. doi: 10.1080/21670811.2014.909122

Tuchman, Gaye. 1972. "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity." *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (4): 660-679.

Usher, Nikki. 2013. "Al Jazeera English Online: Understanding Web Metrics and News Production When a Quantified Audience is not a Commodified Audience." *Digital Journalism* 1 (3): 335-351.

Vos, Tim, Stephanie Craft and Seth Ashley. 2011. "New Media, Old Criticism: Bloggers' Press Criticism and the Journalistic Field." *Journalism* 13 (7): 850-868. DOI: 10.1177/1464884911421705

Vu, Hong Tien. 2013. "The Online Audience as Gatekeeper: The Influence of Reader Metrics on News Editorial Selection." *Journalism* 15 (8): 1094-1110. DOI: 10.1177/1464884913504259

Wardle, Claire and Andrew Williams. 2010. "Beyond User-Generated Content: A Production Study Examining the Ways in which UGC is Used at the BBC." *Media, Culture & Society* 35 (2): 781-799.

Weaver, David H. and G. Cleveland Wilhoit. 1996. *The American Journalist in the 1990s: U.S. News People at the End of an Era*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Willig, Ida. 2013. "Newsroom Ethnography in a Field Perspective." *Journalism* 14 (3): 372-387.

Wolfgang, J. David. 2017. "Cleaning Up the 'Fetid Swamp'." *Digital Journalism*, DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2017.1343090

Zelizer, Barbie. 2005. "Definitions of Journalism." In *The Press*, edited by Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, 66-80. New York: Oxford University Press.