NEWS CREDIBILITY THROUGH AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL LENS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EPISTEMOLOGICAL BELIEFS, PERCEPTIONS OF JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGY, AND NEWS CREDIBILITY

By

Craig T. Robertson

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ABSTRACT

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In recent years, there have been renewed challenges to the credibility of news. Journalists and their way of knowing have been contested on a number of fronts and trust in news in the United States, and beyond, is in decline. Against this backdrop, several pertinent questions have been posed: How can we trust what journalists say? How do we know that it is true? What makes news valid? These are important epistemological questions that have not been fully addressed in the literature on news credibility. With this in mind, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore what makes news, from an audience perspective, credible or not. It does this by exploring credibility through an epistemological lens, considering audience views on news as a form of knowledge and journalism as a way of knowing. The central argument is that the epistemological beliefs that individuals hold with respect to journalism matter when it comes to perceptions of news credibility; that beliefs about the nature of valid knowledge and knowing in journalism inform perceptions of what are 'good' and 'bad' journalistic practices.

In light of this, the present dissertation explores three key questions: 1) What are individuals' epistemological beliefs as they relate to news and journalism? 2) How is the epistemology of journalism, as it is practiced, viewed by individuals? 3) How do the epistemological beliefs and perceptions of individuals relate to or shape views of news credibility? To examine these questions, I draw on data from semi-structured interviews with 65 people from diverse backgrounds in the United States.

I find that, first, most people articulate core beliefs which see valid news as certain, simple, primary-sourced, and justified by a correspondence between factual claims and reality. However, these beliefs shift according to the *epistemological context*. As news contexts become more interpretive, individuals emphasize how journalists ought to balance relative truths rooted in different perspectives, sets of facts, or ways of knowing. These beliefs constitute an idealized form of straightforward objective, impartial, and balanced news which may not necessarily be attainable but which individuals compare real news to. Second, I find there is often a disjuncture between the idealized beliefs of individuals and the perceived epistemological approaches of news sources. Journalists are often seen to diverge from audience expectations, failing to remain objective, include all relevant information or perspectives, and demonstrate how the claims made match with the facts of the external world. Third, I observe that this disjuncture – an *epistemic incongruency* – has important implications for news credibility.

Journalism, as a profession and institution, relies on credibility for its legitimacy, authority, and social and political relevance. But this credibility is both under threat and in decline. I argue this occurs because of an incongruency between what audiences say they want (their epistemological beliefs) and what they see journalists doing (their epistemological perceptions). The findings suggest that, based on what audiences say, to gain credibility, journalism may need to pull back from interpretive or evaluative styles of news, instead revisiting more traditional notions of objectivity, impartiality, and balance. On the other hand, audiences may need to recognize issues in their beliefs and idealized views of news, tempering their expectations and acknowledging the epistemic limitations of journalism and of traditional norms. Findings point to possibilities for both journalistic and audience reflection and education at a time when questions have been raised about notions of fact and truth.

To Erin

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the credibility of journalism as an institution has come under renewed fire from political actors who question its practices, motives, and legitimacy (Newman et al., 2019). Its authority has been undermined by a public, empowered by digital communication technologies, that is increasingly able to seek alternative sources of information, create their own news, and generate consistent streams of media criticism (Waisbord, 2018; Carlson, 2018). And its expertise has been challenged by new actors who have entered the news sphere; actors who do not follow traditional journalistic standards and who contribute to the increased "fragmentation of news epistemologies" (Waisbord, 2019, p. 14). These factors have bought about an epistemic crisis – a challenge to journalism's way of knowing and practices of knowledge production which threatens its credibility (Steiner, 2018; Steensen, 2019; Waisbord, 2019).

While none of these occurrences are necessarily new, this confluence of contextual factors has brought epistemological questions sharply into focus. Pertinent questions have been raised with respect to journalism, such as: How can we trust what journalists say? How do we know that it is true? What makes news valid? And, importantly, what makes news credible?

The various challenges to journalism have led scholars to wonder how journalism might address "empirical tribalism" (Anderson, 2018, p. 34), reinforce common epistemological standards (Steiner, 2018), and regain its status as a commonly trusted and credible institution. Trust in the media has been in decline for decades (Swift, 2016) and, in Steiner's (2018, p. 1854) words, in a present context characterized by biting media criticism, the spread of disinformation, and challenges to notions of truth and fact, "journalists seem unable to convincingly, or plausibly, explain how their work product is reliable." This is all to say that journalism, as a profession, an institution, and a way of knowing, faces a dilemma. It relies on credibility for

legitimacy and acceptance (Carlson, 2016) but this credibility is lacking (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020).

In this context, this dissertation looks at questions of news credibility through an epistemological lens, seeking to understand, from an audience perspective, what makes news credible (or not). A key question is how people construct notions of news credibility at an epistemological level. As Carlson (2016, p. 360) observes, "the validity of any [news] story rests on a shared belief that it is a legitimate form of knowledge." Without this epistemic validity, news lacks in credibility and its power to inform or educate the public is undercut. In short, it is difficult for news to play a key role in society if it is considered illegitimate.

Epistemology is relevant to the study of news credibility because it is concerned with what valid knowledge is and where it comes from. The argument is that for news as a form of knowledge to be seen as credible, it must be viewed as epistemically valid from the perspective of audience members. This means individuals' epistemological beliefs – those beliefs people hold about valid knowledge and knowing – are important to consider. Epistemological beliefs are at the heart of people's interactions with information, playing an important role in how it is judged or assessed (Hofer, 2004).

Specifically, this dissertation considers three core questions: 1) What are individuals' epistemological beliefs as they relate to news? 2) How are the epistemological approaches of journalists viewed by individuals? and 3) How do individuals' epistemological beliefs relate to perceptions of journalism and the credibility of news? That is, what makes news appear epistemically valid and thereby credible in people's eyes? The argument is that the epistemological beliefs which individuals hold with respect to news matter when it comes to

perceptions of journalism; that these beliefs shape how individuals view and trust various news actors and, in turn, construct notions of news credibility.

This argument rests on four key arguments and draws from literature primarily from Western philosophy, but also from journalism studies, communication, and educational psychology. First, it is argued that to consider the credibility of news is to raise epistemological questions regarding how reliable, trustworthy, and believable it is. These are epistemological considerations pertaining to the credibility or truth value of information in the eye of the beholder. It is argued that the truth value of news – its credibility – emerges from an implicit or explicit consideration of the epistemological assumptions underpinning the knowledge claims being made.

Second, people have epistemologies or *epistemological beliefs*. There can be various social, cultural, political, and educational factors influencing the forms of epistemological beliefs that individuals hold (Kreiss, 2017; Perry, 1970; Tabak & Weinstock, 2008) but, at their core, these beliefs shape how individuals construct notions of credible information in different domains (Whitmire, 2003, 2004; Strømsø et al., 2011; Porsch & Bromme, 2011; Hofer, 2000).

Third, journalism, too, has dominant *epistemologies* (Waisbord, 2019; Ekström, 2002; Deuze, 2005; Epstein, 1981). In the United States, news is a specific type or form of information which is constructed within journalistic paradigms that have their own conventions and methods; that is, ways of going about the creation of knowledge (Zelizer, 1993). The assumptions of journalism – or *journalisms* – are indicative of an institutional approach to knowledge construction which has evolved over time in response to shifts in society, culture, and the profession (Schudson, 2001; Hallin, 1992; Barnhurst, 2014; Zelizer, 2004; Durham, 1998; Ryan, 2001; Muñoz-Torres, 2012). The epistemologies of journalism are important insofar as they

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underpin how the news produced by journalists is presented to audiences and how the credibility of the resulting news content may be judged by audiences.

Fourth, when the epistemological beliefs of audience members and the perceived epistemologies of journalism diverge or converge, there are implications for news credibility. Importantly, epistemological (in)congruency may illuminate the nature or features of the crisis journalism is currently facing and provide a path forward for journalists when it comes to re-establishing news credibility. Indeed, it is necessary to explore how individual epistemological beliefs relate to notions of news credibility because understanding this relationship may be one way to understand where, for journalism, problems – and solutions – arise. It may be that a disjuncture exists between the epistemology of traditional mainstream journalism and the beliefs of audiences, and that this epistemic incongruency is what influences views of news credibility. In other words, audiences might see news as being less credible because it is created via a process which does not accord with their view of how knowledge or truth should be constructed (and vice versa for sources whose approaches do align with individuals' epistemological beliefs). Whether this is the case, of course, is the empirical question which this dissertation explores.

The nature of the relationship between individual epistemological beliefs, the perceived epistemological approaches of news sources, and views on credibility is not well known. In order to understand it, exploratory research is necessary. As such, this dissertation proceeds qualitatively, drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 65 people about their epistemological beliefs and their views on news and journalism.

Findings support the view that there is often a disjuncture between the expressed epistemological beliefs of audiences and the perceived epistemological approaches of news sources. I find that most individuals articulate core epistemological beliefs with respect to

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journalism which place emphasis on the provision of singular, observable truths about the world, sourced from firsthand observations and primary sources, and justified by a demonstrated correspondence between the facts relayed and the truth of the external world. In expressing their views on news credibility, individuals place value on traditional notions of objectivity, neutrality, and impartiality. People say they want journalists to provide simple and straightforward coverage of the what, where, when, and who of news events and occurrences without commentary or opinion. Articulated beliefs do shift as the *epistemological context* changes. As news topics or contexts become more complex, involving interpretive or evaluative how and why questions, individuals place emphasis on journalists balancing relative truths which are rooted in different perspectives, sets of facts, or ways of knowing. Individuals say they want journalists, in these situations, to lay out all relevant information, leaving them to decide what is true – or *most* true. To the extent that journalists meet these expectations in practice, news is viewed as more credible because there is a greater sense of *epistemic congruency*.

Often, however, there is a disjuncture between the expressed epistemological beliefs of individuals and the perceived epistemological approaches of news sources. Journalists are often seen to diverge from these notions of credibility, failing to be objective, inserting commentary and opinion, omitting relevant perspectives, and failing to demonstrate how the claims made match with the facts of the external world. The sense of *epistemic incongruency* which these deviations from beliefs and expectations generate negatively impacts perceived news credibility.

Findings from this work have several practical implications for the news industry, educational efforts focused on media literacy, and democracy in general. It is apparent that, in the eyes of many people, journalism lacks certain aspects of legitimacy when it comes to making knowledge claims – its epistemology is often not seen as valid or effective enough at producing

concrete 'truths' about the world (Carlson, 2018; Waisbord, 2018; Kreiss, 2017; Steiner, 2018). This observation points to the types of problems and solutions journalism needs to consider – and, for that matter, the problems and solutions that other knowledge-producing institutions, including the scientific field, may need to consider. It may be that journalism needs to fix, adapt or better present its epistemologies, taking audience beliefs into consideration as it strives for epistemic validity. On the other hand, it may also be that audiences need to adjust their beliefs, recognizing the fallibility of the journalistic process, adopting more realistic views of what good journalism or reliable knowledge are. At the educational level, insights into the epistemological beliefs of individuals may aid in efforts at formulating media literacy curricula aimed at improving critical thinking skills, while at the democratic level, understanding individuals' epistemic beliefs and how they relate to expressions of information credibility may help in forging a way forward when it comes to understanding issues of faltering institutional trust and the spread of mis/disinformation.

Dissertation outline

The goal of this dissertation is to explore people's views on what makes news credible at an epistemological level. Its theoretical lens is rooted in Western philosophy, since I examine how the epistemological beliefs of individuals undergird notions and assessments of news credibility.

In service of this goal, *Chapter One* reviews credibility as a concept and covers existing models and theories of credibility. It makes the case for a philosophical view of news credibility which is sensitive to news as a construct and which grapples with what credibility means as a concept. It is argued that questions of credibility are fundamentally questions related to

epistemology; that to assess credibility is to draw from beliefs about valid forms of knowledge and ways of knowing.

Following this, *Chapter Two* outlines how, since questions of credibility are fundamentally epistemological, the epistemological beliefs that news audiences hold are important to consider. The definition of epistemological beliefs, the forms they can take, and why they are relevant to views of news credibility are covered. Following this, the topics of domain-specific epistemological beliefs regarding journalism as well as perceptions of the epistemic approaches of news sources are covered, and it is explained why these beliefs and perceptions matter for news credibility. Finally, the central argument of this dissertation is outlined: that the relationship between domain-specific epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism and perceptions of the epistemic approaches of news sources is key to notions of what makes news credible. Here, the research questions guiding this dissertation are presented.

Moving on to the methodological portion of the dissertation, *Chapter Three* outlines the qualitative approach adopted, providing a rationale for a semi-structured interview strategy and outlining the data collection and analysis process.

What follows in Chapters Four to Six are the findings of this dissertation. *Chapter Four* focuses on individuals' general epistemological beliefs, establishing a foundation for the analysis of individuals' beliefs with respect to journalism. This chapter covers the nature of individuals' general beliefs and the conditions under which they shift. Following this, *Chapter Five* covers individuals' lay epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism, focusing on what people believe journalism can and should do at an epistemological level. It covers the ways in which individuals' beliefs shift and what such beliefs mean for views of news credibility. It culminates in a description of a Platonic ideal of news – that form of news which is idealized in people's

minds – which is articulated as being most trustworthy and believable. *Chapter Six* then deals

with individuals' perspectives on the epistemology of journalism (what journalism actually does,

in the eyes of audiences) in terms of its deviations from audience expectations. This chapter

covers instances where journalism is seen to move away from the ideal and what this means for

news credibility. It also touches on what journalists can do to repair credibility.

Finally, *Chapter Seven* draws together insights from Chapters Four to Six, outlining

overall what makes news both credible and not credible at an epistemological level from the

perspective of audience members. It covers the implications of the findings, sets the stage for a

future research agenda, and outlines the limitations of this dissertation.

CHAPTER ONE: Credibility, an overview

Defining credibility

The aim of this dissertation is to understand what makes news credible – or how people construct their views of news credibility. As a concept, credibility, in one form or another, has been studied through a number of disciplinary lenses, from information science, to organizational studies, to communication and psychology (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015). In communication, credibility research has its roots in the work of twentieth century psychologists studying persuasion, with researchers seeking to understand what source, message, and medium credibility features – as well as what audience factors – play a role in attitude formation and change (Flanagin & Metzger, 2015; Metzger et al., 2003). In this literature, credibility is seen as a key factor in persuasion; a credible source or message has persuasive power (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

In journalism studies and in philosophy, however, credibility more often speaks to the (epistemic) validity of a source or message (Carlson, 2020; Whitmire, 2004; Strømsø, Bråten, & Britt, 2011; Kreiss, 2017; Ekström, 2002). Here, credibility is not necessarily about persuasive power, but about fundamental trustworthiness and believability; and in the view of Carlson (2016), it is about institutional legitimacy. Indeed, the normative framework of journalism is not rooted in notions of persuasion or influence, but is rooted more in roles such as information-provision and democratic public service (Standaert, Hanitzch, & Dedonder, 2019). Here, journalism requires credibility – buy-in from the audience – in order to ensure that these roles can be effectively fulfilled. Without trust or audience belief, the social relevance and importance of journalism is diminished because audiences are less likely care about what journalists say, believe the information they uncover or make informed decisions based on the news.

When it comes to defining credibility, a range of concepts are typically employed to denote what is being talked about, including message, source, or medium accuracy, reliability, trustworthiness, believability, quality, reputation, authority, competence, authenticity, and comprehensiveness (e.g. Waddell, 2018; Kang et al., 2011; Cole & Greer, 2013). Decades research on credibility has generated a long list of factors which have been found to influence individual perceptions and judgments of credibility, from date stamps on articles, to author credentials, to attractive presentation (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015). Different factors pertain to messages, sources, and mediums.

In this sense, credibility is a multidimensional concept with a range of factors relating to it. However, the variety of terms associated with the concept make it difficult to determine what it actually means. For instance, measures of credibility in the literature vary, with some scholars choosing to combine concepts such as accuracy, authenticity, and believability (Liu & Wei, 2019) and others choosing to combine concepts such as believability, accuracy, trustworthiness, bias, and completeness (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). Despite this, while Flanagin and Metzger (2008, p. 8) note that "there exists no one, clear definition of credibility," they do observe that, historically, "the overarching view is that credibility is the believability of a source or message" and that believability has been traditionally viewed as being made up of two dimensions: trustworthiness and expertise. This definition of credibility is useful because its dimensions (trustworthiness and expertise), and the overarching concept of credibility itself, provide a way to organize the various sub-dimensions (e.g. accuracy, quality, reliability, etc.).

Of note is that the relevance of specific sub-dimensions tends to vary according to whether message, source, or medium credibility is being considered (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008). Different factors come into play at different levels of analysis. For instance, comprehensiveness

is more relevant to messages, expertise is more relevant to sources, and fidelity more relevant to media. This is often how elements of credibility are organized – by reference to the level of analysis to which they are related. That said, features of messages, sources, and media often overlap and intertwine, meaning they cannot always be treated distinctly.

Credibility is also closely related to trust and the two are often used interchangeably as terms in journalism literature (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Trust can be thought of as a relationship where "a trustor, the side that places trust, and a trustee, the side being trusted" interact (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, p. 505). Such a relationship involves a "certain degree of uncertainty where one social actor needs another social actor but cannot be sure how that second actor – be it an individual, organization or an institution – will behave in the future" (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 141). Trust involves an expectation that an individual or organization can be relied on (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003) and different cues are used to make an assessment of whether such reliance can be placed on the trustee by the trustor. In the news context, to resolve such uncertainty, individuals must make judgments of news media along various dimensions in order to assess trustworthiness. Specifically, in order to come to a determination of media trust, Kohring and Matthes (2007) argue, individuals must consider their level of trust in the selection of topics, selection of facts, the accuracy of journalistic depictions, and the validity of journalistic assessments and evaluations. News stories, they observe, always result from selective processes which, in the eyes of audiences, may be viewed as acceptable or unacceptable to different degrees.

Viewed in these ways, both trust and credibility can be considered higher order constructs which are made up of sub-factors, dimensions, or lower-order concepts (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Chaffee, 1991). In other words, given the range of components of credibility, "perceptions

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of media credibility can thus be conceptualized as encapsulating the *clues* that people use to evaluate their trust in media" (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 141, emphasis added). For a source to be credible it may have to demonstrate reliability or have perceived expertise (Lankes, 2008). And for information to be credible, it may have to be timely, accurate, current, and comprehensive (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015). These concepts – reliability, expertise, timeliness, etc. – are lower-order concepts (Chaffee, 1991) which have bearing on whether something is considered credible. These views of credibility are the ones adopted in this dissertation because they organize various elements of credibility under a higher order concept or construct. In this view, to be *credible*, a source or message must be *believed*. And to be believed, they must be considered *trustworthy*, *reliable*, *expert*, *et cetera*, in the eye of the beholder. Sources must follow acceptable approaches in the eyes of audiences, selecting, depicting, and evaluating information in a way which makes it seem trustworthy and believable (Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

The locus of credibility assessments

As Metzger et al. (2003) observe, the locus of credibility assessments is also important to consider when it comes to this area of study. For instance, credibility may be viewed as an individual perception or be viewed as an (inherent) attribute of the source, message, or medium. Perspectives on where the locus of credibility assessments resides vary by academic domain. Information science, for example, emphasizes the objective properties information, focusing on whether it is high in quality, measured in terms of its accuracy, relevance, and usefulness for a particular purpose (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008, p. 8). Here, credibility is seen as being inherent in the message, built in. On the other hand, Metzger and Flanagin (2015, p. 446) argue that, within communication and psychology, credibility is a "perceptual variable," not inherent in a message

or source but something which must be subjectively perceived. Objective characteristics of messages, media, and sources still matter insofar as they are used to inform subjective judgments, but within communication and psychology, the concern is with how receivers judge credibility from their point of view.

The view of credibility as a 'perceptual variable' is adopted here, with the locus of credibility being with individual assessments rather than in inherent features of messages, sources, or mediums (though these elements do inform subjective assessments). Focus in this dissertation is placed on individuals' expressions of what makes news credible. Influences on such views of credibility may include individual beliefs, relational influences (e.g. being told by a friend that something is credible), situational influences (e.g. prior experience with a source), or dispositional/affective influences (e.g. a general feeling that something is credible or a general disposition toward skepticism) (Metzger et al., 2003). The focus in this study is on the ways in which individuals consciously articulate notions of news credibility at an epistemological level, which centers on individual beliefs and perceptions, but which may also involve relational, situational, or dispositional/affective influences.

Existing theories and models of credibility assessments

Since the goal of this dissertation is to examine how people construct or articulate their views of what makes news credible, other models and theories of credibility are briefly reviewed and an argument is subsequently made for why a philosophically-rooted, journalism-specific approach appropriate.

As noted, the study of credibility has its roots in psychological studies of persuasion, where researchers sought to understand the features of persuasive speakers (Metzger et al., 2003). This historical context has arguably influenced, and continues to influence, models and

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theories of credibility assessments (that is, how audiences make judgments of credibility). For instance, credibility assessments have been viewed through the psychological lenses of the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and the heuristic-systematic processing model (HSM) (Metzger, 2007; Metzger & Flanagin, 2015). The models are deemed 'dual processing models' because they hold that when people assess information they will either use a central or peripheral route (for the ELM; Petty & Cacioppo 1986) or a heuristic or systematic route (for the HSM; Chen & Chaiken, 1999). The form of cognitive processing employed will generally differ depending on a person's ability to critically assess a message and how motivated they are to do so (Petty & Cacioppo 1986; Chen & Chaiken, 1999). The route taken will play a role in determining what criteria are used to assess credibility.

In the elaboration likelihood model, for instance, message features are likely to be more salient than source features when people are motivated and able to assess credibility critically (Petty & Cacioppo 1986; Slater & Rouner, 1996). Under such conditions, people may assess the quality of the message in terms of its argument. This is reflective of the central route in ELM. However, when motivation or ability are lower, people may be more likely to follow a peripheral route, relying on surface-level source features to make judgements. Similarly, under the heuristic-systematic processing model, the form of processing employed – and thereby the types of cues used to judge information – will again vary based on a person's ability and motivation (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). The cues/factors people use or rely on to make credibility assessments can be loosely organized under these central/systematic and peripheral/heuristic headings and according to the medium, source, or message to which they relate.

Dual processing models underpin models of credibility assessments which have been put forward by other scholars. For instance, Fogg's (2003) Prominence-Interpretation Theory holds

that people must first notice something (prominence) and then make a judgment about what they have noticed (interpretation). Factors underpinning what will be noticed and what interpretations will be made include elements of ability and motivation, following key tenets of the dual processing models described above. In the context of websites, Wathen and Burkell's (2002) proposed stage model of web credibility assessments also holds that motivations (goals) and ability (prior knowledge) are key factors determining what cues are looked at and how credibility assessments are made. And Rieh's (2002) model of web credibility assessments follows a similar path, holding that people learn over time how to make judgments of credibility, building up knowledge and developing heuristics which can inform future information-seeking and evaluation tasks.

Drawing these theoretical approaches together, Metzger (2007) has proposed a dual processing model of credibility assessments which holds that people will either process information systematically or heuristically depending on their level of ability and motivation to do so. The heuristic criteria individuals may use to assess credibility include looking at website design or relying on what you have been told about a source. Meanwhile, more systematic ways of assessing credibility may include examining content, investigating the source, or checking other sources for consistency.

Finally, The MAIN model, as outlined by Sundar (2008), draws on the assumptions of the ELM and HSM described above, emphasizing the impacts that technological affordances and the structural features of websites might have on credibility assessments through the cueing of certain heuristics. A more technologically deterministic approach, it holds that the heuristics cued by features of media – modality, agency, interactivity, navigability (MAIN) – can be used

to make quick judgments (e.g. peripheral processing under the ELM) or otherwise inform more systematic processing (e.g. central processing under the ELM).

In general, these models all draw, in one way or another, from psychological theories and attempt to explain how credibility judgments might be made by different people in different situations. They emphasize individual variations in motivation and ability which may predict different forms of processing and note that certain cues will be more relevant to credibility assessments than others depending on the form of processing used.

The need for a philosophical, journalism-specific perspective on credibility

While these models and theories can be useful for studying news credibility, with factors of motivation and ability being important to credibility assessments, they do have missing elements which are relevant to the study of news and news audiences. These missing elements are what make a philosophically-rooted, news- and journalism-specific approach to viewing credibility appropriate.

First, these theories and models (apart from the MAIN model) only loosely organize the various cues and factors which form part of judgments of credibility. Assessment of the quality of information, for instance, may be considered part of systematic processing, but it may also be part of heuristic processing if people judge quality based on prior experience with a source.

Second, apart from Rieh's (2002) model (and in a small way, Fogg's (2003) theory), they do not always take expectations of and knowledge about sources explicitly into consideration. Expectations of and knowledge about sources – for instance, knowledge of their political biases or expectations of neutrality – are important to evaluations of news credibility (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders 2010).

Third, the social function of news and the societal role of the news media are important considerations. The above approaches do not take into consideration news as a unique construct and the news media as an institution with a particular societal role. Indeed, the news media are a recognized institution presiding over a defined area of political and social life (Cook, 2006) and it has been argued that the role of journalism is – and the meanings of news are – decidedly democratic in nature (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a). As such, there are higher expectations placed on journalism which have implications for audience views of news credibility (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a). In light of this, it is important to consider audience views on the news media's approach to producing messages in the context of its perceived role in society and the somewhat unique expectations placed on the profession of journalism due to its perceived role.

And finally, crucially, fourth, these theories and models do not directly take into consideration what credibility itself is about and what it means to make judgments of credibility. Specifically, what is absent is a consideration of how people construct notions of credibility, particularly the (philosophical) premises on which individuals base their views. Indeed, while they posit that cues from messages, sources, and media will be used to make credibility assessments, being factored into some heuristic or systematic calculus, they do not explicitly consider the features of that calculus. In other words, they do not consider what these cues amount to or speak to and how a person's view of credibility is constructed at a philosophical level. This, I argue, is because they miss a critical element of (news) credibility: epistemology.

When people are tasked with judging credibility, they are assessing the validity or veracity of a knowledge claim (message) they are being presented with. Individuals are asking "Do I believe this?". Without an epistemological element, I argue, existing theories of credibility fail to consider what ties various credibility cues and factors together (that is, epistemological

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considerations). One can point to various cues which might matter for credibility, but these cues remain unorganized if not tied to a fundamental premise. Here, the argument is that elements of, for instance, information quality and comprehensiveness, source expertise, and medium fidelity all touch on the epistemic validity of information. Epistemological considerations are the premises on which credibility is philosophically based.

While assessments of information may be irrational and affective – based on, for instance, quick heuristic judgments as noted above – these may not always be active assessments or judgments of *credibility*, per se, instead representing uncritical acceptance of or acquiescence to claims (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Indeed, the nature of heuristics is such that they are imperfect approximations, prompting individuals, for example, to perhaps accept information because it is "good enough" or "close enough" rather than credible. Such views fail to provide deeper understanding of what makes something *credible*, rather than simply acceptable in the moment.

Overall, an epistemological perspective provides a basis from which to philosophically understand what makes something credible, rather than just "feel right" or "seem believable." It provides a lens through which to view fundamental notions of credibility, drawing into focus the philosophical premises upon which individuals base their judgments of what is true and what is not. Moreover, it provides a lens through which to view the various factors or cues which make up credibility assessments or notions of credibility; an organizing logic which makes sense of how message, source, and medium-related cues and factors fit together under the umbrella of 'credibility.'

Therefore, I argue that an epistemic perspective on news credibility is important; a perspective which accounts for these factors. In fleshing this perspective out, the following

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section covers credibility as an epistemological question, and the subsequent chapter covers 1) why the epistemological beliefs of audiences matter for views on news credibility, 2) the relevance of perceptions of the epistemological approaches of news sources to credibility, and 3) how the epistemological beliefs of audiences and perceptions of the epistemic approaches of news sources relate when it comes to articulations and assessments of what makes news credible.

Credibility as an epistemological question

As noted, I argue that questions of credibility are fundamentally related to questions of epistemology. This view accords with that of Hofer (2004) who argues that epistemology is at the heart of people's interactions with information, including assessments of credibility. What people view as valid sources of and justifications for knowledge, for instance, factor into how trustworthy and believable they think a claim is. Epistemological considerations are important, particularly as they relate to journalism, because journalists seek to make factual claims about the world and audiences seek to orient themselves in the world based on the information provided to them.

Outside of journalism studies, a focus on epistemology and information evaluation has become part of research in educational psychology and library and information sciences (e.g. Hofer, 2004; Strømsø et al., 2011; Whitmire, 2003, 2004; Kammerer & Gerjets, 2012; Mason, Boldrin, & Ariasi, 2010). Researchers have sought to understand how the epistemological beliefs that people hold shape learning, comprehension, information-seeking, and trust in information. Epistemology has been relevant to scholars in these fields because they recognize that interaction with information – with truth claims – fundamentally concerns epistemology (Mason, Boldrin, & Ariasi, 2010).

Blaauw and Pritchard (2005, p. 49) define epistemology, or theory of knowledge, as "the branch of philosophy that deals with issues surrounding 1) the nature of knowledge, 2) the sources of knowledge, and 3) the extent of knowledge." Hofer and Pintrich (1997, p. 88), similarly view epistemology as being fundamentally concerned with "the nature and justification of human knowledge." In short, epistemology is concerned with what valid knowledge is and what its sources and justifications are.

This is relevant to notions and assessments of credibility because to make a determination of credibility is to decide that a piece of information (a message) is valid; that it is worth considering as believable, trustworthy, and true. When people make judge credibility, this is the core of what they are doing. People, for instance, may cross-check message and source features with their own knowledge and beliefs about what makes information valid, ultimately coming to a determination. This view, of course, assumes that people are at least, in part, rational actors who seek to base their beliefs, attitudes, and actions on reliable information. Views on credibility can be less rational (being influenced by affect, emotion, etc.) and less individual (being influenced by the opinions of others). However, judgments are ultimately made at the end of the day at an individual level, with people deciding what is credible according to their calculus. The focus of this dissertation is on the epistemological elements of that calculus as articulated by individuals themselves; examining how the epistemological beliefs people hold relate to views of what makes news credible.

Indeed, the argument I make is that if credibility is concerned with questions of epistemology and is dependent upon individual perceptions, then the epistemological beliefs individuals hold in general and regarding news are necessary to consider. The epistemological beliefs of individuals are considered in the next chapter, along with an overview of the

perceptions of the epistemic approaches of news actors and how these two factors may interact to shape expressions and assessments of what makes news credible.

CHAPTER TWO: Epistemological beliefs, perceptions of news, and news credibility

Epistemological beliefs

Individuals have epistemological beliefs which they may implicitly or explicitly subscribe to (Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 2004) and which inform how they interact with information (Hofer, 2004). Epistemological beliefs have been generally conceptualized as "individuals' beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing" (Muis, Bendixen, & Haerle, 2006, p. 4) or beliefs about "how knowing occurs, what counts as knowledge and where it resides, and how knowledge is constructed and evaluated" (Hofer, 2004, p. 1). In educational psychology research, where much work on epistemological beliefs has been done, the concern is with "how individuals come to know, the theories and beliefs they hold about knowing, and the manner in which such epistemological premises are a part of and an influence on the cognitive processes of thinking and reasoning" (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997, p. 88). Such beliefs are relevant to the study of news because they shape how people interact with information and make judgments of its credibility.

The nature of people's epistemological beliefs can be complex, and while there are a number of viewpoints on what epistemological beliefs are made up of (e.g. Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 2004; Schommer, 1990; Schraw, Bendixen, & Dunkle, 2004), an influential perspective on the nature of epistemological beliefs comes from Hofer and Pintrich (1997). These authors argue that beliefs should be measured and classified along four dimensions: perspectives on 1) the certainty of knowledge (whether absolute truths exist or whether truth is more fluid and uncertain, evolving over time), 2) the simplicity of knowledge (whether knowledge consists of discrete and concrete facts or whether it is made up of interrelated, contextualized concepts), 3) the source(s) of knowledge (where knowledge comes from, such as

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from one's own perceptions or from external authorities), and 4) the justification(s) for

knowledge (how claims to knowledge are justified, including what are viewed as proper

procedures or processes for grounding truth claims). These dimensions, related to individuals'

beliefs about the nature of knowledge (1 and 2) and the processes of knowing (3 and 4), cover

common elements in epistemological theories and measures of epistemological beliefs (Hofer &

Pintrich, 1997, pp. 118-199). This perspective on the content of epistemological beliefs is the one

adopted in this dissertation, given that it is parsimonious and based on an extensive review of

literature on the nature of epistemological beliefs.

In terms of the epistemological beliefs individuals may hold and why, there can be social,

cultural, political, and educational factors influencing them (Kreiss, 2017; Perry, 1970; Tabak &

Weinstock, 2008). For instance, people may develop more nuanced epistemological beliefs

through higher education (Perry, 1970) or adopt beliefs from their social groups, characterized

by commonalities in culture, political ideology, or religion (Kreiss, 2017; Tripodi, 2018; Tabak

& Weinstock, 2008). Epistemological beliefs can also vary across domains, with people having

different beliefs regarding what knowledge is and how one comes to know depending on

whether, for instance, hard sciences or social sciences are being considered (Hofer, 2000).

Epistemological beliefs and philosophical paradigms

The literature on epistemological beliefs is, of course, rooted in philosophy and, as such, I

draw on Western philosophical thinking as a guiding framework in this dissertation. As Muis,

Bendixen, and Haerle (2006, p. 6) note, centuries of debate in philosophy have centered around

three questions: "What is the nature of human knowledge? What are the sources of human

knowledge? [And] what are the limits of human knowledge?" Answers to these questions vary

and are by no means settled, which means there are a range of perspectives on what the nature of

knowledge and knowing is. These perspectives, implicitly and explicitly, inform the different epistemological beliefs that individuals hold. Philosophical paradigms are not mutually exclusive nor easily classifiable, but several relevant perspectives on sources of knowledge, justifications for knowledge, and the certainty or simplicity of knowledge are briefly covered here.

With regard to sources of knowledge, it can be seen as coming from within an individual (internalism) or as being external to an individual (externalism). In *internalism*, for instance, knowledge is limited by the subjective nature of perceptions: things can only ever be interpreted or known from an individual agent's perspective (Vahid, 2011). In other words, we are limited in our knowing by the fact that our ability to perceive comes from individual embodied senses; the real world, as it 'is', cannot be truly, objectively perceived because we cannot escape our own minds and bodies. Within internalism, we may obtain *self-knowledge*: that knowledge which only individuals themselves can perceive (Goldberg, 2011). Moreover, we may gain knowledge through *intuition* (Lycan, 2011). In this view, knowledge may be justified *a priori* without the need for empirical observation; certain truths just are and they can be obtained directly via the application of pure reason or rational reflection. Related views include *rationalism*, whereby knowledge is not rooted in sense experience but obtained via rational thought (BonJour, 2011). Rationalist doctrines are expressed in *mathematical and logical knowledge*, for instance, where certain necessary truths such as '2 + 2 = 4' are seen to hold true a priori without the need for empirical observation (Bueno, 2011).

Other paradigms hold that sources of knowledge reside in the external world – outside of a person. In *externalism*, for instance, the factors which have bearing on knowledge and justification fall outside of perceptual experience and therefore cannot be reliably accessed (Vahid, 2011). Indeed, in *realism*, objects (and other phenomena) exist independently of sense

experience. However, some features of the external world may be accessed through perception and this is the basis of *empiricism*: we can perceive the objective external world, which exists independently of our own minds, and come to know it via observation. This view embraces the value of perception as a path to knowledge, holding that there are real objects in the world 'out there' which can be known though sensory experience (though individuals are limited in their knowledge by what they can perceive and by the possibility of errors in 'sense data'). Meanwhile, in terms of our everyday knowledge about the world, a lot is said to come in the form of *testimonial knowledge*: we obtain knowledge from others who transmit information to us via communication (Lackey, 2011). Testimonial knowledge may be relied on to the degree that we have no reason or evidence to discount the individual who is relaying information. Testimonial knowledge is perhaps one of the primary bases of journalistic knowledge, since journalists rely on sources (interviewees) to transmit information to them (Gans, 1979).

     Of course, these views are not mutually exclusive and, in many cases, can work in conjunction with one another. For instance, as has been recognized in journalism studies (see Muñoz-Torres, 2012; Durham, 1998; Ryan, 2001), knowledge must emerge from the interaction between subject and object: in order to 'know' the world, there is necessarily an interaction between individual perceivers (with their embodied perspectives, biases, etc.) and the outside world (objects, places, people); a dualist view on the location of knowledge which emphasizes that all human knowledge is filtered through our perceptions (as noted in anti-realism). Views on sources of knowledge are summarized in a simplified form in Table 1.

Table 1. Select perspectives on sources or kinds of knowledge.

Internalism	Justifications for or sources of knowledge are internal to the believer (subjective); a person can draw and reflect on what is within their own perspective (Vahid, 2011). Truth is how things appear from an individual's perspective, given the evidence they have awareness of or access to and their internal mental states or reasons.
Self-knowledge	Knowledge that is unique to a person by virtue of their individual cognition, subjective experience, or agency (e.g. sensory experiences such as the feeling of one's own bodily pain or mental states such as knowledge of one's intentions) (Goldberg, 2011).
Intuition	An internal perception or sense that something seems or appears to be true in support of a hypothesis (Lycan, 2011)
A priori knowledge or justification	An instance of knowledge that is justified – or claimed to be justified – independently of experience by pure reason or rational reflection (e.g. knowledge that a person cannot be biologically human and amphibian at the same time) (BonJour, 2011).
Rationalism	Linked to a priori knowledge or justification, the view that "human being possess…a fundamental faculty of a priori insight (or a priori intuition) that yields direct and justified apprehensions of necessary truths" (BonJour, 2011, p. 287).
Mathematical or logical knowledge	The view that justified knowledge of certain mathematical and logical forms can arise from pure intuition or reason. The paradigmatic example of mathematical knowledge is the proposition that $1 + 1 = 2$.
Externalism	Justifications for or sources of knowledge are in part external to the believer; they may be partially or entirely independent of individual perception (Vahid, 2011). Truth has objective properties.
Realism and anti-realism	Realism is the domain-specific view that real things (objects, numbers, time, etc.) exist within a domain and that "their existence and nature are objective and independent of us, our perceptions, thoughts, and language" (Schantz, 2011, p. 477). Anti-realism contends that such things exist "but are not objective or have no independent status in reality" outside of our perception (p. 477).
Empiricism	The view that "the only way something can be known to be real is, whether directly or indirectly, via [perceptual] experience" (Blaauw & Pritchard, 2005, p. 47).
Testimonial knowledge	A form of communicative knowledge, rooted in the recognition that most of what we possess as knowledge is imparted to us by others via testimony (Lackey, 2011).

When it comes to justifications for knowledge, empiricism points to one perspective on the proper procedure or process for obtaining knowledge: it must involve empirical observation of the world and subjective (but reasonable) interpretation of that which is observed. *Scientific knowledge* is rooted in this paradigm, holding that knowledge can be obtained through the application of accepted standards, procedures, and rules (Achinstein, 2011). Knowledge claims are not accepted until evidence for hypotheses have met agreed scientific standards. Obtaining this form of knowledge involves the application of intuition and deductive (or inductive) reasoning based on empirical observations. This view generally holds that knowledge is discovered through the process of observation but recognizes that subjective biases might get in the way and thus demands objectivity.

Contrary and more critical views, however, hold that "knowledge is created, either individually or culturally, [that] objectivity is a ruse by the powerful to exclude other views, and [that] taking a perspective is unavoidable" (Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 2004, p. 214). This view denies the possibility of objective observation, critiquing the hegemonic structures which uphold knowledge-producing institutions (such as those within the sciences or journalism) for their unquestioned assumptions and biases (post-structuralism). Knowledge claims based on such hegemonic power structures are de-constructed and be shown to be inconsistent, contradictory, and intertextual (Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 2004). Singular ways of knowing are rejected and in such in instances where one singular way of knowing is not endorsed, *pluralism* becomes relevant. In pluralism, knowledge arises from and can exist in different places or perspectives, taking different (possibly contradictory) forms. Pluralism holds that there are multiple epistemic systems or ways of knowing which can be considered valid (Boghossian, 2011).

Meanwhile, *reliabilism* may be viewed as a related paradigm to scientific knowledge, whereby justification of knowledge is determined by one's use of reliable (cognitive) processes (Comesaña, 2011). *Fallibilist* doctrines, moreover, hold that empirical knowledge can be accepted on the balance of reason or probabilities despite the possibility that propositions may be mistaken or proved wrong (Dougherty, 2011). In this paradigm, individuals can never be absolutely sure of truths (no certain knowledge), but they can be reasonably confident, in a particular context, based on the evidence available and by ruling out alternative explanations. In some ways, this view links to that of *evidentialism*, which holds that individuals are justified in believing proposition *P* if *P* fits with all of the available evidence at time *T* (Mittag, 2011). Thus, justified knowledge may be claimed on the basis of good evidence (in context).

Finally, the simplest view of justification holds that knowledge is justified if there is a *correspondence* between beliefs and the facts of the objective external world (Lynch, 2011). Views on justifications for knowledge are summarized in a simplified form in Table 2.

Table 2. Select perspectives on justifications for knowledge (processes of knowing).

Scientific knowledge	The view that justified knowledge can be obtained by following rules contained within the 'scientific method' and that claims can only be justified insofar as they have been rigorously subject to and proved via the scientific method (Achinstein, 2011).
Reliabilism	The view that, generally, valid knowledge is that which is obtained via belief-forming (cognitive) processes that are unconditionally reliable (Comesaña, 2011, p. 177). These reliable processes connect beliefs and reality, making them justified.
Fallibilism	The view that knowledge, despite the fact that humans are fallible knowers, can be accepted on the balance of reason or probabilities despite the possibility that propositions may be mistaken or proved wrong (Dougherty, 2011). Fallibilism can be viewed as the balance between skepticism (uncertainty in all knowledge) and dogmatism (certainty in all knowledge).
Evidentialism	The view that that individuals are justified in believing proposition P if P fits with all of the available evidence at time T (Mittag, 2011). This is a pragmatic view which recognizes the limits of present human knowledge, allowing for (tentative) knowledge claims despite uncertainty.
Pluralism	Related to relativism, the view that there are multiple "epistemic systems [which] are on par as far as their correctness is concerned" (Boghossian, 2011, p. 77). In other words, there are different ways of knowing or coming to conclusions which might be valid.
Correspondence theory of truth (realism)	The view that truth or valid knowledge involve a correspondence of beliefs with the facts of the objective external world (Lynch, 2011).

Finally, epistemological perspectives may also be classified according to the level of certainty it is believed it is possible to obtain (and how simple or complex knowledge is). At one end of the spectrum are *skeptical* doctrines which hold that we cannot be absolutely sure of anything because there is always the possibility of being deceived or wrong. A related view may include *infinitism*, which holds that might be no reason that can be given for a belief that is immune from further interrogation. This potential for infinite regress (i.e. constant questioning) ultimately means that no truth claim can truly be justified because there is always an underlying

proposition which is not supported by reason or evidence. Another view is rooted in post-modernist thought, which "recognize[s] the plasticity and constant change of reality and knowledge" (Muis, Bendixen, & Haerle, 2006, p. 9). Postmodern views can be *relativistic*, holding that knowledge is "subjectively determined by multiple factors" (p. 9), that it can be ambiguous and pluralistic, and that "knowledge is relative and fallible rather than absolute and certain" (p. 9). Here, multiple truths might be held to exist because 'knowing' is context- and person-sensitive (Blaauw & Pritchard, 2005)

At the other end of the spectrum are views which are more certain such as *foundationalism*, where there are certain foundational absolute truths ('building blocks') which form the foundation of all other justified beliefs (DePaul, 2011). This view holds that there are fundamental knowable facts that can support all subsequent propositions and thereby justify knowledge claims. Meanwhile, in *realism or anti-realism*, there is an independent external reality that is either a) independent of our ability to perceive it, or b) perceivable through our senses. In either regard, reality exists in a more or less concrete way. Truth in realism means a correspondence of beliefs with the objective facts or properties of the external world. A realist perspective also serves as a justification for knowledge (a *correspondence view* of truth; Table 2).

In between views of certainty and uncertainty perhaps sits *contextualism*, which holds that knowledge claims are dependent on context: the meaning of '*S* knows *P*' differs depending on the situation and can involve an individual's psychological state and/or the conversational or practical situation (Rysiew, 2011). In other words, the truth value of a claim (e.g. "I know my wife is at home") varies according to the context in which the claim is made (e.g. whether the

individual is at home, observing their wife, or away at work). Views on the certainty or

simplicity of knowledge are summarized in a simplified form in Table 3.

	Table 3. Select perspectives on the certainty or simplicity of knowledge.
Skepticism	A view which generally touches on the uncertainty of knowledge claims. Such uncertainty may arise from a present lack of evidence, a lack of justified reasons, or the consistent possibility that we may be deceived in our knowing. Some skeptics may reject or resist definite conclusions, holding that more inquiry is always necessary (with the possibility that knowledge may eventually be claimed). Others may reject the idea of certain knowledge entirely because there always exist skeptical hypotheses or propositions (doubts to be raised).
Infinitism	The view that there is no reason that can be given for a belief that is immune from further interrogation, meaning no knowledge claim can be truly justified because there is always an underlying proposition which is not supported by reason or evidence. However, Klein (2011) argues that these reasons do exist and that they simply need to be found.
Relativism	The view that knowledge claims and justifications for such are relative, varying in status according to the "epistemic system" utilized by an individual (Boghossian, 2011, p. 76). Such a view might hold that there are no certain truths or absolute facts because knowledge claims and justifications can vary across people and situations.
Foundationalism	The view that there are certain foundational absolute truths ('building blocks') which form the foundation of all other justified beliefs (DePaul, 2011). This is a view which posits the existence of certain truths which need no justification (e.g. "I exist").
Contextualism	The view that knowledge claims are dependent on context, shifting depending on the situation under consideration or the mental state of the knower (Rysiew, 2011).

While this review is not comprehensive and only provides surface-level descriptions of

vast philosophical paradigms and complex concepts, setting aside debates and conflict between

them, it does provide a sense of the perspectives which individuals may subscribe to. These

perspectives matter because they are likely to have very different consequences for how news is

judged; a rationalist, for instance, may approach news differently than an empiricist because of

their beliefs regarding how reliable knowledge is discovered or constructed. Meanwhile, a realist may see news differently than a skepticist, given their divergent views on the nature of truth in the world. Exactly what beliefs people expressly subscribe to when it comes to journalism, and how they relate to perceptions of what makes news credible, are core parts of what this dissertation looks to explore.

Structuring epistemological beliefs

One issue with there being a range of philosophical paradigms for individuals to subscribe to is that they are not organized or structured. To manage this, and facilitate better understanding of and comparison between the stated epistemological beliefs that people hold, in the educational psychology literature features of epistemological beliefs have been formalized into models. These models organize the varying philosophical beliefs that people have and two of these are covered briefly here as examples of how epistemological beliefs regarding news and journalism might be classified and structured.

The first model is a synthesized version of one outlined by Hofer and Pintrich (1997). A number of models of epistemological beliefs exist in educational psychology literature to classify beliefs along certain dimensions (see Perry, 1970; Baxter Magolda 1992; King & Kitchener, 1994). These have been reviewed and generally synthesized by Hofer and Pintrich (1997) who organize them into a model of epistemological beliefs which is structured in a linear fashion, proceeding from 'less advanced' to 'more advanced' epistemological thinking. The model draws on insights from qualitative research conducted with students in the field of educational psychology and classifies people according to their 'epistemological development'; that is, development in the sophistication of their thinking about the nature, processes, and bases of knowledge and knowing. Individuals are seen to hold somewhat static belief positions which can

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shift as learning occurs. The general nature of Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) synthesized linear

model is below, synthesized into three stages or positions. Movement between the

stages/positions represents an 'advancement' in the sophistication of an individual's thinking as a

result of education.

Table 4. A linear, developmental model of epistemological beliefs.

Position one: This form of belief may be described as dualistic absolutism (Perry, 1970), absolute or transitional knowing (Baxter Magolda 1992), or pre-reflective thinking (King & Kitchener, 1994)

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1. Perspective on certainty of knowledge – Knowledge is absolute or certain, or partially certain with some present unknowns.
2. Perspective on simplicity of knowledge – The world is understood in terms of right or wrong answers. There are discrete, concrete facts that can be learned and known. To gain knowledge is to accumulate facts.
3. Perspective on source(s) of knowledge – Knowledge is obtained from authority figures or "can be obtained with certainty by direct observation (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 14). It is external to oneself and becomes known when it is transmitted to the individual.
4. Perspective on justification for knowledge – Knowledge is justified by reference to the word of an authority figure, by direct correspondence between what is believed and what is seen, or, in areas of uncertainty, by reference to personal opinions given that truth has not yet been proven.

Position two: This form of belief may be described as multiplistic/relativistic (Perry, 1970), independent knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1992), or quasi-reflective thinking (King & Kitchener, 1994)

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1. Perspective on certainty of knowledge – Knowledge is uncertain and everybody has their own beliefs. It is perceived that there is legitimate uncertainty in the world and this is dealt with by treating claims relativistically: "anyone has the right to his own opinion" and this prevails over the notion of rights/wrongs (Perry, 1970, p. 11). There is a realization at this stage that "authorities can be wrong or biased" and that "there can be more than one 'correct' answer to a problem" (Whitmire, 2003, p. 130).
2. Perspective on simplicity of knowledge – Facts and knowledge claims are seen as relative, contextual, and subjective. "Knowledge is uncertain and knowledge claims are idiosyncratic to the individual" and "only interpretations of evidence, events, or issues may be known" (King & Kitchener, 1994, pp. 14-15). Knowledge is "contextual and relativistic" (Perry, 1970, p. 11).
3. Perspective on source(s) of knowledge –Sources of knowledge are pluralistic. Individuals are characterized by belief in the uncertainty of knowledge, the questioning of authority as the only source of knowledge, and the belief that individuals have their own subjective beliefs and 'truths' which they are entitled to. There is recognition of "self as knower, with the ability to construct knowledge in interaction with others" (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997, p. 120).

Table 4 (cont'd)
4. Perspective on justification for knowledge – "Beliefs are justified by giving reasons and using evidence, but the arguments and choice of evidence are idiosyncratic" or otherwise "beliefs are justified within a particular context by means of the rules of inquiry for that context and by context-specific interpretations of evidence" (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 15) Individuals may not be able to "justify knowing anything in the face of ambiguity and [may] often conclude many points of view are equally correct" (Wood et al., 2004, p. 278).

Position three: This form of belief may be described as commitment within relativism (Perry, 1970), contextual knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1992) or reflective thinking (King & Kitchener, 1994)

1. Perspective on certainty of knowledge – This perspective recognizes that there is uncertainty in our ability to be absolute knowers and that truth claims may not be definitively made. While there may be no absolute truths, knowledge can be claimed in context if it meets an agreed standard or evidence or procedure. Individuals recognize that "knowledge is not a given [but that] probabilistic knowledge can be constructed by evaluating existing evidence and expert opinion" (Wood et al., 2004, p. 278). Uncertainty in knowledge is dealt with by making a commitment to a point of view but responsibility for this position must be taken (in terms of reviewing evidence, recognizing issues, and updating beliefs on an ongoing basis).
2. Perspective on simplicity of knowledge – Knowledge is judged on the basis of "evidence in context" (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p. 30). Here, "interpretations that are based on evaluations of evidence across contexts and on the evaluated opinions of reputable others can be known" (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 15). That is, evaluated evidence and opinions can be known.
3. Perspective on source(s) of knowledge – This way of knowing emphasizes the value of both the internal and external as sources of evidence and knowledge. Knowledge may come from multiple of sources: experts, authorities, personal observations, etc. Knowledge is "limited and situational" and its value is judged by using "critical inquiry" (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997, p. 101). Knowledge can be claimed after critical evaluation of evidence and consideration of multiple perspectives, contingent on the fact that knowledge remains open to re-evaluation.
4. Perspective on justification for knowledge – Knowledge claims result from "reasonable inquiry" and a weighing of evidence (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 15). Here, "knowledge is constructed into individual conclusions...on the basis of information from a variety of sources" with "interpretations that are based on evaluations of evidence across contexts" (King & Kitchener, 1994, pp. 15-16). Knowledge comes from an assessment of what is "most reasonable or probable according to the current evidence" with the proviso that claims are reassessed when "relevant new evidence, perspectives or tools of inquiry become available" (King & Kitchener, 1994, pp. 15-16). "Beliefs are justified probabilistically on the basis of a variety of interpretive considerations, such as the weight of the evidence, the explanatory value of the interpretations, the risk of erroneous conclusions, consequences of alternative judgments, and the interrelationships of these factors" (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 16). That is, different perspectives are compared, evidence is thought through, knowledge is integrated, and a judgment is made.

Note: Belief positions based on a synthesis from Hofer and Pintrich (1997)

When it comes to the philosophical paradigms described previously, the positions generally correspond to certain perspectives: Position 1 may include perspectives such as realism and testimonial knowledge (where knowledge is simple, certain, and imparted by authorities); Position 2 may include perspectives such as skepticism, relativism, infinitism, contextualism, or pluralism (where knowledge claims are uncertain, contextual, and personal or idiosyncratic); and Position 3 may include perspectives such as empiricism, scientific knowing, fallibilism, evidentialism, or reliabilism (where valid knowledge is contingent on the use of reliable processes and is grounded on the best current evidence).

Again, according to Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) model, individuals are seen to have epistemological beliefs which are at lesser or greater levels of complexity or advancement based on their views on the certainty, simplicity, sources, and justification for knowledge. The positions are viewed as somewhat static in nature, with individuals having one set of beliefs versus another. But individuals are seen to generally progress through these positions as they learn, advancing in their thinking, though some may delay, stay within a position, or retreat to more dualistic or absolutist thinking (Perry, 1970). The education literature has a normative view of this progression, seeing advancement through the stages as a positive. Whether this is the case for the epistemological beliefs of a range of individuals (not just students) and with respect to journalism is not clear, however, and a normative view is not adopted here. Instead, the question in this dissertation is how such beliefs might relate to views on news credibility in different ways, regardless of their level of 'advancement.'

In addition to Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) linear model, a simpler classification scheme is perhaps that of Schraw and Olafson (2008) who posit a two-dimensional, four-quadrant scale to classify individuals' epistemological *and* ontological beliefs (beliefs about what exists or is

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knowable). The authors posit a model where epistemological and ontological beliefs exist on a

continuum between realism and relativism. Realists are those who believe that "entities or

phenomena (e.g. knowledge or physical matter) exist and can be understood and explained to

some degree" (p. 31), with the bases for belief being theory, empiricism, or faith. These

individuals believe in more certain and simple knowledge. Relativists, meanwhile, are those who

are constructivist or subjectivist; those who believe that "entities may exist in an ever-changing

manner...or that we can never know with certainty whether something exists" (p. 32). The

authors argue that while individuals may hold one form of epistemological beliefs, their

ontological beliefs may be different, resulting in different combinations. They provide a scheme

for people to place themselves within this four-quadrant scale (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Schraw and Olafson's (2008) four-quadrant scale.
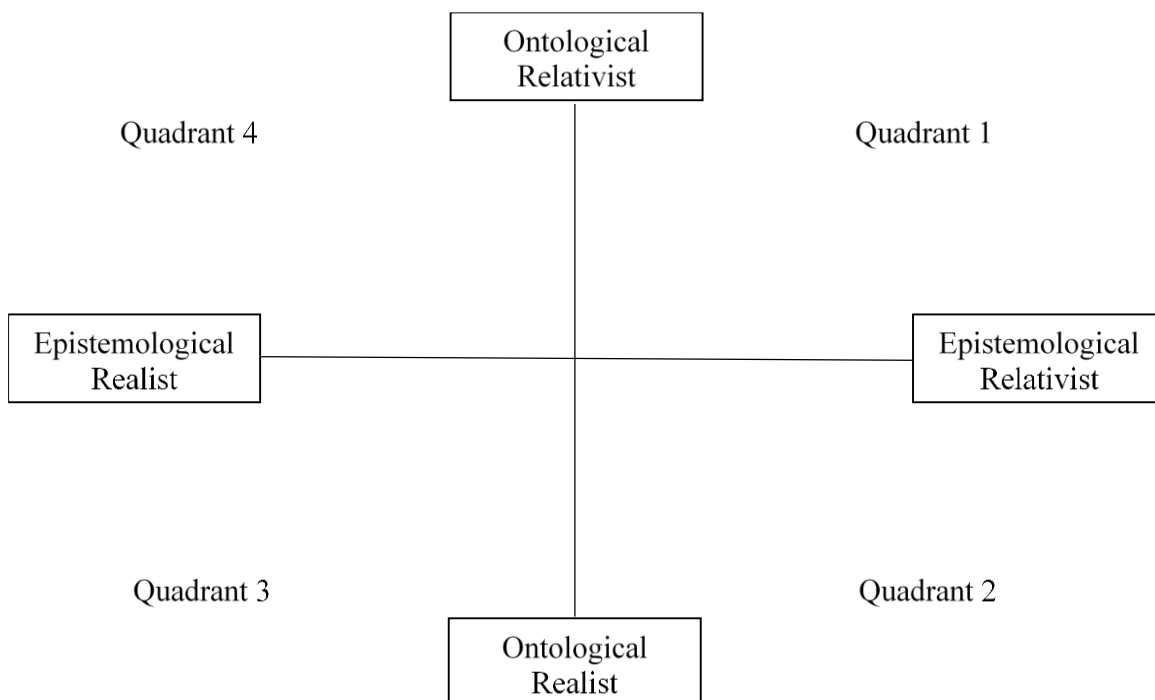
In this classification scheme, an epistemological realist believes there is objective, certain knowledge about the world to be acquired; an epistemological relativist believes that knowledge is uncertain, changing, and contextual; an ontological realist believes there is a single reality which is the same for everyone; and an ontological relativist believes that different people have different realities. Divided into four quadrants, a realist-realist believes in knowledge of a singular objective reality, a realist-relativist believes that different people have their own objective realities, a relativist-realist believes that knowledge is uncertain though there is a single reality to find, and a relativist-relativist believes that knowledge is uncertain and that there are multiple different realities.

These models, the paradigms described above, and the four-dimensional definition of epistemological beliefs offered by Hofer and Pintrich (1997), serve as guideposts for the approach taken in this dissertation. The models described here are guideposts insofar as they provide definitions of epistemological belief positions and examples of how to organize both them and their associated philosophical paradigms. However, these models are rooted in literature from educational psychology and Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) model, in particular, has embedded normative and developmental assumptions. These same assumptions are not adopted here, given 1) the focus on a more general sample of individuals (not just students), and 2) given that it is unclear whether the same normative assumptions about 'more advanced' and 'less advanced' epistemological beliefs apply when it comes to news and journalism. Indeed, one position may not be normatively better than another in this domain. The advancement between stages – e.g. from dualism to relativism – is viewed positively as a sign of intellectual development within educational psychology, but when it comes to journalism, the same normative assumption may not be applicable.

Domain-specificity of epistemological beliefs

So far, general epistemological beliefs have been discussed. While such general beliefs are seen to exist, importantly, epistemological beliefs have also been understood as context- and domain-dependent, with specific beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing becoming more or less salient/relevant depending on the situation, subject, or task at hand (Muis, Bendixen, & Haerle, 2006; Hammer & Elby, 2004; Hofer, 2000; Tabak & Weinstock, 2005; Buehl & Alexander, 2006; Buehl, Alexander, & Murphy, 2002). Hofer (2000), for example, has found that students' beliefs about the attainability of truth and certainty of knowledge, the validity of subjective beliefs and experiences as sources of knowledge, and the role of authorities in generating knowledge differ depending on whether psychology or hard sciences are being considered (see also see also Estes, et al. 2003). Nevertheless, dimensions of beliefs do sometimes cut across domains.

The lessons from such research are that the criteria that make a knowledge or truth claim appear 'valid' in one domain (in the eyes of the perceiver) do not *necessarily* translate to other domains where different criteria or standards might be more relevant. For instance, empiricism, as a way of knowing, is most relevant to hard sciences and rationalism is more relevant to mathematics (Muis, Bendixen, & Haerle, 2006). Different domains bring to the forefront different paradigms and epistemological beliefs. Muis et al. (2006, p. 10), in fact, argue that "although there are multiple epistemological views, domains of inquiry can be categorized by their dominant epistemic views or patterns." Again, the dominant epistemic pattern in science may be viewed as empirical, while in mathematics it may be viewed as rational. Importantly, domain-specific beliefs can be uncovered when beliefs are assessed at the level of domains (Buehl & Alexander, 2006).

Given that this dissertation considers news and that epistemological beliefs can be domain-specific, possible epistemological beliefs regarding news and journalism are briefly reviewed next. The possible existence of domain-specific epistemological beliefs regarding news and journalism underscores the need to study such beliefs specifically. Identifying their form and how they relate to articulations of news credibility is the key focus of this dissertation.

Epistemological beliefs regarding news

When it comes to domain-specific epistemological beliefs regarding news, these beliefs can be viewed in terms of what people see as possible or achievable in journalism (e.g. can truth be found? Is objectivity possible?), as well as what people see as valid journalistic knowledge and practices are (e.g. what are good sources of journalistic knowledge? What are good journalistic practices?). These are beliefs regarding what journalism can and should do at an epistemic level. I argue that these beliefs, which may be informed by individuals' more general epistemological beliefs regarding the nature of knowledge and knowing, shape notions of what makes news credible. This is because such beliefs speak to the validity, trustworthiness, and believability of journalistic knowledge.

In terms of context, the news media in the United States, and particularly among certain segments of the population, suffers from audience distrust (Swift, 2016), with people often viewing content as biased (Jones, 2018; Knight Foundation, 2018; Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020). Public faith in the media has been in general decline for decades (Swift, 2017) and this has been blamed on a number of factors from declining in trust in institutions generally, to increased party polarization, to greater media fragmentation and competition from partisan outlets, to dissatisfaction with more interpretive, negative, and sensational coverage (Ladd, 2012; McNair, 2017; Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2001).

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On the latter point, research has found that audiences, both in the United States and internationally, have a particular concern with journalists being accurate, objective and non-partisan, rating these traits as being key parts of good journalism (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2016; Tsfati et al., 2006; Heider et al., 2005). These concerns relate to journalistic processes, touching on how journalism is done, as well as the form that news takes. And while audiences want journalists to be objective and non-partisan, they instead view the news media as being subjective, biased, and too interpretive (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019; Newman & Fletcher, 2017). Attitudes are, of course, contextual, with members of the Israeli public, for example, having a more positive view of journalistic performance (Tsfati et al., 2006). Nevertheless, performance ratings are lower in Israel in instances where the media is perceived to be too politically biased.

Summarizing a Swedish view of good journalism, Karlsson and Clerwall (2019, p. 1196) write:

> "Good journalism is objective, unbiased, and based on verified facts from many different and reliable sources. It is a watchdog of power and presents citizens with relevant information about the societies they live in. It is carried out by professionals who do not have a personal stake or an agenda of their own in the subjects they cover, but who have great, preferably first-hand, contemporary and historical knowledge of the subject matter...Good journalism takes great measures to tell news stories in an interesting, well-designed, correct, and easy-to-read manner adapted to its audiences."

Here, the expressed view of what is 'good journalism' is news which is simple, certain, well-sourced, and produced by objective reporters with no biases. In this sense, based on research into audience perspectives, publics generally may be viewed as subscribing to empirical and/or realist epistemological perspectives where news is viewed as credible and trustworthy when subjective biases are seen to be removed and journalists simply report facts 'as they are.' It has indeed been found that the public say they want reporters to convey the facts neutrally,

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without providing their own points of view, so that they can come to their own conclusions based on the information (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019; Tsfati et al., 2006). But, in many ways, journalists are perceived as operating within a different (interpretive, constructivist, contextualist) epistemological paradigm which may impact the credibility of news.

This is not to say, however, that this pattern of public perceptions is consistent, with Vos et al. (2019) finding, for example, that audiences see setting the political agenda, influencing public opinion, advocating for social change, supporting national development, conveying positive images of political leadership, and supporting government policy as more important aspects of news than journalists do themselves. These perspectives on the role of journalism do not entirely accord with the view that journalists should be neutral and objective. Thus, audiences can be seen to have sometimes conflicting views about how journalists should go about their jobs. Moreover, there is evidence of contradiction between individuals' stated desire for objective and neutral news (Newman et al., 2020) and tendencies toward the consumption of ideologically-agreeable and/or partisan journalism (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015).

Cultural and political factors may also inform what people view as good, quality journalism. Not all audience members are the same, nor do they have the same view of what good journalism is. In Kreiss' (2017, p. 445) view, "cultural and social identities, including partisanship, shape what people accept as true, including the work of independent and objective professional journalism." This argument recognizes that journalists are part of a landscape of identity and differing epistemologies, and that this may have a bearing on the credibility of news. Insofar as individual epistemological beliefs can be rooted in social, cultural, religious, and political identities, news sources which are seen to reflect the same values may be viewed as

more trustworthy and believable (Kreiss, 2018), while those which do not may be seen as less credible. Perceived journalistic roles and forms of epistemological beliefs, of course, are also likely to shift depending on the national context under consideration (Deuze, 2002; Hofer 2008).

Key to epistemological beliefs regarding journalism are also what people consider news to be. Discussed above are people's views on news, journalism, and the roles of journalists. Recent discussions, however, have brought to the fore questions of what exactly news is in the eyes of audiences. Edgerly and Vraga (2020a, p. 420) describe this in terms of 'news-ness', or the "extent to which audiences characterize a specific piece of media as news." They argue that audience views on what news is shape how people process and respond to this content.

If, as Edgerly and Vraga (2020a) detail, news is seen to have a normative role to play in democratic society – with journalists providing information used to make decisions, holding those in power accountable, etc. – then this arguably places an expectation on journalism to produce highly reliable and accurate coverage. Indeed, audiences have been found to have a view of news which emphasizes the importance of objectivity and neutrality, and they also see it as having an important democratic function (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020). These factors place an epistemic burden on journalism, one which emphasizes the need for journalists to follow practices and procedures which are seen by audiences to produce valid, credible knowledge. In other words, in this view, what audiences see as being news matters for epistemological beliefs regarding journalism. And if journalism does not live up to expectations of news-ness, credibility may be impacted. Indeed, Edgerly and Vraga (2020b) have found that higher perceptions of news-ness are related to higher perceptions of credibility.

While this section has covered audience perspectives on news and journalism, audience-specific research focused on people's epistemological beliefs regarding journalism largely does

not exist. Research has tended to focus on audience expectations of journalism generally, but not through such a specific epistemic lens. This necessitates research in this area to uncover what individuals' stated epistemological beliefs are. Such beliefs, it is argued, influence what is articulated as being credible news. Attention is also paid in this dissertation to what audiences view news to be and how this shapes epistemological beliefs regarding journalism.

The epistemological approaches of journalists

Just as individuals have epistemological beliefs, so do journalists have epistemological approaches in their work. Epistemological stances are implicit in organizational and institutional practices, particularly those in knowledge-producing fields (Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 2004). This means that journalists have epistemologies (Waisbord, 2019); that is, they have specific approaches to the construction, filtering, sorting, and presentation of information or knowledge. The epistemologies of journalism are important to briefly consider because how journalists approach their work plays a role in shaping how it is judged by audiences.

In general terms, news is a genre of information which provides information about and a perspective on the world – a way to "perceive and comprehend reality" (Ekström, 2002, p. 261) – giving the public a sense of what is going on around them and a way to "gain a sense of itself as a public" (Zelizer 2004, p. 24). Because news, as a genre, is fact- or truth-oriented (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a), journalists may seek to establish its validity as a form of knowledge, in some instances, by emphasizing its realism, with the content of news texts representing a correspondence between mind and reality (Muñoz-Torres, 2012). Similarly, news may seek to establish its validity by providing audiences direct representations of the world (e.g. pictures, audio, video) which generate a sense of 'being there' (Sundar et al., 2015) and which indicate to audiences that what they are being told happened did indeed happen (Ekström, 2002). These

appeals to validity present news 1) as certain and simplistic in its representation of truths, with 2) knowledge about the world coming from direct observation, and 3) this knowledge being justified in its truth value by empirical evidence.

Intimately tied to the concept of news is also news practice itself; the process of creating knowledge about the world (Zelizer, 2004). The validity of news as a form of knowledge rests on the procedures or processes which go into its construction (Ekström, 2002). Journalists employ a range of epistemological assumptions and approaches which differ by national and cultural context, journalistic movement and brand/outlet. But at the core of journalism in the United States is "its claim to present, on a regular basis, reliable, neutral and current factual information that is important and valuable for the citizens in a democracy" (Ekström, 2002, p. 274). In terms of practices, while there is no singular journalistic epistemology (Waisbord, 2019), journalists tend to operate according to common sets of professional and organizational norms, routines, values, and beliefs which guide the selection, framing, analysis, and presentation of information (Gans, 1979; Epstein, 1981; Henry, 1981; Deuze, 2005; Schudson, 2001; Ekström, 2002; Zelizer, 1993). They operate according to news values such as prominence, conflict, timeliness, and proximity (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014); share principles such as public service, objectivity, autonomy, and immediacy (Deuze, 2005); and follow set organizational routines (Gans, 1979). These features of journalistic practice make up part of the profession's epistemology – its approach to the construction of knowledge.

Journalism's epistemology is manifest in these processes which are employed in the mediation of social reality. Importantly, however, journalistic approaches to knowledge construction are not value-neutral and the degree to which the knowledge claims of journalists are accepted depends on how audiences view the knowledge-producing procedures adopted.

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Indeed, there is an interaction between journalism and audiences: news sources seek to be believed and therefore enact certain communication strategies to get audience buy-in, while audiences react and respond to what these sources produce, making judgments of credibility. Journalism may seek legitimacy and credibility by showing it follows procedures which provide 1) a level of certainty to knowledge claims, 2) simple facts about the world, 3) valid sources of authoritative knowledge, and 4) proper justifications for the claims made. But while journalists may have very deliberate and intentional epistemological approaches, what is important for this dissertation is how their epistemological approaches are perceived by audiences (who may view things differently).

Core argument

Here, the core argument of this dissertation is presented. As outlined in the introduction, this argument rests on four key assumptions. The first is that news credibility is fundamentally an epistemological question. While assessments of credibility may be rational or irrational, being influenced by emotions, social influences, or ideological beliefs, as well as based on different factors or cues, the core consideration when it comes to credibility here is the believability and trustworthiness of news at an individual level. Second, given the argument that news credibility is fundamentally an epistemological question, the epistemological beliefs that audiences hold are important to consider. Such beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing inform how audiences are likely to construct and articulate notions of what makes news credible. With respect to journalism, these beliefs constitute views on what journalists can and should do to make news valid at an epistemic level. Third, the epistemic approaches that news actors adopt matter insofar as they are the basis upon which journalism is judged: how journalists do their job – or, more specifically, are *seen* to do their job – is important for how they and their work will be judged. And finally, fourth, congruency or incongruency between individual epistemological

beliefs and the perceived epistemic approaches of news actors has overall implications for news credibility.

The central argument is that the credibility of news hinges, at least in part, on the acceptance of news as a legitimate form of knowledge and the acceptance of the newsmaking practices that are adopted as part of the process of knowledge construction. The thrust of this is that if there is divergence between audience epistemological beliefs (beliefs about *what journalism can and should do*) and the perceived epistemological approaches of news sources (views on *what journalism actually does* from an audience perspective), then news content may be less likely to be viewed as credible. On the other hand, if there is convergence, then news content may be viewed as more credible. Whether this is the case, of course, is an empirical question. The nature of the relationship between individual epistemological beliefs, the perceived epistemological approaches of news sources, and views of credibility is not known. The above review of the literature leaves open questions regarding the relationship between these factors.

Research questions

This dissertation adopts an exploratory approach to address questions regarding epistemological beliefs, both generally and as they relate to news, perceptions of the epistemological approaches of news sources, and how these factors relate to perceptions of news credibility. Research questions are ordered such that they follow a progression from individuals' epistemological beliefs, through to perceptions of journalistic epistemologies, and finally to views on what makes news credible or not.

The first two research questions concern epistemological beliefs. Of interest here are people's general epistemological beliefs and their domain-specific epistemological beliefs regarding journalism. Epistemological beliefs regarding journalism include what people see as

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possible or achievable in journalism as well as what valid journalistic knowledge and practices

are.

> RQ1 – What are the nature of individuals' epistemological beliefs? Specifically, what are individuals' beliefs regarding of 1) the certainty of knowledge, 2) the simplicity of knowledge, 3) the source(s) of knowledge, and 4) the justification for knowledge?

> RQ2 – What are the nature of individuals' lay epistemological beliefs as they relate to news and journalism? Specifically, what are individuals' beliefs regarding of 1) the certainty of knowledge, 2) the simplicity of knowledge, 3) the source(s) of knowledge, and 4) the justification for knowledge in journalism?

The third research question focuses on perceptions of journalistic epistemology in

practice. Of interest here are audience perceptions of how journalists do their work at an

epistemological level.

> RQ3 – How is the epistemology of journalism, as it is practiced, viewed by individuals? Specifically, how is journalism judged in terms of a) the certainty of knowledge that it provides, b) the simplicity of knowledge that it provides, c) the source(s) of knowledge that it provides, and d) the justifications for knowledge that it provides?

The final research question focuses on how epistemological beliefs and the perceived

epistemic approaches of news sources relate to views on news credibility.

> RQ4 – How do the epistemological beliefs and perceptions of individuals relate to views on news credibility?

CHAPTER THREE: Method

Methodological approach and rationale

The goal of this dissertation is to examine, at an epistemological level, what makes news seem credible or not in individuals' eyes. Its focus is the epistemological beliefs of individuals, their perceptions of journalistic epistemology, and how these beliefs and perceptions inform the articulation and construction of news credibility.

In service of this goal, this dissertation utilizes in-depth semi-structured interviews as its methodological approach. Semi-structured interviews have been identified as a key method in exploratory studies, as well as those probing epistemological beliefs, precisely because they allow complex issues to be explored in-depth and in a manner which allows individuals to articulate their attitudes and what they believe (Crano, Brewer, & Lac, 2015; Perry, 1970; Baxter Magolda, 1992). The semi-structured approach gives shape to the interview process, ensuring that key topical issues are covered. At the same time, it allows for flexibility, enabling interviewees to discuss their beliefs, opinions, attitudes, interpretations, and perceptions in ways that they wish to (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The overall goal is to elicit information about interviewees' beliefs and worldviews which can be used to generate empirical insights.

Sampling

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 65 people from April 21 to June 5, 2020. Given the timeframe during which interviews took place, participants were recruited online and interviews were conducted online via Zoom and by phone (rather than in person). This was done to comply with temporary Institutional Review Board (IRB) rules, introduced during the coronavirus pandemic in the United States, which prevented in-person contact with research participants.

Interviewees were recruited using a combination of mediated strategies. The original intention was to seek out interviewees in a range of face-to-face settings, but the ongoing pandemic prevented this. Instead, three mediated strategies were employed in order to get a range of participants with different backgrounds, avoiding a homogenous sample and ensuring more adequate data saturation. Recruiting participants with a range of backgrounds was also important insofar as demographic factors such as age, education, and gender, as well as political beliefs, have been found to have implications for epistemological beliefs (see Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Perry, 1970; Tabak & Weinstock, 2008; Kreiss, 2017). Theoretically relevant participants were sought and both the recruitment of participants and the process of interviewing was conducted until data saturation was reached; that is, when new data no longer added significant insights (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

In terms of participant recruitment, first, initial interview participants were sought from Michigan State University's paid SONA community pool. This pool of research participants includes individuals from Lansing, Michigan, and surrounding areas who have signed up to be included in research studies. Since this dissertation focuses on beliefs and cognitive processes – i.e. how individuals think about issues of truth and justified knowledge – there is no good reason to believe that the nature of Lansing, Michigan residents' thinking would be substantially different to the thinking of people who reside elsewhere in the United States. Prior research has found consistency in students' styles of thinking across contexts in the United States, for instance (see Perry, 1970; King & Kitchener, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 1992). However, given that SONA community pool participants tended to be younger and more ideologically liberal, on average, other sampling strategies were also employed.

As such, secondarily, interview participants from the SONA community pool were asked to pass on my contact details to people they knew who were older and/or ideologically conservative. This purposive snowball sampling approach was adopted in order to increase variation in interviewees along key demographic dimensions (following Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Older and/or ideologically conservative individuals constitute two theoretically important groups when it comes to both epistemological beliefs and attitudes toward the news media. Methodologically, a purposive sampling approach can ensure greater theoretical variation in responses, allowing a researcher to capture a fuller picture of the phenomena under investigation and better saturate emerging analytical categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Thirdly, interview participants were also recruited via a post in a large Michigan-based Facebook group (15,000 members) which was set up during the pandemic for people to share their day-to-day experiences, seek comfort and connections, and talk about political issues. While started in Michigan, membership of this group spread across the United States. This third round of recruitment, which occurred after initial interviews, was again purposive (seeking older, conservative, and male participants) and driven by a theoretical sampling rationale. Charmaz (2015) describes theoretical sampling as an approach designed to fill out analytical categories emerging from prior interviews. It involves the revising of interview questions, adding specific follow-ups and new questions with the aim of exploring emergent themes and checking insights from analytical memos. Such an approach helps with the development insights as they emerge (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 47). As noted, interviews stopped when new data no longer added significant insights.

Participants

The above approach resulted in a sample of 65 people from a range of age groups, life stages, educational backgrounds, occupations, racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender and sexual identities, and political orientations. Demographics were collected from the SONA community pool website or otherwise from voluntary disclosures by participants during interviews. Following the approach of other qualitative researchers (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019), disclosure of demographic characteristics was voluntary for interviewees so as to have researcher-defined categories imposed on individuals and to improve individuals' level of comfort participating. Conducting interviews in an entirely mediated fashion limited opportunities for the type of rapport-building which can come from face-to-face interviews, so attempts were made to ensure as much comfort on the part of interviewees.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 81, with an average age of 30. A total of 37 interviewees identified as female, with other participants identifying as male or non-binary. In terms of race and ethnicity, 38 participants identified as White, eleven as Asian, four as Black, one as Hispanic, one as Native American, and the remaining participants as mixed-race or non-identified. In terms of life stage and education, 31 interviewees were in college (studying a range of majors including human biology, engineering, communication, and neuroscience), three had an associate's degree, twelve had a bachelor's, ten had a master's, and one had a PhD. Other participants either did not have a formal post-secondary qualification or did not identify their level of educational attainment. Participants worked in a range of occupations, with the sample including individuals in the fields of education, social work, IT, healthcare, food service, and marketing/PR. Of the participants who chose to state their ideological stance, 28 identified as

politically liberal, six as expressly moderate or mixed in their political beliefs, and three as conservative.

It must be noted that while most participants (43 overall) were located in the state of Michigan, the nature of the online sampling approaches employed and the fact that many participants were sheltering from the coronavirus pandemic in their home states meant participants were also included from California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, and Oregon.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were conducted following a semi-structured interview format via Zoom and by phone. Interviews lasted an average of 57 minutes (for a total of ~62 hours of audio and 1248 pages of transcripts) and participants were compensated with $15 gift cards for their time. Prior to interviews commencing, participants were informed of the nature of the study and verbally provided consent. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed both manually and using AI transcription technology (both temi.com and scribie.com offer paid services for automated audio transcription, delivering transcripts which can be subsequently edited to account for transcription errors). While efforts were best made to transcribe interviews as accurately and fully as possible, interruptions in internet connectivity during some Zoom calls resulted in small inaudible portions of audio. These inaudible portions are marked where relevant in the quotes used (e.g. "[inaudible]"). To protect the privacy of participants, names have been replaced with pseudonyms and portions of quotes which risk personal identification have been anonymized. Some portions of quotes have been edited for clarity.

Interviews questions probed individuals' general epistemological beliefs and their beliefs as they related to news/journalism. Participants were also asked about their perceptions of the

news media, their trust or distrust in news sources, and briefly about their news consumption behavior (see Appendix). Interviews were semi-structured, as noted, in order to ensure that topics of relevance were covered, but participants were able to freely express their thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes. Interviews took a conversational tone. Latitude was provided to interviewees to discuss what was important or relevant to them, allowing new insights and lines of inquiry to emerge from discussions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

The overall focus was on individuals' expressions of their epistemological beliefs and how they constructed notions of news credibility. Interviews present moments of opportunity for individuals to articulate or construct their views – or otherwise "perform their identities as well as to make sense of their own positions" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 180). The words expressed by interviewees are reflective of how they are able to make sense of their (implicit) attitudes and beliefs in the interview moment. Hence, what are represented in this dissertation are individuals' constructions of their attitude and belief positions (instances of "participants actively creat[ing] meaning"; Silverman, 2006, p. 129). These insights are important insofar as they represent the type of data of most interest to this dissertation: instances of sense-making and meaning-making – the rationalization of attitude and belief positions. Expressions of affect or emotion are of less relevance to this dissertation, given the project's overall focus on understanding 1) epistemological belief positions, 2) views on journalism and journalistic practice, and 3) views on what makes news credible or not.

Given the inherent difficulty in asking and answering questions related to epistemological beliefs (King & Kitchener 1994), questions probing epistemological beliefs were based around or inspired by those used in prior studies in educational psychology. These include questions from King and Kitchener's (1994) Reflective Judgment Interview (RJI) – an interview approach

designed to elicit responses which reflect individuals' typical reasoning styles with regard to epistemological issues – and questions based on the Epistemic Belief Inventory, the Epistemological Beliefs Questionnaire, the General Epistemological Beliefs Questionnaire, and on frameworks intended to guide epistemological belief interview protocols (see Schommer, 1990; Hofer, 2000; Schraw et al., 2004; Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 2004; Wood & Kardash, 2004). Such questions are designed to probe individuals' reasoning styles and epistemological assumptions, getting to their beliefs about the nature of knowledge, sources of knowledge, how beliefs are justified, and the certainty with which they (and others) can make knowledge claims within a particular domain. Lay language was used in questions so that participants could more readily answer, articulating their beliefs and positions (Crano, Brewer, & Lac, 2015).

Given that a theoretical sampling approach was taken, interview questions were adjusted, removed, or added over time. This approach allowed for more systematic probing into news areas of interest brought up by participants and focused development of emerging analytical categories from earlier interviews (Charmaz, 2014).

Coding and analysis

From the first interview through to the last, in-process analytical writing was conducted, with memos, initial codes, and emerging categories hand-written down (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These notes guided purposive and theoretical sampling approaches. Participants were sought, and interview questions were adjusted and added (such as questions about the nature of media bias and notions of 'personal truths'; themes which emerged in early interviews), with the aim of probing new emerging themes and more fully developing analytical categories (Charmaz, 2014). Relevant literature was also sought, based on emerging themes, which could guide subsequent lines of inquiry (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Coding of interview transcripts followed a sequence of initial coding, focused coding, axial and selective coding, and, finally, theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Silverman, 2006; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Coding was conducted using NVivo. This was supplemented by hand-written notes, though the major coding process was done using the software.

The first stage of initial open coding focused on identifying large and intuitive thematic categories (such as 'trusted news', 'distrusted news', 'the role of journalists', and 'definitions of news'), as well as major forms or processes of thoughts and beliefs (such as 'the role of existing knowledge', 'desiring consistency', 'distinguishing facts and opinions', and 'resolving truths', as well as 'desiring certainty', 'beliefs about justification') which emerged from readings of interview transcripts and cross-checks with written memos. This stage of initial coding was also guided by sensitizing concepts (namely, dimensions of epistemological beliefs; certainty, simplicity, sourcing, justification) which acted as starting points for data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). This was an important part of the process, given this dissertation's focus on epistemological beliefs and the need for theoretical guideposts for this part of the coding process. Here, prior research was drawn on to guide the analysis of individuals' epistemological beliefs along various philosophical dimensions (e.g. Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Perry, 1970; King & Kitchener, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 1992). However, initial coding was not limited by these sensitizing concepts, nor were they determinative of the content of categories (Charmaz, 2014). In other words, they provided a framework, but coding was not limited to these. I was particularly open to variations within categories and to new emergent categories – and such variations were identified (e.g. shifts in beliefs according to the epistemological context under consideration).

The second stage of more focused coding involved the assessment of initial codes and the development of sub-codes (such as 'balance', 'multiple sources', 'domain expertise', 'mitigating bias', 'professionalism', and 'transparency' under 'trusted news'). These codes were then compared and reorganized, with some codes subsumed by others (e.g. 'desiring consistency' coming under the umbrella of 'trusted news'). The recasting of some codes and reorganization into larger categories allowed properties of categories to emerge (such as the dimensions of news trust and credibility, as well as the dimensions of individuals' epistemological beliefs). Fuller categories also emerged from a process of comparing codes, categories, and units of data (following a constant comparative approach), seeking out overall meanings (e.g. the meaning of 'bias'). Tentative definitions and boundaries of categories were created and refined.

The third stage of axial and selective coding involved assessing the relationship of categories to subcategories, more fully developing the properties of categories (such as the properties of news trust and credibility, as well as epistemological beliefs, as noted). Here, the specific properties and dimensions of categories were identified (e.g. the nature of individuals' epistemological beliefs along certain dimensions). Variations within categories along particular continuums and dimensions were noted and saturated definitions were created (e.g. variations in epistemological beliefs). Throughout, there was a cross-checking and testing of assumptions through constant comparison between pieces of data.

Finally, connections between major categories were identified in a process of theoretical coding. Categories were organized and integrated into a structure; that is, a storyline to explain connections between categories (such as the connections between epistemological beliefs and views on news credibility). What follows in the finding is that storyline, drawn from the connections between analytical codes and categories. Quotations throughout the subsequent

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chapters are reflective of the sentiments of the wider sample or sub-groups within the sample within that overall storyline.

Interview context

The unique context under which interviews were conducted must be recognized, along with potential influences on responses. While any study of news and news attitudes occurs against a backdrop of daily goings-on in the world which are reported in the media (e.g. celebrity deaths, political in-fighting, new scientific discoveries), the 65 interviews conducted for this dissertation were conducted against the backdrop of two major, defining news events in the United States: the coronavirus pandemic (specifically, the first wave of the virus) and the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The pandemic impacted not only the research methodologies and strategies employed, but potentially also interviewee responses.

At a practical level, the coronavirus pandemic meant myself and all interviewees were under some kind of lockdown or 'stay at home' order, altering the nature of their (our) daily lives. The gravity of the pandemic – including its disruptions to work, university, and the thousands of deaths caused globally – naturally drew interviewees' attention to the news as they sought out information about this global crisis and how it affected them. Moreover, the killing of George Floyd on May 25th at the hands of Minneapolis police sparked nationwide protests which again drew interviewees' attention to the news.

Prior research has shown how public attention to the news media can be oriented by large, atypical events such as public health emergencies (Jang & Baek, 2019), war (Pan et al., 1994), and terrorist attacks (Boyle et al., 2004), as well as routine events such as elections (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013; Tewksbury, 2006). Notably, interviews were also conducted during a US Presidential election year. Survey data point to how the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States as well a breakout of nationwide protests following the killing of

George Floyd strongly oriented public attention toward the news media (Jurkowitz, 2020; Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Olihpant, & Shearer, 2020a,b). These events also oriented public attention to the performance and role of the news media (Jurkowitz, 2020; Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Olihpant, & Shearer, 2020a).

These events influenced many portions of the interviews, though participants did not entirely focus on these news stories, discussing other topics alongside these. However, the unique circumstances under which interviews were conducted did influence participants' news consumption behaviors and may have more strongly drawn their focus to questions of media performance.

By far, most interviewees, particularly those in a younger age bracket, reported consuming more news at the time interviews were being conducted, primarily out of a need to stay abreast with important coronavirus developments (such as changing government rules and the increasing number of deaths). Here, the pandemic naturally drew attention because of its gravity. However, individuals also reported consuming more news because they were at home, unable to work or go to class. As Hayley (42, F) summarizes it, "we all have more time to look at the news now." Here, the gravity of the pandemic and the resultant changes to individuals' daily routines operated in tandem, with higher news consumption resulting, in part, from individuals being at home and having higher access/exposure to both television and the internet and also, in part, from needing something to do during lockdown with increased leisure time. Several participants here reported higher consumption as a result of increased incidental exposure (spending more time online while at home had the byproduct of exposing them to more news, even if they did not seek out news specifically) and, among several students, as a result of exposure to their parents' television-watching (another form of incidental exposure generated by

the circumstance of many students being sent back from college to their family homes). Among the small handful of interviewees who noted their news consumption behavior had not changed, most were older and already frequent news consumers.

Overall, an interesting observation is the degree to which not only the gravity of the pandemic but also disruptions in (young) people's daily routines influenced news consumption. Caleb (19, M), for instance, notes: "When I'm at school, I don't have access to television. I'm really busy. I'm a student athlete, I'm taking a lot of courses. I just don't necessarily have the time to keep up with the news as much as I'd like. But during the pandemic, I've been much more up to date with the news." The circumstances of the pandemic intersect with the news consumption influences observed by Boczkowski et al. (2018): increased consumption because of frequent technology use, more leisure time, and a need to pass the time.

Of note, a small subset of interviewees did report consuming less news. This was largely out of a desire to protect their mental wellbeing, avoiding the stress and anxiety which came from consuming news about the pandemic. Some reported increasing their news consumption at first, but pulling back once they felt the negative effects on their mental health. Several also complained of the redundancy or "noise" created by over-coverage of the coronavirus.

These observations about changes in news consumption tendencies may affect findings in the following chapters in various (undetected) ways. It may be that increased attention to the news media, the need for information, and criticisms of the media from prominent figures such as President Trump during this time may have oriented individuals to questions of journalistic performance. An increased need for information may influence perceptions of what news and the role of journalism are. Moreover, the longer-term discourses about the news media propelled forward by President Trump – who has called various mainstream outlets 'fake news' and

'enemies of the people' – and public concerns over 'fake news' and misinformation may also have undetected underlying influences on individual attitudes. It is possible that such discourses have raised key questions about media bias, objectivity, polarization, and the overall reliability, trustworthiness, believability, and credibility of the news media which have permeated individuals' attitudes and beliefs. Combined, these factors may influence individuals' desire for objective, neutral/impartial, and balanced news. However, given the specific focus of this dissertation on epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism and views on what makes news credible, many potential underlying influences on beliefs and attitudes remain unexplored. Their potential influence is noted here for the purpose of context.

CHAPTER FOUR: Individuals' epistemological beliefs

This chapter addresses RQ1, covering people's general epistemological beliefs; specifically, how they articulate their beliefs regarding the certainty and simplicity of knowledge (nature of knowledge) and the sources of and justifications for valid knowledge (nature of knowing). In describing individuals' beliefs, the chapter sets the stage for the analysis of people's epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism. It covers the types of beliefs that people say they hold and the conditions under which they shift.

When it comes to what people believe about knowledge and knowing, there is a large degree of similarity across people of different backgrounds. What I find, generally, is that, first, people describe surprisingly similar core beliefs which are grounded in what I will call a realist-empiricist view of the world where the most reliable knowledge comes from direct observation of real things. There are pragmatic reasons expressed for such core beliefs: people point to the necessity of accepting that concrete, verifiable things exist so that daily life can effectively function.

Second, however, these expressed beliefs do shift along a continuum from realist to relativist and simple to complex, depending on how much perceived interpretation or evaluation are involved in situations. Unlike in prior models of epistemological beliefs (e.g. King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1970; Baxter Magolda, 1992), I find that belief positions are not as static. Instead, people's expressed beliefs shift along a continuum from realist to relativist (cf. Schraw & Olafson, 2008) based on context or the domain under consideration.

When it comes to what are seen as the concrete aspects of the what, where, when, and who of daily life, people tend to agree there is simple and certain knowledge that is justified by direct observation. However, when the question at hand is seen as being more interpretive,

involving evaluations of why and how, beliefs shift. Here, people tend to express more relativist views, holding that there can be multiple truths rooted in individual perceptions and perspectives. Importantly, what are viewed as more interpretive versus less interpretive topics or domains is dependent on the individual, meaning shifts in beliefs from realist-empiricist to relativist occur in different instances for different people. However, there are generally topical domains – such as politics – which are viewed by most people as more interpretive in nature. Whether a domain is considered more or less interpretive in nature generally depends on the number of perceived explanations for how and why.

Indeed, I observe that this shift tends to happen more often when the domain under consideration changes. Realist-empiricist core beliefs are expressed most often with respect to domains that are seen as 'hard science' in nature because these domains are viewed as concrete. More relative beliefs are articulated when the domain under consideration is considered more 'social science' in nature because such areas of life are seen as more debatable and prone to (legitimate) differences in opinion. This finding is reflective of what Hofer (2000) found when it came to changes in epistemological beliefs when either 'science' or psychology were being considered.

Finally, I find that some people say they seek to manage this relativism by seeking to make determinations of truth for themselves. Given that people generally have realist-empiricist core beliefs which place emphasis on the certainty of concrete facts, some individuals seek to manage the uncertainty of 'multiple truths' by using their own background knowledge, beliefs, values, and intuition to come to a decision about what is true which satisfies them. Relativism in interpretive and 'social science' domains is managed by individuals using basic facts as bases for beliefs, contextualizing them, and looking for consensus across sources and perspectives. People

say they look to engage in their own processes of triangulation when coming to decisions about what is true, rather than placing all their trust in singular authorities or sources. Some individuals, however, do continue to express relative beliefs, either being resigned to the acceptance of relative truths or not seeing the possibility for the resolution of relative truths. Individual interest and motivation play key roles in shaping whether individuals say they seek resolutions to multiple, relative truths.

The realist-empiricist core of people's epistemological beliefs

Most people, when asked, generally express core epistemological beliefs which are grounded in a realist-empiricist view of the world. These interviewees are realists in the sense that they say they believe that real things exist in the world independently of themselves which can be perceived and known. They are empiricists in the sense that their beliefs about what is true are rooted in an articulated faith in direct observation. People say they trust their senses to tell them what is true and what is not. These views are both externalist in nature, with individuals holding that truth does exist independently in the world; that is, external to the perceiver (Vahid, 2011). In fleshing out this account of people's core epistemological beliefs, I will discuss aspects of beliefs about the nature of knowledge and the nature of knowing in turn.

When it comes to people's epistemological beliefs about the certainty and simplicity of knowledge (nature of knowledge), I find that most people express realist views. Participants subscribe to the view that real things exist independently in the world and that we can perceive them. First, as far as certainty of knowledge is concerned – that is, whether there are absolute truths – people generally accept the existence of external reality, holding that we can be sure about the what, where, when, and who of daily life. For instance, interviewees hold the view that we can be sure a house burned down in a fire by witnessing it. Alternatively, we can see

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evidence of it having burned down by observing a charred house structure. In either case, there is surety in the event having occurred. Moreover, we can be sure that President Trump said something on a particular day by witnessing it ourselves or by seeing a video of the statement being made on that day.

This perspective extends to a range of phenomena, with the core theme being the observability of the truth. Thea (20, F), for instance, illustrates this perspective by drawing a parallel between what is, for her, the certain truth of climate change and the certain truth that witnessing a bicycle accident means a bicycle accident did in fact occur. For her, both are true because they are observable:

> I believe in climate change. Some say climate change isn't real. But then you're like, "Look at the data. How is climate change not real?" And then they're like, "What are you talking about?" So it's like, is that a truth, is that an opinion? For me, [there are] some things that are hard facts. Like okay, she fell down riding her bike and you say she has a bicycle accident. That's a hard fact for me. And if you say, you know, oceans are doing this, the climate is like this, this is way worse than it was 20 years ago. That's a hard fact for me. (Thea, 20, F)

There are some interviewees, however, who see all things as uncertain, holding that we can never be entirely sure of what we know. These individuals tend toward a more generally relativist or philosophically skeptical position, holding that most – if not all – things are up for debate. Such individuals tend to be more liberal in their political beliefs, reflecting a position which has been noted in prior research: greater tolerance among liberals for epistemic uncertainty and ambiguity (Jost et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2007). Alice (32, F), for instance, says that "in any scenario, I feel like there can be multiple truths." When asked whether people who believe the earth is flat are categorically wrong, she says that even in this scenario she believes people are entitled to their views:

> No, I think that you can have your own opinions about that, I think that as long as you can debate like, "This is why I feel like the earth is flat," then I'm like, "Okay, so I can understand that." I would never tell a person that they're flat out wrong on something. (Alice, 32, F)

For Alice, this position extends to even mathematical propositions. When asked whether people who say $1 + 1 = 3$ are wrong, she says:

> I would be like, "Why do you feel that way? Can you show me why you feel that way?" And then I'd be like, "Well, this is why I feel like this is a better answer to that." (Alice, 32, F)

Meanwhile, as far as simplicity of knowledge is concerned – that is, whether knowledge consists of discrete facts – most people similarly express the belief that knowledge can exist in a simple, concrete form. This view links to the faith placed in the truth of observable reality.

Such observations track with the view of Fitzgerald and Cunningham (2004, p. 217), who note that, "in a commonsense form, realism has probably always been the epistemology of the ordinary person." This is because such a view of the world, for many people, *is* commonsense. In fact, what Thea expresses above, along with other interviewees, is a sense of frustration that people could ever deny the existence of observable reality. Faith in the certainty of observable truths is such that interviewees such as Avi (27, M) express disbelief, for example, that President Trump could ever claim to have a larger inauguration crowd than President Obama given the visual evidence available.[1]

Crucially, I do not find, among the participants I interviewed, that perspectives on the existence or certainty of external reality differ much by political affiliation. Logan (37, M), for instance, coming from a conservative perspective, notes that while he does not agree with many

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[1] Lee, T.B. (2017, January). Trump claims 1.5 million people came to his inauguration. Here's what the evidence shows. *Vox*. Retrieved from https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/1/21/14347298/trump-inauguration-crowd-size

of the measures taken to curb the coronavirus pandemic, expressing skepticism about some of the governmental and scientific advice, says he does agree that the virus is real. He accepts the truth of the virus' existence, noting that it is possible to agree on that reality, but he delineates between this and debates over what to do about it, noting that they are separate issues:

> We can agree that there's a virus and [it does] bad things. But you want to start talking about mortality rate and talking about the value of shutting businesses down and keeping people at home and blah, blah, blah? That's where you start to create an argument. That's very hard for a lot of people, you know, because they want to believe what they want to believe. I don't want to be stuck at home. I want to be able to go out. (Logan, 37, M)

Logan here adopts a realist perspective on the existence of the virus but notes that the question of how to manage it is a more interpretive one (an issue I cover in a subsequent section). However, there are still individuals who hold more general skeptical or relativist views, such as Zoey (21, F), who notes, from her perspective, that even in science there is general uncertainty: "even science can be contextual…I think in science we do search for a single truth but I don't know that it can always actually exist."

In sum, these views constitute the core of people's expressed beliefs about the nature of knowledge. Most interviewees say they believe in and accept the existence of singular truths regarding events, occurrences, or situations (though some are general skepticists or relativists). These singular truths are what might be deemed 'ground truths' pertaining to the what, where, when, and who of daily life. Ground truths are concrete, falsifiable pieces of information; they have correct/incorrect or right/wrong answers (Levine, 2020). In terms of prior models of epistemological beliefs, the views that most interviewees express here most closely align with position one in Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) synthesized model of epistemological beliefs. In that position, people believe that knowledge is absolute or certain and that discrete, concrete facts about the world can be learned and known.

When it comes to people's articulated epistemological beliefs about the sources of and justifications for knowledge claims (nature of knowing), I find that most people subscribe to empiricist views. Participants hold the view that a primary way to know and to justify knowing is to rely on direct observation. As far as sources of knowledge are concerned – that is, where valid knowledge is seen to come from – this means people say they place the most credence in their own direct, firsthand empirical observation. This ties closely into beliefs about the certainty and simplicity of knowledge and represents a correspondence view of justification: we can claim to know something if our beliefs are reflective of the facts of the external world.

Indeed, people say they trust most what they see with their own eyes. Participants note that to have a level of trust in and surety of a fact, the one source of perceptual knowledge they can most rely on is themselves. Other people can lie, misrepresent, or otherwise obscure what the truth is. Ruby (21, F), for instance, expresses this in terms of me knowing whether her pen will fall when she drops it:

> There really is no way to know for sure unless you're like, you're there firsthand…So, if you were trying to prove that my pen will fall. You know, what if I told you my pen it just fell? For you to know that, you should be looking to see if the pen is going to fall, you know, so trying to be present for it. (Ruby, 21, F)

She points out that without me directly observing it, it is hard for me to know for sure whether her pen did fall. Elijah (20, M), meanwhile, puts this in terms of the well-known question "if a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it, did it really fall?", making the case that, "things like that we will never know. We can't go back in time. We can't teleport to the time of it to really witness it." To know best, he observes, we should be there to see the tree fall.

This trust in oneself and one's own perceptions as the most reliable source of true knowledge, of course, has the most relevance in concrete, verifiable areas of life where people

are able to witness events and occurrences. However, there is a recognition among participants that they cannot personally witness everything there is to know. Thus, beyond firsthand observation, there is a hierarchy of valid sources which is discussed, ranging from other primary evidence such as eyewitness testimony from others to trace evidence. The common theme tying these together is that they are sources of observational knowledge.

In the hierarchy, there is secondary faith placed in primary witness testimony – a form of testimonial evidence. This source of knowledge falls below personal observation because, as noted, it can be hard to completely trust the word of others. Nevertheless, participants note you can trust someone who was at an event or who saw something themselves more than someone who was not there. People note, however, that multiple similar accounts from different witnesses add more weight to a claim and that this is preferrable to a singular account.

Meanwhile, trace evidence serves as a slightly different source of observational knowledge for interviewees. This type of evidence, as a source of knowledge, provides a reflection that something happened; for example, the charred structure of a house which indicates that a house did indeed burn. It is seen as having epistemic value because it is empirically observable and serves as a reliable indicator of an occurrence. The same is said of video, a source of knowledge which serves as a mirror or reflection of reality. Another example interviewees bring up is DNA being a useful source of knowledge in the criminal context (for instance, Logan [37, M] argues that "the [evidentiary] standard needs to be things that are actually verifiable, you know, like forensics…DNA evidence or maybe there's security camera footage"). While the presence of DNA does not necessarily prove that somebody committed a crime ("DNA is not always a slam dunk," says Logan [37, M]), it does indicate that a person was at a location.

Following these sources of knowledge, people next place credence in the word of recognized experts. For interviewees, experts can be reliable sources of primary observational knowledge (e.g. a scientist who witnesses a chemical reaction; Jasper, 26, M) or otherwise be sources of knowledge about things which may not be so directly 'observable' in a literal sense; for instance, the risk posed by the coronavirus pandemic. The validity of expert knowledge for many interviewees comes from their background – their word has more credence than the word of non-expert others and can fill in gaps in personal knowledge. Elena (21, F) expresses this trust in her doctor who she regards as having the requisite background to provide her with justified knowledge – knowledge which she does not possess herself:

> If my doctor tells me that this is true, then I'm gonna believe it. Why? Because of expert power. She is an expert at what she [does]. She went to school for this. Who am I? And so [I don't] challenge her unless it's something that I feel really strongly about. But who am I to challenge her thinking? Because she's the one that has went to school. So, I would say I would definitely believe more of something from someone who has experience and expertise within a certain field or just in general. (Elena, 21, F)

Often, however, these experts, must be seen to lack agendas or vested interests. For a subset of interviewees, experts are not always as highly regarded as sources of knowledge because of fears about bias: some experts, they note, may be beholden to political or financial interests. This underlying distrust of others ties back to the trust people have in themselves: at the end of the day, participants observe, the main source of information they can trust is themselves. The perceptions, actions, intentions, and opinions of others can never be entirely known, hence their validity as sources of knowledge is somewhat lower.

Finally, as far as justifications for knowledge claims are concerned – that is, what people view as proper procedures or processes for grounding truth claims – people's expressed beliefs depend on whether they can witness something themselves or not. If they can, most people say they rely on a correspondence view of justification: something is true if it corresponds with the

facts of the observed external world (i.e. people believe what they see). If they cannot witness themselves, there is generally faith placed in scientific ways of knowing by most interviewees. At the core of both is credence placed in empirical observation.

When it comes to scientific knowing, this is seen as a justified process because it involves "repeated testing and confirmation" (Alexander, 20, M) and procedures such as "balancing the similarities and differences until the point where the similarities outweigh the differences to a significant extent" (Harper, 20, F). People say they trust in the empirical processes of science to provide them with reliable knowledge because there is seen to be, for instance, controlled hypothesis testing and replication. This knowledge is seen as most justified when it comes from experts within the specific domain under consideration (a gynecologist providing a view on coronavirus is not seen as valid; Frank, 81, M). Moreover, the scientific method is viewed as an important way to remove people's beliefs from the process of knowing.

However, some interviewees do take a more generally skeptical position, noting that the scientific process has inherent flaws and that it is an imperfect method of discovering truths because it is conducted by fallible humans. Logan (37, M), a conservative, for instance, raises these points:

> What conditions were this test done under? What conditions create, you know, what environment caused this to happen? There's so many factors, you know. Was the wind blowing? Was the sun out? You always have to factor in [these things]…Anytime you introduce a human factor or human element to anything, then you, in my mind, there's risk of it being diluted from being a hundred percent accurate. In science, you know, were you supposed to put three drops in and you accidentally squeezed it a little hard and put four drops in? And so now the test isn't a hundred percent accurate. You know? The human factor plays a huge role into accuracy of anything. (Logan, 37, M)

Despite these divergences in beliefs, overall, the above views constitute the core of most people's beliefs about the nature of knowing. They primarily correspond to position one in Hofer

and Pintrich's (1997) synthesized model (Table 4, page 33) whereby valid knowledge is gained through direct observation, or from experts, and which is justified either by a correspondence between what is seen and the facts of the external world or by a scientific process.

The pragmatic reasons for realist-empiricist core beliefs

I observe that the primary reason people tend to express realist-empiricist core beliefs is because it is, for them, largely commonsense. For instance, to deny the existence of a pen that sits in front of you and which you can see is seen as unreasonable. However, there is also a pragmatic reason for these realist-empiricist core beliefs.

For many interviewees, the position that there is verifiable and certain knowledge in the world is held, both implicitly and explicitly, because it is functional. Taking a foundationalist stance (the view that there are certain foundational absolute truths which form the foundation of other truths and beliefs), interviewees note that without the acceptance of certain ground truths, it would be difficult to navigate daily life or build on knowledge. Carl (57, M), for instance, arguing from a conservative perspective, holds that there is a need to accept certain truths, and avoid relativity, in order to make decisions. He says that "it's very difficult to make an objective decision about something if everything is relative," taking issue with what he sees as liberals "prevaricating" on the world's problems. He prefers decisiveness, arguing that life is difficult to navigate if nothing is accepted as true, a perspective reflected in prior research on conservative beliefs which has found a desire for certainty (Jost et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2007). For Carl, the acceptance of certain ground truths has practical utility.

Meanwhile, other interviewees point to the need to accept certain truths in order to make scientific progress. Without the acceptance of certain scientific theories, for example, interviewees argue that human progress is hamstrung. Therefore, it is held that some well-tested

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knowledge claims must be accepted on their face. Elijah (20, M) expresses this pragmatic view, noting that while things can be argued about, agreement on basic facts is necessary for science to move forward:

> I feel like a lot of things, I mean, universally, we can agree on, like atoms and maybe science and all. But, then again, there's always going to be arguments. Scientists that were studying atoms and designed all these models, they decided what we were going to call an atom, what shape it took, what the graph represented or even with cells and things like that. [But] at some point I feel like we have to put our trust in something if we want to progress. So, again, it's good to question everything, but then at some point we have to [inaudible] and whatnot. I mean people can say that whoever [inaudible] and people who discovered cells and atoms and everything could be completely wrong. But, I mean, until we put our trust in something, nothing's going to progress. (Elijah, 20, M)

Thus, people hold that it is often necessary to accept that certain and simple knowledge exists. This pragmatic view on the acceptance of ground truths also extends to acceptance of external sources and ways of knowing. While the most credence is placed in one's own firsthand observation, a position which is informed by the potential untrustworthiness of others, as interviewees acknowledge, it is not always possible to have direct experience. Therefore, other sources of knowledge must be relied on. The pragmatic position here is that these other sources of knowledge can be generally accepted as valid if the claims being made are reasonable and correspond with what an individual knows about the world. In other words, claims can be accepted if they make sense on their face (which, of course, may not always be the case). Kylie (18, F), for instance, says that she can accept something as true if it squares with her prior knowledge and "if I think that it's plausible based on what I already know."

This position applies to trust in experts and scientific ways of knowing. Reliance on experts is, for many interviewees, a pragmatic and common-sense approach to take given the background knowledge that individuals with education and training have. Priya (30, F) expresses

this, acknowledging that while she may have some knowledge on climate change, she is not an expert and therefore the pragmatic position to take is to rely on the word of climate scientists:

> We're not all experts on everything. So I can feel the way I feel, even about climate change, and I'll do what I can, but I'll leave it up to people who know more, who I think are the scientists who study this stuff. I'll believe what they say. (Priya, 30, F)

The proviso, however, is that experts must be seen to lack personal interests and biases in order to be considered valid sources of knowledge.

The conditions under which epistemological beliefs are held and shift

Holding to core beliefs in less interpretive domains (position one)

What is described above is a somewhat static set of core beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing that most individuals articulate. However, unlike in models of epistemological beliefs in educational psychology – where students are generally seen as being in somewhat static positions (e.g. King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1970; Baxter Magolda, 1992) – I find that people's beliefs are not constant. In other words, people are not tied to one epistemological belief structure and, in fact, expressed beliefs shift depending on the circumstances or domain under consideration (cf. Hofer, 2000; Muis et al. 2006). This shift in belief occurs along a realist–relativist continuum (cf. Schraw & Olafson, 2008) with people generally moving from simple and concrete beliefs to more complex and relative beliefs as the subject matter is seen to become more interpretive, involving consideration of, for instance, why something occurred or how something came about. In other words, expressed beliefs are likely to shift if there are seen to be more subjective evaluations to be made.

Importantly, what topics or domains are viewed as more interpretive is dependent on individual perceptions, meaning shifts in beliefs occur in different instances for different people. Despite this, there are generally topical domains – such as politics – which are viewed by most

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people as more interpretive because of their subjectivity and associated differences in opinion, and others – such as chemistry or biology – which are viewed by most people as more concrete and less interpretive because of their perceived objectivity.

The core realist-empiricist views that most people hold are, as alluded to, more likely to be held when considering the what, where, when, and who of daily life. These are viewed as concrete and verifiable topics: people, places, and time, for instance, exist. Certain ground truths are not seen as debatable – or, at least, legitimately debatable – and beliefs are distinguished from truths in these instances. Liam (27, M) makes this point explicitly, noting that what someone wants to be true does not deny the existence of facts or truth. He illustrates this with the observation that both he and I are present during our interview:

> I think there is one truth, but there are multiple beliefs. So, truth and belief are like distinct. Because, in my opinion, truth is fact. You can't dispute truth. It's almost like it's foundational. For example, right now, between you and me, like you are real and I am real. You know, that is truth. But then belief is, I think that is like something that you want. It's like something that you wish or want to happen. (Liam, 27, M)

Such core realist-empiricist views are more likely to be held when the domain under consideration is seen to be that of hard sciences. Most interviewees note, for example, that while people may be entitled to *believe* that the earth is flat, these people are *factually incorrect* (as noted, however, there are several exceptions to this view among more generally skeptical and relativist interviewees). In this scientific domain, belief for most people is distinguished from truth because reliable scientific processes exist to prove the shape of the earth. Interviewees express such views when it comes to domains including mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology. In these domains, hard facts are seen to be present or discoverable. For many interviewees, moreover, faith in the certainty of scientific knowing is held because it is seen as being less subjective.

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Shifting to relativity in interpretive domains (position two)

However, interviewees' expressed epistemological beliefs shift when the domain under consideration is seen as being more interpretive, involving aspects of personal opinion and belief. In particular, deviations from a realist-empiricist position occur in situations where there is a consideration of how and why; that is, when there is more interpretation or evaluation involved. These beliefs are also more likely to shift when the domain under consideration is viewed as being more social scientific in nature. The common theme is the degree of interpretation which is seen as possible in a domain, an assessment which differs somewhat by individual.

In other words, different people view different topics or domains as more interpretive, but the determining factor is the number of possible explanations perceived. When it comes to less interpretive domains, truths are described as singular and concrete, while in more interpretive domains there are more perceived *truths*. In instances where the topic or domain is seen as more interpretive in nature, people are more likely to express relativistic views, holding that there can be multiple truths and valid ways of knowing. Standards for what are considered valid sources of knowledge also shift.

When it comes to expressed beliefs regarding the certainty of knowledge, this shift can be illustrated in several ways. Emery (44, F), for instance, describes a shift from away from realist perspective when it comes to figuring out a), why a car crash happened, and b) how bad the coronavirus pandemic is:

> If there's a car crash, there's a car crash. The only thing up for interpretation is what caused the car crash. But some of the stories that are huge in the news, like even the COVID crisis, it's a fact that there's a virus. It's a fact that it exists. The part that I see people interpret is, how bad is it, and has it been exaggerated?…Something obviously

happens, and the only details are up for interpretation are like how and why. (Emery, 44, F)

Similarly, Sophie (21, F), describes a shift away from what is, for her, the truth of climate change to a consideration of how bad the issue is and how to deal with it:

I would say that the truth is climate change is real in terms of human interaction with the earth is changing the climate. That is true. Science proves it. To what extent is, I feel like, the multiple truths. Or what should we do? That's multiple truths. (Sophie, 21, F)

Both Emery and Sophie point to situations where there is a shift to considerations of debates over multiple truths. The potential for multiple truths is seen to come about because the questions under consideration are less well-defined than the mere existence of a virus or changes in average global temperatures (both scientific subjects). Now, there are subjective judgment calls or evaluations to be made regarding 'how bad is it?' and 'what should we do?' This is also what Logan (37, M) points to, taking a conservative perspective on the coronavirus pandemic, when he argues that the debate is not so much about the existence of the virus but "the value of shutting businesses down and keeping people at home." Interviewees see the answers to these questions as unclear and open to legitimate debate. Therefore, in such instances, they are less likely to hold that there are singular, certain truths. These observations illustrate interviewees' shifts in epistemological beliefs regarding the certainty of knowledge toward relativism.

In most cases, a more relativistic position comes about because some topical areas are seen as being inherently more debatable and prone to interpretive differences rooted in human error or subjective biases. Here, interviewees observe that people are liable to – or even entitled to – adopt their own opinions or 'personal truths' which may derive from their personal perspectives or lived experiences. This conception of truth is somewhat different to the realist conception of truth, described above, which places emphasis on a verifiable external reality. Here, instead, interviewees are concerned with internal truths which derive from individuals'

perspectives, beliefs, and values (or different ways of knowing). Jack (21, M), for instance, describes how two people's feelings about a situation can constitute their own distinctive truths:

> It's kind of like whenever people are like, "Speak your truth." Everyone has their own truth. You're in a relationship and one person says, "You're unhappy with X." The other person is like, "I'm unhappy with X because you're unhappy with X." That's two truths. No one's wrong in that situation. You guys are both entitled to your opinions and your feelings. (Jack, 21, M)

Tied closely to this notion of personal truth, a recurring theme in interviewees' discussion of truth is bias. Biases and subjective perceptions pose an issue for many interviewees, with people noting that individual perspectives and the fallibility of human perception complicate realist truths. In the eyes of interviewees, individual biases limit the possibility for universal truths, especially when it comes to political or moral issues. Here, what is 'true' or 'right' is colored by individual beliefs.

As for the simplicity or complexity of knowledge, while it is held that concrete facts and figures exist and can be agreed upon, an important consideration is how they might be used in more complex ways to create multiple truths. At the core of this shifting of beliefs is the recognition of how discrete facts might fit into more complex assemblages to create different meanings. When the question at hand is simple, simple answers suffice and are easy to agree on. But views on the simplicity or complexity of knowledge – as with the certainty of knowledge – shift depending on how much interpretation or evaluation are seen as being involved in a situation.

Emery (44, F), for instance, observes that discrete facts – in this case, basketball scoring statistics – can be used to make an argument that LeBron James is one of the greatest basketball players. However, she observes, these might not be the only metrics used to assess 'greatness,' pointing to the complexity of interpretive claims:

Looking at sports, for example, to me, it is definitely the truth that LeBron James is one of the greatest basketball players out there. And there are statistics to back that up. However, people have a different perspective on that because, for some people, being the best ever, one thing that contributes to that is how many championship rings you have. So, if you're looking at that perspective, he may not be one of the best ever. The stats that I would look at that contribute to him [being the best], I think he's definitely one of the best ever. But there are lots of people that would say "no, definitely not" depending on how you define the 'best ever' and also depending on how you perceive LeBron James. (Emery, 44, F)

Emery recognizes here that an assessment of who the greatest basketball player is subjective and interpretive. There is not necessarily a 'right' answer. It involves more complexity than simply citing scoring statistics and, because of this, uncertainty and disagreement are introduced. This shift is, again, similar to that noted above when it comes to the certainty of knowledge: as more room for interpretation or evaluation are introduced, the more knowledge claims become complex and relative.

When it comes to the sources of and justifications for knowledge, this shift in beliefs in more interpretive or evaluative areas sees, first, individual perspectives and beliefs starting to take more primacy as legitimate sources of knowledge and, second, pluralistic views on justifications for knowledge claims emerging.

Regarding sources of knowledge, in domains where there is less sense of verifiability, more internal forms of knowledge – such as self-knowledge and intuition – become relevant in individuals' epistemological frameworks. In domains such as chemistry or biology, for instance, things can be observed and verified. In a domain such as psychology, however, where there might be consideration of how someone thinks or feels, or consideration of the motivations a person has, the status of empirical observation – in the literal sense of *observing* – is diminished. Here, the status of personal knowledge and experience increases in epistemic value. This tracks with what Hofer (2000) found in a study of domain-specific epistemological beliefs, where she

found that personal knowledge is viewed as a more valid source of knowledge in psychology, as compared to harder sciences.

In such instances where there is no 'right' answer, people are more likely to take the relative position that personal truths can have equal epistemic value or weight. This is because definitive truths may not be attainable, meaning personal truths can stand. Caleb (19, M), for instance, raises the point that "there's multiple ways to run a country, there's multiple ways to bounce back from an economic decline," and so differing perspectives on these questions can be equally valid. Feelings, experiences, and interpretations can exist in the same realm, being forms of 'personal truth' which have similar epistemic value. Regarding the equal or comparable value of these truths, Jason (34, M) points out:

> I don't think you could talk to someone and say "Hey, what was your experience?" and then turn around and tell them that they're wrong for what they've perceived that experience to be. (Jason, 34, M)

Here, Jason points out that a person's experience is their own legitimate form of truth. This view feeds into the belief that in interpretive and evaluative areas of life, justifications for knowledge can be pluralistic. Pluralism is the view that there are "multiple epistemic systems [which] are on par as far as their correctness is concerned" (Boghossian, 2011, p. 77). If there are no 'right' answers, then knowledge may be justified, in participants' eyes, by relying on methods such as intuition, 'gut instinct', personal values, or faith. Indeed, several interviewees observed that when there are things that are not knowable for sure, they place epistemic value on faith – a religious epistemology or way of knowing which emphasizes reasonable belief (Zagzebski, 2011).

Interestingly, when it comes an issue such as the coronavirus, uncertainty and the lack of concrete scientific understanding with respect to the virus (at the time interviews were

conducted) create a situation where relative perspectives are able to take hold. While many

liberal-leaning respondents say that measures to curb the virus are reasonable and rooted in

verified science, conservative interviewees take a different view, arguing that responses to the

virus are a matter of perspective and interpretation given what they see as a lack of scientific

agreement. Logan (37, M), for instance, points to uncertainties and inconsistencies with respect

to scientific understandings of the coronavirus which have generated conflicting pieces of advice

about what to do. For him, then, responses to the pandemic start to look unreasonable because

they are grounded not in concrete evidence but relative scientific opinions, and he takes the view

that people should be able to act based on their own judgment of the situation. Carl (57, M), a

conservative, similarly observes how the coronavirus is an unsettled topic:

> There are so many things that are unverifiable at this point about how the virus behaves
> and what's the real impact. And, you know, how much is the real infected rate in the
> population? Nobody really knows that. And so even though you have a scientific method
> for analyzing that, there's so much data and the data is inconclusive, that people are
> starting to have probably just as wild theories about this medical subject, the virus, than
> other things which are more subjective like politics. (Carl, 57, M)

As a result of this, responses to the coronavirus are seen to be an interpretive or

evaluative issue, given the perceived lack of widespread scientific agreement on it, and it is held

that relative perspectives and individual opinions are permissible.

Overall, when it comes to people's epistemological beliefs about the nature of knowledge

and knowing, in interpretive or evaluative areas of life there is the view that multiple valid truths

can exist and that ways of knowing can be personal and relative. This corresponds to position

two in Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) synthesized model of epistemological beliefs (Table 4, page

33). In that position, people believe that knowledge is uncertain and that people have their own

beliefs to which they are entitled. Truths here can be relative and contextual. Sources of

knowledge are subjective and idiosyncratic and justifications for knowledge can be pluralistic.

Resolving multiple truths when motivated (position three)

Among many interviewees, there is the expressed view that there are some interpretive or evaluative domains in life where legitimate, unresolvable disagreement is perceived (e.g. different views on the existence of God). In such instances, it is held that relativity can be left as such because resolution is not seen as possible or fruitful. In other areas, such as politics, most interviewees hold the view that while there may be different personal truths, there is either a need to or utility in coming to a decision. People do often want resolution for themselves. This comes back to the pragmatic view that decisions need to be made in life. Moreover, there can be discomfort or dissatisfaction with uncertainty. Indeed, given the core realist beliefs that are expressed, there can be frustration with relativism.

Thus, while there may be a recognition that there are multiple truths in some situations, many interviewees feel that they *can* come to firm conclusions about what is true, at least for themselves. Perry (1970) describes this as adopting a commitment within relativism. It also corresponds to position three in Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) synthesized model of epistemological beliefs (Table 4, page 33) where individuals use processes come to reasoned conclusions about what is likely to be true. In that position, while people believe that there may not often be certain knowledge or absolute truths, people can agree on knowledge or truths in context if they meet an agreed standard. Here, the standard people say they apply is seeking consensus on what is most likely to be true in an interpretive or evaluative situation.

I find that people describe using their own beliefs, values, and triangulation processes to come to decisions for themselves which they feel are justifiable. Importantly, the conditions under which paths to resolution are said to be sought include situations where a) people see it as possible to come to a resolution, and b) when they are motivated to come to a decision because

they are invested in the subject matter or because they need to make a decision (e.g. who do I vote for?). Indeed, this is not static: Motivation and interest are key. When they are present, interviewees say they are more likely to engage in processes of 'truth resolution' where they look to reconcile different relative truths and come to a decision. When they are not present, individuals say they may either be satisfied with or resigned to the existence of relative truths.

On the point of motivation, Kelly (41, F), for instance, says when it comes to interpretive domains where there is disagreement, "if it's important, you definitely wanna find the middle ground, 'cause there's always his story, her story, and the truth. So, you gotta figure out what that is." The possibility of resolution of, in this instance, 'he said, she said' truths is envisaged and the motivating factor for Kelly is how important the topic is to her. Other interviewees, however, are more resigned to uncertainty. In many cases, this is because public debate is viewed as being so contentious or divided that it is hard to see the possibility for general consensus on truth. Elena (21, F), for instance, expresses this view:

> You're always gonna have two different people that will have two different viewpoints, and I think issues like climate change and vaccines and a lot of other stuff that... I don't think that there will ever be one truth. You will always have two truths competing against each other, and sometimes it has to do with society and what society views as the more dominant truth at that time. (Elena, 21, F)

On the other hand, when it comes to managing the uncertainty of knowledge claims, if people are motivated to come to a decision or are otherwise seeking a level of certainty, they say they rely on a process of 'reading between the lines' to get down to the core facts. Despite the view that there can be multiple, personal truths in interpretive domains, interviewees still hold onto the position that there is a core reality which can be used as a guidepost. For instance, in a situation where there is disagreement over why a peaceful protest escalated into violence, as with

the George Floyd protests[2], there is the view that, first, focus can be placed on the fact of the violence and, second, processes of reasonable inquiry can be used to try and figure out what might have happened. Ideally for participants, coming to a decision means relying on the most likely or reasonable explanation given the core facts and surrounding evidence available.

As such, many interviewees see the existence of multiple truths as manageable insofar as they can find agreement on basic realist facts and work around that central core. Around these central truths circulate more interpretive 'truths' which may have greater or lesser degrees of validity. In other words, in the eyes of interviewees, ground truths can be used as jumping-off points for assessing how near or far something might be from the truth. Jason (34, M) describes this idea using the metaphor of a campfire. In this metaphor, there is a central ground reality (a large campfire) and increasingly interpretive truths surrounding that reality (smaller campfires). The large campfire in the center is the guiding 'consensus reality':

> I think that there's a spectrum of what I like to call consensus reality. My friend best described it to me as series of campfires and the largest campfire is in the middle and that is what is widely agreed upon as consensus reality. And you can get a little further from that campfire and there's smaller campfires where other groups of people are at. They agree that this is their consensus reality and yet they could still see the main fire and they're still within the scope of generally accepted what is our reality. And then, there are groups that go further and further from that central fire to what they individually believe is reality or what they, as a small group, agree is reality. And the further you get from that common consensus, the less you share with that common consensus and it may be that your individual consensus reality or your small group consensus reality is reality to you. (Jason, 34, M)

In the context of this metaphor, multiple relativistic truths can be managed by keeping an eye on the central campfire which represents consensus reality.

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[2] MacFarquhar, N. (2020, May). Many Claim Extremists Are Sparking Protest Violence. But Which Extremists? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-protests-white-supremacists-antifa.html

When it comes to the complexity of knowledge, in a similar fashion, it is held by a

number of interviewees that while facts might be assembled in ways which create contradictory

knowledge claims, proper contextualization of these facts can be employed to come to a

reasonable conclusion. Ruth (50, F) raises this point during a discussion of a news report she saw

which was covering the issue of why people from ethnic minorities were more likely to die from

coronavirus. She says that the news report explained the issue as being one not about race, but

disparity. For Ruth, however, this claim lacked proper contextualization and she observed that it

was not an either-or situation of one truth versus another. Instead, she argues that the two are

intertwined and that it takes proper contextualization to understand this. This process, along with

that described above, represents a shift to position three within Hofer and Pintrich's (1997)

synthesized model where relativity is managed by looking at claims and evidence in context and

coming to a probabilistic determination of what is likely to be true.

When it comes to sources of knowledge, there is a recognition that, if resolution of

different truths is to be sought, both internal and external sources of knowledge can be used in a

process of critical inquiry. Here, when seeking to resolve multiple truth claims, motivated

individuals say they engage in a weighing of different types of evidence – from testimonies to

expert statements to personal intuition – to come to an evaluation. Ivy (21, F) describes this

process using an analogy to the television show Bones, outlining a method of combining

different types of evidence in a process of critical inquiry:

> I imagine being a detective and trying to figure out the truth or like being a lawyer and
> trying to figure out the truth. And I think that in a lot of ways, it's like a continuous
> search of looking for the facts and looking for the evidence, but at the same time, like
> talking to people. This is going to seem like a really weird way to state this, but I'm
> currently watching the show Bones and in the show Bones…you know how she's a
> forensic anthropologist and then he's an FBI agent? And she's all science, all facts, all
> evidence. And then he is all like talking to people, gut feeling and things like that. I feel

like in that show, they dramatically show how like you have to combine both in order to find what is true and what helps people. (Ivy, 21, F)

Ivy's process is reflective of the epistemological beliefs of many interviewees who say they look to draw on different types of evidence, combining them to come to a decision when they feel motivated to do so. Again, a motivation for engaging in such a process is key and this can include strong personal interest in the subject matter or a need to make a decision. Particularly at the time interviews were conducted, for instance, for many participants impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, information-seeking and the weighing of different sources was motivated by a need to know what they could do (e.g. can I safely move homes between states?) and how to keep themselves safe.

Ultimately, however, when it comes to deciding the validity of sources and making a determination of what is true, most participants say they trust themselves. Primacy is given to personal judgment as a deciding factor. People say that sources of evidence are filtered through their perspectives, experiences, and personal knowledge. The common process is triangulation of different pieces of knowledge and evidence, with these factored in with what people already know and what they feel to be true. If people do have existing knowledge and experience in a domain, this particularly helps as it is used as a key part of the process of making decisions and determinations.

This triangulation of different sources is representative of the primary method of justification that motivated or interested people say they rely on when it comes to managing disagreement: consensus. Most interviewees articulate the view that consensus between perspectives is an ideal form of justification for knowledge and truth claims in interpretive areas where truth may be unclear. In particular, from what interviewees describe, there are two forms

of consensus justification employed: 1) evidentialism (P is justified if it fits with all available evidence at time T), and 2) fallibilism (P can be justified on the balance of reason or probability given the evidence available). These views generally hold that people can be justified in believing something if the totality or balance of evidence available supports it. By taking in the evidence available, individuals say they engage in a process of assessing what is "most reasonable or probable according to the current evidence" (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 15). Zoey (21, F) describes this as a process of seeking an 'omniview', trying to "see the truth from every different angle and every different aspect in order to get an omniview over everything, to be able to see it and see the whole truth" and come to a decision.

Overall, multiple truths may be viewed as resolvable if it is perceived that consensus between perspectives can be achieved (arrival at consensus truth) or if there is an expert source or reliable body of consistent information that can be relied upon (deciding by expert truth). Otherwise, if no path to resolution is seen, people say they may accept multiple truths in the form of 'personal truths' which are rooted in what are seen to be legitimate differences of opinion or ways of knowing.

Given the faith placed in personal judgment at the end of the day, however, a smaller subset of interviewees say they rely on 'faith', 'gut instinct', or 'intuition' as methods of justification, giving primacy to these instead of looking for a consensus between perspectives. This applies particularly in what are seen as highly interpretive and potentially unresolvable scenarios. Rose (30, F), for instance, observes:

> There are certain areas where you're not going to be able to pull scientific evidence, so you pretty much trust your gut…There are a lot of those 'he said, she said' things in the world where you're never going to know the full truth because it's two different voices. So, you just have to go with what your gut instinct says. (Rose, 30, F)

For other interviewees, however, the pragmatic view is that reasonable, probabilistic knowledge can be claimed in context if the weight of evidence points in a particular direction. One issue this does pose, however, is that people's procedures of consensus-seeking and information evaluation can be biased toward confirmation of existing attitudes or beliefs (Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979).

Moreover, what is described here, of course, is somewhat of an idealized process that people either *say* they engage in or *speak about* engaging in. It cannot be known for sure in this study whether individuals *are* engaging in such processes, given an interview-based approach. Given both research and theory on less systematic individual information-seeking and problem solving (e.g. Petty & Cacioppo 1986; Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Edgerly et al., 2020), it may be unlikely that individuals are in fact engaging in such highly-motivated processes all the time.

Indeed, I do find that people say such intensive processes are only likely to be undertaken by them if there are higher levels of investment or personal interest. More often, when there is less motivation, the consensus-seeking process of justification described involves looking for commonalities across a handful or fewer sources. Among most interviewees, there is the view that if a few sources are in agreement with one another, then something is more likely to be true. This more basic or heuristic form of justification has been described in different ways in the literature. Sundar (2008), for instance, in the domain of credibility research, has described this in terms of a bandwagon heuristic – something seems credible if more people are in agreement about it. This more heuristic method can also be thought of in terms of psychological fluency: an 'illusion of truth' or 'validity effect' among people, whereby repeated or familiar statements take on more truth value (Hasher, Goldstein, & Toppino, 1977; Begg, Anas, & Farinacci, 1992; Boehm, 1994). These are less consciously rationalized forms of justification.

On this point, it is important to note that the stated beliefs described in this chapter emerge from individuals consciously constructing and articulating their belief positions during interviews in response to direct questions about them. Responses about ways of knowing are therefore rationalized. This methodology may not capture some of the more irrational, affective, and socially-influenced aspects of epistemological beliefs just mentioned – those instances where individuals believe claims are true because they 'feel true' or because they have, for instance, been influenced by friends or family into believing they are true. However, as noted, some interviewees do describe relying on intuition, gut instinct, and faith, which can be described as less rational ways of knowing. The focus of this dissertation, nevertheless, is on people's more rationalized beliefs because these are important for understanding views on what makes information – particularly news – appear credible.

A summary and note on domain-specificity

Overall, in addressing RQ1, when it comes to how people express their general epistemological beliefs, I find, unlike in prior models, that stated beliefs are not static. Instead, most people's expressed beliefs shift between realist and relative positions depending on the degree of interpretation or evaluation perceived in a domain (though some individuals remain general skepticists or relativists). What moves people from position one (realist; concrete external truths) to position two (relative; internal, personal truths) is the nature of the subject matter, with articulated beliefs shifting when individuals perceive that the topic or domain is more interpretive in nature. This assessment differs from person to person, but most interviewees see 'hard science' domains such as chemistry and biology as less interpretive, while 'social science' domains such as politics are viewed as more interpretive. Meanwhile, a shift from the relativity of position two to a commitment within relativism (position three; engaging in a process of reasonable inquiry to come to a decision about what might reasonably be true) is

influenced by whether there is a motivation or interest in coming to a truth determination and also whether the possibility for a definitive truth is perceived (given the subject matter and evidence available).

The question is what these expressed beliefs mean for domain-specific beliefs regarding journalism. What is apparent from the general epistemological beliefs articulated here is that they are already domain-specific: people say they have different beliefs and apply different standards depending on whether the subject matter is chemistry or politics, for example. In the former instance, certainty and simplicity of knowledge are seen as possible and are expected. Processes of scientific knowing and justification via empirical observation are viewed as applicable. In the latter instance, however, multiple competing truths are seen as the norm. There is a lack of certainty in politics, people hold their own personal views, and sources of truth and methods of justification for perspectives are seen as pluralistic. The idiosyncrasies of the political domain mean truth is often seen as unresolvable.

In the context of this dissertation, the question is: How do these general epistemological beliefs compare to the lay beliefs held with respect to journalism? What influences on such domain-specific beliefs are there? Specifically, what are people's views on 1) the level of certainty that is expected or seen as possible in journalism, 2) how simple journalistic knowledge claims can and should be, 3) what are seen as valid sources of journalistic knowledge, and 4) how journalistic knowledge claims can and should be justified? The beliefs expressed in this chapter help in understanding the expectations placed on journalism at an epistemological level. These rationalized beliefs undergird expressions of what makes news epistemically valid and therefore credible.

CHAPTER FIVE: Lay epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism

This chapter addresses RQ2, considering interviewees' domain-specific lay epistemological beliefs with respect to news and journalism. These stated beliefs constitute perspectives on what journalism *can* and *should* do, in abstract terms, to make itself a valid form of knowledge and knowing.

Before directly considering individuals' epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism, I cover individuals' views on what news is and what the role of journalism should be. As noted in Chapter 2, what people consider news and the role of journalism to be matter insofar as these views create epistemological expectations regarding how news should be constructed and how journalists should do their job. If, as Edgerly and Vraga (2020a) describe, news is viewed as having a particular normative role to play in society – for instance, providing information which is important to democracy – then this places an expectation on journalism to produce highly reliable and accurate coverage. For this reason, I first cover participants' perspectives on what news is and what the role of journalists should be – and the expectations these views generate – before moving onto consideration of the epistemological beliefs of individuals with respect to news and journalism.

What is news?

In some ways, news can be seen as a taken-for-granted concept, having the nature of a primitive term that is not in need of explication (Chaffee, 1991). Its everyday usage in common language, such as in the statement "I watched the news today," reflects a sense of knowing what it is and what it means. However, it becomes apparent, upon asking individuals what news is, that the concept is not simple nor easily definable. Indeed, when it comes to participants' views on what news is – as a concept or construct – there is recognition that the meaning of the term

has become somewhat blurred. In light of the expansion of the number of outlets and sources of news in the digital era catering to different audiences, alongside the affordances which new technologies provide individuals and groups to disseminate their own information on a large scale, participants note that what constitutes 'news' has become very broad. They point out that news can cover very niche topics, be disseminated by lay people, and include content which might not traditionally have been considered news. Rose (30, F), for instance, says in her mind there has been a shift away from a narrow view of news to a broader one which includes a range of information, saying: "now with social media and instant communication, I think the definition's changed as to what's news and what's not…Now it's anything from politics to somebody's dog doing [something]. Like crazy videos that blow up and it ends up on news outlets."

The variance in perspectives on what news is can be described in terms of degrees of 'news-ness' or "the extent to which audiences characterize a specific piece of media as news" (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a, p. 420). Despite variations in what is seen to constitute 'news', among most participants there is a core view of what the concept means: it is new factual information relayed to an audience. Around this core view are various forms of news which have different degrees of news-ness. Specifically, I find that, for interviewees, news-ness varies as a function of 1) the factuality of the information, 2) its newness or timeliness, 3) the locus of the information with respect to the individual, 4) its source, 5) the objectivity with which it is relayed, and 6) its perceived social importance or relevance to a larger number of people. These aspects of news-ness relate to what is communicated, how it is communicated, who is communicating, and to whom information is communicated (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a). They represent a set of lower-order elements which make up the higher-order concept that is 'news' (Chaffee, 1991). In this

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sense, rather than being a primitive term, I find that news is, in fact, has the nature of a derived term or higher-order concept that is made up of constituent lower-order elements. The elements that make up 'news' create expectations for journalism to live up to, particularly when it comes to achieving higher degrees of news-ness.

First, I find that due to complications around the meaning of news, most interviewees adopt a simple dictionary definition which reflects its core features and which distinguishes it from other information-related concepts like 'gossip' and 'history.' This core conception of news allows the term to encompass a variety of things, from coverage of political occurrences to viral dog videos. Participants use this simple core definition as a tool to reconcile differences between types of content which differ significantly in nature. This definition stresses news as *new information being relayed to an audience*. It hews closely to a realist view of news as the relaying of informational updates about real things in the world outside of one's own immediate purview. As such, the core constituent elements of participants' view of what news is are: 1) information about the world, 2) that is new, and 3) outside of one's immediate purview.

When it comes to news as information about the world, interviewees variously observe that it is "a reporting of information to people...a repository of information for people to consume" (Avi, 27, M), "updates on what's happening in the world" (Emma, 19, F), "reporting about reality, about what has happened" (Jason, 34, M), "relaying facts about current events, things that are going on that are relevant to humans" (Jasper, 26, M), "any event or occurrence" (Lauren, 19, F), "the spreading of information on the basis of events that have occurred in the past…it's recent history almost" (Levi, 18, M), "anything that is about current world happenings" (Noah, 20, M), "reporting anything that's current or that's happening" (Priya, 30, F), "the sharing of information" (Ivy, 21, F), "a recap of [daily] events, it's a stream of

information, a list of going-ons, things happening in the world and in your society, in your community" (Jordan, 43, M), "the reporting of like what's going on…archival records, in a way" (Elijah, 20, M), and "events happening just not even in the world, it could be in space, or it could be anywhere, so just reporting on events happening" (Zoey, 21, F).

This view of news, to some degree, divorces it from its ties to journalism or the news media – a trend witnessed particularly among younger interviewees. Many older interviewees tend to explicitly link the concept of news to journalism, noting that news comes from reporters who work for news media outlets. But at the same time, many of these same older individuals acknowledge that news can now come from non-professionals, reflecting the changing nature of the media landscape. News – as informational updates about the world – can come from ordinary people on social media, for instance. For this reason, the role of journalists is decentralized in both older and younger interviewees' core definition of what news is. This decentralization allows for the inclusion of information emanating from other non-institutional, non-professional sources. However, information does have a higher degree of news-ness if it comes from institutions or professionals (particularly for older interviewees).

With regard to the newness or timeliness of this information, interviewees remark that news is "new information about events occurring" (Audrey, 22, F), "[new] developments in anything" (Caleb, 19, M), "information on contemporary events that you don't already have" (Connor, 40, M), "information coming to light" (Caroline, 19, F), "a current event, but it's something that I don't already know" (Hayley, 42, F), and "the most recent happenings locally, nationally and globally…so you have an idea of the happenings, the events, that have taken place like over a short period of time" (Ruth, 50, F). This view of news distinguishes the concept from other information-related concepts such as 'history.' Indeed, several interviewees explicitly

distinguished news from historical information on the grounds of timeliness. Historical information comes from the past, while news is from the present or very 'recent history.' For them, the quality of news is its *newness*, reflecting the etymological roots of the term.

And with regard to the location of this new information, interviewees note that it is beyond their immediate firsthand observation; that it is: "new information that I'm not aware of, or like an update" (Naomi, 21, F), "any information that's going on in the world outside of your direct circle" (Rose, 30, F), "something which happened that I didn't know at the current time…the people who are in that situation or close to that situation find those things and report it to me" (June, 24, F), and "any information sharing that I did not personally witness or, even if I did personally witness, it's any information that I didn't witness from my point of view" (Sophie, 21, F). This view of news reflects a perspective on the locus of the information with respect to the individual. An event which an individual witnessed oneself is distinguished from news because it is personal experience. In this sense, news has the quality of being transmitted. In other words, it is testimonial in nature or communicative; being news because it is information about something which is relayed to an individual or an audience who were not there to witness it firsthand.

This core definition that interviewees employ encapsulates news in the more colloquial and everyday sense of the term, including personally-relevant information (e.g. '*Mary had a baby? That's good news!*'), as well as in the more journalistic, mass media sense (e.g. '*I read news about Donald Trump's recent press conference*'). Indeed, some interviewees, particularly those in a younger age bracket, include in their view of news a broader notion of personally-relevant updates such as "my mom seeing something and then calling me and telling me about it" (Sophie, 21, F). But what distinguishes these forms of news is their perceived level of

importance and relevance to a wider audience. Ivy (21, F) characterizes this difference as 'small world' and 'big world' news:

> I think it can be small and it can be big. Like, it's news to me that my neighbor now likes to go for runs, but it's also news to me that the Prime Minister in England...I don't really know. But do you know what I mean? I think it can be a big world and small world. (Ivy, 21, F)

> What Ivy points to here is degrees of news-ness: information has a greater news quality if it is 'big world', but it can also be news if it is 'small world.' In this sense, news-ness varies according to views on the perceived scope and importance of a report. That information which has the highest degree of news-ness is need-to-know information which is viewed as socially important, useful, and which impacts a large number of people. Information with a lower degree of news-ness tends to lack social importance and is relevant to a smaller number of people.

Thea (20, F) neatly outlines degrees of news-ness which are reflective of most participants' views – both old and young – placing at one end of the spectrum news of wider social consequence that is need-to-know or which has utility, and at the other end news that is of more trivial importance:

> I think you have different levels of news. So, I think you have hardcore reported news. It talks about the political, it talks about government. You obviously have some softer news. It may be car accidents. And then you have things like, you know, talking about what Kim Kardashian is doing today. I think that's news, but just not on the same level as Donald Trump talking about drinking bleach...You need to know the governor just put out a new 'stay at home' order. You need to know what the symptoms are of coronavirus. You need to know these things that can help you with your daily life. I mean, if you follow the Kardashians, I think you need to know that she has new glasses coming out too. But I think you might want to know if you have coronavirus before you know about Kim's glasses. (Thea, 20, F)

Thus, at the high end of the spectrum are "relevant and current findings that impact a large number of people" (Ruby, 21, F) and reports on "what's happening in the world that's relevant to the world" (Kylie, 18, F) which includes topics such as politics and public health. In

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the middle sits "anything that happens that part of the population needs to know about…something that more than just a handful of people either want to or should know about" (Ethan, 21, M), including topics such as crime and car accidents. And at the low end of the spectrum sits news which is relevant to a small number of people or even news which is only relevant to oneself. This also includes what is perceived to be trivial information such as commentary on what public figures are wearing (Alice, 56, F), updates about celebrities like Taylor Swift (Caleb, 19, M; Elena, 21, F; Emery, 44, F; Emma, 19, F; Jasper, 26, M; Lydia, 18, F; Naomi, 21, F; Sophie, 21, F), and interesting dog videos (Caroline, 19, F).

Of note, however, is the fact that this sense of relevance and importance varies by person; a fact recognized by participants. Jason (34, M), for instance, notes how news-ness shifts, giving the example of grass growth – something which would be irrelevant to most people, but important to farmers: "[News is] anything noteworthy that happens. To report that the grass grew three inches last week is pretty meaningless, but to a farmer, I guess you could call that news."

News-ness can also vary as a function of the source. Again, while younger interviewees are more likely to say that news – in the colloquial sense – can come in the form of updates from friends and family about goings-on, this has a lower degree of news-ness than updates coming from journalists and mass media institutions (sources more emphasized by older participants). In fact, some interviews include only information from mass media sources in their definition of news, such as Alice (32, F) who says: "I feel like if it's my friend stating something to me, it's not news. [Compared to] if I see it on TV or if I catch it in the paper or something like that." Here, definitions of news can be distinguished by the source and whether information has gone through an institutional or professional mediation process. What participants do stress, however, whether old or young and whether it is small world or big world news, is that the information

being relayed to them should be factual. News is new *factual* information. For this reason, interviewees from a range of backgrounds exclude celebrity gossip, for example, from the scope of what news is, seeing at as lacking in facticity. Rather than being news, it is viewed as unverified chatter or speculation. This view on celebrity news, in particular, comes from interviewees observing that such content often turns out to be factually incorrect. Misinformation is also excluded from the definition of news, because it lacks facticity.

Following on from this emphasis on factuality, most interviewees across the board, meanwhile, also argue that news should strictly not include opinion from journalists. News is viewed as information which is *relayed objectively*, without subjective opinion, by reliable observers who do not insert their own subjectivity into the information relay process The concern about biases entering news content via journalistic opinion strongly underlies an emphasis on external factual information (i.e. from people who are not the reporters themselves). Taking a realist view, the core of news is seen to be rooted in that which is externally observable and verifiable. This does not exclude the reporting of people's opinions, such as what President Trump thinks about an issue, because this still constitutes news insofar as the fact that President Trump *made a statement* is verifiable. Instead, opinions of *journalists* – which are forms of internal, personal knowledge – are excluded from the definition of news because they represent deviations from external, observable facts. Participants here adopt an externalist perspective where truth is seen to be independent of the observer (Vahid, 2011). In this sense, information which has a higher degree of news-ness is that which is more directly reflective of reality. The definition of news here represents a realist, correspondence-with-the-facts perspective: it is the objective relaying of what happened. This desire for objectivity, and the removal of biases, often

stems from a desire for a middle ground; the perceived politicization and polarization of the news media brings about a desire for simple 'just the facts' reporting.

In summary, rather than news having the nature of a primitive term that is not in need of explication, I find that it has the nature of a derived term or higher-order concept which is comprised of primitive terms or lower-order concepts (Chaffee, 1991). In exploring individuals' definitions, I find that news is made up of constituent elements which speak to degrees of news-ness. News is a form of information and that information's news-ness varies as a function of 1) the factuality of the information, 2) its newness, 3) the locus of the information with respect to the individual, 4) its source, 5) the objectivity with which it is relayed, and 6) its perceived social importance or relevance to a larger number of people. In light of these views on the concept of news, an audience perspective on the definition of news that is highest in news-ness can be summarized as follows: *News is new or recent (previously unknown) factual information about events or occurrences happening in the world that are outside of an individual's immediate purview, relayed objectively. Information has a greater degree of perceived news-ness when it is viewed as socially important, relevant to a larger number of people, and when it is produced by professionals.*

Compared to journalistic and scholarly views on news, the audience views on news I note here point to some important differences. Journalistic and scholarly views on news have often referred to informational qualities or 'news values' such as prominence and importance, exclusivity, conflict and controversy, the unusual, human interest, entertainment, celebrity, timeliness, and proximity which are seen to create variations in newsworthiness and which are meant to capture audience attention (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, 2017; Parks, 2019). These elements of what constitutes news have

some overlap with audience perspectives, especially when it comes to audiences viewing news as information that is timely/new and prominent/important. However, there is divergence when it comes to interviewees de-emphasizing qualities such as conflict, controversy, entertainment, celebrity, and the sensational as inherent parts of what news is. As I note in Chapter six, such qualities are seen to detract from news, rendering it less factual and objective from participants' perspectives. Indeed, I find that several of the news values noted in works on journalism (e.g. Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) are actually seen to detract from both news-ness and news credibility (see also Edgerly & Vraga, 2020b). In this sense, the focus on such news values as a tool to attract audiences (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) may actually be misguided, serving to diminish credibility and put audiences off news.

Of note, findings here may be influenced by the context under which interviews were conducted. The need for information precipitated by the coronavirus pandemic and George Floyd Floyd protests may have influenced individuals' perceptions of what news is, drawing their focus to the informational qualities and aspects of news, the need for social relevance and impact in news, and the need for professionalism.

What is important to note here is that this audience view of news becomes relevant to the expectations that individuals place on journalism at an epistemological level. The view of news that interviewees have creates expectations of factuality, direct observation, and the objective relaying of information. From this perspective, to produce content which has the highest degree of news-ness, journalists should be mindful of the elements of news described above. Interviewees note that there are practices to follow to achieve this, which are covered throughout subsequent sections and in the following chapters.

Beyond views on what news is, what are also relevant to the epistemological expectations on journalism are audience views on what the role of journalism is. Part of the definition of news includes what people consider the role of news and journalism to be. The following section delves into the normative expectations that participants place on journalism. Combined, these views on news and journalism lay the ground for a discussion of individuals' epistemological beliefs as they relate to this domain.

The role of journalism

For journalists, conceptions of their roles play a key part in shaping the actions or activities that they engage in (Mellado, 2015; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). From an audience perspective, the perceived roles of journalism serve to shape the expectations placed on the profession and are connected to views on what news is. I find, upon analyzing views on journalism's roles, that the majority of individuals have two primary perspectives on the role of journalism. The first, and most frequently cited, is the role of journalists in informing and educating the public. The second though less prevalent role mentioned is the role of journalists in holding those in power to account. These perceived roles set up expectations for journalists to live up to in their everyday practice.

The first primary role of journalism connects closely to what interviewees across the board view news to be – that is, new factual information. Here, most interviewees note that the function of journalists is bringing previously unknown information to light, informing the public about what they may need to know, and educating them on important topics. This is an informational public service role which emerges from interviewees' recognition that, without news outlets, some things that the public needs to know would never come to light. As Rose (30,

F) recognizes, without journalism, there would be lack of crucial information needed to make

decisions:

> It's necessary, because I feel without that, without news outlets, we would not be getting information in bulk like we do to make our own decisions. So, I definitely think that news is necessary. I think media outlets are necessary. (Rose, 30, F)

These sentiments are shared by a number of participants who, moreover, generally hold

the view that news outlets should be information repositories relaying to the public that which

they need to know *without commentary or opinion*. Avi (27, M), for instance, makes this

argument. In the context of a discussion about the negative impact of biased opinions in public

discourse, he argues that the role of journalism is to help the public be informed by providing

accurate, objective accounts of world happenings, whatever they might be:

> At the end of the day, that's what news is supposed to be about, it's supposed to make people well-informed, it's supposed to give people an accurate portrayal of what's going on in all these various aspects of our lives, whether it's entertainment, whether it's politics, sports, et cetera. (Avi, 27, M)

News, participants argue, should be direct and fact-laden, not full of opinion,

commentary, and explanation. Again, this view often stems from the complaint that news has

become too politicized and polarized. This view of journalism connects to journalism's

informational public service role: the point of journalism is to provide accurate information to

the public, not unverified opinion.

Further elaborating this view on journalism's public service role is also the feeling,

among several interviewees, that the news media should not be profit-driven. Instead, it should

be service-driven. Brian (45, M) makes this case, connecting journalism to service professions

such as education and medicine:

> I kind of feel that there are certain things in this world that you shouldn't make money from. I don't think you should make money from education, I don't think you should

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make money from medicine, and I don't think that you should make money from journalism. What I mean is that it shouldn't be a business. (Brian, 45, M)

Jack (21, M), in a different fashion, makes the case that the role of journalism is to report facts, relaying simply "here's what's said, here's how this affects people." In service of this, he argues that the news media should eschew their entertainment focus, which he sees as a tactic "to get more viewers and get more readers." This sentiment Jack expresses echoes that of other interviewees who lament that the entertainment focus of the news media – a focus which includes visual spectacle, sensational over-coverage of certain stories, partisan opinion and argumentation, and a focus on celebrity – detracts from the core purpose of journalism.

Finally, when it comes to the public service, information-provision view on the role of journalism, a theme which emerged in interviews was that of variety. For a number of interviewees, the role of journalism is not simply to provide need-to-know information, but a *range* of relevant and useful information. This is what Avi alludes to above as he discusses journalism's role in providing information about topics relevant to various aspects of people's lives.

The second, though less frequently cited, role of journalism which emerged in interviews is its role in holding those in power to account. Charles (38, M) states this succinctly, placing accountability-seeking as a top priority: "I think not at singular purpose, but one of its most…I guess the top priority is accountability of the institutions of our nation and the citizens" (Charles, 38, M). Oscar (46, M), meanwhile, connects this role of journalism to its public service role, arguing that the news media should not seek to turn a profit but instead hew to their duty of keeping an eye on those in power:

> I think their primary role should not be to turn a profit, but like any other business they've got to pay their workers. They've got to pay for supplies. I think if it becomes a

state-run media then we're all in trouble…Because their role is really to keep an eye on who's in power and what they're doing. (Oscar, 46, M)

What Oscar alludes to here is connected closely to the role of accountability-seeking: the importance of independence, particularly from political influence (but also from corporate influence). Perhaps the most common complaint across interviewees about the news media – a complaint which emerged in almost every interview conducted – is the politicization of the news and a perceived lack of independence. Interviewees lament that news outlets appear to lean in particular ideological directions, complain of what they see as the presence of partisan political opinion throughout news reporting, and express frustration at politics' seemingly generalized influence on both what is covered and how it is covered. These are general themes which will run through subsequent sections in this chapter and in following chapters.

In general, these views on the role of journalism again set up specific expectations for straightforward, factual, and objective news coverage that contains no opinions or speculations, and which is not entertainment-focused but rather service-focused. Combined with interviewees' views on what news is, there is an emphasis on the factual, informational quality of news. This view of journalism may be influenced by the interview context – with the need for coronavirus information influencing individuals' emphases on straightforward, factual, and objective news coverage – but findings do reflect what has been found in other studies. Analyses of audience perspectives have found that people value journalists reporting things as they are and being detached observers (Vos et al., 2019). Above all, there is concern with journalists being accurate and neutral/unbiased (Heider et al., 2005; Tsfati et al., 2006; Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020). These observations reflect what I find. I also find that people see the news media as having a watchdog role, with the profession tasked with holding those in power to account. This is a role

which also emerges in other studies, though it is also, as I note, less emphasized by audiences (Heider et al., 2005; Vos et al., 2019).

When it comes to journalists' perspectives on their role, there are some points of convergence with audience views but also important points of departure. While both audiences and journalists value reporting things as they are, being detached observers, being a watchdog, and educating the public (Wolfgang, Vos, & Kelling, 2019; Vos et al., 2019; Standaert, Hanitzsch, & Dedonder 2019), journalists place more emphasis than audiences do on roles such as providing explanations and analyses of news events, providing interpretation, and providing content which will attract the largest audience (Wolfgang, Vos, & Kelling, 2019; Vos et al., 2019; Tsfati et al., 2006). Regarding the latter two roles, as I detail in this chapter and in Chapter six, there are negative implications for credibility when journalists engage in forms of explanatory analysis and transparent audience-seeking.

The realist-empiricist core of people's beliefs about news

The perspectives described above regarding what news is and what the role of journalism should be frame the core expectations placed on journalism at an epistemic level. There are expectations of factuality, objectivity, and independence, reflective of prior research (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2016; Tsfati et al., 2006; Heider et al., 2005). In short, there is an emphasis on reporting the facts (Barthel & Gottfried, 2016). Among most interviewees, this emphasis is rooted in a sense that the political and media landscapes have become toxic and polarized, hence there is a desire for a middle ground or, at least, clear factual information that does not come across as biased.

Given these expectations, I find that the core epistemological beliefs most individuals hold with respect to journalism are tied closely to their general epistemic beliefs (Chapter four),

hewing to realist-empiricist expectations of certainty, simplicity, primary sourcing, and justification by way of correspondence with reality. The beliefs individuals tend to hold here are largely externalist in nature, with truth being seen as independently existing in the world. It is believed that journalists can and should strive for certainty of knowledge by objectively relaying definitive truths, provide discrete facts in a simple and straightforward manner, base information on firsthand observations or otherwise on other primary or valid expert sources, and justify claims made by demonstrating correspondence between news reports and objective reality.

This core set of beliefs is reflective of position one in Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) synthesized model of epistemological beliefs (Table 4, page 33) where it is held that absolute or certain knowledge is possible and that direct observation and correspondence with reality are the best ways to source and justify knowledge. As with people's general epistemological beliefs (Chapter four), there are pragmatic reasons to hold that definitive truths about the world exist and that journalism can convey them. For interviewees, this comes down to the fact that, without agreement on the existence of objective truths, "the universe just doesn't make sense" (Megan, 32, F).

Core beliefs are similar across most individuals: the majority of interviewees believe that journalists can achieve or come close to achieving a realist-empiricist ideal. Importantly, however, participants hold the view that these ideals are most achievable when it comes to what are viewed as less interpretive news topics or domains; those which deal with the what, where, when, and who of news events and occurrences, rather than the why and how.

As part of this realist-empiricist set of epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism, when it comes to beliefs about the nature of journalistic knowledge – specifically, perspectives on the certainty of journalistic knowledge – most participants hold the view that journalism *can*

and *should* seek singular truths about the what, where, when, and who of news events and occurrences. It is noted that concrete events such as car crashes happen, that people and places exist independently of perceptions, and, as such, the belief is held that these truths can be reliably captured and conveyed. Mary (24, F), for instance, holds the view that there *can* be certainty in the reporting of political events and occurrences. While politics is typically viewed as an interpretive domain involving debate, disagreement, and complex how and why questions (see following section), what Mary points out is that real things do happen and these can be uncovered and conveyed to the public:

> I would say there's generally a singular truth about the political event that you're reporting about. Like with the Russia investigation, for example, there's a truth out there somewhere. There's a core story of what really happened, and I don't think anybody's found it yet, but it's out there. (Mary, 24, F)

Mary notes that there are less interpretive aspects of politics – aspects which are concrete and knowable – and that journalists should strive to find the relevant facts.

These beliefs about what journalism *can* achieve are also tied to beliefs regarding what journalism *should* be doing. Informed by perspectives on what news is and what its role should be (to convey factual information), most interviewees hold the view that certainty is what the profession should strive for; that what journalists should seek to present are simple and straightforward factual observations which reflect reality. This is a correspondence view of truth, where facts or truth derive from a correspondence between what is observed and what is reported. Harper (20, F) expresses this idea in such terms, putting forth the common view that quality news is that which is epistemically certain, rooted in empirical observation:

> [Quality news is] completely observational and factual... [In an ideal world], news would just be something that...it's just something that everyone could agree happened, where everyone would believe is true. (Harper, 20, F)

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It must be noted that what Harper expresses applies primarily to less interpretive news topics which are centered on observable, verifiable events and occurrences. Moreover, it must be noted that there are a subset of interviewees who see no possibility for certainty in news, adopting more philosophically skeptical or relativist views. Owen (20, M), for instance, sees no possibility for true objectivity or epistemic certainty (in a philosophical sense) in news because of the inherent limitations that reporters have as humans:

> If you ask any one person to write about the same exact topic, they'll never write it the same way. And so, because of that, I feel like it is not possible for there to be unbiased opinions or unbiased articles because those opinions and ideas have to come from somewhere. And depending on where they're coming from, the person who's getting those ideas can really pick and choose what they want to actually include or not include. So, I do feel like it is difficult to have a completely unbiased article. (Owen, 20, M)

From this perspective, true certainty or objectivity are myths for a subset of interviewees because reporters are inherently limited to their own perspectives and because every choice made in reporting a story is subjective. As such, some interviewees recognize the socially constructed nature of news, noting that it always involves subjective choices and that any representations of 'reality' have inherent biases. In this vein, Sophie (21, F) observes that: "You always are getting a biased opinion, just because you never see the full 360 circle of the situation. You never can. No matter the intent, you're still seeing your own point of view." Such views tend to be held by more liberal-leaning interviewees, perhaps reflective of a greater tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity among individuals with such political beliefs (Jost et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2007).

However, I do find that most interviewees – from a range of backgrounds and political persuasions – hold that a level of certainty is both possible and achievable, at least in the most basic terms (such as reporting that a house burned down). These views tend to be held for pragmatic reasons, with interviewees holding that the world only make sense if it is agreed that there are real things and (some) fundamental truths. They also tend to be held because this

certain, objective, and fact-oriented form of news is seen as less biased. The more that journalists hew to this approach, the less opportunity there is for personal and political biases to color news accounts.

Regarding beliefs about the simplicity of journalistic knowledge, most individuals' beliefs here stem from their general epistemological beliefs regarding the existence of discrete, concrete facts (Chapter four) and their perspectives both on what news is and what the role of journalism should be. Here, the majority of participants believe that discrete facts are possible to obtain when it comes to what are seen as less interpretive stories and that the purpose of journalism is to present them to the public in a straightforward fashion. They, therefore, have a realist perspective on journalistic epistemology where it is held that it is possible to obtain discrete facts about the external world.

Given this perspective, most participants advocate for a straightforward approach to reporting as an ideal, one which strips news of all color, commentary, and potential slant. Samuel (33, M), for instance, states a preference for a 'boring' approach to journalism; one which is simply provides facts and states what happened on a particular day. He frames this in terms of the role of journalism:

> News is to inform us about the world around us. At its most basic, that's what the news is for. In my opinion, news should be incredibly boring, but obviously then people don't wanna watch it. But it should be very boring, it should be very fact-based, where it's like, "This is what happened," and not putting in any type of color commentary onto it. (Samuel, 33, M)

While Samuel notes that this form of journalism might not be popular with audiences, his sentiments are shared with a range of other interviewees of diverse ages and perspectives who see this approach as key to excising bias from news. Indeed, Ruby (21, F) advocates for an approach to journalism which presents the fundamental non-interpretive elements of what,

where, when, who. She frames her idea of an ideal news report around the example of Michigan and Governor Gretchen Whitmer's 'stay at home' orders issued in response to the coronavirus pandemic:

> [Quality news would say] "Gretchen Whitmer extended stay at home order for this time. Here's what this means for us." You know, saying what has changed, what stayed the same. And not if people agree or not. Just like the actual facts of it. If there was an article about the extension of the 'stay at home' order, I would just want to know what that means. Not people's reactions. That reaction part should be a whole separate article. (Ruby, 21, F)

For Ruby, an ideal report is basic, straight to the point and excludes opinions. It covers the non-interpretive, factual bases of a story. Her perspective reflects a common view that news should serve an informational purpose, particularly during a health crisis. There is a place for reaction, she notes, but reactions are interpretive in nature, being superfluous to the primary purpose of a news report about measures implemented to combat the coronavirus pandemic: information.

It must be noted that the above stated preferences for simple, fact-laden news were presented in the context of a global pandemic. The unique circumstances arguably make this form of news most preferable, given the heightened desire for straightforward factual information (indeed, this desire *was* expressed by interviewees). However, interviewees also express this preference when it comes to other news topics. In the political realm, when it comes to less interpretive event-based stories, the desire stems from a preference for unbiased content: simple, straightforward reporting is seen to mitigate the potential for bias. Mary (24, F) succinctly sums up what this reporting looks like for her, pointing out that journalists can present bare information about political events without unnecessary color. Referencing a hypothetical bill approved by President Trump, she says: "I'd rather just have a notification that's like, 'Trump approves the relief bill,' or whatever. Not words like 'finally' or applauding it." As such,

Mary views the hypothetical headline 'Trump *finally* approves relief bill' (emphasis added) as a biased and unnecessary deviation from the simple, informational purpose of the report: telling the audience what happened. Mary's example represents an instance of a potentially less interpretive political news story. Most political news stories, however, tend to be viewed by interviewees across the board as more interpretive in nature.

As for beliefs about the nature of journalistic knowing, most interviewees hew to an empiricist perspective where the most valid forms of knowledge are seen to come from direct perceptual experiences and where the ideal way to know is to demonstrate correspondence between what is observed and the facts of external reality. This perspective again applies most readily to less interpretive news topics which are centered on definable events and occurrences, such as car crashes, protests, and sports matches. Journalists are seen as being more able to achieve these ideals in such circumstances.

An empiricist perspective is most apparent when it comes to views on valid sources of journalistic knowledge. Participants have a hierarchy of sources which tracks closely with their general epistemological beliefs (Chapter four), with an emphasis on empirical observation. This emphasis sees the hierarchy of valid sourcing beginning with firsthand, on-the-ground reports from journalists, moving outward from there to other forms of primary evidence as well as information from experts. In many cases, participants prefer this information presented as it is, expressing a desire to see or hear for themselves instead of having primary evidence edited or filtered. This is because, for interviewees, the least valid form of knowledge comes in the form of journalistic interpretation (*journalists as sources*) and the most valid form of knowledge comes from unfiltered, objective observation.

Given the noted weight placed by the majority of participants on empirical observation, as well as their view that ideal news should be an informational relaying of the less interpretive what, where, when, and who of daily life, journalistic knowing which is rooted in demonstrable on-the-ground reporting is valued highly. Interviewees, in their lay perspectives on journalistic practices, see greater epistemic value in reporters being 'on the scene' at an event, rather than simply interviewing people about the event. Alice (32, F), for instance, places greater truth value in this direct and unfiltered way of reporting:

> If I see a person actually right there, in the heart of it, then I'm like, "Oh, that's a lot more believable than if you're just reporting on it." Because I can visualize it as well at that point, and I'm like, "Okay, so that seems a lot more believable than if you're just reporting on it."...I feel like if it's happening right there and then, and someone's directly at the scene, then I feel like it's a lot more unbiased than if it's been reported over and over and over and over again. (Alice, 32, F)

For her, and other interviewees, 'seeing is believing' when it comes to concrete events and occurrences. However, as with people's general epistemological beliefs, there is a recognition that journalists cannot always be on the scene of a story – if there even is a scene to be at. In instances where there may not be direct observation by journalists themselves, other forms of primary evidence serve as next-best valid sources of knowledge. These sources of knowledge include testimonial evidence from people involved in a story, video evidence, and the word of recognized experts. They serve as the nearest alternatives to direct observation, coming from news subjects themselves or being material evidence of the facts of a story.

Importantly, when it comes to testimonial evidence from primary sources, Brian (45, M) makes the point that the best journalists allow these sources to speak and do not insert themselves into a story. He says, "To me, the most believable and best journalists that I've encountered let the person that lived through whatever is being reported, that participated in it, tell their story and kind of get out of the way and ask the right questions." This view is held by

many participants who see journalists' opinions – rather than their direct observations – as the least valid form of knowledge. Journalists being too much a part of the story raises concerns about bias and signals to people a shifting away from the ideal of neutral, objective, empirical observation.

Meanwhile, high credence is placed in video because it provides that empirical, observational element of knowing that interviewees prefer. Unedited video is preferred, if possible, because this provides a fuller and more indisputable picture of an occurrence. Lydia (18, F), for instance, states that she has a hard time believing stories covering the statements of politicians (instances of less interpretive political stories where the news is the statement being made) unless she is actually directly shown, in video form, what that politician said:

> For politics, I feel like there's really no way that you can tell if something is believable, unless they're saying, "Oh, like so and so said this," and they're showing you a video of them saying it and there's actual evidence they said that. It's a bit hard to actually prove that it's believable [otherwise]. (Lydia, 18, F)

This preference for video is part of participants' desire to 'see for themselves', a preference which also extends to a desire to see original documents studies which form the basis of news reports. These pieces of evidence provide individuals with greater confidence in the truth value of stories. This perspective, of course, does somewhat eschew the fact that all information is filtered in some way, coming from journalists who have made subjective decisions about what to focus on, a point that some interviewees recognize.

Next in the hierarchy of the most valid sources of journalistic knowledge is information from experts, including data compiled by experts. Reflective of individuals' more general epistemological beliefs, expert views and data are useful when it comes to the not-so-directly observable (in a literal sense) – such as the number of coronavirus cases and public opinion on

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political issues. It must be noted that expert opinions are valued so long as they *are* experts in the specific domain under consideration (again, a gynecologist providing a view on coronavirus is not seen as valid; Frank, 81, M).

Experts are trusted as sources because they have domain-specific knowledge. A limitation on journalistic knowing that a number of interviewees point to is the perceived lack of expertise of reporters. There are reservations expressed about the ability of journalists to accurately communicate nuanced scientific findings in physics or microbiology, for example, especially if they lack formal qualifications in these areas. Therefore, they argue, journalists should lean on people who have a deep knowledge of an area. Meanwhile, faith is placed in numerical data because it is seen as a less corruptible or potentially biased source of knowledge. The addendum to expert testimony as a valid source of knowledge is that, given the credence placed in 'seeing as believing', if expert knowledge is relied on, people like to see original materials provided if possible. This includes video of the experts being interviewed, but also links to the original studies mentioned.

Finally, when it comes to domain-specific epistemological beliefs regarding valid justifications for journalistic knowledge, the ideal form of justification for most interviewees is correspondence. Here, it is held that journalists can best justify their claims by showing how their reporting corresponds with the facts of the external world. This connects with individuals' emphases on firsthand observation, video, and original documentation. Among the majority of interviewees, it is strongly believed that journalists should not be in a position of dictating what is true in the sense of telling audiences what to think, but simply relaying what they see and hear.

Overall, when it comes to the majority of people's core epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism, it is held that journalists can and should seek out simple, realist ground

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truths: concrete, falsifiable pieces of information which have correct/incorrect or right/wrong answers (Levine, 2020). Moreover, most individuals hew to an empiricist perspective where perceptual experience is highly valued, primary sources are emphasized, and where truth claims are seen to be justified by a demonstrated correspondence between claims made and the facts of the external world. People tend to hold such beliefs and expectations with respect to journalism because this form of concrete, verifiable news is viewed as the most reliable and least biased.

In practice, ideal justification of claims is seen to involve a) the neutral and objective relaying discrete facts about the what, where, when, and who of news events and occurrences, b) sourced from firsthand observations or other primary sources, and c) presented in a straightforward fashion. Justification in many cases hinges on journalists being transparent in their reporting so people can 'see for themselves' and come to decisions about what is true. This involves, as noted above, providing evidence to people in an unedited or unfiltered form if possible. Moreover, for interviewees, this process also ideally involves the use of multiple pieces of primary evidence to strengthen the justification for a story's claims. Participants generally believe this form of justification can and should be achieved in journalism when it comes to less interpretive topics or domains. However, the primary impediment to this, they note, is journalists inserting their own opinions and slants into stories. The concern with bias delegitimizing journalistic knowledge claims is detailed more fully in Chapter six.

Shifts in beliefs: Difficulties raised by interpretive topics

Beliefs, however, are not constant. As the epistemological context changes, so do individuals' beliefs. Much like with individuals' general epistemological beliefs, the locus for the shift or variation in epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism rests with the nature of the topic or domain under consideration (see Hofer, 2000, for similar findings), specifically whether

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it is seen as being more or less interpretive in nature. More interpretive topics are generally seen to be those which involve evaluations, how and why questions, or (political) debate. Less interpretive topics are generally seen to be those which are concrete, involving coverage of real-life events or occurrences and covering questions of what, where, when, and who. When a less interpretive topic is under consideration, most individuals tend to hold the realist-empiricist epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism noted above. And when a more interpretive topic is under consideration, most individuals here tend toward more relative epistemological beliefs.

As such, there is a shift in beliefs along a realist-relativist continuum (cf. Schraw and Olafson, 2008). Here, most individuals' epistemic beliefs with respect to journalism tend to reflect position two in Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) model (Table 4, page 33) where the view is that knowledge claims are uncertain, that people are entitled to their own beliefs, that knowledge is contextual and subjective, and where sources of and justifications for knowledge are seen as pluralistic.

Importantly, there is individual-level variation what news topics or domain are viewed as more or less interpretive in nature, though interviewees tend to agree that more concrete 'hard science' and event-based stories are less interpretive in nature, while more 'social science' and opinion-based stories (particularly those dealing with politics) are more interpretive in nature. The perceived level of interpretation depends on the number of truths or explanations which are seen as possible. In low-interpretive situations, concrete and singular truths are more likely to be perceived. In high-interpretive situations, multiple truths are more likely to be perceived.

The reason for this shift in beliefs is that while most people do have an ideal approach to journalism in mind, as represented by their core beliefs (described above), there is a recognition,

when it comes to more interpretive topics, that it can be harder to achieve levels of certainty and simplicity and that other sources of knowledge may become relevant to understanding the 'truth' of a story. It is acknowledged that it becomes harder to achieve a realist-empiricist ideal because multiple (and often personal) truths are seen as being present. Individuals believe that journalist should still strive toward a realist-empiricist ideal, however. Simple, straightforward news represents an idealistic core to which people frequently return and make reference to. While it is acknowledged that interpretive stories can be rooted in multiple 'truths', individuals still want these truths to be rooted in reliable information.

I detail here the shift in people's epistemological beliefs when it comes to journalists dealing with interpretive or evaluative issues, particularly the challenges for journalism in settling on singular truths. In the following section, I address how people believe such challenges should be managed.

Regarding beliefs about certainty in journalistic knowledge, as well as sources of journalistic knowledge, individuals recognize that when the news must deal with more interpretive or evaluative topics – for example, how to manage the coronavirus pandemic, what to do about climate change, or debates over the effectiveness of economic stimulus packages – it is harder to present singular truths. Such topics are not seen as necessarily epistemically certain because they involve opinions and subjective evaluations. Indeed, for interviewees, this issue most often arises when it comes to political news or topics which have been politicized in public discourse, generating differences of opinion. In such instances, people hold that there can be the presence of multiple – often personal – truths rooted in different perspectives and sets of relevant facts.

Jack (21, M) uses an analogy to explain the difference between instances where there can be certainty in reporting – the provision of singular truths – and instances where there are multiple personal truths or perspectives rooted in different possible evaluations. He describes this in terms of the difference between saying "the earth is flat" and "the earth is pretty":

> Objectively, the earth is round. There are multiple studies that prove that, and people go around and they're saying, "No, you're wrong." But the fact is the earth is round. But if you wanna say, "I think that the earth is pretty," and someone else is like, "I think the earth is ugly," you can't say, "The earth is pretty." Those are both subjective topics. And especially in the news, there are a lot of subjective topics when you come to things like, "How should you invest your money? How should you look at the stock market prices? How should we have prevented this virus more? How should people have handled this?" People are gonna say different things. (Jack, 21, M)

In these situations, for Jack, along with other interviewees, there is the relative view that there can be multiple truths, meaning it is difficult for journalists to obtain certainty. Other topics, such as the shape of the earth, are seen as more certain, however, and this is where realist-empiricist beliefs apply.

Crucially, what is seen as interpretive differs somewhat by individual and this can often be influenced by political ideology, for instance with liberal-leaning interviewees arguing the coronavirus is a non-interpretive topic (in the sense that they argue it is dangerous and that both masks and social distancing are necessary) and conservative-leaning interviewees arguing that the issue is more debatable, with less scientific conclusiveness than is claimed about its dangerousness and the need for measures such as lockdowns, masks, and social distancing. Many liberal-leaning interviewees, however, note that while they consider the existence of climate change a non-interpretive question, what to do about it *is* an interpretive question, reflecting the nature of the difference between 'what' and 'how' questions.

When it comes to beliefs about the simplicity of journalistic knowledge, there is also a recognition, in the context of what are seen as more interpretive stories, that not all news stories can be reported in terms of discrete facts. Charles (38, M), for instance, points out that you can report a series of discrete facts about unemployment and housing statistics, but that these facts do not explain *why* they are the way they are (the interpretive question with respect to these topics). Explaining why unemployment numbers look the way they do is a more difficult task, involving a range of explanations and possible truths, depending on who you ask. In such contexts, interviewees observe, a simple relaying of discrete facts may not capture the full truth of a story in the sense of a 'why' explanation, limiting the utility or informational value of a news report for people who may want to know. Contextualization or explanation may be necessary to account for the complexity of a situation or question.

The risk that interviewees observe, however, is that providing interpretation or analysis introduces the potential for journalistic error or bias. A journalist presenting one view of unemployment numbers may ignore other views. Indeed, the belief that there are multiple perspectives or truths means room is perceived for journalists to be selectively biased in how they cover a topic or issue. Moving beyond the core facts of a story also risks drawing a news report away from its core purpose of providing factual information. For Owen (20, M), delving into the 'why', if it is not entirely known, risks the introduction of inaccuracy. He discusses a hypothetical news story about a house burning down:

> So why did the house burn? I mean, in that case, if they said like the house burned because of this, I would maybe not necessarily completely believe it. Because I have read a lot of articles where it's like, "X, Y and Z believed that the house burned down because of these causes." But, like, it's not known for sure. So, I wouldn't believe straight up that was why it burned down. I would think maybe there's other reasons why. But I would believe obviously that burned down. (Owen, 20, M)

Here, for Owen, the core fact of the story is that a house burned down. But without concrete evidence as to why it burned down, he expresses a reluctance to put full faith in the story. Thus, while there is recognition that journalists *can* delve into the complex, addressing questions of why, whether they *should* depends on the available evidence. Moreover, from this perspective, while there may be different explanations – different 'truths' – it is held that these truths still need to be rooted in facts. This is an example of individuals hewing to their core realist-empiricist beliefs, arguing that journalists should stick to known and observable facts where possible.

For these reasons, a view held by a subset of interviewees is that journalists should actually avoid addressing these interpretive or evaluative questions if possible. This perspective is reflective of the findings of other audience studies which have found that people do not highly value 'explanatory journalism' or interpretation in the news (Heider et al., 2005; Tsfati et al., 2006). Instead, there is a primary concern with journalists presenting the bare facts, keeping interpretations or explanations to a minimum. However, on the other hand, when it comes to managing interpretive or evaluative questions and multiple truths, most people tend to hold the relativistic view that journalists should present the different accounts. This position is more fully addressed in the following section.

How journalists should manage interpretive topics

While there is a core belief among most individuals that journalism can and should seek certainty in reporting, providing singular truths where possible (a position held with respect to less interpretive news stories), it is recognized, as noted above, that this may not be possible in what are seen as interpretive or evaluative domains where there are often multiple truths or 'sides' to a story to tell. In such instances, individuals generally hold that journalists should

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present multiple perspectives and types of evidence. The appropriate approach to journalistic

justification here, in line with individuals' general beliefs about how to resolve multiple truths

and manage individual perspectives, is a pluralist one.

For some interviewees, the view that different perspectives should be presented extends

to a wide range of issues (including, for instance, climate change), though for most participants

there is the view that journalists should not present different views on what they consider to be

settled questions, only on issues where there are perceived to be legitimate differences. This, of

course, means that there is some individual-level variation in which issues are considered settled

and which are seen as debatable, with this variance most often coming down to differences in

political opinions. Examples of issues which interviewees consider debatable include debates

over economic policy and gun control, while "proven" issues include, particularly among liberal

participants, the existence of climate change and the effectiveness of vaccines. Most (liberal)

interviewees tend to consider an issue "proven" when it is backed up by a substantial amount of

scientific evidence, being 'hard science' in nature. It must be noted, however, that social issues

such as abortion, despite having scientific elements, are seen as debatable topics because of their

deeply personal moral and ethical components. Jasper (26, M) outlines the nature of these

distinctions:

> So, politics-wise, hear both sides. In terms of what to do with the economy, what to do
> with voting rights or states' rights, stuff like that, that should be both sides. Everyone's
> got an opinion. But when it comes to things that have been proven, I think there shouldn't
> be two sides to it if there's facts all on one side. It should just be then that one story or
> that one line of thinking. (Jasper, 26, M)

Jasper's view is reflective of views on what journalism can do to get closer to an ideal in

instances where the subject matter is more interpretive in nature (as opposed to less interpretive

instances where questions are settled by facts being 'all on one side'). In practice, a pluralistic

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view of journalistic justification most often manifests as 'balance': people want reliable information presented from both (or more) sides.[3]

For interviewees, the point of balance is to either mitigate or prevent undue preferential treatment being given to one perspective or interpretation over another. There is the belief that truth lays between (politically) polar perspectives and that to engage in the practice of balance is to allow for a moderate or center view – a truth – to emerge between this polarity (or 'between the lines'). For Charles (38, M), for instance, ideal news is centrist and allows him the opportunity to make up his own mind about an issue. This centrism comes from presenting and balancing reliable information from 'both sides':

> News should, as best as possible, present a clear picture of what happened or what is happening. And then perspectives from both sides through either direct quotes or data. I'd like my news to be as center as possible. And then allow me to make my opinion from that. (Charles, 38, M)

> Caroline (19, F), meanwhile, frames this preference in the context of her reservations

about media manipulation. She does not want an opinion forced on her:

> I like showing both sides: "This is what's happening over here, and this is what's happening over here. We have no opinion about it." Because I feel like they're trying to kind of force their opinions onto us. And I don't like that. I want to be able to form my own opinion with the information that's given. (Caroline, 19, F)

> Both Charles' and Caroline's statements are reflective of many interviewees' views

which stem from the belief that the role of journalism is not to directly shape public opinion, but to provide information which can inform it. From the view of participants, it is not for journalists to decide between perspectives but to provide the information necessary for people to come to

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[3] Of note, from the perspective of interviewees, realist-empiricist practices remain relevant and important to follow, if possible, when it comes to more interpretive news. It is stressed that the information provided must still be accurate and reliable, sourced from observation or primary sources. While perspectives on an issue may differ, it is still held that these perspectives should being rooted in different sets of relevant facts or different ways of knowing, not being pure fantasies or speculations.

their own determinations. Balance as a form of justification fits in with individuals' preference for deciding what is true for themselves, engaging in triangulation and an evaluation of evidence in light of their own beliefs, values, and background knowledge (as noted in Chapter four).

Overall, by not picking and choosing perspectives and instead neutrally presenting information from both or more sides of an issue, journalists can achieve a level of impartiality, justifying their news reports by demonstrating an absence of bias. By ensuring balance, journalists, in participants' eyes, put themselves in a more credible position.

The Platonic ideal of news, epistemic congruency, and news credibility

The journalism-related epistemological beliefs which most individuals hold, detailed in the preceding sections, lay out what I will call a Platonic ideal of news. The concept of the Platonic ideal of news draws from Plato's Ideas and Forms. In general terms, the notions of Ideas and Forms speak to the fact that, in an unreliable and imperfect world, there are often not set examples of things which we can point to as the definitive (e.g. the ideal, perfect table). We are unable to reach perfection. However, there *do* exist perfect Forms or Ideas of things which we can describe and make attempts toward (e.g. the notion of an ideal, perfect table). In this sense, there is a Platonic ideal which exists. Using the example of a table, we can construct one. And while it may not be possible for us to construct *the* perfect table, we can still make one that has the features of what we understand to be a good-quality table: legs, a flat surface, solid material (Chappell, 2011).

In the present context, the way interviewees talk about their ideal view of news points toward an ideal Form or Idea of news which exists abstractly and which individuals expect journalists, in practice, to attempt to approach. I call this a Platonic ideal of news because it is

not necessarily achievable: it is in many ways beyond the realm of possibility given many of the practical and philosophical limitations on journalism.

Several interviewees describe this Platonic ideal in terms of what the 'perfect' journalist would be able to do. For Sophie (21, F), for instance, perfect news would come from "perfect people" where "everybody just had selfless intent at all times." In an ideal world, journalists would be able to provide news that was epistemically certain, simple, well-sourced, and justified by correspondence. Personal motivations, biases, and imperfections would not get in the way. Moreover, news, in Robert's (54, M) words, would come from 'True Witnesses' able to describe the world in neutral, objective detail. Drawing from Robert A. Heinlein's 1961 novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* – a book where characters known a Fair Witnesses act as truly objective, impartial observers of events – Robert describes his ideal journalist as someone with the ability to record and describe events in perfect, untainted detail:

> There are a couple of characters in this book who are known as True Witnesses...True Witnesses, as members of the society, if requested, go into True Witness mode. They live normal lives, but they go through such a rigorous ethical training that if they are ever asked to become a True Witness to events unfolding, they will stop and they will go into almost a recording mode. All of the senses are engaged and they are recording for posterity what is happening in front of them. They go through and they can describe what the apparent barometric pressure is, the wind speed direction, blah, blah, blah. They can literally describe everything that's happening around them, including verbatim recitations of conversations in almost cinematic detail, describing what they had seen or heard in that time. (Robert, 54, M)

While these descriptions are described as 'utopian' and unachievable by Robert and Sophie, they point to a Platonic ideal of news; that form of news which exists abstractly as an ideal Form or Idea. These do not necessarily take into account all of the limitations on journalism as a way of knowing, but reflect what people wish they could see.

In more grounded terms, looking to individuals' beliefs regarding what journalism can and should do, as described in this chapter, the core Platonic ideal of news that interviewees hold in their minds can be described as follows: It is news which is epistemically certain, rooted in discrete objective facts relayed in a straightforward manner with clarity and brevity. Moreover, it is news which is properly sourced using multiple pieces of evidence, with claims justified by reference to firsthand observations or otherwise rooted in primary evidence from others with direct or expert knowledge. This core Platonic ideal, which is rooted in individuals' realist-empiricist epistemological beliefs, is seen as most achievable when it comes to topical domains which are viewed as less interpretive, dealing with the what, where, when, and who of concrete events and occurrences. When the topical domain under consideration is more interpretive, involving individual perspectives and evaluation, this form of the Platonic ideal is seen as less achievable. However, there are ideal practices which get journalists closer to it, representing a form of the Platonic ideal in interpretive scenarios. These practices include the relaying of multiple perspectives in a neutral and balanced fashion. Here, the truth, for individuals, lays somewhere in the middle of the range of evidence which is possible to be presented. Overall, when it comes to the Platonic ideal of news, people hold that journalists should stick to realist-empiricist practices where possible and, when it comes to differences in opinion, dispassionately present both (or more) sides of an issue or debate, leaving the audience to decide what to think. These observations provide an answer to RQ2.

The core Platonic ideal of news which interviewees envision is less interpretive in nature, reflective of what Iyengar (1990, p. 7) terms episodic news: that which "depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances or specific events." Desire for it is also reflective of the strong preference for straight news content, as opposed to feature-style storytelling and

opinion/commentary, found among consumers by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013). Straight news, according to the authors, is defined as being "narratively sparse and fact-loaded" (p. 88) and often begins with "information about who, what, where, when, and why — the five W's of journalism...written in a dispassionate tone and third-person voice" (p. 89). Interestingly, the views that interviewees express closely reflect those of participants in Karlsson and Clerwall's (2019, p. 1196) study of Swedish audiences, where ideal news was seen as "objective, unbiased, and based on verified facts from many different and reliable sources...carried out by professionals who do not have a personal stake or an agenda of their own in the subjects they cover, but who have great, preferably first-hand, contemporary and historical knowledge of the subject matter."

Overall, people's epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism reflect traditional notions of objectivity, neutrality, and balance (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Schudson, 2001). A pervasive concern with journalistic bias entering stories often underpins these beliefs, reflective of a more general public concern noted in other research (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020). While this idealized view of journalism has been critiqued in academia (e.g. Durham, 1998; Muñoz-Torres, 2012), with journalists and educators also looking to move away from what are seen to be unrealistic or unhelpful idealized concepts (Baleria, 2020; Cunningham, 2003; Eschelman, 2014), these internalized beliefs about what journalism can and should do persist among audiences. The expectations and desires which people have create a picture of an ideal form of news which has the most news-ness (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a) and which, at an epistemic level, is the most credible in people's minds.

Indeed, this Platonic ideal represents the most epistemically valid and therefore most credible form of news in individuals' eyes because it is seen as certain, simple, well-sourced, and

justified. Moreover, there is an expected or desired level of cooperation from journalism to conform to this Platonic ideal. Notably, however, the ideal is a Platonic one, labelled as such because I argue it is not *necessarily* achievable. But, in individuals' eyes, to seek to approach it is to engage in best practices which improve perceptions of trustworthiness and believability. To the extent that journalists, in practice, are seen to be conforming to this ideal, there will be a greater sense of *epistemic congruency* – that is, an alignment of epistemological beliefs with the perceived epistemological approaches of news sources – and greater perceptions of news credibility. The ways in which journalists can approach this were detailed in this chapter.

On the other hand, to deviate away from the Platonic ideal is to diminish the perceived credibility of news at an epistemic level. Perceived deviations from the core Platonic ideal are more likely when news moves toward interpretation or evaluation, or what Iyengar (1990, p. 7) terms thematic news: that which "places public issues in some general or abstract context...which requires interpretive analysis." A disfavor for more interpretive news reflects the lower preference for feature-style storytelling and opinion/commentary found among consumers by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013). People view this type of news as more prone to issues with certainty, simplicity, sourcing, and justification. However, individuals note that journalists can manage more interpretive topics and issues by presenting perspectives in a balanced way, following another aspect of the Platonic ideal to positively influence news credibility. Perceived deviations from the Platonic ideal in practice are covered in depth in Chapter six.

It must be noted, however, that this Platonic ideal is what individuals *say* they want. There is a potential risk that the views expressed represent socially desirable responses. Indeed, a number of interviewees openly admit to preferring news which aligns with their political views; an indication that ideological congruency may be underpinning news choices and credibility

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assessments (see also Metzger, Hartsell, & Flanagin, 2020). However, what I find is that despite this stated bias, there is a difference in the way that these interviewees express *news consumption preferences* and articulate *notions of news credibility*. While many individuals with stronger left/right-leaning beliefs note consuming news which is more agreeable with their attitudes, this does not mean they view it as entirely credible, and, in fact, many of these same interviewees complain about politically biased journalism on both sides of the political spectrum (including in news which is more agreeable to their political views). Interviewees recognize the biases in many of their preferred sources (see also Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020; Newman et al., 2020), biases which impact perceived credibility and see people taking most news, if not all news, "with a grain of salt."

The preference for agreeable news tends to be reflective of the fact that, given a perceived binary choice between agreeable and disagreeable content, it makes sense for interviewees to select that news which aligns with their point of view. The political and media environments are seen as increasingly polarized, meaning many interviewees see no news sources as truly neutral or middle-ground (see, for example, Mitchell et al., 2014; Fletcher, Cornia, & Nielsen, 2020). In this environment, they choose to seek out ideologically agreeable news. But what interviewees *say* they ultimately want is not to have to make this choice. They would ideally want to see a Platonic ideal of news.

This observation provides qualitative texture to what Metzger et al. (2020) found regarding individuals' higher ratings of credibility for attitude-consistent news sources vis-à-vis attitude-inconsistent news sources. In their study, the authors found that attitude-consistent news was rated higher in credibility than attitude-inconsistent news, but not significantly differently than neutral news. In fact, neutral news was rated highest in credibility, though the difference

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with attitude-consistent news was not statistically significant. Combined, these observations suggest that there is a hierarchy of news preferences, with neutral news at the top.

Overall, what individuals say they want to see with respect to journalism – when it comes to ideal practices which reflect notions of greater credibility – does not necessarily translate directly to news consumption. This is an attitude/perception and behavior disconnect which has been observed in prior work (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, 2005; Newman et al., 2020). It must be noted, however, that the focus of this dissertation is the examination of what individuals express as being more or less credible when it comes to news and newsmaking, rather than the link or disconnect between credibility and news consumption. The question of what individuals see as being credible news is important to answer, in and of itself, insofar as credibility is important to the legitimacy of journalism as a profession; without trust and audience buy-in, journalism lacks institutional relevance or power.

CHAPTER SIX: Epistemic incongruency (or deviations from the Platonic ideal of news)

This chapter addresses RQ3 and RQ4, exploring the questions of how the epistemology of journalism, *as it is practiced*, is viewed by individuals and how the epistemological beliefs and perceptions of individuals together relate to views on news credibility.

The prior chapter detailed individuals' beliefs and expectations with respect to what journalism *can* and *should* do at an epistemological level. It covered beliefs in abstract terms and culminated in a description of the Platonic ideal of news; that form of news which most individuals generally consider most credible at an epistemological level. This chapter covers perceptions of journalism as it is seen to be done. In particular, it focuses on news sources and their perceived deviations from ideal news practices, detailing primary instances where individuals see an incongruency between what they believe journalism can or should achieve at an epistemological level and what they see journalism doing in practice at an epistemological level. These deviations, individually or combined, negatively impact perceived news credibility.

I argue that deviations from ideal news practices represent, fundamentally, violations of an expectation of cooperation. Insofar as journalists fail to conform to ideal practices, individuals perceive *epistemic incongruency*. I define epistemic incongruency as the disconnect, as perceived by individuals, between what is expected or desired from journalism at an epistemological level and what journalists are seen to be doing in practice. Instances where journalists are seen to deviate from epistemological expectations represent cases of epistemic incongruency.

Perceived epistemic incongruency, as a concept, can be viewed as being similar in nature to the perception of ideological incongruency experienced by individuals who read news content from a politically opposite news brand (such as conservatives seeing news from MSNBC or

liberals seeing news from Fox; e.g. Metzger, Hartsell, & Flanagin, 2020) or by individuals who

perceive a disconnect between their political beliefs and the ideological leaning of news content

(e.g. Edgerly et al., 2020). However, while these examples represent forms of attitude

(in)congruency, epistemic (in)congruency points to disconnects between individuals' beliefs

about valid knowledge and knowing in journalism and perceptions of journalistic performance in

practice. My focus here is on incongruencies at an epistemic level, not at a partisan or ideological

level, though the two can be intertwined (see end of chapter).

This perception of epistemic incongruency has negative implications for news credibility.

Importantly, the judgment of incongruency rests with individuals and shifts by news context. In

the context of less interpretive stories, when people perceive that journalists are not providing

news that is certain, simple, well-sourced, and justified by a correspondence of facts with reality,

there is a view that it is less credible. And in the context of more interpretive stories, when

people perceive that journalists are not providing news that is balanced, then there is also a view

that it is less credible. Of note, some individuals are generally skeptical of all news, taking it

"with a grain of salt", while others do appreciate and find credible news that is more complex

and interpretive in all instances. However, the latter individuals constitute only a small subset of

interviewees. Moreover, these individuals continue to hold that more complex and interpretive

news should be built on a less interpretive core.

Given that the Platonic ideal is seen as easier to achieve when it comes to what are

viewed as less interpretive news topics and domains and, conversely, harder to achieve when it

comes to what are viewed as more interpretive news topics and domains, I observe that perceived

deviations from ideal practices are more likely in the latter instance. The associated negative

implications for credibility result in large part from the perceived introduction of journalistic

biases in interpretive domains. However, it must be noted that perceived deviations from the Platonic ideal are possible and observed by individuals when it comes to all news topics. They are just more likely when news addresses the why and how.

This chapter covers, first, perceived deviations from ideal news practices and, second, the individual-level conditions under which these deviations are more likely to be noticed and prompt questions regarding news credibility. Indeed, I observe that there are individual-level variations in perceptions which emanate from differences in news interest, knowledge, and ideological beliefs. Specifically, people who have higher levels of either general or topic news interest, greater knowledge, and stronger ideological beliefs are more likely to observe one or more of these deviations.

There are four primary deviations from ideal news practices, most frequently cited by interviewees, which constitute violations of expectations regarding the certainty of, simplicity of, sources of, and justifications for knowledge that journalism should provide. The greater these perceived deviations are in scope or in quantity, the more news is viewed as less credible. This is due to the fact there is a greater sense of epistemic incongruency. These deviations are as follows:

1. The first deviation is a perceived motive for the distortion of news (**motive for distortion**), which draws journalism away from presenting objective, factual information, and therefore away from core expectations of epistemic certainty and justified sourcing.
2. The second deviation is from expectations of information quantity (**quantity of information**), with journalists providing too little information to justify the claims being made or too much irrelevant information which obscures key facts, drawing journalism away from core expectations of epistemic certainty, simplicity, and justified sourcing.

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3. The third is a deviation from expectations regarding how news should be presented (**manner of presentation**), with journalists providing information in a manner which makes fact claims uncertain or unclear, drawing journalism away from core expectations of epistemic certainty and simplicity.

4. The fourth is a deviation from expectations of professionalism (**professional processes**), with journalists not following institutional practices which are seen to ensure that high-quality accurate information is presented, again drawing journalism away from core epistemic certainty and justified sourcing.

Each of these observed deviations from ideal news practices, alone or in tandem, detract from perceived news credibility because they feed into epistemic incongruency; that is, the disconnect between the epistemological beliefs of individuals and the perceived epistemic approaches of journalists.

It must be noted that these four types of deviations are not necessarily exhaustive or mutually exclusive, with perceived journalistic practices often engaging several types of deviations at once. But the four types are distinguished by the locus of the deviation, with 1) *motives for distortion* being seen as largely stemming from institutional biases, 2) *quantity of information* being an issue with the substance of news content, 3) *manner of presentation* being an issue with the style or appearance of news content, and 4) *lack of professional processes* being an issue largely with the actions of individual journalists and editors.

Also of note, a common theme underlying these four deviations is the expectation that journalists avoid bias in their reporting. At an epistemological level, bias, in one form or another, is a violation of all expectations on journalism to present objective, factual information. Because of perceived biases, a common refrain from interviewees is that they tend not to trust any one source all of the time. Many participants note that they "don't trust anyone" (Alice, 56, F), "don't really trust any of them" (Samuel, 33, M), and "don't trust everything a hundred percent, I don't

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care what source" (Fiona, 59, F). Instead, they take news articles "with a grain of salt." Most news outlets are seen to violate one or more ideal news expectations, affecting trust and credibility; even outlets that individuals themselves report consuming or having a preference for. And, as Liam (27, M) observes, "Trust is very fragile. Once that trust is gone, it's very hard to come back."

Ways that journalists are seen to manage deviations and generate perceptions of epistemic congruency in practice – apart from cooperating with the ideal news practices detailed in Chapter five – are detailed after the sections on deviations as counterpoints to the observations made. These sections cover news sources which are seen to perform well. Specifically, for interviewees, there are three principles which journalists abide by which are related to a greater sense epistemic congruency: consistency, transparency, and independence. When journalists demonstrate independence and are both transparent and consistent in what they do, there is a greater sense among individuals that they are cooperating with ideal news expectations and news is viewed as being more credible. Moreover, these indicate that attempts are being made to prevent biases from influencing news content.

Motive for distortion

The first and most common deviation from ideal news brought up by interviewees – and which is perhaps associated most with low credibility – is a perceived motive for the distortion of news. This deviation comes in the form of perceived political and/or financial motivations, with the locus of the deviation residing largely with journalistic institutions (i.e. news brands or organizations) but sometimes with individual journalists. Individuals argue that news outlets and individual journalists often have overarching political and/or financial motivations which result in the biased distortion of news content. Perceived motivated distortions of news content

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constitute violations of the expectation to provide information which is grounded in objective, empirical observation, and/or properly justified by the use of what are seen as valid external sources. The credibility of news is impacted here because the perception of deliberate distortion of information makes it appear less objective or factual.

When it comes to perceived political motivations for the distortion of news content, while many news sources are viewed as politically biased, interviewees raise particular concerns when it comes to cable news networks such as Fox, CNN, and MSNBC. These outlets serve as apt examples for discussion of what interviewees think of when it comes to a primary deviation from ideal news practices. Specifically, the goal of these sources, interviewees argue, is not necessarily to inform audiences by providing factual information but rather to a) persuade audiences to feel a particular way about an issue, or b) appeal to and maintain the attention of a partisan audience by providing them with content which is agreeable to them. On the latter point, as Alexander (20, M) argues, "news outlets are businesses and so, you know, what appeals to their demographics is what [they report]. It funds their company, right?" On the former point, such sources are seen to have overarching political goals and are therefore seen as less trustworthy and believable because they fail to solely present objective, factual information. Instead, they are seen to deviate into partisan political commentary, the mixing of factual reporting with personal opinions, and the intentional distortion or manipulation of information for political ends.

Views on Fox, CNN, and MSNBC serve as examples of how perceived motivations for distortion are attached to news sources at an institutional level. Interviewees argue that corporate owners, news editors, and news producers at outlets such as Fox News and CNN are either a) motivated to deliberately distort content, or b) creating the conditions for news to be politically

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distorted such as by setting editorial expectations or exclusively hiring journalists who fit the news organization's political culture. Indeed, many interviewees do not allege widespread political conspiracies on the part of such outlets (though some do), instead pointing out that top people within these organizations are likely to create 'corporate cultures' which encourage employees to think in particular ideological terms. Caleb (19, M) explains his view in terms of who certain news outlets are likely to attract, arguing that "if you're a journalist and you're left-leaning, you're probably not going to go work for a corporation like Fox just because that's a news corporation that's against your views, whereas if you're a right-leaning journalist, you're probably not going to want to go work for CNN because that's a corporation that gives more left leaning news. So, it's kinda like the people who get attracted to those places and the ideology or bias of the corporation itself."

Because the locus of the deviation is seen to be at the institutional level, this means it is most often entire news outlets (e.g. Fox News, CNN) which are seen as biased. However, sometimes perceived political motivations are attached to specific journalists or news figures such as Sean Hannity or Rachel Maddow. When it comes to content from these figures, many interviewees recognize that their shows are meant to be political commentary and that there is some division on the networks between opinion programming and straight news programming. However, they argue that this commentary nevertheless bleeds into editorial and reporting practices, creating an overall impression of bias. The presence of figures such as Sean Hannity on Fox News or Rachel Maddow on MSNBC, for instance, serves to taint the entire image of a network, reducing the perceived credibility of the news outlet's reporting because they provide a signal of the overall political leaning of the source.

Moreover, metajournalistic discourse surrounding such news outlets (Carlson, 2016), which comes from other news media, politicians, as well as interpersonal discussions about news, generates overall impressions of news outlets which come to be labelled with ideological markers such as 'conservative' and 'liberal.' Other scholars have described such impressions and ideological markers as heuristics which are developed over time and used to judge the credibility of news content (e.g. Baum & Gussin, 2007).

As alluded to, perceptions of political motivations tend to come from background information about a news source gathered from third parties – several interviewees, for instance, mentioned hearing from friends or family that a particular news outlet is politically biased, while other interviewees gathered information about source biases from politicians (e.g. Donald Trump) and media sources as The Daily Show and Last Week Tonight with John Oliver – or from their own evaluation of the source. The information gathered from other media and interpersonal discussion feeds into overall metajournalistic discourses (Carlson, 2016) about certain news outlets – most often large, well-known news brands – which generate perceptions that are brought to the consumption of news stories. Indeed, perceptions of political motives are often pre-existing and shape perceptions of stories from the outset. However, perceptions of political motives can also sometimes emerge during the consumption of a story, being noticed due to the language used or arguments made. This tends to occur with less well-known sources which do not have widely-discussed pre-existing ideological labels attached to them (as do Fox News and MSNBC).

Importantly, concerns about political motivations arise more often in the context of what are seen as interpretive news stories (particularly, of course, those dealing with political issues) where more room for (political) bias is perceived. This is because such news topics are less

concrete – that is, grounded in simple and certain questions of what, where, when, and who – and instead involve differences in perspectives, opinions, and evaluations. Neutrality is seen as more difficult because interviewees tend to hold that it is hard, even for trained journalists, to remove all conscious and unconscious biases from a story. Alexander (20, M), for example, speaks to this topical or domain difference, noting that it is easier to be neutral in a car accident story, while there is higher risk of bias in a political story:

> It really depends on the context, like what topic it is. 'Cause if it is, for instance, a car crash, there's probably gonna be less bias in presenting that information compared to, like, political opinion about a certain politician or the President. I think some news, some types of news, has more bias than other news. (Alexander, 20, M)

When it comes to these more interpretive news stories, the relative epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism that individuals hold (as detailed in Chapter five) mean people expect relative perspectives to be treated in a balanced fashion. What is often perceived to be the case, however, particularly with regard to these highly political or *politicized* topics, is that one perspective is given precedence and that others are either (deliberately) ignored, distorted, or downplayed. This creates a negative impression of news credibility because it is perceived that news outlets are not following expectations when it comes to managing relative perspectives.

Moreover, perceived political motivations reduce confidence in the certainty of fact claims by raising the possibility that facts have been manipulated, impact the simplicity of coverage by introducing partisan contextualization, undercut what is seen as valid sourcing by introducing reporters as sources of information (in the form of personal opinions), and leave news seeming unjustified because it is felt that a fair consideration of the facts has not been provided.

On the other hand, concerns about political motives for distortion are less likely to arise with respect to what are viewed as less interpretive news topics. When stories are perceived as less interpretive, less room or reason for political bias to enter into stories is perceived (such as in stories about car accidents or the weather). Given the realist-empiricist beliefs with respect to journalism that individuals hold when it comes to less interpretive stories, as long as news outlets present the basic facts in a simple, certain, straightforward manner, credibility can be maintained. An example here comes from Robert (54, M) who notes that while he cannot trust Fox when it comes to political news, he can trust Fox to report about a weather event:

> Fox, for actual news, can be fairly good sometimes. Like during a hurricane, the reporter in the hurricane is going to be just like the other reporters from the other news sources. They're going to be in freaking hip waders standing out on a dock. Fox, for natural events, disasters, things like that [can be trustworthy]. Things that can't be skewed really. (Robert, 54, M)

This less interpretive story about a weather event presents less perceived rhyme or reason for political distortions to enter the news, meaning Fox can be seen, in Robert's eyes, to present a story which is considered credible. Here, Fox's reporting of a hurricane satisfies expectations of direct observation and the objective relaying of information.

A second – though less frequently cited – motive for distortion of news regards perceived financial motivations. Here, interviewees point to the ways in which news outlets might be motivated to omit, sensationalize, or otherwise distort information to gain audience attention, retain audience attention, or serve their monetary interests by not criticizing financial backers such as corporate owners or advertisers (see also Palmer et al., 2020, for similar findings from Spain and the UK). Of note, what is important here is not whether these perceptions of news sources are accurate but whether these beliefs are actually held by individuals. Jason (34, M),

with respect to perceived financial motivations, for instance, sees a potential for corporate

ownership leading to incomplete coverage of certain stories:

> I think that the news media has too soft of a view on big business. I think that there's a lot of ties with the major media outlets to other corporations and sponsors and I think that oftentimes that will water down a lot of the reporting on things that corporations are doing. (Jason, 34, M)

Moreover, perceived financial motivations for the distortion of news content often go

hand-in-hand with political motivations for interviewees. The two are often seen as linked, with

news outlets trying to appeal to and retain certain audience demographics for both political *and*

financial reasons. Palmer et al. (2020) similarly found that audiences in the UK and Spain linked

financial and political motivations together.

Financial motivations reduce the perceived epistemic quality of news, negatively

impacting credibility, in the same way that political motivations do by raising questions about

the objectivity of news reports, the neutrality of journalistic practices, and the completeness of

sourcing. Levi (18, M) raises such issues with respect to CNN, arguing that its corporate

ownership structure means that it is likely to omit information or not operate entirely objectively

in order to protect the financial interests of the larger corporation:

> A lot [biased reporting] has to do with the people in charge. And the other main thing I feel is money. The people who are backing these outlets have their own interests in mind. Like, for example, CNN is owned by Time Warner, I believe. It'll be in CNN's best interests to not do something that would reflect poorly on them. And that'll lead to how they word things and what stories they cover more intensely. (Levi, 18, M)

Of note, interviewees see financial motives for distortion of news touching on both

interpretive and less interpretive news topics where there is a perceived motive to editorialize

content to gain audience attention or to protect corporate monetary interests.

Quantity of information

The second deviation from ideal news expectations has to do with the quantity of information provided in the news. This deviation comes from individuals reading, listening to, or watching news reports and perceiving that either important information is missing or that too much extraneous information is included. Therefore, the locus of this deviation is in the news content, with individuals taking issue with its substance.

When it comes to the perceived omission of information, this can be in the form of omitted facts or perspectives which are deemed relevant to understanding the truth of a story. As with motives for distortion, issues with perceived omissions of information are more likely to be raised when it comes to what are seen as more interpretive news topics. In such instances, as detailed in Chapter five, individuals adopt relativist views, holding the belief that multiple perspectives should be presented in a balanced fashion in order to make news appear more valid. The ideal for interviewees is to follow a pluralistic approach where different sources, perspectives, and ways of knowing are presented and audiences are left to decide for themselves what to think. Balance is seen as part of journalists justifying their stories through the demonstration of non-bias; not inserting opinion but instead relying on external sources which provide relevant perspectives.

However, interviewees see it as more difficult for journalists to provide an adequate quantity of information because how and why interpretations or evaluations can be so varied in number. Moreover, it is perceived that perspectives may be deliberately included or excluded in interpretive contexts because there is greater room for journalistic bias. The omission of relevant perspectives is seen to diminish the credibility of a report because it comes to be viewed as incomplete or potentially biased. From the perspective of interviewees, the omission of

information means a failure on the part of journalists to follow epistemic expectations, with reporters providing enough (balanced) information in an objective way for them to justify their claims or for individuals to make their own determinations of truth. Elena (21, F), for example, raises the point that a story about the impact of the Flint, Michigan, water crisis is incomplete and therefore less credible if it excludes the perspectives of residents in Flint actually affected by the issue:

> It could be a story about the Flint water crisis or something, and they're interviewing about the impact, but they're not actually talking to people who were actually affected by the crisis themselves. They're talking to other people. So, it's kind of like, "How are you doing an article about people that were impacted, but you're not even talking to the people who lived through it?" So, I think, a lot of times, "Do you have different perspectives? Are you being one-sided?" really plays a big part into if I would be like, "Okay, I don't really like this article." (Elena, 21, F)

For Elena, the omission of such information is seen to reflect one-sidedness or bias; a deference to the point of view of those in power in Michigan and a downplaying of the perspectives of ordinary – mostly minority – citizens. It reflects a violation of the expectation of balance.

Omissions, meanwhile, are less likely to be perceived when it comes to what are viewed as less interpretive news stories. Here, it is held that journalists are better able to provide straightforward accounts of what, where, when, and who, thereby covering their informational bases. What Elena points to above with Flint is a perceived omission of relevant or pertinent information in the case of a more interpretive or evaluative story ('how has as the water crisis impacted Flint?'). On the other hand, Jen (21, F) observes that journalists can more often provide a sufficient amount of objective information when it comes to straightforward topics which are seen as less subjective and interpretive. In practice, when it comes to less interpretive stories (instances where individuals hold more realist-empiricist epistemological beliefs), providing a

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sufficient quantity of information involves reporting, where relevant: firsthand observations, testimonial evidence from primary sources, data supporting claims, and the testimonies of recognized experts.

For Jen, the question is one related to the simplicity of a story and whether there is the potential for subjectivity to be involved when it comes to making decisions about what to include in a story where multiple (conflicting) points of view may exist:

> I definitely think it depends what kind of news you're reporting on. If you're reporting on factual type of news, like the 5 o'clock news about traffic and weather, you're not gonna be too subjective. That stuff is pretty standard…But, as far as when it comes to more controversial topics, politics, all that kind of stuff, there's obviously always two sides to a story. And I feel like a lot of the time with the more controversial stuff, they'll kind of leave it more open-ended. (Jen, 21, F)

Here journalists can more easily provide a sufficient amount of objective information about straightforward topics such as traffic and weather because they are seen as less subjective, having singular viewpoints (or truths). However, when it comes to more controversial, interpretive topics, there is a greater potential to leave out relevant information (e.g. 'both sides' of a debate) which may be used to make a determination about the truth. It must be noted that when there *are* cases of perceived omissions of information from less interpretive stories, in epistemological terms, such quantity of information violations reduce confidence in the certainty of journalistic claims because news does not appear fully justified on evidentialist grounds.

Meanwhile, on the other side, the inclusion of too much information can also be seen to obscure the truth of a story. In particular, when it comes to less interpretive stories where individuals hold realist-empiricist beliefs, providing too much information beyond that which is necessary to understand a story can be viewed as a violation of the expectation that news be straightforward. In other words, too much content risks the truth or main point of a story being

obscured. In epistemological terms, it violates expectations regarding the certainty and simplicity of knowledge that journalists ought to provide. This issue is not frequently cited by interviewees, however.

What is more frequently mentioned by participants is how journalists providing too much extraneous information can raise red flags and signal potential bias. Too much information, for interviewees, most often comes in the form extraneous opinion, commentary, or, on television, 'talking heads' content which extends a story beyond the bounds of the core facts. This issue is raised particularly with respect to the cable news networks, though other outlets are also seen to violate expectations. On television, the inclusion of extraneous information is seen to be an outgrowth of the fact that 24/7 programming incentivizes it. In order to fill airtime, interviewees observe, cable news channels such as CNN and Fox News shift beyond the bounds of the core story to include commentary. It is a practice which raises bias concerns and reduces perceived news credibility. Alice (32, F) raises this point, noting that she is happy to see a straightforward story detailing what President Trump did today, but that she starts to see bias when broadcasters stray into providing their feelings:

> I don't care if someone's like, "Okay, well, President Trump did this and this and this today." But when they start bringing in like, "Oh, this is how we feel about it," then I'm like, "Oh, you're kind of biased." (Alice, 32, F)

The kind of extraneous commentary that Alice points to is seen as most likely to occur with political news. And because political news stories often include debate and differences of opinion, the issue of too much information is most likely to be raised when it comes to interpretive news stories, largely because such stories create the potential for interpretive or evaluative commentary to enter the picture.

Overall, for interviewees, providing too much or too little information is often tied to the perception of political biases. This illustrates how deviations from expectations are often intertwined (here, quantity of information violations being linked to motives for distortion). In the context of politics, not providing information from 'both sides' is the most obvious example of an omission of information that interviewees point to. It is a failure which is frequently seen as deliberate, with outlets only wanting to cover one perspective on an issue. This view is reflective of the general American public's opinion that there is too much intentional bias in news that ought to be objective (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020) and the view in other countries that perspectives are deliberately left out for political reasons (Palmer et al., 2020). Meanwhile, when it comes to providing too much information in the form of extraneous commentary, this is viewed as a deliberate attempt to sway audiences with partisan talking points.

Manner of presentation

The third deviation from ideal news expectations has to do with the manner in which news is presented. As with quantity of information violations, the locus of this deviation is in the news content, though here individuals take issue with its style or appearance. Manner of presentation violations include the use of sensational or emotive language, along with the perceived misuse of presentation elements such as colors and graphics. These violations occur with both more and less interpretive news stories, though they differ slightly in nature.

When it comes to what are seen as less interpretive news stories which deal with straightforward topics – instances where individuals hold realist-empiricist beliefs with respect to journalism – the most common manner of presentation violations that interviewees mention have to do with sensationalizing content. Sensationalism here encompasses instances of journalists over-dramatizing or exaggerating aspects of stories with emotive or colorful language.

Interviewees view these practices as being designed to attract their attention (see also Palmer et al., 2020; Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020) but note that sensationalism has the effect of reducing both the levels of trust and belief they put in stories. At an epistemic level, the exaggeration of news content reduces the perceived correspondence between what is being claimed (e.g. in a headline) and what the actual story is, affecting the basis of justification for a story and reducing its epistemic certainty. Stories are ultimately viewed as less accurate and therefore less worthy of trust and belief from a realist-empiricist perspective.

Participants observe that this often occurs with celebrity stories or in clickbait headlines. In both instances, interviewees have a generalized lack of trust because story content often fails to match the headline or the overall claim being made (e.g. a claim that two celebrities are in a relationship, but the article only notes that two celebrities were seen at a coffee shop together). Moreover, the use of exaggerated language can undercut how much individuals are likely to believe a story because of a perceived mismatch between claims made and the *objective facts* of a story. Jack (21, M), for example, says he is unlikely to believe a headline reading "Donald Trump tells you to drink bleach? I can't believe that's what he said!" because, he observes, Donald Trump never did tell anybody to drink bleach.[4] This is an example of a less interpretive political story in the sense that participants note that it can be covered by simply directly relaying what President Trump said.

Outside of US examples, Joanna (26, F) points to the misleading and overdramatized presentation of Spanish news which is designed to "freak you out" and Sam (27, M) laments the tendency of Indian news to present everything as "breaking news", diminishing one's ability to

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[4] Funke, D. (2020, April). In Context: What Donald Trump said about disinfectant, sun, and coronavirus. *PolitiFact*. Retrieved from https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/apr/24/context-what-donald-trump-said-about-disinfectant-/

judge how important a news story is. Exaggerated or misleading language in these instances can introduce ambiguity for interviewees, undercutting the certainty of knowledge claims by raising questions regarding what is actually true. Some participants note that opinions in news can often be apparent to them in the use of small instances of emotive language and that even these small cases are enough to put a dent in the credibility of news because they signal deviations from expectations.

While trust and believability are affected when there are mismatches between real-world events and journalistic claims in less interpretive stories, when it comes to what are viewed as more interpretive news topics, credibility is affected when sensational or emotive language is used because it suggests that journalists may not be acting in a neutral or objective fashion, instead introducing (partisan) bias to stories. In other words, interpretive news topics, such as those dealing with politics or politicized issues, are seen to be more open to opportunities for journalists to insert sensational or emotive language that is biased.

Ruby (21, F), for instance, points out that a clickbait headline reading "is Gretchen Whitmer right for introducing this [coronavirus lockdown] order?" provides an indication in its tone and phrasing of potential bias against the Governor of Michigan. Meanwhile, Liam (27, M) gives a stark example of being at the gym and seeing reports from CNN and Fox News simultaneously side-by-side on the televisions in front of him. The story he saw being reported was that of President Trump's impeachment trial and he characterizes the differences in language used to describe it:

> It's kind of funny in terms of the terminology that they both use, like what CNN uses and then what Fox News uses. During the Trump impeachment trials, you see a title about it on CNN which is a lot more on the left-wing side of news or a little bit more in the center. It was like, "Trials are scheduled to be on blah, blah, blah." And then you have

Fox News on the righthand side saying, "Trump's trials, or known as the Witch Hunt, are scheduled for blah, blah, blah." (Liam, 27, M)

In these examples provided by Ruby and Liam, language selections raise concerns that journalists are introducing themselves as sources, biasing the interpretation of simple facts (here, the introduction of a coronavirus lockdown order and the scheduled start date of President Trump's impeachment trial). There is a violation of the expectation that journalists, in line with the relative beliefs that individuals hold when it comes to interpretive news topics, provide information neutrally and in a balanced fashion.

Of note, the impacts of language use also extend to perceived negativity in news. A large subset of both older and younger interviewees complain about consistent negativity in news coverage. While these interviewees do recognize that a lot of news is inherently negative in nature, with these types of stories often being the most important (e.g. the coronavirus pandemic), often negativity is also connected to sensationalism and transparent audience-seeking. This includes news outlets deliberately "trying to make [us] panic" (Alice, 32, F) because "sparking emotion gets the most views" (Caleb, 19, M). When viewed this way, negativity impacts perceived credibility because it is felt that news outlets are exaggerating the bad and scaremongering for their own financial gain. Negativity also feeds into news fatigue and avoidance among these interviewees.

As for aspects of audiovisual presentation, several interviewees mention the use of aggressive or emotional tone in reporting, as well as the use of eye-catching colors and graphics as off-putting elements of presentation which raise credibility issues for them. Isaac (23, M), for instance, raising issues he has with CNN, mentions that "all their thumbnails are bright red, and psychologically, red is supposed to be more attractive for you to click on it. And I don't like

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those games. I don't want games like that being played on me." For Isaac, these aspects of presentation raise concerns about potential manipulation, which detracts from CNN's trustworthiness as a source. Meanwhile, participants point to instances of television news personalities yelling or shouting as indicators that they are not being neutral or objective, instead inserting themselves into the news. These manner of presentation violations are seen to detract from the core role that journalists are mean to perform; that of information dissemination. As deviations, they are seen to add more to a story than is necessary, distracting from core facts. These aspects of audiovisual presentation as deviations apply to what are seen as both more and less interpretive stories.

Professional processes

Finally, the fourth deviation from ideal news brought up by interviewees is a perceived lack of professional processes. Expectations of professional processes include newsrooms having fact-checkers and editorial oversight, as well as journalists following ethical practices and having sufficient expertise in the domain being reported on. These concerns are largely to do with interviewees wanting accurate and objective information, in accordance with the view that the most desirable characteristics of journalism are accuracy and objectivity (see also Heider et al., 2005; Vos et al., 2019). The locus of each deviation is with journalists and editors, though the absence of professional processes is largely detected or perceived by individuals via news content. Indeed, given a lack of direct insight into the behind-the-scenes of newsrooms, absences of professional processes are most often inferred from the nature of content (e.g. perceiving a lack of ethics or morals from the way a story is reported), but also inferred from other sources (e.g. news outlets reporting on errors in other media) as well as from one's own knowledge (e.g. noticing journalists have reported incorrectly about a specific topic).

Deviations from expectations of professional processes are likely to be perceived when it comes to both more and less interpretive news topics, though they differ in nature. When it comes to what are seen as less interpretive stories where people hold realist-empiricist beliefs, to deviate from these expectations is to raise questions regarding the quality and accuracy of information being presented. In epistemic terms, such deviations reduce confidence in the certainty of claims and raise questions about proper sourcing. Meanwhile, when it comes to more interpretive news topics and domains where individuals hold more relative beliefs, to deviate from expectations of professional processes means to violate the expectation that perspectives be balanced. Here, a perceived lack of editorial oversight, ethics, or journalistic expertise can see individuals raising questions around the validity and completeness of the sourcing in news stories, which negatively impacts credibility. Interviewees see it as easier for news organizations to act professionally when it comes to what are seen as simpler, more straightforward news stories which are less interpretive in nature. As stories become more complex, however, involving interpretations and evaluations, participants view it as more difficult for journalists to act professionally because there is more room for biases and errors.

The concern for accuracy in reporting underlies expectations that news sources employ fact-checkers or otherwise have forms of editorial oversight which can ensure that news reports do not contain errors. In many cases, these expressed deviations from ideal news are not noticed in the moment (as, for example, with manner of presentation violations) but learned later (e.g. when an outlet has been criticized by other media). At an epistemological level, such instances of poor fact-checking or editorial oversight are deviations from the expectation that journalists gather enough evidence to justify a claim before reporting it.

Examples of poor fact-checking or editorial oversight that interviewees point to include inaccurate coverage of the death of Kobe Bryant in early 2020[5] and the misidentification of Boston Marathon Bomber suspects in 2013[6]. In both cases, the problem for interviewees stems from journalists trying to get information out too quickly and failing to follow proper processes which ensure accuracy (see also Newman & Fletcher, 2017, on audience criticism of journalists putting speed before accuracy).

Elena (21, F), for instance, explains how inaccurate reporting around the death of Kobe Bryant affected her trust in the media. For her, it was an example of journalists being more concerned with getting a story out than telling the truth, failing in their duty to provide reliable information. She points to journalism's role as an information-provider and the way in which inaccurate reporting around Kobe Bryant's death represented an abandonment of that role:

> Honestly, that was a big thing in the news. And I think it exposed media tactics that are used in the sense of, the media no longer cares about being accurate or telling the truth. It's all about being first and publishing a story. And, so, I think that has been a huge shift. And maybe it is a little bit unethical. It makes people not wanna trust media outlets when [they] would rather report that people have died versus waiting until [they] actually have the facts to report a story. And that's kind of scary, especially within the news, because a lot of people seek out news for information. (Elena, 21, F)

What Elena points to, also, is another aspect of professionalism which participants look to: ethical practices. A lack of ethics, especially surrounding the reporting of celebrity news, negatively impacts trust by raising questions around the legitimacy of information obtained through "dirty work" (Lauren, 19, F).

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[5] Finn, C. (2020, January). How did the media report Kobe Bryant's death? With confusion and misinformation, to start. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved from https://www.bostonglobe.com/sports/celtics/2020/01/28/rush-report-kobe-bryant-news-led-some-confusion-and-misinformation/NUtyPbjDeMvQupCA9C9AdO/story.html

[6] Fung, K., & Mirkinson, J. (2013, April). New York Post's Boston 'Bag Men' Front Page Called 'A New Low,' 'Appalling.' *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/ny-post-boston-suspects-bag-men-front-page_n_3109052

While most deviations of this kind are not noticed in the moment, interviewees do point to breaking news scenarios as being prone to these types of errors. In such instances, the uncertainty of claims being made by journalists can become readily apparent as new details roll in minute-by-minute. Participants say that they have learned to be wary of breaking news claims (such as with reports of celebrity deaths), precisely due to the uncertainty of the truth claims which emerge in these scenarios. In these situations, interviewees note that they take news "with a grain of salt", being unwilling to take claims at face value until they know more. Credibility is affected due to the uncertainty of what are seen as tentative claims being made.

What also affects the perceived quality of information presented, negatively affecting credibility, is a perceived lack of journalistic expertise in a domain. Participants raise concerns, for example, regarding news reports on data related to the coronavirus pandemic because of a perceived lack of journalistic expertise in the domains of mathematics and statistics. The issue for participants, in such situations, is the difficulty in trusting that journalists have 'got it right'. With reference to individuals' general epistemological beliefs (Chapter four), there is the view that accurate information is more likely to come from people who have domain expertise because it is believed that such people are better able to judge the quality of evidence, check claims for errors, and justify their analyses. Interviewees question the ability of journalists without domain expertise to properly contextualize information gathered from primary and expert sources. For interviewees, this undercuts the certainty of claims being made. However, it is observed that journalists can be trusted more if they have experience working a beat, given that they have had time to gain domain knowledge, of if they have relevant qualifications.

Finally, it must be noted that a lack of professional processes generally covers individuals' lack of trust in unfamiliar sources, particularly those encountered on social media.

Familiarity and reputation play key roles here in guiding individuals' assessments of what news sources to either give consideration to or immediately dismiss. Participants say they are more likely to immediately discount information coming from websites such as "Jen's mom's neighborhood.com" (Liam, 27, M), other "sketchy sites" (Thea, 20, F) with "shitty layouts" (Sophie, 21, F), and from known or unknown individuals on social media who lack trustworthiness because of their absence of expertise or because they have a history of unreliability. Diminished credibility comes from the uncertainty surrounding where such sources are getting their information and the professional processes it has been through, if any. Meanwhile, participants are more likely to give fair consideration to recognizable news brands. This is because such outlets are seen to have 'proven' themselves on some level by virtue of their longevity (the reasoning being that an unreliable news outlet would not last in business for decades) or because their status means they have too much to lose by outright lying to the public.

A note on the pervasive concern about journalistic bias

It is apparent that what often underlies these four forms of deviation from audience expectations is a persistent concern about journalistic bias. In fact, by far the most common complaint about news raised by interviewees across the board has to do with bias. It is seen as the primary issue that journalists have to mitigate.

Its persistent mention initially raised the possibility of including bias as *the* primary deviation from ideal news. However, the way in which bias permeated through other dimensions of individuals' attitudes and beliefs prompted a line of inquiry which sought to explore its role. Specifically, the persistent mention of bias in early interviews led me to explore in subsequent interviews what the term meant to people and in what forms bias manifested.

When it comes to uses of the term, most often bias is described in terms of political bias, but the term also encompasses journalists' own conscious non-political personal biases and unconscious biases arising from journalists' personal backgrounds. Among interviewees, bias is conceived of as pushing a political agenda (Brian, 45, M), a preference for one point of view over another (Vincent, 40, M), deliberately ignoring contradictory facts because of one's beliefs (Cole, 35, M), a failure to consider a different perspective (Charles, 38, M), an unconscious tendency toward a point of view or an interpretation (Kelly, 41, F), your thoughts and opinions as influenced by your experiences (Samuel, 33, M), and a filter through which we see all things (River, 41).

Bias is seen as occurring both intentionally (as part of deliberate distortion) and unintentionally (as a natural by-product of human error and imperfection), touching on all aspects of the journalistic process. Indeed, bias touches on all four deviations from ideal news practices. For example, 1) the conscious inclusion of subjective opinions relates to motives for distortion, 2) the deliberate omission of information from the one or more 'sides' relates to quantity of information, 3) the unconscious inclusion of biased language relates to manner of presentation, and 4) the unconscious failure to include or consider other perspectives relates to professional processes.

Overall, at an epistemological level, bias is seen to diminish the certainty of knowledge claims by raising doubts about their validity, add disingenuous complexity to knowledge claims, introduce journalists themselves as invalid sources of personal knowledge, and undercut justifications for knowledge by raising the possibility that empirical observations have been distorted or that other primary or expert sources have been selectively used. Bias represents a

violation of all expectations on journalism to present objective, factual information, generally

affecting credibility.

Notably, participants see more conscious and overt forms of bias as most relevant to and

more pervasive in what are viewed as interpretive news stories, particularly those dealing with

politics. The perception of greater room for journalistic bias to enter into such stories through

evaluations, why and how explanations, and contextualization, sees conscious bias being the

greatest concern here. For example, while Charles (38, M) recognizes that explanation and

interpretation may be necessary with complex topics, he observes that 'how' and 'why'

explanations create opportunities for journalistic bias to enter into stories:

> A lot of times [interpretation] is welcome. But that is where we have the opportunity to
> get into… You know, especially in financial news, you get into certain aspects of the
> GDP or interest rates, lending rates, and different things that are part of this huge
> financial system that are just very difficult for a lay person that isn't in the industry to
> understand. And, so, they need some explanation as to what that means. It's welcome in
> cases. But it does present the opportunity for that to become biased. (Charles, 38, M)

On the other hand, when it comes to what are seen as less interpretive stories which deal

with more straightforward news topics such as the coverage of events and the what, where,

when, and who of daily life, interviewees tend to more often raise concerns about unconscious

biases, noting that while it can be easier for journalists to be neutral and objective in such

instances, there remains the risk that unintentional biases will slip through.

Counterpoints: The roles of consistency, transparency, and independence

The corollary of the above observations about deviations from ideal news practices is that

if perceived motives are lacking, if there is an adequate quantity of information, if news is

presented in a neutral and straightforward manner, and if professional processes are followed,

there is more likely to be a perception of epistemic congruency – or an alignment of audience

expectations with the epistemological approaches of journalists – and a greater sense that news is credible.

News sources, however, are often seen to fail in one or more areas in practice. In order to help overcome this problem (apart from adhering to the epistemological expectations of audiences by following ideal news practices), there are three principles which journalists are seen to enact in practice which aid with credibility: consistency, transparency, and independence. Adhering to these principles increases the impression that a news source is acting in accordance with audience expectations. Here, I cover news sources which are seen to perform well and how these principles act as counterpoints to the four deviations noted.

Mitigating perceived motives for distortion

With regard to mitigating perceived motives for distortion of news, interviewees note that the news sources they trust the most are those they consider consistently ideologically neutral or centrist. These include outlets such as ABC News and NBC News which are viewed as having demonstrated their bipartisanship or middle-groundedness, and a corresponding lack of motivation to distort news, over time. Emery (44, F), for instance, observes that "there's nothing necessarily in the wording on the NBC news that has alarmed me, or I've thought, 'Oh, that's clearly bullshit, or someone's opinion.'" In a similar fashion, Kylie (18, F) points to ABC News as an outlet which has proven itself over time to be politically neutral, avoiding the type of criticism that other outlets have attracted for pushing points of view:

> I feel like no news outlet is like dead in the middle, but I feel like ABC News comes really close just based on different articles and different websites that have talked about that…I feel like it's generally accepted that ABC news is one of the more, closer to the middle in terms of news outlets…There haven't been any huge scandals that have brought it down or things like that. (Kylie, 18, F)

Thus, for interviewees, the consistent demonstration of political neutrality communicates trustworthiness. Moreover, if a news outlet is able to stay out of the critical spotlight, not attracting the negative attention that outlets such as CNN or Fox News do, there is a greater impression of credibility because of an absence of negative metajournalistic discourse influencing perceptions (Carlson, 2016). Consistently demonstrated neutrality indicates cooperation with the Platonic ideal because there is a perception that, due to their neutrality, such outlets have a greater focus on communicating facts.

When it comes to the perceived absence of both political *and* commercial motivations, two news sources are among those most frequently cited by interviewees: BBC News and NPR. The commonality between these two sources is that they are public broadcasters, trusted by a number of participants because they are seen to be fulfilling a key role of journalism: public service. Moreover, their status as public broadcasters provides them with a level of perceived independence from commercial and political influences. Indeed, there is the view among participants that public broadcasters such as the BBC and NPR are required at some level to be neutral and objective, being mandated to serve the public interest, and that they can be independent from commercial influence because of alternative funding structures. From Caleb's (19, M) point of view, the funding structures and public service mandates of these outlets provide an incentive to be unbiased:

> The BBC is funded by the government, so there's much more incentive for them to not be biased because it's not as privatized. It's much more public. I guess it'd be the difference between watching something like NPR and CNN, whereas a public news source is going to want to be unbiased because it's public, it's meant for everyone and it's funded by the government. The government isn't going to fund biased news. (Caleb, 19, M)

At an epistemological level, there is the perception that because these outlets remain politically neutral, they provide more certain and simple coverage. Brian (45, M), for example,

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argues that, from his perspective, "[NPR and BBC] tell, for the most part, an unbiased retelling of the actual things that happened in a news story. I don't think that they put any of their spin or try to particularly please anybody."

In the context of political news coverage, trust in the BBC (along with other international outlets) also arises due to the perception that, because the BBC is removed from US politics, it has little incentive to have a partisan point of view. In other words, the BBC is viewed as having independence or no 'skin in the game' as far as US politics goes. Because of its 'outside observer' status, it is viewed as being better able to maintain a neutral perspective on US politics. On the other hand, US-based outlets are viewed as potentially biased because they are embedded in the US political system. Higher trust in the BBC among US news consumers tracks with findings in other research (Newman et al., 2020).

Of note is the fact that epistemic congruency and credibility here emerge largely from factors outside the control of individual journalists, having to do with organizational funding structures and public service mandates placed on specific outlets or, in the case of international outlets, their positioning as outsiders to US politics. In terms of what individual journalists can do, from the perspective of interviewees this comes down to communicating an absence of political or financial motives. What interviewees note is that transparency can aid in this. Examples include interviewees wanting to see the Washington Post be as transparent as possible regarding its ownership by Amazon's Jeff Bezos. Participants also place emphasis on outlets both being very transparent about op-ed content, making explicitly clear what is op-ed content and what is not, and about outlets maintaining a bright line between opinion and regular news (there is a perception that this line is not as bright as it could be). For interviewees, transparency and clear demarcation (in the sense of a complete, walled-off separation) between news and

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opinion provide a greater level of confidence that news can be relied on. The level of distrust felt

for CNN and Fox News stems in part from the feeling that these sources too often blur the line

between what is news and what is editorialization. Given the perceived blurring of news and

opinions, uncertainty as to what can be relied on as fact in any story is generated, violating the

expectation of certainty.

Mitigating perceived quantity of information violations

With regard to mitigating perceived quantity of information violations, in practice,

journalists can show cooperation with ideal news expectations by being consistent and

transparent in what they do. For example, Frank (81, M) notes that his trust in Bill O'Reilly and

Walter Cronkite as broadcasters came from the fact that they, in his eyes, consistently presented

both sides of a story:

> They earned [trust] over time by telling the truth on a consistent basis, and both sides. And it
> was offered up as, "This is this side, and this is that. These are the facts, you make up your
> own mind." They didn't try to sell you anything. And I would much rather listen to a news
> broadcast that was that way, that gave me both sides of the story. (Frank, 81, M)

Another example comes from Willow (34, F), who explains why she found her local

Channel 13 ABC News station trustworthy during the 2016 election cycle. She notes that the

station consistently provided a straightforward, balanced picture of the candidates, giving her full

information – or "full sides" – in an unbiased way. For her, this approach conformed to her

expectation that journalists provide the available evidence, leaving her to decide what to think. It

also accorded with her view of the role of journalism being that of an information provider, not a

determiner of public opinion:

> They did a really good job of basically just stating, "This is what's going on." And I felt like
> they did a good job of showing both positives and negatives about different candidates. And
> so, I appreciated that. I think that I can come to my own conclusions. I don't need somebody
> to tell me how to think or necessarily how they think, either…It can be dangerous when
> people in power…and I do think that journalists are in power because of their ability to share

what they think is important, and how that shapes public ideas and public opinion. I think that it's important to try to be as unbiased as possible to allow people to come up with their own conclusions. And in doing that, it's important to provide full sides of the stories in ways that allow people to look at those and say, "Is that in keeping with my values? What do I think about that?" versus, "Oh well, they say that's that, so that's that." (Willow, 34, F)

A greater sense of justification also comes from the provision of all evidence available. This is part of journalists providing a sufficient 'quantity of information' in the sense that information is provided in full. Interviewees place more credence in news stories where information is presented transparently, with journalists providing interviews, videoclips, and relevant documents or studies in their unedited forms where possible. This type of transparency provides individuals with a level of certainty regarding what the evidence is, making stories seem epistemically justified. It also allows them to review the evidence for themselves, providing them an opportunity to check the claims of journalists.

Several interviewees describe source transparency in terms of journalists providing lists of references or citations backing up the claims made in a story. Being oblique about where information has come from – such as in instances where information is described as having come from a 'source' instead of a named individual – negatively affects credibility because it creates uncertainty as to the validity of information. Such practices also violate the expectation of clarity contained in the Platonic ideal of news.

Mitigating perceived manner of presentation violations

When it comes to mitigating perceived manner of presentation violations, this largely comes down to journalists showing cooperation with audience expectations by being consistent in their approach. In terms of outlets which conform more closely to manner of presentation ideals, NPR is again mentioned by participants as an example of a more credible source. Joanna (26, F), for instance, says that she likes NPR because "they do such a good job in connecting you

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to the story and being calm about it, just giving you a good understanding like breaking things down." In the same way, NPR's "very soothing and very calming" delivery is cited as one reason for its greater trustworthiness and believability (Cole, 35, M). This style of presentation is indicative of neutrality, suggesting to interviewees the absence of opinion. Moreover, consistently calm presentation is seen to facilitate better understanding, providing individuals with a sense of certainty as to what the facts are. On the other hand, sensationalism creates uncertainty because it creates the impression that situations have been exaggerated or that the facts have been overblown.

To interviewees, a straightforward, neutral style of presentation, without unnecessary distractions, means more focus on the facts. A lack of opinion or emotion signals the exclusion of journalistic self-knowledge from the news – that form of knowledge which is viewed as the least valid – and allows information to stand on its own. It is for this reason that Fiona (59, F) cites Good Morning America as a news source she places trust in. From her perspective, the show reports facts and excludes emotion, meaning it cooperates with the Platonic ideal:

> I really do like to watch Good Morning America because I think they report the facts. They don't try to put their emotional swing on things. We all have enough emotions as it is, you don't need to be picking up on somebody else's or being swayed by someone else's feelings on something. I just want the facts, man. (Fiona, 59, F)

Mitigating perceived violations of professional processes

While professional news outlets do look to work in accordance with expectations, what is important for audiences is that their presence is readily apparent. In practice, journalists can show cooperation with audience expectations by being transparent and consistent.

An important cue that participants rely on to signal a level of professionalism – and one which aids with views on news credibility – is transparency regarding minor errors. Interviewees

say that they appreciate and take note of instances where journalists admit to small mistakes because this shows honesty. Of note, however, is the fact that this is appreciated so long as the errors are minor. The misidentification of Boston marathon bomber suspects, noted earlier, was considered a large and consequential error which negatively impacted news credibility.

Such transparent admissions signal to audiences that editorial oversight is being conducted, fact-checking is being done, and that ethical practices are being followed. Admitting to small errors has the effect of signaling that outlets are trying their best to get the facts straight and to inform the public, in line with journalism's perceived role as an objective information provider. Transparency garners trust, as Priya (30, F) observes of NPR and the New York Times:

> I always respect a news source that is not afraid to say, "Hey, we did this wrong, or said this wrong, and we're correcting it." To me, that shows a little bit of integrity when you're able to admit that you reported something wrong, 'cause I think some just may ignore it or never acknowledge it. (Priya, 30, F)

Moreover, Connor (40, M) says that when it comes to trusting news sources, he looks at whether there are "certain ethical practices of journalism that are either being followed or not." Demonstrating professionalism through particular actions such as admitting errors, Connor observes, adds to credibility and helps to manage negative perceptions (including perceptions of bias). A level of noticeable professionalism is what sets trustworthy outlets apart from untrustworthy ones. He goes on to say:

> [I look for whether] there's a level of staffing and editorial leadership. People say The New York Times is more liberal and The Wall Street Journal is more conservative, but you can pretty well trust that anything from either of those sources has gone through a rigorous process. And if mistakes are found, corrections are made. And if unethical practices are discovered to have been behind any of the stories, the story of the mistake becomes bigger than the original story that had the mistake in it. Whereas a website like Being Liberal, while that's sure fun to read, and they might share things from a reputable source, they themselves don't bother with any real journalism, or a source like Breitbart... They're pretty obviously trash sources. (Connor, 40, M)

What Connor alludes to also is the fact that the reputations of outlets such as the New York Times and Wall Street Journal place a level of expectation upon them: impropriety at the New York Times becomes a scandal, while impropriety at Breitbart might not. Editorial and public oversight, combined, create expectations of professionalism for news outlets which, if conformed to, create the impression that they are likely to be acting in a fashion which is closer to audience expectations.

On the point of reputation, news outlets which have a longer history and are able to demonstrate desirable practices over time are more likely to be seen as having an absence of a motivation for distortion and to be engaging in professional processes. When it comes to the longevity of a source, the rationale that interviewees employ is that if a news outlet has been in business for a long time, it must be consistently doing something right. News sources which have been in business for decades, interviewees argue, have been through an audience vetting process and have therefore demonstrated, at some level, that they are worthy of consideration. Extremely biased outlets which distort information or those which do not fact-check, have editorial oversight, or possess expertise, it is rationalized, are less likely to survive. Liam (27, M) expresses this sentiment, noting that he is more likely to trust "established organizations" because they have proven themselves over time:

> Established organizations have embedded through time. If the Washington Post or Fox news or the New York Times, if they were just a year old, you know, they haven't been through the vetting process through the American public for that long. But I know that if they've been around for a hundred years or, you know, for more than a decade, I know that it has gone through a vetting process of the American public and that they only have so much that more to lose. (Liam, 27, M)

In addition to this, sources with a good reputation are also seen as being under pressure to uphold that reputation, which means they are more likely to engage in reliable journalistic practices. Emery (44, F), for instance, says she places trust in the New York Times because

public scrutiny of the outlet means it maintains high standards. For this reason, it can be relied

on:

> [The New York Times] are read so wildly that it would be a lot harder to present false information when you're read by so many people and you've existed for so long. Because you have that many more people kind of keeping you in check. And you can see the times where they have messed up, and they have been kept in check in that regard. I feel like it's been a professional organization for a long time. (Emery, 44, F)

There is also an implicit level of trust which comes from news outlets staying out of the

spotlight, away from public attention. In other words, trust also tends to come from news sources

not raising eyebrows. Indeed, interviewees point to the fact that negative metajournalistic

discourse (Carlson, 2016) about news outlets – coming from the public or other news sources –

has an effect on trust. If a news outlet is constantly being talked about or criticized (for instance,

as with Fox News or CNN), this creates the impression that they are doing something wrong and

thereby not living up to ideal practices. Meanwhile, if a news outlet is not talked about or

criticized, this creates the impression that the source must be doing something right. It suggests

that the outlet is remaining neutral and objective, not reporting false or misleading information,

and is being ethical. Isaac (23, M), for example, points to ABC News as a source which has

gained his trust because it has consistently avoided scandal and criticism in his eyes:

> I've been watching their [ABC News] networks for a long time. And I guess the legacy of that network alone makes it trustworthy. And the reporters are another thing as well, these are veteran reporters who are doing it for the most part. I haven't seen ABC do something outlandish. And you don't often hear that network under hot water for saying something. CNN or Fox News often get criticized for some of their stories, but you don't hear that as much from ABC or CBS. (Isaac, 23, M)

Isaac points to ABC News (alongside CBS) as a good example of an outlet which has a

legacy of professionalism, skilled reporters, and a tendency not to attract negative attention

(though such outlets have attracted recent criticism from President Trump). Moreover, what

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Isaac alludes to in his account of why ABC News appears trustworthy is also the expertise its journalists (veteran reporters).

Individual differences in perceptions of (in)congruency

The above sections detail four primary forms of deviation from ideal news practices which influence perceptions of news credibility. From the point of view of study participants, these are deviations seen in everyday journalistic practice which draw journalism away from what it can and should be doing in their eyes. In other words, these deviations represent instances of incongruency between individuals' beliefs regarding epistemologically valid forms of news – when it comes to both more and less interpretive news topics – and journalistic epistemology in practice. In contrast, when journalists hew closer to expectations by engaging in ideal practices, greater epistemic congruency is perceived and news is seen as more credible.

While deviations from ideal news practices are more likely to be perceived when it comes to what are seen as more interpretive news topics and domains (and less likely to be perceived when it comes to less interpretive news topics and domains, where cooperation with the ideal is seen as easier to achieve), pointing to news-level variations in perceptions, I observe that there are also individual-level variations in perceptions. Not all people are the same when it comes to articulating deviations or, on the other hand, identifying instances of cooperation with ideal news practices.

Regarding these differences, I find, at the individual level: 1) individuals who have higher levels of news interest are more likely to identify one or more of these deviations from ideal practices or otherwise to identify trustworthy practices, while individuals who have less news interest are more likely to either rely on shorthand reasons for their trust or distrust in news or otherwise not identify any particular (un)trustworthy practices; 2) individuals who have

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greater knowledge in a domain are more likely to identify one or more deviations or otherwise to

identify trustworthy practices, while individuals with less knowledge are more likely to either

express shorthand reasons for their trust or distrust in news or otherwise not identify any

particular (un)trustworthy practices; and 3) individuals who have stronger ideological beliefs are

more likely to express dissatisfaction with ideologically incongruent sources while finding less

fault in ideologically congruent sources. These variables represent differences in either the

motivation to assess news content or the ability to do so and are therefore reflective of the

individual difference variables present in other credibility work (e.g. Fogg, 2003; Wathen &

Burkell, 2002; Metzger, 2007).

The role of news interest

I find that individuals who are more interested in and who follow news more closely –

consuming news content more often – are more likely to identify deviations from ideal practices.

This is due to the fact that such individuals have greater awareness of different news sources,

providing them opportunities to develop opinions about them and to notice problems, and

because they are more invested in news. The latter factor, which is relevant to all types of

deviations, is reflective of other research which has found that individuals who are more

interested in news place more importance on journalists performing their ideal roles (Vos et al.,

2019). The former factor, meanwhile, has to do with ability to spot issues. Inversely, I find that

individuals who have more interest in and frequently consume news are also better able to

articulate reasons for trusting news sources.

Those more interested or invested in news – consuming news more frequently – tend to

be older and politically interested. These participants have more habitual news consumption

behaviors, deliberately attending to specific sources, and are more likely to consume news via

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more traditional mediums such as television and radio. For instance, Alice (56, F) is a habitual news consumer who incorporates television watching into her everyday life: "My husband and I are early risers, so the standard news we get every single day is we watch the national broadcast. So, I am usually up about 5:30, the television's on by 6:00, and usually I watch it till I leave, and sometimes that goes to 8:00." Alongside television viewing, Alice also incorporates some digital consumption: "About two years ago, my husband got me an iPad and through that there's the news app on my iPad. So yeah, I do follow some news articles online. Also, I get the notification feeds. So sometimes CNN, Huffington Post, their articles."

This is a particular theme along older interviewees who blend deliberate traditional news consumption with more casual/or and incidental forms of exposure online. Emery (44, F), in fact, points to this explicitly:

> I get my news in a variety of places. I'm kind of...I synthesize old school and younger ways of looking at news as well. So I am pretty Gen X in some ways, and growing up, being influenced by boomers, there's a part of me that really likes to see the evening news, it feels like routine for me, and so, I kinda like having being able to watch David Muir on ABC News every night, 'cause that's how I grew up. But I also get news from articles that are linked on Twitter, and certainly through other social media venues, it's pretty hard to avoid, for the fact that you log on to every social media platform [and it's there]. (Emery, 44, F)

Similarly, Connor (40, M) for instance, says, "I'm a big of listener to NPR, so that's a prime news source for me. And then I do have a news app, an aggregator app called Flipboard that I use that brings in from various web news sources. So, I get things from that and then obviously, living in the social media world, friends share sources or sources come across my feed." Carl (57, M), moreover, blends his consumption of Fox News with consumption of conservative commentators on YouTube: "So I do listen to Fox news. Even though I don't listen to it all the time because it gets a bit tiring. I infrequently listen to the liberal MSNBC or CNBC or that sort of thing, but not too much. And then I listen to podcasts and the YouTube thing."

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What Carl points to is what some ideologically committed but mostly moderate interviewees do, in particular, which is to get a broad range of coverage from 'both sides' in order to balance out the perspectives they are receiving. More frequent news consumption is tied closely to interest in politics. In this vein, Jordan (43, M), who describes himself as ideologically mixed, says: "I spend in the morning time when I have my coffee, I usually flip between CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. If it's a big story, if it's a main story that all the new stations are covering, I try to get both, I try to hear both sides to see what they're saying. So, I flip between all three of those stations." And Elijah (20, M), while younger and more liberal leaning, says: "I try to be holistic. I know that there's different degrees of favoritism amongst new sources. Fox news is more conservative and Republican. CNN more Democratic. But I try to listen to everything. So, I watch some Fox news, BBC for my international sources."

What these more frequent news consumers have in common is that they ground their views on the under- or over-performance of journalists or the media in general in experiences with both traditional and digital media, providing more perspective and concrete examples. Higher investment motivates more attendance to core elements of news credibility. News interest is particularly relevant to *motives for distortion*. Here, interviewees who have a stronger interest in news identify more sources – including Vice News, the BBC, and the Detroit Free Press – which they trust or distrust and give more detailed reasoning as to why certain news outlets, to them, are balanced or otherwise have political or financial motivations. Explanations of the latter include details about media ownership (e.g. the Washington Post's ownership by Jeff Bezos and possible influences on coverage), observations about the history of the sources (e.g. Roger Ailes' mission for Fox News), and descriptions of the nature of content that such outlets produce.

On the latter point, Robert (54, M), who identifies as ideologically mixed and who attends to a range of different online and offline sources, says: "The sorts of things that Fox perverts is the op-ed stuff, the feigned outrage. The dishonesty. They will show a picture of something and change the context or lie about how it came to be. They are completely and utterly dishonest. I think the left has had its moments of that [too]." Moreover, Mary (24, F), who says "I consume more news than the average person my age," points to perceived biases on the part of both CNN and Fox News, saying:

> CNN and Fox are two sides of the same coin. I just think they're both so extreme. I'll get a notification from Fox and notification from CNN and the CNN one will say, you know, 'Trump finally agrees to give people some relief from coronavirus.' And then Fox will be like, 'Governors are applauding that Trump is stepping up to save the world.' They just both have their angle and they present it that way without even like hiding it. They interject opinions into their own stories. (Mary, 24, F)

Interestingly, Samuel (33, M) points to a source which, to him, has a conservative bias but which he says is useful when it comes to engaging his relatives in political discussions about issues of day: "I do have an affinity for The Hill which is weird, 'cause they have kind of a conservative bias. But they're conservative in a way that I think really connects with the people that, like my older relatives and stuff, that I'm trying to help without being too in your face about it." Kay (23, F), moreover, an international student who closely attends to news, provides a perspective on Indian media, pointing to a deliberate mixing of politics and religion: "There's a news channel called Republic TV in India. And there's another channel called Aaj Tak, it's sort of a regional language slash English news channel. These two news channels have been sort of those absurd channels...It's kind of, I would say, because of politics and religion being such a mixed up situation in India, I feel like these news channels have taken these things into the wrong light. So, I know not to trust these two channels for sure."

Beyond motive for distortion violations, participants who have more general interest in news are also able to better describe various *manner of presentation* violations, pointing to examples from their own news consumption, provide specifics about *quantity of information* violations, and point to *professional processes* which they see as being absent (and conversely when it comes to identifying instances of cooperation with ideal news practices). Thus, individuals with greater news interest may be said to have both a greater ability to notice credibility cues and, because of their investment in news, also more motivation to assess news. On the topic of manner of presentation violations, Mary (24, F), who subscribes to the New York Times, follows both Fox News and CNN, and uses news aggregators, provides a detailed and colorful description of Daily Mail content she sees on Snapchat:

> The Daily Mail is entertaining. It always comes up on my Snapchat. It's very salacious. It's like the grossest, most extreme. It's like TLC. If you know what that channel is like, it's like a train wreck, you don't want to look but you can't look away type thing. They just have the craziest selection of stories and, I don't know, I just have like a disgusted vibe about them...I think there's bits of fact for sure. I think that in some Daily Mail reports there's like that little sliver of truth, but they've maybe just taken an inch and written a mile of story, if that makes sense. (Mary, 24, F)

In contrast to more interested or invested news consumers, I find that participants who say they consume news less often are less able to identify news sources which they either trust or distrust more than others. Noah (20, M), who is a low and casual news consumer, in fact says, "because of the fact that I don't really read the news that often in terms of politics and things, I don't know a lot of sources that I explicitly don't like." He goes on to say, "In terms of specific sources of news that I don't like, I wouldn't say there are any at this point with me. But if there were, then they would be the ones that are pushing their own agenda."

These interviewees often point to high-profile outlets such as Fox News or CNN as examples of sources they see as having political or financial motivations to distort news content,

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for example, but they do not go far beyond them. Explanations for their views often tend to be

rooted in second-hand information, with the overall perception being that sources are simply

'biased'. Interesting examples here include interviewees learning from late night comedy or

ideologically-similar friends and family that Fox News is conservative-leaning. Rhea (27, F), for

instance, recalls learning from Jimmy Kimmel: "There was this episode of Jimmy Kimmel. He

was roasting Fox News and Trump. He was kind of saying that it's owned by him and just like

roasting them both. So, that caught my eye. I was like, 'Okay, is Fox news that bad?' In a similar

fashion, Joanna (26, F) bases her view of Fox on the views of those close to her and experiences

with late night comedy:

> The same people that I trust that show articles and share things and attach meaning to it based on their experience and what they're learning have noted Fox News as a fake source, and how many of these pro-our-current-administration or pro-Republican fall under watching these specific sources like Fox News. And so I've never given myself the opportunity to watch Fox News, to even try and see what it's like, but I've seen shows like Jimmy Fallon, or John Oliver, and Jimmy Kimmel, who also bring up specific stories, and I'm like, 'Wait, how do people think that's real?' (Joanna, 26, F)

Lower attendance to news sees interviewees speaking in general terms about bias, with,

for example, Rose (30, F) saying "Fox News and MSNBC both kind of have their sides to

things," Lydia (18, F) saying "I think that [Fox] try to skew the news to their viewpoint," and

Jack (21, M) saying "I think that both [Fox News and CNN] like to have very strong opinions

and I don't think that the world needs super strong opinions."

These interviewees tend to be younger, consuming news largely in an incidental fashion

via social media, and are less interested in politics. This mode of consumption and a lower

interest in politics means these individuals do not attend so closely to specific sources, speak in

general terms, and base their judgments largely on the opinions of others, as well as what they

see happening in social media spaces. In fact, much of their commentary on manner of

presentation violations and the lack of professional processes, in particular, is rooted in

discussions of social media. Thus, there is a medium difference between those more and less

interested in news; those more interested speak more often to traditional media, while those less

interested speak more to social media. On this point, interviewees, with respect to manner of

presentation and lack of professionalism, note "if it's something that's from Facebook, if it's

something that has like a weird URL name or something like that, then I'll kind of question it

more" (Amanda, 18, F), point out that "a lot of people make stuff up on Twitter and will

Photoshop things just for retweets and likes, I've seen it many times" (Ethan, 21, M), and say

"I'm very skeptical of news articles on Facebook...Facebook and misinformation has been a huge

thing" (Elena, 21, F).

Sam (27, M) provides an overarching example of this way of judging news credibility. As

someone who gets a lot of his news via Facebook, he says:

> I mean, I can't name any sources, but obviously there are like pages on Facebook that
> share some news articles from some random websites that you have not ever heard of and
> they seem sketchy. They're attractive, their headlines are attractive. Because if it's fake
> news, they would want you to read it in some capacity. So that's how they attract you.
> (Sam, 27, M)

Overall, individuals who consume news less frequently and show less interest in news are

less able to articulate specific reasons for trusting sources. Among these younger and less

politically interested interviewees, there are often no particular news sources they seek out.

Instead they tend to read, watch, or listen to stories that come to their attention on news

aggregation platforms and smartphone push notifications (e.g. Flipboard, Apple News, Google

News), via friends or family, or incidentally online (e.g. while browsing on social media). A lack

of general familiarity with news sources arising from this more casual approach to news

consumption may diminish individuals' ability to identify aspects of news credibility beyond

heuristic cues and reliance on peripheral information which falls outside the control of journalists. Indeed, generally, I find that individuals who are less engaged with news tend to provide more peripheral, heuristic reasons to trust or distrust news and news sources. The heuristics relied on are similar to those noted in other credibility research (e.g. Sundar, 2008; Metzger, 2007; Metzger & Flanagin, 2015), including the popularity of stories or news outlets, the opinions of friends and family, website design, brand recognition, and the presence of 'blue tick' verification marks on social media.

Notably, what unites low and high news consumers is the positive effect that familiarity has on stated perceptions of sources. News sources which participants have grown up with, which they have paid attention to for a long time, or which they are generally more familiar with are more likely to be judged as lacking *motives for distortion*, having adequate *quantities of information*, presenting news in a *fair manner*, and engaging in *professional processes*. Familiarity may make news seem more credible because of psychological fluency. Research in psychology has found that sources or information which seem familiar are viewed as more credible because of cognitive biases which make that which is familiar 'feel right' (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Familiar things seem more credible because they fit in better with people's ways of thinking, being easier to process and seeming more coherent.

Moreover, familiarity with sources gives individuals a basis from which to judge them, meaning a greater ability to identify aspects of credibility. Participants who discuss their trust in news sources they have consumed for a long time point to the consistency of their reporting and their demonstrated lack of bias. Sam (27, M), for instance, says that he places trust in Times of India because he has consumed their content for a long time and come to learn that they are a trustworthy source.

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Beyond long-time associations with news sources – which allow individuals to develop a relationship with and build up background knowledge about them – familiarity in terms of brand recognition also plays a role in creating perceptions of credibility in uncertain situations. This occurs most often with participants' discussions of news online and especially on social media. Participants observe that they are more likely to place trust in news stories from recognized brands on social media (even if they do not consume news from these outlets often) and less likely to place trust in sources which they do not recognize.

The role of knowledge

News interest operates in a similar fashion to personal knowledge when it comes to identifying cooperation with or deviations from ideal news practices. I observe that individuals who are more knowledgeable about a domain are more likely to notice specific deviations because they have the ability to crosscheck news claims with what they know. Moreover, domain knowledge aids in people's assessments of journalistic practices and content as they relate to ideal practices. Knowledge, however, is not necessarily connected to news interest but more closely to education. Thus, even infrequent news consumers describe specific instances of assessing news credibility based on what they know or have learned.

Sometimes this knowledge can come from a specific topical news interest. It must be noted that some interviewees tend to not pay attention to general news but focus their attention on topics such as health, science, business, or technology. I note that their focus on these topics helps them to identify reasons for trust or to identify deviations from the ideal practices in news stories related to these areas of interest. Noah (20, M), for instance, who is a student and low news consumer, talks about how his interest in chess led him to noticing a problem with a news article:

I'm interested in chess. So, I was reading a chess article once and it was a about the world championship in 2018 and it in the article that said, and Magnus Carlsen, who's the current world champion, was famously involved in a cheating scandal. I'm like, "Oh, I've never heard about that one before." So, I clicked on the link that they had a hyperlink to, and when I read the article that that was linked to, not once in that article did it mention that he had been explicitly linked to that cheating scandal. And it wasn't even a cheating scandal because it was an accidental release of information from the opposing side. (Noah, 20, M)

Personal knowledge about a domain applies particularly to noticing the presence of or issues with sufficient *quantity of information* and *professional processes*. In both instances, individuals are in a better position to interrogate the claims made by journalists because they have a knowledge base from which to draw. On the other hand, individuals who are less knowledgeable are less likely to identify these violations.

Examples of participants employing their knowledge include Rose (30, F), who has a Master's degree in nursing but is a casual and incidental news consumer, noticing a potential accuracy problem in an article about a one-day old baby who apparently had died from COVID-19. She says that the article mentioned the baby was born at 22 weeks and, given her general knowledge, she made the connection that 22 weeks was half a baby's normal gestation and that this was a pre-existing health risk. Thus, she reasoned, "to have an article titled that 'the baby died of COVID' is not fully factual because the baby's chances of survival were very low and they don't know if that was the culprit." In a similar fashion, Liam (27, M), who has a PhD in pharmacy and is a frequent news consumer, says he saw an article which claimed that COVID-19 was a 'DNA virus'. This, for him, raised red flags because he knew from his own background in science that it was actually an RNA virus. This, he said, put him in "red flag mode in terms of evaluating the whole article."

The examples here represent individuals using their background knowledge to spot potential omission of information issues (in the case of Rose) and accuracy of information issues

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(in the case of Liam). In some instances, however, background knowledge can also help individuals identify motive for distortion violations. Robert (54, M), for example, who has a Master's degree and is an NRA Life Member, says his background knowledge on firearms allows him to spot instances where MSNBC host Rachel Maddow is wrong and showing her bias on guns:

> I freaking love Rachel Maddow. But, every once in a while, I'll hear her say something about firearms or something else. And she'll just be so off on something. She's so on with everything else… (Robert, 54, M)

Conversely, in the context of noticing adequate quantity of information, domain knowledge helps individuals identify when journalists have provided sufficient detail, explanation, or coverage of a topic. Participants note, for instance, how they have been able to keep track of news coverage of COVID-19 with the help of their background knowledge in health and human biology (arising from college study). Having knowledge about how viruses are transmitted and spread, several participants observe, helps with news trust because it allows them to make the assessment that certain news outlets are getting their coverage right. It also allows individuals to identify where news outlets are providing an adequate range of perspectives. Priya (30, F), for instance, who has a Master's degree and works in public health, drawing from her background knowledge in public health combined with her focus on health equity, says it is positive to see an emerging discussion about the negative impact of COVID-19 on minority communities:

> As somebody who tries to promote social justice and health equity in my work, [what is important] is having the reporting of the disproportionate impact on people of color from COVID-19. The fact that it's reported on and there's this topic of discussion is really nice to see, because other times it hasn't happened or it hasn't been acknowledged. (Priya, 30, F)

General, non-domain-specific knowledge also helps with identifying whether there is professionalism or whether professional processes are being followed. Several college student

interviewees mentioned, for instance, taking classes related to research methodology. These classes involved learning about the features of trustworthy sources and how to identify and assess whether reliable research processes have been followed. For these interviewees, they say this knowledge has aided them in identifying trustworthy news sources, giving them tools to use. Jen (21, F), a student who is and infrequent news consumer, says taking a research methods class has helped her better assess the news she does see:

> I had a Research Methods class and so I've definitely come to learn about what makes a source trustworthy. Is it just a .com? Is it .edu? .org? That kind of thing. It taught you about conducting research studies, collecting research, how to run certain experiments to avoid bias…But it definitely just helped me better understand what sources to trust. (Jen, 21, F)

In general, what this knowledge aids with, in the parlance of psychological theories of credibility assessments, is one's ability to assess information. Knowledge from higher education provides a basis from which to assess news sources and news content. Notably, the role that knowledge plays is often unconnected to news interest, with both frequent and infrequent news consumers describing how their knowledge informs their views of news credibility.

The role of ideological beliefs

When it comes to ideological beliefs, biases tend to play a role in blinding individuals to potential deviations from ideal news practices. In fact, a number of participants openly admitted in interviews that they were less likely to criticize news sources with which they agreed ideologically or, otherwise, said they more likely to give these sources the benefit of the doubt if they did notice a potential issue. As Hayley (42, F) says: "I like my liberal bias to be reflected in the news that's fed to me." This form of bias toward (perceived) agreeable news content is reflected in other research (e.g. Metzger et al. 2020; Baum & Gussin, 2007). Interviewees with stronger ideological beliefs say they try to keep an open mind but acknowledge that their ideological beliefs always or sometimes play a role in the news they consume and put trust in.

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Because of these biases, individuals with stronger ideological beliefs are more likely to

see ideologically congruent news sources as engaging in practices which are credible. In

particular, ideologically congruent news sources are more likely to be judged as presenting

adequate *quantities of information* in a *credible manner* and in line with expected *professional*

processes. Here, people engage in biased processing of information, expressing sentiments which

are reflective of confirmation bias or prior attitude effects (Nickerson, 1998; Taber & Lodge,

2006). Sentiments expressed by interviewees may also be described in terms of a self-

confirmation heuristic: the "tendency to notice and place greater value on information that

supports one's beliefs" (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015, p. 453). In this vein, Amanda (18, F) says,

"stuff that goes up against my political views is stuff that I question more often. Stuff that kind

of aligns with my political views, those are things I'll trust more." Meanwhile, Ivy (21, F)

expresses a similar yet conflicted view, saying she trusts news which aligns with her views, but

is careful about that bias getting in the way of what is true:

> Being a liberal, I'm probably more likely to trust liberal articles. But I still try to not be
> like super, like only believing one side. I try to look at both sides. And, so, I think that if
> there's an article that seems like it's making statements that don't have like backed up
> information, then I probably wouldn't trust it. (Ivy, 21, F)

What is interesting to note is that a number of interviewees express contradictory views

when it comes to news credibility. In particular, individuals with stronger ideological views at

the same time say they dislike bias in news but also say they trust and consume biased news;

they acknowledge they seek out congruent sources. Thus, there is somewhat of a disconnect

between attitudes and behavior. To explain this, sometimes it is rationalized that a source with a

congruent bias gets you closer to the truth than a source with an incongruent bias. River (41), for

instance, says they recognize biases in the news media they consume and that such biases have

negative implications for credibility. However, they also "subscribe to the adage that reality has a

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liberal bias." A preference for liberally-biased information, for River, stems from a comparison

of liberal and conservative viewpoints, a comparison which leaves them concluding that

conservative views lack justification:

> I've heard [conservative] arguments before and I've listened to them. That's the thing,
> I've listened. It's not like I've completely ignored these things. I will sometimes delve
> into opinions that I disagree with to see what people are saying, and I never find those
> arguments to be convincing. And in fact, I find their view counters reality...I feel like I've
> listened to a lot of their arguments and found them to be wanting. (River, 41)

Meanwhile, Robert (54, M), who is ideologically mixed in his beliefs, expresses a bi-

modal bias, saying he seeks out different sources depending on the issue and how that source

aligns with his pre-existing beliefs. He argues that liberal-leaning sources are more likely to be

correct about some issues, while conservative sources are more likely to be correct about others:

"I usually will trust something from the BBC or the Guardian...But I will go to a right-leaning

website if it's for something particular that I want to see their take on it. Or I might be going for

a confirmation bias because it happens to be one of my conservative viewpoints."

Ideological biases are not unlimited, however, and a few participants do criticize news

sources for showing *too* much bias. This criticism often comes in the form of complaints about a

lack of balance and about manner of presentation violations. Examples include conservative

participants criticizing Fox News for being too "forceful" and sensationalistic in their messaging

(Logan, 37, M) and liberal participants criticizing CNN for too much focus on criticism of

President Trump (Jasper, 26, M). Carl (57, M), a conservative, is critical of both Fox News and

MSNBC, saying "on one extreme, you've got MSNBC, and on the other extreme, you've got

Fox News."

Thus, problems do arise for ideologically-aligned individuals who see biases diminishing

the quality of news. Elena (21, F), who leans Democratic, expresses her view this way:

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So, I would say I really wouldn't trust any political websites that are maybe for or against either side, because at the end of the day, they're going to position themselves for their side. You're not gonna go on a Republican website and they're praising Democrats, and you're not gonna go on a Democrat website and they are praising Republicans. So, I think for those websites, I kind of try to remain impartial and say, 'You know what, even if I may be a Democrat, I'm still not going to really trust all this information because I know that they have one goal in mind.' (Elena, 21, F)

There is a feeling of dejection stemming from a feeling that some ideological biases have gone too far, affecting the believability of news. Here, while agreeable news may seem more trustworthy in some ways, there is also a sense it may be manipulated. As such, individuals can say they simultaneously like and dislike biased content. In a similar vein to Elena, Kylie (18, F), who is liberal, says that when she reads an agreeable story, "if it's left, maybe it aligns more with my views. But is this what is true?...I just don't want to read things that are that biased." And Sophie (21, F), who also identifies as liberal, says, "when I look on Twitter, the news that I get is either aligning exactly with my political views or it's the exact opposite. There's nothing in between. So yeah, I definitely don't trust it as much…Everything you read, you have to take with a grain of salt. They're writing with a certain perspective. No author has no bias, you know? But. I mean, I feel like I definitely trust more liberal sources."

What Sophie points too here is the polarization of the news landscape and the problem this has created for her: a perceived lack of a middle ground, which means she leans toward liberally-biased sources. Thus, a conflict between attitudes and news consumption comes to a head in instances where there is often desire for unbiased news but availability of ideologically congruent news, creating a credibility dilemma in individuals' minds. Several interviewees manage this by deciding to dismiss both sides, such as Megan (31, F) who identifies as liberal but says, "If it's Blaze, then I'm not gonna bother reading it. If it's whatever the liberal equivalent, I'm not gonna bother with that either."

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For ideologically moderate interviewees, the recognition of polarization and biases in news too creates credibility dilemmas, prompting them to express general skepticism in news. Emery (44, F), who identifies as politically moderate, says that while she distrusts the bias of Fox News, she also notes that "I've certainly seen some liberal commentators that present things in a biased way. I certainly respect some of what Rachel Maddow does, but I do think she's more agenda-based. And I see more of her opinion come out, and so I wouldn't bother listening to her. Just as I wouldn't bother listening to Sean Hannity. I think that's just neither of those places are news for me. That's just like you listen to those people because you wanna support your own biases." Similarly, for Jordan (43, M) who has ideologically mixed beliefs, says of news posted on social media: "No matter whether it's posted from one of my really right-wing friends or one of my left-wing friends, I still go into the article skeptical."

Meanwhile, ideologically-aligned participants say they are more likely to spot flaws in news content from outlets they do not align with ideologically (a disconfirmation bias; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Interviewees find ideologically incongruent news sources easier to manage because they can be dismissed off-hand as not being credible. For instance, Caleb (19, M) says, "as a left leaning a young adult, I don't trust or pay attention to media that would be more catered towards the right," and Frank (81, M), a conservative, says, "CNN I think invented fake news."

Political attitudes play the most central role when it comes to individuals identifying *motives for distortion* in news content. Among participants who identified as liberal, almost all identified Fox News as a source they were less likely to trust because of its perceived conservative bias. For conservative-leaning participants, less trust was placed in CNN and MSNBC because of perceived liberal biases. This is evidence of directionally motivated

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reasoning (Kunda, 1990) and individuals broadly applying heuristics (e.g. Fox is conservative, CNN is liberal) in making decisions about credibility (Baum & Gussin, 2007).

Such sources are not always completely dismissed, however, and some less partisan interviewees note that they will try to fairly assess news content from ideologically incongruent sources if it addresses a politically neutral topic – more often a less interpretive news topic – or if the content does not appear too biased. But the posture that people say they approach stories from incongruent sources with is one of caution or skepticism. Amanda (18, F), for instance, says she less likely to trust a source if it "seems unprofessional or if it really goes up against my political beliefs" but, referencing Fox News, says she is "not saying that it's completely lies." Instead, Amanda says she is more likely to be careful and raise questions. Most partisan interviewees, however, tend to be more outright dismissive of ideologically incongruent sources.

Beyond perceiving political motives for distortion, stronger ideological beliefs also see individuals noticing more *manner of presentation* violations. Here, individuals pick up on language cues which signal potential biases in news content (for example, sources describing George Floyd protestors as "thugs"). They are also more likely to believe that incongruent sources are sensationalizing content. When it comes to *quantity of information* violations, stronger ideological beliefs lead people to considers whether news sources have covered the "other side" of the story. Often it is perceived that news outlets such as Fox and CNN favor one side of a political debate and leave out perspectives which would politically balance out stories.

Overall, it must be noted that while ideological beliefs play a role in biasing assessments, often in knee-jerk and reactionary ways, with individuals dismissing ideologically incongruent news sources outright, individuals are still often making judgments of news credibility which are epistemological in nature; that is, concerned with aspects of epistemic certainty, simplicity,

sourcing, and justification. The main concern partisan interviewees have is with bias, which is seen to diminish the believability (epistemic certainty) and trustworthiness (epistemic justification) of news. Thus, while many individuals' negative attitudes toward sources are affective and emotional, what they criticize in their explanations is often the truthfulness of the news. Moreover, while there is somewhat of a tendency for individuals to gravitate toward agreeable sources, people still sometimes criticize these sources on the same (epistemological) grounds.

Of note also is how attitudes and behaviors often do not align, with individuals expressing a desire for neutral and impartial news, but still consuming ideologically biased content. In some instances, this contradiction emerges from the perception that the news environment is polarized and there is not a neutral middle ground to turn to. In other instances, this contradiction is not rationalized at all by interviewees. This contradiction between stated preferences and news consumption in practice was noted at the end of Chapter five and is addressed again in Chapter seven as part of the limitations of this dissertation. Specifically, I note that the link between news consumption and views on news credibility was not directly explored.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Discussion and conclusion

In the context of challenges to the epistemology of journalism (Steiner, 2018; Steenson, 2019; Waisbord, 2019; Robertson & Mourão, 2020), questions over the nature of truth and how we come to know (Waisbord, 2018; Kreiss, 2017), as well as declining trust in news (Newman et al., 2020), all of which have threatened the legitimacy and authority of journalism (Carlson, 2016, 2018), the goal of this dissertation was to explore individuals' perceptions of what makes news credible through the lens of their epistemological beliefs. In service of this, through a framework rooted in Western philosophy, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 65 US adults from a range of backgrounds, exploring their beliefs about knowledge and knowing, both in general and with respect to journalism, as well as their perceptions of the news media and how journalists do their job. The findings of this dissertation add deeper epistemic understanding to audience perceptions of journalistic practices and news credibility. The findings are important insofar as journalism needs credibility for social and political relevance – if the work produced by journalists is not trusted or believed, individuals may not consume certain content (Nelson & Kim, 2020; Williams, 2012), turn elsewhere for potentially less reliable information (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Jackob, 2010), and be less knowledgeable or less likely to engage politically (Moy et al., 2005; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Zhang & Chia, 2006).

The central argument of this dissertation is that the epistemological beliefs which individuals hold with respect to journalism matter when it comes to perceptions of news. Its thesis is that such beliefs play an important role in how individuals view news and, in turn, contribute to determinations of credibility. In light of this, I considered the nature of individuals' general epistemological beliefs and, with respect to journalism, explored three key questions: 1)

What are the nature of individuals' epistemological beliefs as they relate to news and journalism? 2) How is the epistemology of journalism, as it is practiced, viewed by individuals? 3) How do the epistemological beliefs and perceptions of individuals relate to views on news credibility?

In find that, first (with respect to RQ1 and RQ2), individuals' epistemological beliefs are not static but context specific. That is, they shift by epistemological context. While most people have core realist-empiricist beliefs both generally and with respect to journalism, seeing valid information as that which is certain, simple, primarily-sourced, and justified by a correspondence between claims and reality, these beliefs shift according to the context. Individuals' beliefs become more relative as the subject matter changes. In managing this relativity, consensus between perspectives becomes a goal and balance becomes a core feature of reliable journalism.

Second (with respect to RQ3), my findings indicate that there is often a disjuncture or incongruency between individuals' epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism and their perceptions of how journalistic epistemology operates in practice. Audiences have expectations for how credible news should be produced, embodied in what I call a Platonic ideal of news. This ideal is *Platonic* in that it is, in many ways, an idealized abstraction and, indeed, journalists are often seen to fail at producing news which is epistemically reliable according to this standard. They are perceived as inserting biases into news, exaggerating the truth, failing to provide sufficient evidence, and not demonstrating how the claims being made reflect the facts of the external world. These findings echo the words of Steiner (2018, p. 1854): from the perspective of audiences, "journalists [often] seem unable to convincingly, or plausibly, explain how their work product is reliable."

Third (with respect to RQ4), I find that this disjuncture between expectations and observations plays an important role in when it comes to views on news credibility. Key points

of incongruency occur when there is a perceived a) motive for the distortion of news, b) inadequate quantity of information, c) departure from expectations for how news should be presented, and d) absence of professional processes to ensure the reliability of news content. Such deviations from expectations are negatively related to perceptions of news credibility. Journalists can counteract negative perceptions by cooperating with audience expectations and demonstrating transparency, consistency, and independence.

Combined, these findings see perceptions of news credibility, in part, as the product of (in)congruency between epistemological expectations and observations. The rest of this chapter overviews my findings, connects them to existing literature, outlines the contribution of this dissertation to theory, details limitations and possibilities for future research, and finally touches on the wider implications of the findings for journalists, audiences, and society.

Summary of findings

First, when it comes to people's general beliefs about knowledge and knowing (RQ1), while some individuals are skeptical or relativist in their beliefs, most people generally express realist-empiricist beliefs. That is, most people pragmatically say they believe in and accept the existence of ground truths regarding events, occurrences, and situations which can be known through observation. These ground truths pertain to what, where, when, and who of daily life and are seen as more achievable in less interpretive domains (such as the domain of hard sciences, rather than the domain of social sciences). Ground truths are epistemologically certain, simple, primary-sourced, and justified by empirical evidence and correspondence with external observed reality. They may be simple and straightforward or need to be established over time with repeated demonstration of consistent evidence. There are pragmatic reasons for this epistemological position; a necessity to agree on a basic consensus reality.

Second, general epistemological beliefs shift when the situation or question under consideration is seen as being more interpretive in nature; that is, in situations where there is an evaluation to be made or when there are considerations of how and why. In such situations, people tend toward expressing relativist perspectives where they see the existence of multiple truths rooted in different perspectives or ways of knowing. Whether a situation or question is considered more or less interpretive in nature depends on the number of possible interpretations or explanations involved. In low-interpretive situations, people's expressed beliefs tend toward the existence of singular truths. In high-interpretive situations, people tend toward saying there are multiple truths. More interpretive situations or questions tend to be those which are more 'social science' in nature, with a greater number of possible 'truths' perceived.

Third, individuals express that multiple truths may be accepted or (sought to be) rejected depending on whether resolution is seen as possible and whether they are motivated to or interested in coming to a determination. In coming to decisions about what may be true, or *more* true, while some people say they rely on faith or intuition, most people say they engage in a process of consensus-seeking, triangulating different pieces of knowledge and evidence in a manner consistent with evidentialism (P is justified if it fits with all available evidence at time T) or fallibilism (P can be justified on the balance of reason or probability given the evidence available). In this sense, multiple truths may be viewed as resolvable – and therefore be rejected – if it is perceived that consensus between perspectives can be achieved (arrival at consensus truth) or if there is an expert source or reliable body of consistent information that can be relied upon (deciding by expert truth). Otherwise, multiple truths may be accepted as present in the form of 'personal truths.' Decisions are made by individuals themselves on a person-by-person

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basis depending on how motivated or interested they are. Notably, this triangulation process can be biased by personal beliefs.

Fourth, in light of people's general epistemological beliefs and their perspectives on what news and the role of journalism are, when it comes to beliefs with respect to news and journalism (RQ2), while some individuals express more skepticism or relativism in their beliefs, most people's stated core beliefs hew to a realist-empiricist position. Such beliefs are articulated primarily when it comes to what are seen as less interpretive news topics or domains which deal with the observable what, where, when, and who of daily life. Here, where individuals' expressed beliefs are realist-empiricist in nature, the most valid and more credible news which people identify is that which communicates, in a straightforward and objective manner, singular truths about the basic what, where, when, and who of news events and occurrences. This news is justified by reference to firsthand observations or otherwise by reference to other primary information (e.g. from witnesses or documents) or expert testimony. Individuals say they often prefer a straightforward, 'just the facts' form of news due to a desire to make decisions about more complex issues for themselves. It must be emphasized that what is considered interpretive or not is perceptual. Philosophically, all news stories are interpretive in some way because their production involves journalists making subjective decisions about what information or perspectives to include or omit. Some interviewees recognize this, while more argue that there are definitive truths which can be presented.

These beliefs with respect to journalism constitute what I call a Platonic ideal of news; an idealized view of news that is credible in individuals' eyes because it is epistemically certain, simply, well-sourced, and justified by a correspondence of facts with reality. The Platonic ideal is so-called because it is an idealized image of news which is not *necessarily* achievable, which

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many participants acknowledge. But this ideal is what individuals say journalists can and should strive for. This Platonic ideal is seen as most achievable when it comes to topical domains which are viewed as less interpretive, dealing with concrete events and occurrences which are observable. Ideal practices which inform the Platonic ideal and which individuals say make news seem more credible include focusing primarily on relaying facts, providing all available primary source material, and, if relevant, relying on the word of recognized experts in the domain under consideration. To the extent that journalists, in practice, are seen to be conforming to these ideals, there is a greater sense of epistemic congruency and news which more closely conforms to these ideals is seen as being more credible.

Fifth, domain-specific epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism shift when it comes to what are seen as more interpretive news topics or domains which deal with how and why questions or matters of evaluation. Here, individuals tend to express more relative beliefs because it is recognized that multiple truths rooted in different perspectives or ways of knowing may exist. Whether a topic is considered more or less interpretive in nature depends on the number of possible interpretations or explanations involved, but low-interpretive topics tend to be those which are 'hard science' or event-based in nature (tending toward singular truths) while high-interpretive topics tend to be those which are 'social science' or opinion-based in nature (tending toward multiple truths). In more interpretive situations or contexts, where individuals' expressed beliefs are relativist in nature, the most valid and more credible news described is that which presents different perspectives in a balanced fashion. To the extent that journalists abide by this expectation, there is a greater sense of epistemic congruency and news is seen as being more credible.

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While it is noted that the Platonic ideal of news is harder to achieve when it comes to situations which are seen as more interpretive in nature, journalists can get closer to the ideal by sticking to basic facts where possible and following a pluralistic approach where different sources, perspectives, and ways of knowing are presented and audiences are left to decide for themselves what to think. This aligns with individuals' desire to make determinations of truth for themselves and with the view that the truth is seen to lay between perspectives. Of note, from the perspective of individuals, ideal practices contained within the Platonic ideal also remain relevant and important to follow when it comes to news that is more interpretive in nature, contributing to perceptions of epistemic congruency and credibility. The information provided must still be reliable and rooted in concrete facts if possible, though perspectives may be rooted in different sets of facts. The realist-empiricist ideal forms the core around which more interpretive news should be built. If 'facts' are not directly relevant per se, individuals call for the balanced presentation of different opinions.

Sixth, journalists, in practice, can move away from the Platonic ideal by engaging in particular behaviors which decrease perceptions of credibility. Individuals' epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism represent expressed desires or expectations in the abstract. Here, there is a consideration of how such beliefs relate to perceptions of the epistemology of journalism *in practice* (RQ3 and RQ4).

The most credible news which people articulate is that which conforms to the Platonic ideal, but this ideal is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Often, individuals observe one or more instances of deviation from their epistemological expectations. Specifically, when it comes to journalists constructing and presenting news to audiences, news is seen as being less credible when one or more of the following is present: 1) a perceived motive for the distortion of news, 2)

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a perceived omission of important information or perspectives from news or a perceived inclusion of extraneous information or perspectives, 3) a perceived 'manner of presentation' violation, and 4) a perceived lack of professional processes.

These deviations generate instances of epistemic incongruency; that is, instances of disconnect between audience expectations with respect to journalism (rooted in their epistemological beliefs) and the perceived actions or epistemological approaches of journalists in practice. For individuals, such deviations negatively impact perceptions of news credibility by undermining the epistemic certainty and simplicity of news, as well as violating expectations related to the proper sourcing of and justification for claims in news. They represent instances of non-cooperation with expectations contained within the Platonic ideal of news. They are more likely to be perceived when it comes to more interpretive topics because such topics are inherently less certain and more prone to differences of opinion, though they can also be perceived when it comes to less interpretive topics.

On the other hand, if perceived motives are lacking, there is an adequate quantity of information, if news is presented in a neutral and straightforward manner, and professional processes are perceived, there is more likely to be a perception of epistemic congruency or an alignment of audience expectations with the perceived epistemological approaches of journalists. Such actions positively contribute to news credibility by increasing perceptions of epistemic certainty and simplicity, as well as pointing toward adequate sourcing and justification. They signal journalistic cooperation with expectations. In addition to following ideal practices, ways that journalists can communicate to audiences their cooperation with the ideals include being consistent, transparent, and independent.

Seventh, there are individual-level variations in perceptions of epistemic congruency and incongruency. Individuals who are more interested in or involved with news are more likely to notice or be able to identify instances of epistemic (in)congruency, as are individuals with more knowledge about a domain. Stronger ideological beliefs, meanwhile, play a role in biasing perceptions. Here, individuals find fault with ideologically incongruent news content (or news sources) and are less likely to express fault with ideologically congruent news content (or news sources). Factors of news source reputation, consistency, and individual familiarity with the source play an ancillary role in perceptions of credibility. News sources which are more familiar, perceived as more consistent in their practices, and which have greater public reputations are more likely to be perceived as following good journalistic practices.

Discussion of contributions

This dissertation makes contributions to 1) epistemological beliefs literature, 2) credibility literature, and 3) journalism studies literature. I consider each of these contributions in turn.

First, with respect to the epistemological beliefs literature, I find that a key point of variance when it comes to individuals' epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism is the situation or question under consideration. Beliefs (in general and) about what journalism can and should do shift depending on whether the topic of news is seen to be more or less interpretive in nature. In other words, they shift according to the epistemological context. When the topic is seen as less interpretive, there are one set of beliefs and related expectations that individuals with respect to journalism. When the topic is seen as more interpretive, there is a slightly different set of beliefs and related expectations. In this way, what I find is that individuals' epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism are not as static as in prior models or theories of

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epistemological beliefs (e.g. Perry, 1970; Baxter Magolda, 1992; King & Kitchener, 1994), adding an important observation to the literature.

Indeed, while existing literature on epistemological beliefs has tended to see beliefs as a set of somewhat static positions, with individuals moving between belief structures as a result of education (see Table 4, Chapter two; e.g. Perry, 1970; Baxter Magolda, 1992; King & Kitchener, 1994), I find that individuals' beliefs are more context-dependent, shifting according to the domain under consideration. People's beliefs generally shift between the positions set out in Table 4 (which represents a synthesis of Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) overview of epistemological belief models; see page 33), with people moving from absolute to relative to evaluative beliefs depending on the context. This sees the same individuals holding different epistemological beliefs at different times, rather than the same individuals holding static sets of beliefs. As such, my findings are more reflective of what Hofer (2000) found when it came to differences in epistemological beliefs with respect to different scientific domains. Here, I extend those observations to individuals' perspectives on journalism, finding that a key point of variance in beliefs is the news topic or domain under consideration (*within* the existing journalistic domain). This adds a new dimension to the literature on epistemological beliefs.

Second, with respect to credibility literature, I offer a way to structure the often unorganized (or loosely organized) cues and factors which have been noted to influence credibility assessments while also providing a potentially missing link between cues such as 'the length of a news article' or 'the use of pictures' and judgments of credibility. As noted in Chapter one, existing theories and models of credibility only loosely organize the various cues and factors which form part of credibility assessments. Often these cues and factors are left unorganized but for their linkages to messages, sources, and mediums (e.g. comprehensiveness is

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a message feature, expertise a source feature, and fidelity a medium feature). And when it comes to psychologically-rooted theories of credibility (e.g. Metzger, 2007), these generally posit that forms of more or less systematic processing influence the types of cues paid attention to and that these cues directly influence assessments of credibility: for example, systematic processing leading to an assessment of the credentials of an author and then a judgment of credibility, or heuristic processing leading to a quick assessment of news article length and then a judgment of credibility. I posit that such theories fail to rationally organize credibility cues and miss an important link in the credibility because they fail to consider what credibility means as a concept.

Indeed, the notion that the credentials of an author or the length of a news article directly relate to credibility arguably misses an important step. This is because there is a failure to consider the fundamental meaning of credibility; specifically, the philosophical premises upon which credibility, as a concept, is based. I offer the rationale that the various cues and factors that people use to assess credibility are related to questions of epistemology; that to consider credibility is, fundamentally, to raise questions about trustworthiness and believability, about valid forms of knowledge, and about valid ways of knowing. An epistemological perspective provides a basis from which to philosophically understand what makes something credible, drawing into focus the philosophical premises upon which individuals base their judgments of what is true and what is not. Here, the argument is that elements of, for instance, information quality and comprehensiveness, source expertise, and medium fidelity all touch on the epistemic validity of information. Epistemological considerations are the premises on which credibility is philosophically based.

From this perspective, with respect to the common elements of epistemological theories – which are concerned with the certainty of, simplicity of, sources of, and justifications for claims

(Hofer & Pintrich, 1997) – to consider the credentials of an author, for instance, is to make, implicitly or explicitly, a judgment about the validity of the source of a claim, while to consider the length of a news article is to make, implicitly or explicitly, a judgment about the justifications for a claim. Epistemological considerations provide a link between cues and judgments, pointing to the philosophical premises on which individuals base their views. When it comes to psychological theories of credibility assessments, this view would posit that, irrespective of the form of cognitive processing used, medium/source/message cues feed into individuals' epistemological beliefs (in terms of certainty/simplicity/sourcing/justification), which speak to believability, trust, and ultimately credibility. For instance, use of data speaks to sourcing which speaks to expertise and the use of pictures speaks to certainty which speaks to believability.

An epistemological view, therefore, provides a rationalization for credibility assessments and also a way to structure the links between various cues/factors and aspects of credibility. Existing literature tends to focus on how credibility varies as a function of various and disparate message, source, and medium features, with these speaking to aspects of trustworthiness, believability, and related concepts (e.g. Metzger et al., 2003). The present study looks beneath these concepts, getting to the epistemic roots of credibility and providing a foundation for scholarly thinking about news credibility.

With respect to *news* credibility specifically, as outlined in Chapter one, a philosophically-rooted, journalism- and news-specific view of credibility was seen as necessary to develop insofar as news is a unique media genre with specific expectations and associations attached to it which call for journalists to enact particular practices (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a).

The organizing principle I offer for the cues and factors related to news credibility assessments – from considerations of journalistic expertise to the manner in which news is

presented – is that of the Platonic ideal of news and its associated practices. This is an idealized picture of what news *should* look like from an audience perspective which is considered the most credible because it is epistemically certain, simple, well-sourced, and justified. By comparing the perceived epistemological practices or approaches of journalists with individuals' beliefs along these dimensions, credibility may be assessed. Put simply, I posit that the credibility of news can be assessed, in part, by asking individuals, in light of their beliefs, how certain, simple, well-sourced, and justified they view news to be.

The Platonic ideal and dimensions of individuals' beliefs provide a way to organize the various cues and factors used to make news credibility assessments, providing structure to this literature. For example, 1) perceived *biases* and information *accuracy* speak to the certainty or uncertainty of knowledge. If valid knowledge in journalism is seen as certain, news needs to be seen as accurate and unbiased to be more credible; 2) the *clarity* and *brevity* of writing, as well as information *comprehensiveness*, speak to the simplicity or complexity of knowledge. If valid knowledge in journalism is seen as simple or complex depending on the context, news needs to be either clear and brief or comprehensive to be more credible; 3) source *citations* or use of *evidence* speak to sources of knowledge. If valid knowing in journalism is seen to be based on proper sourcing from firsthand or primary sources, journalists must live up to expectations in order for news to be seen as more credible; and 4) *tangible evidence*, *author credentials* or *expertise*, as well as the *range of sources* used, speak to justifications for knowledge. If valid knowing in journalism is seen to be justified by a correspondence of facts with reality or by the presentation of balanced perspectives, then journalists must provide the proper justification in order for news to be seen as more credible.

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Overall, by looking at beliefs and expectations with respect to journalism through an epistemological lens, this dissertation sets out a rationale for how credibility may be judged, providing some structure to the credibility literature. The basis of a credibility assessment is seen to be the degree to which a knowledge claim fits with beliefs about valid knowledge and ways of knowing.

This is not to say, however, that an epistemological lens is the only prism through which to view credibility assessments. This lens is rational – the product of consciously articulated expressions of what makes news credible – and does not necessarily incorporate the affective/emotional and social influences on credibility assessments, which are less rational influences on perceived news credibility. But I argue an epistemological lens provides a way to link these cues and influences to judgments of credibility. For example, an individual may not think CNN is credible because they are part of a social group which ideologically opposes the network. In this scenario, a direct link is posited between social group influence and a negative credibility assessment. I posit, however, a missing link in this situation: social group influence undermines the perceived certainty and justification of CNN's claims, which contributes to lower credibility.

Third, with respect to journalism studies literature, I show how individuals' views on journalism perpetuate traditional notions of good journalistic practice and are in many ways philosophically internalized.

The image of ideal news which individuals' epistemological beliefs represent is captured in this dissertation by the Platonic ideal of news. This is an idealized – but not necessarily achievable (hence, *Platonic*) – form of news which has a high degree of perceived news-ness (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a) and which is viewed as most credible. Of note, I find that the picture

of ideal news which individuals paint is reflective of traditional modernist notions of 'good journalism.' Specifically, people point to concepts such as objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, and balance as key elements of what they consider to be reliable and trustworthy news.

While the meanings of these terms within journalism have been debated, with their definitions and applications shifting over time (Schudson, 2001; Durham, 1998; Boudana, 2011), what individuals subscribe to here is largely an early and mid-20th century 'high modern' view on good journalism (Hallin, 1992) which has been embodied in journalism textbooks and which has permeated throughout US political and media discourse (Zelizer, 1993). This view centers around the notion of journalism as a profession oriented toward the empirical pursuit and uncovering of facts, with this discourse being influenced by positivist scientific theories of how 'truth' is best uncovered (Boudana, 2011; Schudson, 2001). In service of this pursuit of facts, emphasis is placed on scientific notions of objectivity, the importance of neutrality, the separation of facts from values and opinions, and the value of detached observation in getting to the world 'as it is' (Durham, 1998). Boudana (2011, p. 386) calls this a "focus-on-facts empiricism." Of note, this view of journalism has largely predominated in the United States and is thereby context-specific.

Moreover, when 'facts' cannot be uncovered, because the subject matter deals with differences in opinion, people adopt a pluralistic view of 'balance' which, in their minds, allows for objectivity, neutrality, and impartiality to be enacted. This view, which is relativist in nature and also rooted in traditional journalistic discourse, continues to have "objectivist presumptions inasmuch as it demands that journalists refrain from favoring one of the competing accounts over the others about a contested matter" (Muñoz-Torres, 2012, p. 576). People call for balance to be

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enacted in situations where there may not be one 'truth' to uncover but instead different views to account for.

While such audience views on journalism are not entirely unique to this study, having been noted in similar forms elsewhere (e.g. Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2016; Tsfati et al., 2006; Heider et al., 2005), what this study does is to view them through an epistemological lens and make clear the extent to which US news consumers have internalized these notions of good journalism at a philosophical level (i.e. in their realist-empiricist beliefs, as well as their relativist beliefs). The desire for objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, and balance perhaps reflects a want for certainty at a time of uncertainty – both because of current global events and because of 'post-truth' discourse (McIntyre, 2018) – and is perhaps also a response to perceived increases in political polarization. Indeed, study participants lament the polarization of the political and media landscapes, calling for objective, impartial, and balanced news over politically biased coverage. On one level, a stated preference for this form of news runs against notions that audiences prefer content which is biased toward their ideological beliefs. Distrust in news and the commensurate desire for straight facts (and less interpretation; cf. Barthel & Gottfried, 2016) may further represent a desire among audiences for autonomy: a want to think for oneself and come to independent decisions (Barnhurst, 2015).

Limitations and future research

This dissertation, of course, has limitations – and these limitations point to opportunities for future research. The first limitation is that this dissertation is framed specifically by rational forms of Western philosophy and, in its methodological design, explores individuals' expressions of their beliefs and what makes news credible. While these expressions of beliefs and views on news credibility are valuable, responses are naturally limited by what individuals

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are able to consciously and rationally articulate in the moment during interviews. As such, I may not have been able to fully capture less rational and deeply rooted beliefs and attitudes which are difficult to put into words – particularly in a time-limited interview context.

Moreover, the semi-structured interview framework I employed was guided by Western philosophical assumptions, focused on exploring individuals' notions of truth and credibility in rational ways and in the abstract. This limits the scope of this dissertation to an analysis of conscious, rational articulations of beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions through this lens. My work adds important understanding to the epistemic dimensions of news credibility, but left out are some of the potentially less rational forms of and influences on beliefs and attitudes which may be difficult to express, including affective/emotional and social/contextual influences on perceptions of news credibility. Moreover, these influences may come about in moments of exposure and not be captured here where the focus is on more general expressions of what makes news credible. I note that the lens through which I view credibility in this dissertation is not the only one – there are complementary psychological and sociological views on credibility which add other dimensions to this complex area of research.

In light of this, future research should explore the role that these influences play, in tandem with epistemological beliefs. In particular, to what degree are perceptions and assessments of news credibility rational (e.g. informed by individual beliefs about valid knowledge and knowing) and/or irrational (e.g. informed by emotional reactions or influenced by friends and family)? It may be that individuals express rational beliefs about what makes something true or credible when asked, but in practice are influenced more by their emotional reactions to news stories or by their group affiliations (e.g. political party or religious group).

Ultimately, this dissertation only explores what people *say* is credible, not how they assess credibility in particular moments of exposure.

This connects to a second limitation: the potential disconnect between what people *say* they want from news, from a credibility perspective, and what they actually choose to consume. This dissertation was not specifically focused on the link between news credibility and consumption, being oriented instead toward epistemic views on credibility. This limits what can be said about this disconnect, but there is research suggesting that views on news credibility are not always directly associated with consumption: people do not always consume the news they find most trustworthy or credible (Tsfati & Capella, 2003, 2005). This is not to say that credibility is unimportant, however. It still remains normatively important for journalism. But I recognize here that there are other reasons beyond credibility which influence news consumption (e.g. entertainment-seeking). Future research should examine what role credibility plays alongside other variables when it comes to news consumption.

One influence on news consumption is ideological beliefs. With respect to my own findings, while people express a desire for objective, neutral, and balanced journalism, I note that they may not always be seeking this news out in practice. Indeed, whether audiences seek out objective, neutral, and balanced news in practice is still the subject of much scholarly debate. Academics have variously identified tendencies toward selective exposure to pro-attitudinal information (Garrett & Stroud, 2014), partisan news consumption (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), and confirmation biases in news-seeking (Van der Meer, Hameleers, & Kroon, 2020). This research points to a potential contradiction: while people say they want impartial journalism, many seek out news which is not impartial and which is far divorced from the idealized version of news described to me. However, other research indicates that the majority of people still seek out and

use middle-ground news sources (Nelson & Webster, 2017), suggesting that audiences may actually practice what they preach.

When it comes to the participants in this study, a number openly admit to consuming news which aligns with their political views, suggesting an awareness of the disconnect between attitudes and behavior. In other words, while some people may say they want objective and impartial news, in practice they report consuming news which is biased toward their beliefs. The disconnect raises a concern with respect to some interviewees providing socially desirable responses; people saying they want unbiased news for the sake of impression. This impression concern is somewhat undercut by the open admission of these participants that they are biased consumers, but the under-explored disconnect between reported attitudes and behavior remains as a limitation.

The disconnect between reported attitudes and behavior for some participants suggests individuals may be in a position of consuming news which they might not consider fully credible. Many of these participants complain about the biases of their preferred sources, maintaining a desire for more objectivity and impartiality. In this regard, while people may say they consume news which is agreeable, this does not mean they view it as entirely credible (see also Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020; Newman et al., 2020).

Why individuals may continue to consume news they might not view as credible is a question for future research. It is possible that consumption of ideologically agreeable news is more psychologically comforting, even if it not considered fully credible. It may reflect a perception among people that, in a polarized political and media environment in the US, there is somewhat of a binary choice to make: few news sources are seen as truly neutral, so the perceived choice is between ideologically agreeable and disagreeable news sources (cf. Mitchell

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et al., 2014; Fletcher, Cornia, & Nielsen, 2020). In this context, it makes sense to choose the former over the latter because it is less confronting to consume ideologically agreeable news content. Future research may wish to also tease out these perceptions more, exploring views on ideological diversity or neutrality in the news, the degree to which individuals believe there to be binary news choices to be made (e.g. ideologically congruent vs. incongruent), and whether people either know of or believe there to be neutral sources. On the latter point, it may be that individuals are not aware enough of different news sources. Indeed, as I point out in the section on individual differences (Chapter six), people who are less interested in or knowledgeable about the news media are less able to identify credible sources.

The role that political ideology may play in biasing credibility assessments on epistemological grounds should specifically be explored. As noted, ideological beliefs play a role in bias individuals' views of the performance of news sources. They also play a role in shaping news consumption behaviors. Future research should look at the ways in which ideological beliefs influence epistemological beliefs, shape assessments of whether news outlets are engaging in ideal practices or deviations from the ideal, as well as whether individuals, in practice, would actually choose to consume news which reflects the Platonic ideal or whether individuals would gravitate toward biased yet ideologically agreeable content. Disentangling ideologically-based assessments from epistemic assessments of news will be crucial, particularly since ideological biases are a key feature of the news trust and credibility literature.

A third limitation is associated with the narrow focus of this dissertation. Specifically, there are prevailing questions about where journalism-related epistemological beliefs and perceptions come from – questions which this dissertation did not specifically explore. Future research should examine the roots of journalism-related epistemological beliefs and further

investigate how perceptions of journalism come about. To what degree are beliefs influenced by social forces (e.g. family, group affiliations), other types of beliefs (e.g. religious beliefs), education, or the news media itself? On this latter point, there is an interesting question of how the news media itself plays a role in shaping beliefs and attitudes. Journalists and audiences exist in relation to one another: audiences are influenced by news and news is influenced by audiences in turn. How do these feedback mechanisms play out when it comes to epistemological beliefs and epistemic practices? It may be that the expectations audiences have of journalism are influenced by the discourses of journalists themselves. Inversely, to what degree do journalists pay attention to audience attitudes? Are they adjusting their epistemic practices? If so, the effects on audience perceptions should be explored. If not, a perception among audiences that journalists do not heed their concerns may further contribute to declining trust and credibility.

Finally, there are limitations pertaining to the nature of the methodology and sample employed in this study. The strength of a qualitative approach is that it allows for the exploration of attitudes and beliefs in-depth, but a limitation is that the findings are in many ways limited to this method and the sample of individuals relied upon. While care was taken to include people from diverse backgrounds, there are inevitably beliefs and perspectives which are not included (for example, diverse religious perspectives and the perspectives of individuals living in different news media systems outside the US). Findings are limited to the US context and this sample of participants.

Future research should explore the extent to which a more representative sample of individuals in the US share similar epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism and whether there are cross-national or cross-cultural differences in epistemological beliefs (e.g. by national context). Of particular interest is also how people perceive different levels of

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interpretation in news stories. What are the precise boundaries or conditions under which individuals see a news story as more or less interpretive in nature? These are questions to explore more thoroughly and systematically, perhaps employing quantitative methods.

Such methods may also be useful in exploring 1) the positive effects that journalistic practices contained within the Platonic ideal of news have together or differentially on news credibility, as well as 2) the negative effects that deviations from the Platonic ideal of news have together or differentially on news credibility. In this vein, future research should also examine which aspects of individuals' epistemological beliefs (e.g. beliefs regarding certainty, simplicity, sources, or justifications) matter most when it comes to news credibility.

Specifically, while my findings do not identify whether deviations from ideal news are hierarchical (i.e. ordered by their level of impact on news credibility) or additive (i.e. each additional deviation further decreases credibility), and vice versa for ideal practices, it seems likely that the most influential deviation is a perceived motive for distortion of news (specifically, political bias) and the most influential ideal practice is demonstration of a lack of motive. The relative influences of each ideal practice/deviation on news credibility should be explored in future research, particularly in terms of how their influence on news credibility is mediated by their effects on different aspects of epistemological beliefs/perceptions (e.g. the influence of political motives in news on the perceived certainty of knowledge vs. justification for knowledge and, in turn, on news credibility). Their influences should also be assessed in light of the mediating or moderating effects that individual differences in ability and motivation (e.g. news interest, knowledge, political ideology) have.

There is also a limitation imposed by the context under which interviews were conducted: during a global pandemic and ongoing protests against lockdown orders intended to slow the

spread of the coronavirus, as well as during protests against police violence (in the case of the

George Floyd protests). My findings in many ways are influenced by this context, with most

individuals altering their news consumption behaviors in response. Examples discussed in

interviews often pertained to these stories, but I steered interviews to cover a range of news

topics, with individuals expressing their general views on the news media separated from the

context. Nevertheless, increased news consumption, the background context, and wider

discourses about the news media (propelled by figures such as President Trump and concerns

over fake news) may have drawn individuals' attention more closely to questions of media

performance, raised questions about issues of objectivity, bias, and the

trustworthiness/believability, and influenced individuals' desire for objective, impartial/neutral,

and balanced journalism.

The conditions under which this dissertation was undertaken also meant more limited

access to interviewees. Institutional Review Board restrictions imposed during the coronavirus

pandemic altered original plans to source and interview people in person. Plans had been to

source politically and demographically diverse participants from physical locations such as

churches, local events, political meetings, and more. I had started making connections with a

Professor of Practice and former journalist with ties in the community to gain access to those

spaces and recruit participants. Restrictions, however, meant turning to alternate approaches

involving recruitment of interviewees from an existing participant pool, snowball sampling, and

social media. A digital approach somewhat limited my ability to gain entry into communities and

build rapport through in-person interaction. Digital divide issues also meant the exclusion of

participants without broadband internet and video calling capabilities (though several interviews

were conducted via phone to overcome technological limitations). These limitations see my final

sample being more liberal, younger, and highly educated than originally intended. However, I sought to mitigate this issue by deliberately seeking out individuals who were more conservative, older, and less educated. I was still able to reach data saturation utilizing the approach I did.

Conclusion and wider implications

The findings of this dissertation have implications for both audiences and journalists. Overall, while I find that audiences have traditionalist views on what makes good news, scholars and journalists, for their own part, have looked to move beyond traditional notions of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, and balance, seeing them as problematic insofar as 1) objectivity is seen as a myth which ignores the reality of subjectivity in journalism and the fact that news is socially constructed (Durham, 1998; Cunningham, 2003; Steiner, 2018), 2) neutrality and impartiality see the perpetuation of social inequalities resulting from journalists not taking a stance and instead maintaining the hegemonic status quo (Boudana, 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017), and 3) balance risks the introduction of false-equivalency into news, perpetuating marginal views and obscuring the fact that not all opinions have the same value (Zelizer, 1993; Muñoz-Torres, 2012; Eschelman, 2014; Baerlia, 2020; Hiles & Hinnant, 2014; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). Moreover, the criticism of 'just the facts' journalism is that it may actually diminish understanding by decontextualizing information, leaving people less informed.

With these issues in mind, efforts have been made to reform journalism and its methods of truth-seeking and sense-making. There have been shifts toward interpretive journalism (Barnhurst, 2014), an emphasis on 'weight of evidence' over balance (Hiles & Hinnant, 2014), increases in and calls for more evaluative and contextualized news (Fink & Schudson, 2014; Baleria, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017) as well as explanatory journalism (Parisi, 1999; Mann, 2016; Clark, 2020), and contemplations about the potential benefits of solutions

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journalism (McIntyre, 2019). These are journalistic formats which scholars and commentators have argued may either get journalists closer to the 'truth' or at least mitigate the problems inherent in traditional journalistic practices, helping journalists serve the public more effectively as information providers by clarifying issues, explaining problems, contextualizing facts, and providing solutions.

What the findings of this dissertation point to, however, is the potential risk that such moves pose for news credibility. People continue to hold on to realist-empiricist views of journalism and view the inclusion of interpretation and explanation with some skepticism (cf. Barthel & Gottfried, 2016). While I find that some interviewees embrace the idea of having interpretation, explanation, and contextualization in the news, seeing these as positive and necessary, most people view these as potential Trojan horses for the insertion of journalistic biases into the news. People say they want news to be simple and this added information is seen to reduce the credibility of news by introducing journalists' subjective views as an information source, undercutting expectations that journalists remain objective, neutral, and balanced conduits for realist truths. In terms of the implications for journalism, the risk is that the pursuit of 'better' forms of objectivity (Durham, 1998) may actually reduce perceived objectivity and harm both news trust and credibility.

Moreover, even when people have more relative beliefs in more interpretive contexts, they continue to hold onto the traditional notion of balance, arguing that journalists should deal fairly with perspectives on different sides of an issue. While some interviewees do reject or resist the notion of balance, noting that it risks generating false equivalence, many more note that it should not be up to journalists to decide which viewpoints are more valid (and therefore which viewpoints to include or exclude at the outset). The implications for journalism are that if there is

a further shift toward forms of advocacy or solutions journalism which see specific viewpoints being selected or highlighted, then journalists may be doing damage to their credibility.

Indeed, journalism is already viewed as biased and, for the most part, not living up to audience expectations (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020). Concerns about political motivations are pervasive and reflect the attitudes of news audiences in other research, both in the US and in other countries (see Newman & Fletcher, 2017). It has been found that US news audiences generally perceive a great deal of political bias in the news (even in sources which they choose to go to) and that they see this bias as deliberate (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020). In Spain and the UK, audiences express concerns about politically-biased news outlets which are seen to be part of an elite establishment distorting the truth for their own gain (Palmer et al., 2020). Trust in news is declining worldwide (Newman et al., 2020). Moreover, metajournalistic discourse surrounding news outlets (Carlson, 2016) fuels negative perceptions, particularly when it comes to news media being viewed as biased.

In this context, I find that people express a generalized skepticism toward the news media, taking most news stories "with a grain of salt" and being unwilling to put their full faith in news outlets. Audiences have expectations of journalism, but do not see journalists as living up to them. While both audiences and journalists see detached observation, political oversight, public education, and reporting things 'as they are' as important (Wolfgang, Vos, & Kelling, 2019; Vos et al., 2019; Standaert, Hanitzsch, & Dedonder 2019), journalists also see providing explanations and analyses of news events, providing interpretation, and providing content which will attract the largest audience as important; foci which audiences view as less essential to journalism (Wolfgang, Vos, & Kelling, 2019; Vos et al., 2019; Tsfati et al., 2006; Barthel & Gottfried, 2016) and which negatively impact credibility. The major concern among audiences,

as I find in this dissertation and as noted elsewhere, is with journalists being accurate, neutral, and unbiased (Heider et al., 2005; Tsfati et al., 2006; Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2020). People want journalists to report just the facts in a straightforward fashion (Barthel & Gottfried, 2016).

Beyond new forms of journalism, I find that some more traditional approaches to news production also do not resonate. For instance, by focusing on 'news values' such as conflict, controversy, the unusual, entertainment, and celebrity to capture audience attention (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), journalists may be harming their own credibility. I find that people de-emphasize these qualities of news, complaining about negativity and sensationalism, as well as what they see as the pointless over-coverage of celebrities. Such news values are seen to detract from a focus on facts and what is important, negatively impacting credibility. As such, the focus on such news values as ways to attract audiences may actually be misguided, serving to put audiences off news.

Overall, in order to gain credibility, journalism may need to rethink its approach, pulling back from interpretive or evaluative styles of news, instead revisiting more traditional approaches. It appears that journalistic and scholarly critiques of news practices have precipitated a shift in journalistic epistemology away from philosophies of realism and empiricism toward philosophies of social constructionism and standpoint epistemology (Steiner, 2018). An incongruency between the epistemological beliefs of audiences and the epistemological approaches of news actors – an epistemic incongruency – may underlie distrust in journalism. Indeed, in many ways, journalism appears to lack the legitimacy to make knowledge claims because its epistemology is not seen as valid or effective enough at producing 'truths' about the world (Carlson, 2018; Waisbord, 2018; Kreiss, 2017; Steiner, 2018). This negatively impacts credibility. Given that credibility is central to journalism's effective

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functioning as an institution – without credibility, journalism lacks the authority and legitimacy required to make it socially or politically relevant (Carlson, 2016, 2018) – these observations are important, especially at a time when questions are being raised about the nature of 'facts' and 'truth' and when both mis- and disinformation are contributing to social discord (McIntyre, 2018). Journalists need to be able to effectively communicate (and demonstrate) to audiences how news is reliable, trustworthy, and factual. Understanding individuals' epistemological beliefs helps in guiding this communication process, pointing to ways in which journalists might be able to better connect with audiences.

On the other hand, it must be noted that audience expectations of journalism are in many ways unrealistic. The high audience expectations on journalism put the profession in a tight bind where it cannot realistically live up to what is being asked. For instance, journalists are practically unable to include all perspectives on an issue, meaning there will always be an audience segment who feels that something was omitted. The emphases on singular truths, firsthand observation, the provision of multiple sources and detailed events, and visual or documentary evidence ignore constraints on journalism and journalistic practice including budget limitations, tight deadlines, the obstinance of news subjects unwilling to give up their secrets, the unavailability of some information, and the tendency of politicians and other news subjects to lie or obfuscate. Journalists are not perfect and nor are journalistic practices. Further, many things are out of journalists' hands. It may be that audiences need to recognize the limitations *on* and *of* journalism, tempering their expectations and altering their epistemological beliefs.

Moreover, while individuals emphasize concepts such as objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, and balance, they in many ways fail to recognize the inherent problems and

contradictions associated with them: objectivity obscuring the socially constructed nature of news, neutrality and impartiality perpetuating social problems, and balance creating false equivalencies. The more that audiences call for adherence to these 'ideals', the more that journalism may in fact become the opposite of what people are calling for. In a similar vein, the calls for 'just the facts' journalism may end up doing audiences a disservice by reducing the informational quality of news: if facts are presented without context, background, or explanation, the news of the day may actually end up being more difficult to understand and less valuable in people's lives. It is for these reasons that journalists and journalism scholars have looked for alternative approaches. The benefits of these approaches, and the inherent issues with more traditional approaches, should be better communicated to audiences if they are to be more widely adopted.

What these issues present are potential opportunities for media literacy education. Journalism may benefit in terms of credibility if audiences are more aware of how news is produced, the limitations on journalism (both practically and philosophically), and the problems inherent with realist and empiricist notions of truth (as they apply to journalism). Indeed, media literacy training may improve perceptions of credibility and decrease perceptions of bias because it helps people better understand the purpose of news and why stories are presented the way they are (Vraga et al., 2012; Vraga, Tully, & Rojas, 2009). Further, understanding the limitations on journalism may temper audience expectations, while fostering audience understandings of the problems inherent in traditional notions of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, and balance may open the door for newer forms of journalism. In sum, if audiences know more, they may have more realistic beliefs or otherwise alter their epistemological beliefs with respect to journalism. The insights provided here into the epistemological beliefs of individuals may aid in efforts to

produce media literacy curricula which could be aimed at improving critical thinking and encouraging the exploration of alternative epistemological belief structures.

For their part, the news media may be able to aid their own cause by being more transparent about how their do their work, the sources they rely on, and how they come to their conclusions. This has been the approach of fact-checkers, who have argued that the reliability of their form of journalism is communicated through the transparency of their methodology. As Graves (2016) observes of the approach of fact-checkers:

> "Revealing sources very self-consciously performs the idea of scientific reproducibility. The practice of 'showing your work' acts simultaneously as a way to argue and persuade and as a defense against critics who remain unconvinced." (p. 125)

The open, scientific-oriented approach of fact-checkers may fit well with individuals' empiricist beliefs which call for the reliance on primary sources, the provision of original documentation, and a 'laying out' of both evidence and methods in a transparent way (though views on fact-checkers do differ by political ideology; Robertson, Mourão, & Thorson, 2020). If journalism better communicates its epistemological approach, this may be beneficial to credibility. Indeed, people are not liable to trust opaque institutions. Alongside transparency, journalism may also benefit from being frank with audiences about limitations on newsgathering, as well as emphasizing the value of fairness over pure neutrality or balance.

In terms of wider implications for other knowledge-producing institutions, understanding the epistemological beliefs that individuals have may provide insights into the ways in which people interact with information of different kinds. While they were not specifically addressed in this study, domain-specific epistemological beliefs with respect to different areas of science (e.g. Hofer, 2000) may reveal where problems and potential solutions arise when it comes to trust in science and scientists. In this dissertation I find that individuals' epistemological beliefs with

respect to journalism look one way and that many individuals see the epistemology of journalism operating in a different way. A similar situation may play out when it comes to science, a knowledge-producing institution increasingly under attack from groups who do not trust it (McIntyre, 2018).

Moreover, understanding individuals' epistemic beliefs and how they relate to assessments of information credibility may help when it comes to understanding susceptibility to mis/disinformation. It could be that people who have more absolutist beliefs (Perry, 1970), being generally less critical of information, are more likely to take information from unreliable sources at face value and thereby be more likely to spread it. People who have more relativist or skeptical beliefs, meanwhile, may question all information, accepting nothing as truth. These individuals may be more distrusting of information and thereby susceptible to conspiratorial thinking (Garrett & Weeks, 2017). When it comes to fake news, producers of this content challenge the epistemology of journalism, appealing to individuals who are distrustful of media and have alternative belief systems and ways of knowing (Robertson & Mourão, 2020).

Overall, the approach of this dissertation was rooted in philosophy and journalism studies, with influences from educational psychology. It considered the societal function of news and role of journalists in the eyes of audiences, detailed audience expectations of news sources, and explored how individuals view news credibility, all through an epistemological lens. The central argument of this dissertation is that epistemological beliefs matter for news credibility and it was indeed shown how such beliefs relate to perceptions of news.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Semi-structured interview questions

Notes:

>Questions noted here come from my pre-written interview guide. Items are not ordered. Not all questions were asked of all participants, nor were they asked in the same order. General follow-ups and prompts are not included here, only substantive guiding questions. Question wordings were not the same across all interviews.

>In line with IRB guidelines, participants were told they could choose not to answer particular questions asked of them.

>Questions on epistemological beliefs are based on or inspired by prior research.

News consumption

Is there a news story you have seen recently that has stood out to you or caught your eye?

>What was your reaction when you saw/heard that story?

>How did you feel about it?

>Did you think the story was true? Why or why not?

>What made the story seem believable or true to you (or not)?

>Did you discuss the story with anyone? And did it shape the way you thought about it?

>Where did you see the story? What was the source?

If you are getting news, where do you typically see it? Where do you usually get your news?

What kinds of stories do you pay attention to, if any?

How much news do you tend to consume?

>Has that changed recently?

If you don't really pay attention to news, why is that?

To you recognize your own biases when looking at or consuming news?

>Do you think you read or like to look at news that aligns with your views?

Views on news and journalism

What is news? What does 'news' mean to you?

>What counts as news?

How do you feel about the news media?

Are there things that the news media does well/not well?

>In what ways do you think the media does a good job at all?

>In what ways do you think the media does a bad job at all?

Are there any particular sources that you trust? Why is that?

Are there any particular sources that you distrust? Why is that?

>For you, how do these sources compare to each other?

What does ideal news or journalism look like to you?

>What should journalists do?

To you, what is the point of news? What is its purpose?

Do you ever talk about news with people?

>Does this shape how you think of stories or the media?

What is your general posture when you go into a story? Do you tend to believe it, question it? Or does it depend what it is about/where it's from?

Epistemological beliefs

To you, what makes something believable or true?

>Does it depend on what we are talking about?

What is the best way to uncover the truth or know if something is true?

>Does this differ depending on what we are talking about?

If you had to find out if something was true, how would you go about it?

From King and Kitchener (1994, pp. 269-260): "Some people believe that news stories represent unbiased, objective reporting of news events. Others say that there is no such thing as unbiased, objective reporting, and that even in reporting the facts, the news reporters project their own interpretations into what they write."

>What do you think?

>Do you think it depends on what the topic or issue is?

If two news stories or sources say different things about an event or issue, is one right and one wrong?

>Why is that?

>Do you think it's fine for there to be different views? Should views be reconciled?

Why or why not?

Do you think journalists can uncover the 'truth'?

How? Why or why not?

Do you think it depends on what the topic or issue is?

Do journalists get closer to the truth with the more information they gather?

Do you think there are singular truths in the world to find or that we know?

Or are there multiple truths in every situation?

In what situations are there single truths vs. more truths?

Do you think it depends on what the topic or issue is?

Can we be sure if something is true?

Is there one right way to uncover is something is true?

What are facts? Or what is a fact?

Are some types of stories more trustworthy or believable than others?

Added theoretical sampling questions

What is a 'personal truth'? Is this a type of truth or is it a belief?

What is bias? What does it look like or what does it mean?

In news, what does bias look like?

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