

## **News as Relational Social Practice: A Theoretical Framework**

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Most studies of news focus on production structures, texts, or audiences, often in isolation. But what might be the value of theorizing them together? A practice framework lends itself to this task. Both durable and contingent practices underlie news consumption and communication. These practices manifest in news content that expresses a dual-layered meaning system of enduring moral foundations and specific cultural codes. The problem-solving practices of news consumption and the goal-seeking practices of news communication intersect at the content of news, fomenting reciprocal relationships of mutual support and dependency between the two. This is news as relational social practice. Theorizing news as such provides a way of negotiating the dichotomies of durability/specificity, citizen/professional, and similarity/difference that currently structure the scholarship on news and social theory.

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Research on news commonly focuses on production, text, and consumption. This “holy trinity” (Couldry, 2004) involves the study of professional, credentialed journalists associated with formal news organizations (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017; Ryfe, 2012; Usher, 2014), citizen and alternative news creation (Atton, 2009), and inventive mixtures of both (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, & Lewis, 2018; Bolin, 2012; Deuze, 2008; Lewis & Westlund, 2015; Ostertag & Tuchman, 2012). Much of this work tends to focus on one aspect of the holy trinity, isolating news creation from news text and consumption, focusing on news audiences while leaving creation and text to the periphery, or examining citizen news and professional news separately, as detached phenomena.<sup>2</sup> Rarely are these examined together. Yet news creation, without people to consume it, is like talking to ourselves, and news consumption, without people communicating it, is like listening to silence. News has value, and its value is dependent on the

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<sup>2</sup> There is a sizeable literature on how professional news workers accommodate citizens in news creation, but the focus is usually on questions of control and authority over news from the professionals’ perspectives. Little scholarship examines the work and output of both, theorizing them together.

relationship among creators, users, and text, regardless of credentials or occupational status.<sup>3</sup> How might we theorize news in ways that capture these open-ended and relational qualities, and what might be the value of such a theory? Toward this, I suggest theorizing news as relational social practice, and I develop a theoretical model for doing so. The model I propose in this article provides a way of thinking about and with news that (1) is holistic, integrating creation, consumption and text into a single framework; (2) traverses several dichotomies that currently structure the field (e.g., professional/citizen, durable/culturally contingent); and (3) lends itself to broader social theorizing on difference and similarity under a single umbrella framework.

To live up to these expectations, a model of news as relational social practice should do three things: include a theory of motivated action that accounts for news communication and consumption, a theory of meaning systems expressed in news content, and a conceptualization of news as a social phenomenon, all of which must simultaneously account for the common and specific. To do so, it should draw on scholarship that recognizes both the commonalities we share across socially constructed domains of history and culture and the things that are unique to these domains. Common emotional energies that motivate action, the moral platforms that orient action and structure abstract shared meaning systems, and treating news as ritualistic communication all serve to capture the commonness of news. Cultural codes and referents that activate and register our shared emotions, that make abstract moral meaning systems more concrete, and that speak to the news as a distinct cultural object all serve to capture the particularities of news. Those who want news and those who can provide it come together in time and space around the content of news. This is news as relational social practice. I elaborate on this model below.

### **News as Relational Social Practice: Theoretical Model**

#### ***Conceptualizing News: Ritualistic Moral Communication***

The ritualistic view of communication sees news as a moral story, where consuming it is like attending a mass, "a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed" (Carey, 2009, p. 16). Above and beyond the imparting of information, communication is simultaneously about the presentation and creation of reality, giving "life an overall form, order, and tone" (Carey, 2009, p. 17). News, much like its relatives of hearsay, gossip, rumor, and urban legend, is a form of ritualistic moral communication (Cottle, 2006; DiFonzo, 2008; Rosnow, 1988). It involves conveying important moral messages from society to society, contributing toward larger social processes involving understanding and predictability, social order and control, and social inclusion and exclusion (Carey, 2009; Cottle, 2006; Dunbar, 2004). These are timeless phenomena found everywhere (DiFonzo, 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> By way of metaphor, consider the game of baseball. At minimum, baseball requires a pitcher, a batter, and a ball. It is the three as they relate to each other that constitutes baseball. This is the case for professionals and amateurs alike.

As a form of moral communication, the news is typically current (on timely events and issues), expansive (of interest to a group of people), presumably trustworthy (at least to consumers), and useful in its application to personal and social life. In its usefulness and current focus, the news shares similarities with other forms of moral communication. It differs, however, in its expansive collective/group focus and in its presumable truthfulness and trustworthiness. This may be understood in a sentence: The news is presumably trustworthy information useful for understanding and addressing personalized current and collective social issues. It is a valuable resource (Bird 1998, 2011) for those who know it and those who want it. Consumers reduce ontological insecurity and anxiety by reaffirming the social and moral order, especially during uncertain times. Communicators demonstrate moral worth by providing news for those who want it, generating pride and enhancing their senses of self. This means the news involves collective action and relationships. Practice theory offers a way of studying news that centers on both.

### ***Practice Theory: Relational Social Practices of News***

Most social research takes one of two approaches to the study of society—individuals and totalities (Schatzki, 1996). Regarding news, individual approaches examine those formally labeled, often through credentialing, education, or formal training, as news agents (e.g., professional journalists), as well as those not formally trained nor working for a formal news organization (e.g., citizen journalists). Totality approaches examine news organizations, worlds, and fields—the collective accomplishment of making news and the constraints and pressures that structure it. These two social ontologies inform the professional, organizational, and citizen-based studies of news, with scholars examining the production, content, and uses of each, often in isolation. Practice theory offers an alternative approach, one not based on label, identity, nor work in an organization, but on the socially recognized, routinized, and embodied behaviors and sayings around the object of news (Ahva, 2017; Postill, 2010; Reckwitz, 2002).

According to Schatzki's (1996) Wittgensteinian approach, there are two basic kinds of practices: integrative and dispersed. Integrative practices are those clustered in cultural configurations that resonate with particular contexts, technologies, and conventions that change over time. Dispersed practices are more common and durable. They transcend social and cultural contexts of time and place, with technologies and conventions adapting to them. These are related. Dispersed practices inform and orient integrative practices so that integrative practices are culturally specific manifestations of more common, abstract dispersed practices. Approaching the news as dispersed social practices that manifest as integrative social practices provides a heuristic framework for theorizing news that is expansive, widespread, and enduring, while also recognizing its cultural and historical particularities.

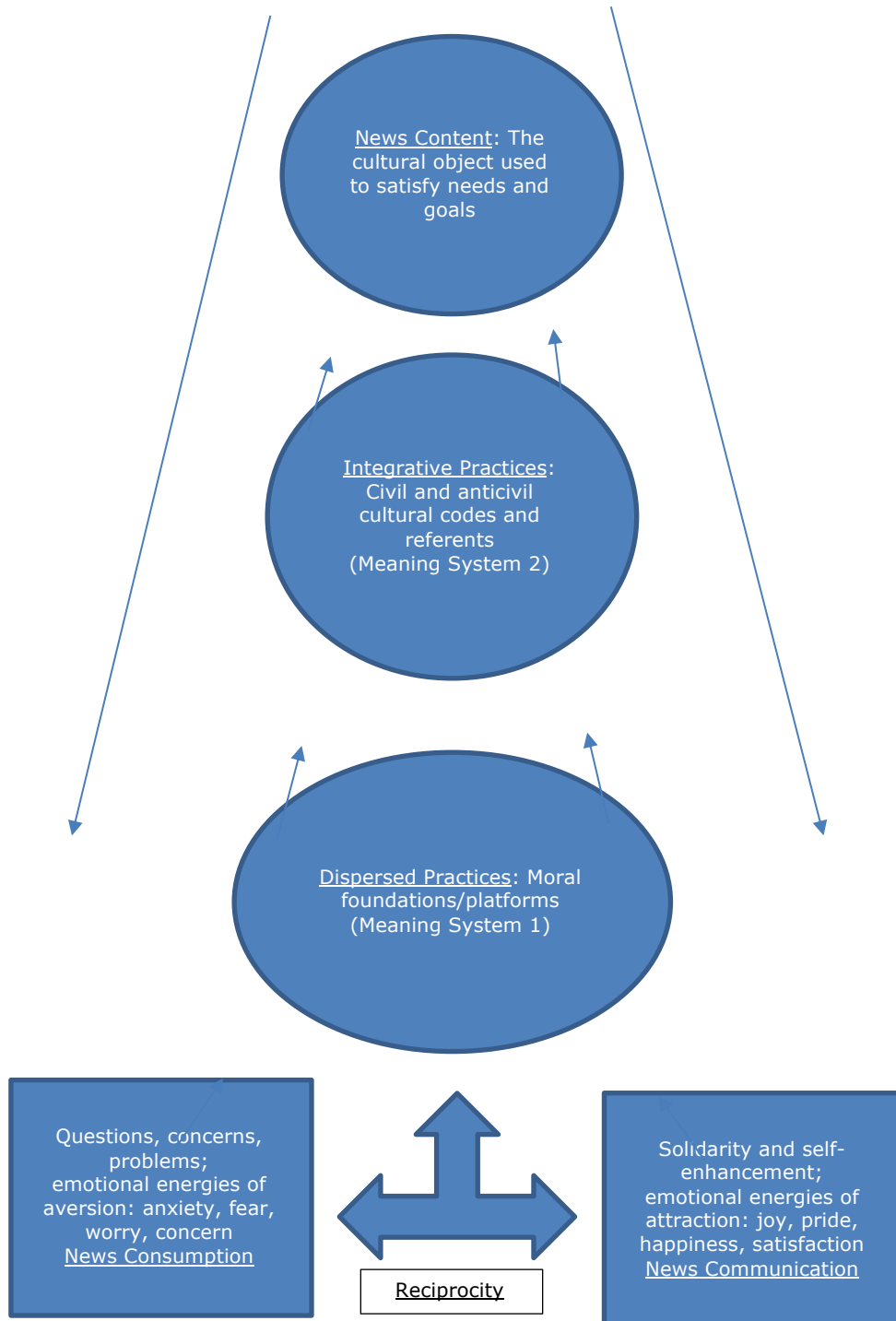
Practice informed approaches to the study of news are uncommon, but recent scholarship suggests it is particularly promising for "deconstructing journalism" and thinking it anew (Nerone, 2015, p. 1). Ahva (2017, p. 1525), for instance, outlines a practice theory of "participatory" journalism, noting that activity, materiality, and reflexivity are three core elements that turn a "bundle of activities" into a practice. They are related to each other in various ways, including their mutual causation. Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi (2018) draw on practice theory to understand the users' perspectives, their social media practices and incidental news consumption. They note that people using social media may

inadvertently consume news, following news links from friends in their social networks even though they were not initially looking for news.

Though insightful, practice approaches still tend to examine production, text, and audience separately, not sufficiently accounting for their relational qualities. Yet news practices involve ongoing, widespread collective action rooted in powerful relationships between the problem-solving nature of news consumption and the goal-seeking interests of news communication, with the news content as a versatile resource for both.

### ***News as Relational Social Practices: Emotions, Meanings, and Reciprocity***

News practices involve the collective doings and sayings of consumption and communication around the shared cultural object of news content. Both the consumption and communication of news are motivated by shared emotional energy sets, themselves informed by ongoing problems and goal-seeking interests. In its capacity as a cultural object, news content helps satisfy these emotional urges. It does so through a dual-layered meaning system. Dispersed practices reflect a culturally transcendent meaning system informed by moral platforms—general areas of concern about how people should treat each other as people. Integrative practices reflect a culturally specific meaning system, informed by the moral platforms of dispersed practices, but that manifest in the civil and anticivil cultural codes and referents relative to a particular time and place. News content is the cultural object used to satisfy both emotional urges through the dual-meanings it expresses. Those communicating news and those consuming it foment reciprocal relationships of mutual support and dependency due to what each offers the other with news content. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the model.



**Figure 1. News as relational social practice (theoretical model).**

*Emotional Motivations of News Practices*

Emotions are the physiological and biological states that make action possible and motivate social practices (Collins, 2004; Fox, 2015; Jasper, 2010). Action-based emotions fall into two broad categories: approach and avoidance (Elliot, 2008). The most relevant emotional motivators of news consumption are associated with aversion—unpleasant emotional states we often wish to avoid. They include the base emotions of fear, worry, and anxiety. The most relevant motivators for communicating news are associated with attraction—pleasant emotional states we typically seek to enjoy. They include happiness, joy, satisfaction, and pride. Both emotional states may be fulfilled by what each offers the other with news content.

Our emotional states resonate with core human concerns and needs associated with the problem-solving nature of pragmatism and the goal-seeking nature of normativity. By consuming news, we gain useful information that we use to answer questions, orient our lives in relation to others, avoid ontological insecurity, and generate understandings upon which we can plan and prepare within our own protective cocoons (Bird, 1998; Giddens, 1991; Park, 1940). Emotional energy sets of aversion motivate these practices. By communicating news, we reaffirm our shared morals and values to ourselves and others, help develop and maintain a common culture and social solidarity (Bird & Dardenne, 1988), demonstrate our social belongingness and moral worth and enhance our sense of self. Emotional energy sets of attraction motivate these practices.

Though emotions motivate our practices, they are guided by a dual-layered meaning system, one of dispersed practices and one of integrative practices, that together manifest in news content.

*Dispersed Meaning System: Moral Platforms*

Moral platforms constitute the meaning system of dispersed practices. These are widely shared notions on how we should treat each other as human beings. Moral platforms are culturally transcendent moral topics and concerns upon which more culturally distinct moralities emerge (Haidt, 2012). From the cultural psychology tradition, I draw from moral foundation theory (MFT) to build my argument of a deep, transcendent meaning system widely communicated and consumed in news. There are six widespread foundations upon which culturally specific moralities emerge (Haidt, 2012). Presented as oppositions, these are care < >harm, fairness < >cheating, liberty < >oppression, loyalty < >betrayal, authority < >subversion, and sanctity < >degradation. It is upon these topics that most societies build more specific moralities. Not all moral foundations are attended to equally, everywhere and all the time. Nonetheless, these are durable platforms, found in every society studied and upon which various groups construct more specific moralities.

Moralities play two related roles in my argument. One involves the normative meanings of those communicating news and the other involves the meanings of news content among consumers. These are related, as it is in appreciation of the moral reaffirmation offered through news content that the moral worthiness of those communicating news derives. Moralities provide an expansive, normative-based meaning system that informs the communication of news, and therefore a means of generating pride and happiness for the communicator. By communicating news, especially if it proves true and useful, we earn moral validation in our loyalty and care for others. This is a source of pride and self-enhancement,

illustrating our social belongingness and moral worth. This is possible because of the content of news, which consumers use to avoid the fear, worry and anxiety associated with uncertainty, unpredictability and ontological insecurity. Episode by episode, across outlet and medium, the news communicates ongoing morality tales that we use to provide predictability, cognitive consistency, and ontological security through the moral lessons communicated and confirmed. News communicators earn moral validation by providing news content with which we may address these ongoing concerns and reaffirm our realities and sense of order. These moralities take concrete shape within the more particular cultural contexts associated with integrative practices.

#### *Integrative Meaning Systems: Cultural Codes and Referents*

Integrative practices are those of particular times and places. They reflect dispersed practices in that they are informed by a broad meaning system of moral foundations, but they manifest according to particular codes, referents, technologies and conventions of a given time and place. Democratic civil societies, for example, share a system of codes and referents that are meaningful according to shared notions of civility and anticivility (Alexander & Smith, 1993). It manifests in a collective discourse that focuses on the motivations of actors, the social relations they may form based on their motivations, and the social institutions that may develop out of their social relations. Oppositional cultural codes are associated with specific referents that are meaningful within particular cultural contexts. These cultural codes of civility and anticivility, and their particular referents, are communicated in news content.

The shared meaning systems of news content associated with dispersed and integrative social practices are closely related, with moral platforms informing this discourse of civil society, its civil and anticivil cultural codes and their application to particular referents. Motives of actors that are constructed as rational or irrational, reasonable or hysterical, sane or mad, for example, reflect the moral foundation of care < >harm. Likewise, social relations constructed as open or secretive, trusting or suspicious, altruistic or greedy, and truthful or deceitful may reflect the moral foundations of fairness < >cheating or loyalty < >betrayal. As such, we may see how the distinct integrative meaning systems of cultural codes and their specific referents build upon more common, dispersed meaning systems associated with moral foundation theory, both manifesting in news content.

Moral platforms and cultural codes inform the dual-layered meaning system of news content. Emotions provide the energies that urge us into action around this content. Yet these meanings and emotions only matter in the relationship between news communicators and consumers. Reciprocity in the mutual support and dependency served with news content explain these relationships and why they are self-sustaining and durable.

#### ***Reciprocal Relationships of News Practices: Dependency and Support***

The meaning systems and related emotional energies foment mutually beneficial relationships between communicator and consumer around news content. These relationships are based on reciprocity. Reciprocity is the perceived fairness in what one offers others and gets in return. It is a common quality of social interaction and relations across societies and throughout human history (Gouldner, 1960). Reciprocity

may be based on material exchange, symbolic exchange, or the simple sense that one is doing "right," and it has consequences for social relationships and the emergence of trust and solidarity (Molm, 2010; Molm, Collett, & Schaefer, 2007; Perugini, Gallucci, Presaghi, & Ercolani, 2003). Benefits of reciprocity need not only flow unilaterally, but may flow bilaterally; they may be direct or indirect, and they need not require the active involvement of others. News as relational social practices is rooted in reciprocal relationships between news communicator and news consumer, around news content. Communicators serve those dependent on news, alleviating their anxiety and concern over the moral order of society, as it manifests in particular cultural contexts. Consumers reciprocate by offering their gratitude and appreciation for news (directly, indirectly, or presumed) and the moral support, pride, and self-enhancement it generates. Relational social practices of news are based on this sense of reciprocity, and the mutual support and dependency between communicator and consumer around news content.

When conceptualized as ritualistic moral communication, and approached through the lens of practice theory, the news is a cultural object expressing widespread moral stories of social order and reaffirmation that manifest in specific cultural codes and referents. Practices of news consumption and communication are motivated by emotional energy sets of aversion and attraction. Communicators and consumers use the content of news to satisfy their emotional needs, fomenting ongoing, symbiotic, reciprocal relationships of mutual support and dependency. This is news as relational social practice. In what follows, I support my argument using existing research on news creation, uses, and text.

### **News as Relational Social Practice: Support in Existing Research**

The following section is composed of four parts: news communication, news consumption, news content, and reciprocal journalism. I offer a reinterpretation of this scholarship to illustrate support for my theory of news as relational social practice.

#### ***News Communication: Normativity and Motives***

##### *News as Organization and Profession*

The creation of news organizations and the professionalization of news are two related phenomena associated with the control of news in the context of growing industrial capitalism and state formation. Organizational pressures channel and mold news communication practices through routines (Tuchman, 1978), formats (Altheide, 2002), beats (Fishman, 1979), rhythm and tempo (Snow, 1987), and other evolving (Boczkowski, 2004) values and means of efficiently producing news. The result is to institutionalize the practices associated with news making in familiar, efficient, and predictable ways, resulting in similar news content across institutions.

Likewise, professions reflect attempts to control the behaviors and tasks associated with a certain practice (Abbot, 1988). Typically, this involves controlling who may perform such tasks and the criteria on which they are evaluated (Freidson, 2001). Professions help occupations control market expertise and status, working to establish senses of public legitimacy and protecting the boundaries of their work (Lewis, 2012). Medicine, engineering, accounting, law, and journalism have all become professions, claiming



jurisdiction over certain knowledge and practices (Abbot, 1988; Lewis, 2012; Schudson, 1978). Professionalism is commonly associated with specific training and credentialing, indicating that one has learned the appropriate knowledge, language, and behavior associated with the tasks (Larson, 1977).

Professional journalists and news organizations may be understood as means of capturing, institutionalizing, and protecting certain already existing news practices, but not creating news per se. Deeper and enduring emotional energies and notions of news as a morally relevant social good resonate in the professionalization of news today (Jacobs, 2017). They manifest in the focus on justice and democracy, truth, and fairness (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014) that informs various codes of ethics (e.g., Society of Professional Journalists and International Federation of Journalism's Declaration of Principles) and underlie the growing tensions between professional journalists and news managers within formal organizations (Borden, 2007; Lewis, 2012). Moral foundations of care, fairness, and loyalty to both citizens and people in general underscore these normative commitments. Yet they are filtered through cultural contexts, definitions, institutional pressures, and professional practices that mold and bind them, influencing the news that's produced, but not necessarily the motivations to communicate it, nor the deep moral meanings of news content given its ritualistic role.

These normative orientations inform news selection. News with negative overtones that illustrate conflict, surprise, or drama and that is relevant to a large number of people all seem to be common news values (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). These all assume some normative-moral criteria upon which such judgments are made (often at the expense of others), and the fact that similar judgments of newsworthiness exist across many countries (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006) adds further support for an underlying normative-moral structure of news.

As a form of moral communication institutionalized through professionalism and news organizations, the reporting of news nonetheless remains linked to broader normative-moral goals and motivations. Concerns with loyalty, fairness, and care appear as deeper moral forces informing news practices despite, or in addition to, its institutionalization. How exactly these are communicated and the signs and referents used to communicate them remain subject to cultural context, institutional pressures, conventions, and technologies, but as dispersed practices they cannot be reduced to them.

Yet reporting is more than a profession and not always institutionalized in formal news organizations, nor does it go unchallenged. Rather, as Carey (1995) noted, it can and often is "practiced virtually anywhere and under almost any circumstance" (as cited in Borden, 2007, p. 49). Indeed, the simple fact that so many alternative forms of news reporting exist, and emerge under the most dangerous of conditions, is indicative of deeper motives to communicate news and unmet needs among consumers. Turning attention to citizen news offers further evidence of the deeper emotional and moral forces motivating and directing news communication.

#### *Citizen News Reporting*

Falling under the umbrella term of "citizen news" is a host of more specific practices typically treated in opposition to or separate from professional journalism and formal news organizations (Atton,

2009). Yet, like professional journalists, citizen journalists often abide by codes of ethics similarly rooted in fairness, loyalty, truth, and the minimization of harm (e.g., CyberJournalist.net; the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism [PCIJ.org]). Though some important differences exist, they nonetheless remain rooted in deeper moralities. For example, citizen journalists might not share the same understanding of "objectivity" and may be willing to take a particular moral stand on an issue as harmful and wrong (e.g., see "human journalism"; Willis, 2003). Digital communication technologies (DCTs) have opened up new avenues and mechanisms for outsiders to create news, covering what legacy news ignores, but that consumers may nonetheless want (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001). A deeper explanation of citizen news as an emergent phenomenon might see it as reflecting senses of cheating derived from a betrayal of neglected social groups and the harm such practices might cause because of traditional beats, sources, and other routinized practices associated with legacy news (Huang, Shen, Lin, & Chang, 2007; Liu, Liao, & Zeng, 2007; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004).

### ***Normative Expressions of Social Approval and Sources of Pride***

By communicating trusted, useful news, citizens and professionals receive social approval, positive feedback that signifies widespread appreciation, aids in self-enhancement, and encourages continued behavior (Huang et al., 2007). Social approval fosters senses of pride and happiness, activating emotions that energize the continuation of behavior. Social approval comes in numerous forms and need not be direct or immediate (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014; Molm, 2010). For professionals and citizen journalists alike, this may include awards, ratings, website "clicks," public opinion, or the simple belief that one is providing an important social good.

The value of social approval and its linkages to pride may be deeply rooted in human beings as social creatures. We are socially motivated to act in efforts to meet the expectations and gain the affection of others, as this nurtures our sense of attachment and social belongingness (Collins, 2004; Haidt, 2012). Expressions of social approval help establish valued reputations, for both news organizations and individual journalists and reporters. It is a reward for prosocial behavior—or acts that benefit others (Willer, Feinberg, Irwin, Schultz, & Simpson, 2010, pp. 315–316), inflating social status and the prestige and honor that come with it, and motivating similar action in the future (Willer, 2009). These are sources of pride and happiness rooted in normative concerns with solidarity, social belonging, and self-enhancement, and they encourage continued behavior (Collins, 2004; Summers-Effler, 2004). They do not belong to institutions or specific cultures, though they are institutionalized and manifest in culturally specific ways. As Pettegree (2014) noted about the spoken news of our medieval ancestors, "a news report gained credibility from the reputation of the person who delivered it" (p. 2).

Here, we may see the communication of news as a dispersed social practice, guided through the moral foundations of care, loyalty, and fairness and motivated with the emotional-energy sets of pride, joy, and happiness. I have shown how social practices associated with the communication of news weave through dominant news industries and lay practitioners, and how the institutionalization of news reflects attempts to control this practice, while the continual emergence of citizen news reflects its relatively autonomous, dispersed qualities. Yet the news as social practice is based on a relationship between giver and taker, a symbiotic relationship of mutual support and dependency that fuels these practices. Goal-seeking-based

emotional energies of pride arise in the utility of news for others, in people's ability to use the news to quell anxiety and alleviate ontological insecurity. To address this quality of the relationship, I turn to news consumption and the problem-solving motivations to learn and understand. The news provides consumers with a valuable, culturally meaningful resource to establish ontological security and cognitive consistency and avoid the fear, worry, and anxiety that may arise from uncertainty (Giddens, 1991; Lagerkvist, 2017; Shibutani, 1966).

### ***News Consumption: Attending to the News and Ontological Insecurity***

One fundamental aspect of being human is our need to understand our surroundings. Indeed, fear of the unknown is considered the "fundamental fear" (Carleton, 2016). Establishing some level of understanding is essential as we interpret, process, and create a grounded sense of reality and ontological security, "a sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual" (Giddens, 1991, p. 243). Conversely, ontological insecurity creates a state of concern and anxiety due to the uncertainty it reflects. It is an uncomfortable emotional state that we often wish to avoid. Ontological security is a constant work in progress. The news is an important resource in this maintenance work, and one of the reasons it has value.

People use the news to satisfy various different social and psychological needs (Bird, 1998; Martin, 2008; Park, 1940). Much audience research focuses on the first order of news; the who, what, when, where, and why material. Yet it is with the postconsumption, informal discussions that the deeper issues about the state of society and its future arise. By attending to the news, we get familiarity, predictability, and reliability, and avoid (in varying degrees) the fear, worry, and anxiety that arise with uncertainty. These are powerful emotions that motivate behavior. They encourage consuming news, whether it be from an official source, a citizen journalist, a blog or Facebook page, a pundit on the radio or cable, or a neighbor on her porch.<sup>4</sup>

Often, what interests us most are stories that contain a villain, victim, and confrontation, as these shock, titillate, and pull at our heartstrings (Darnton, 1975; Mindich, 2005, pp. 58–59). Such content helps users deal with ongoing issues of morality, law and order, and so on, in their daily lives (Bird, 1998; Dahlgren, 1988). People want news that they see as relevant to their lives as they know and understand them. We do this in myriad ways with myriad resources; rumor, gossip, and news are all important in these ongoing processes. Audiences may seek out and attend to information that helps them make sense of their lives and the larger social world, especially in times of uncertainty. They get answers, reaffirm moralities, and negotiate senses of belongingness and exclusion, all within their particular cultural and historical contexts. We clarify and answer ambiguities and uncertainties relevant to our bracketed social worlds, establish trusted understandings of what is, prepare for what is to come, and avoid ontological insecurity (Ostertag, 2010).

Put together, we may see that people want to avoid ontological insecurity, and attending to the news is one way of doing so. The potential anxiety, fear, and worry associated with ontological insecurity motivates people to attend to the news, but only when necessary and only the news that is useful to them.

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<sup>4</sup> In some cases, they may also encourage disengagement, a kind of "ignorance is bliss" relationship to news.

The usefulness of news is, among other things, in how we use it to understand and know our social world. By providing trusted information that allows us to do this, those who communicate news offer a great service, fostering senses of pride and self-enhancement. Though the specific individuals communicating and consuming news vary over time, as do the mechanisms and means of doing so, these basic emotional motivations foment an ongoing, symbiotic social relationship of mutual support and dependency that both spans boundaries of time and place, while manifesting within particular historical and cultural contexts.

### ***News Content as Cultural Object: Moral Discourse and Cultural Codes***

News content is the meeting point between communicator and consumer. It is the linking cultural object that makes the social practices of news relational. It is the meaningful material that consumers use to understand and avoid ontological insecurity and that communicators use to display their social belonging and generate pride and self-enhancement. The content of news reflects two levels of meaning: a deeper, lower level system of moral platforms (e.g., moral foundations) reflecting news as dispersed social practice, and a higher level system of culturally relevant codes and referents reflecting news as integrative social practices. This dual-layered meaning system of news content explains both its common, enduring themes and its cultural specificity.

#### *Lower Level Meaning System: News Content as Moral Discourse*

The shared moralities associated with MFT that underlie the practices of sharing news are found in news content, especially news on social problems, the most threatening to social order. In news content we can see the polluting moralities associated with harm, cheating, and betrayal manifest in the topics covered and the framing of those topics. Yet we may also notice trends in the purity morality as well. This is most often the case with human interest and other "feel good" stories typically associated with "soft" news (Bird, 1998; Hughes, 1940). In addition to the topics covered and the framing of those topics, the sequencing of the news story as it is narrated also contributes to the moral messages of news (Cerulo, 1998), as do the areas of focus within an ongoing story (Katz, 1987). This is the content we use to avoid ontological insecurity and extend our gratitude to those who provide the tools to do so.

For example, crime news tends to center on specific aspects of crime (Dahlgren, 1988), focusing on either the immediate aftermath (the moral violation) or the court proceedings (the punishment and return to "normal"). Other aspects of the process are typically ignored. This is not a coincidence or reducible to institutional pressures, but rather reflects the role of crime news in helping a broader public to "work out sensibilities routinely made problematic in everyday modern life" (Katz, 1987, p. 48). Content on criminal insensitivity and collective vulnerability serve to "structure a symbolic referent for human behavior and morality" through common themes of quirkiness, audacity, evil and cruelty, greed and other foibles, abuse of trust, and threats to and defenses of the social order (Dahlgren, 1988, p. 203). A thick reading would see the moral themes of care < >harm, fairness < >cheating, and loyalty < >betrayal encoded in news content. Similar underlying moral themes are noted in the news of other constructed social ills and in times of great social instability (Ostertag, 2016). Finally, the sequencing of news events, the order in which a news story is told, also contributes to its underlying moral messages, as the "story sequence come[s] to signify a matrix

of good and evil. The perspective imposed by an account's sequence establishes a moral gauge, one that locates the acceptability of the event under scrutiny" (Cerulo, 1998, p. 7).

How the news is told, the specific aspects of an event that get told, the topics discussed and their framing, work together to communicate consistent underlying moral messages about right and wrong, serving to reaffirm senses of social order and control. Yet these are not the only meanings associated with news content. Existing upon these platforms are the culturally specific meanings that find expression in distinct codes and referents, and reflect the integrative social practices of particular cultural and historical contexts.

#### *Higher Level Meaning System: News Content as Cultural Codes*

News content is a cultural object, not only reflecting the deeply moral but also the culturally specific. In democratic societies, there exists a complex cultural discourse of civil and anticivil codes focusing on the motives of actors, the social relations they may form based on these motives, and the social institutions that may emerge around these motives and relations (Alexander, 2006). For example, civil motives include being active, autonomous, rational, reasonable, calm, self-controlled, realistic, and sane. Anticivil motives include being passive, dependent, irrational, hysterical, excitable, wild/passionate, distorted, and mad (Alexander, 2006, p. 57). These cultural codes inform a larger cultural discourse that contributes to broader processes of social order and control through the ongoing moral regulation of society.

As with moral foundations, analysis of news content on social problems reveal consistent themes of dependency, passivity, wildness/passion, and madness associated with distinct anticivil referents. The news on New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina, for example, was saturated with anticivil codes, where violent criminals and opportunistic looters were said to be roaming the streets, and those who stayed were at first framed as ignorant and then as unworthy victims seeking free handouts from generous others (Garfield, 2007; Shah, 2009). Similarly, anticivil codes exist in the media and political discourse of the "get tough" movement in the U.S. and the system of racialized mass incarceration it informed (Beckett, 1997), as well as the more recent coverage of Black victims of police violence. To the extent that society is one of social performances, the meaningful construction of self and others involves this collective discourse of civil and anticivil codes and referents (Alexander, 2006).

#### ***A Bilayered Meaning System: Moral Foundations and Cultural Codes***

A discourse of moral foundations and cultural codes should not be understood or treated independently. These are related, layered, coexisting systems of meaning, linked to the dispersed and integrative practices from which they emerge. As a moral platform, MFT is a "thick" theory (Abend, 2012), with evidence existing across various cultural contexts. Yet more specific moralities build upon this base, manifesting in a system of civil and anticivil cultural codes specific to certain domains. Looking at the oppositional cultural codes associated with motives, relationships, and institutions, we can see the moral foundations of care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, and sanctity/degradation all constituting a deeper meaning system. In democratic civil societies, why do people care about motives, relations, and institutions? Because of how they will experience life based on these. Care, fairness, sanctity, and loyalty

resonate with civil motives, relations, and institutions. Harm, cheating, degradation, and betrayal resonate with anticivil motives, relations, and institutions. These notions of civility and anticivility are not important in and of themselves. They are important because of how they relate to more enduring concerns with justice (Alexander, 2006), where questions of fairness, safety, and security sit front and center (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). This is what gives them both their emotive force and why people across boundaries can understand, appreciate, and sympathize. Being framed as irrational or wild/passionate, for example, matters not in and of itself, but because of its consequences for treatment, treatment that may be harmful, unfair, and exclusionary, as this would be unjust. A nuanced reading of news content that recognizes a layered meaning system allows for this kind of dynamic, boundary-crossing theorizing.

### **Reciprocal Journalism and News as Relational Social Practice**

As a key component of news as relational social practice, reciprocity (in its various forms) helps explain the ongoing relationship between communicating and consuming news (Holton, Coddington, Lewis, & De Huzinga, 2015, p. 2529). Capturing this is the notion of reciprocal journalism, which refers to the role of journalists as community builders, involved in the building of trust, connectedness, and social capital among readers and community members over time. In return for these community services, journalists earn instrumental and symbolic rewards (Lewis et al., 2014, p. 232). Through these mutual benefits, reciprocal journalism contributes to the building of ongoing voluntary social relations.

The notion of reciprocity, its role in social relations, and its application to news communication and consumption provides further support for a theory of news as relational social practice. First, as the “starting mechanisms” (Gouldner, 1960, p. 177) for social relations, reciprocity is believed to be a quality of social relationships that span cultural and historical specificity. This is consistent with the news as ritual view, the argument that news is widespread and enduring (Carey, 2007; Lule, 2001; Stephens, 1988), and that the communication and consumption of it (as with rumor and gossip) are dispersed social practices. Second, benefits are many—they are instrumental and symbolic, direct, indirect and general (Molm, 2010), and they may include the simple act of reciprocating in and of itself (Perugini et al., 2003). This speaks to the reward system that develops between news communicators and consumers. It is not necessary for benefits to be exchanged immediately or directly, as benefits may come later, through third parties, or be enjoyed simply in the act of helping others. When theorizing news as relational social practice, such benefits may involve satisfying a sense of moral duty by communicating news, and in the subtle, everyday ontological maintenance of consuming news.

### **Conclusion**

The news is a resource that consumers use to avoid uncertainty and alleviate the anxiety that comes with ontological insecurity. It is also a resource communicators use to generate pride and enhance their sense of self. When approached through a ritualistic lens (Carey, 2009), we may recognize an underlying morally rooted meaning system of news content. This meaning system crosses cultural borders and historical eras, ordering dispersed social practice of news. Yet it manifests in distinct contexts of codes and referents, technological uses, and conventions, ordering integrative social practices of news. Consumers

and communicators develop reciprocal relationships of mutual dependency and support around the content of news, relationships that are enduring, but that nonetheless take shape within particular times and places.

What might be the value of theorizing news as relational social practice? Scholarship on news is characterized by several dichotomies that theorizing news as relational social practice might help traverse. Building upon recent calls to challenge these distinctions (Neveu, 2017; Raetzsch, 2017) and be creative in our scholarship (Witschge, Deuze, & Willemsen, 2019), I use this conclusion to consider three that have structured the field for a long time.

One lasting distinction involves where to historically locate news, whether news and the reporting of it are widespread and eternal or culturally/historically contingent, emerging only over the past few centuries (Lule, 2001; Pettegree, 2014; Schudson, 1978; Stephens, 1988). There is truth to both arguments, as Carey (2007, pp. 5–6) noted, as some kind of monitoring and signaling system seems necessary for the survival of any society, no matter how primitive or advanced. Yet journalism, as a distinct form of work, and news, as content useful for a particular notion of “public,” are modern inventions (Pettegree, 2014), emerging over the past 14 or 15 generations (Schudson, 2013). These positions are not mutually exclusive. I hope to have shown a way to traverse them by illustrating how the motives and meanings of news are rooted in widespread, enduring human needs and wants associated with collective problem-solving and goal-seeking, but also how these motives and meanings manifest in specific modern contexts of technologies, conventions, efforts at control, and notions of collectivities. The news, as we commonly know it, emerged in the wake of the Enlightenment and public sphere, but the motives and enduring meanings of news did not begin there. The news, as we know it, reflects integrative practices as they orient around certain notions of a public and citizenship, and ways of creating, distributing, and consuming it. But they emerged and took the shape they did in part because the dispersed practices of news and the abstract meaning system and emotional motives of consumption and communication that already existed. Collective needs for news on such things as famine, war, disaster, disease, all resonating with moral foundations (e.g., care/harm, sanctity/degradation), existed long before, as did those communicating news on them. The value of news for communicators and consumers, and their emotional motivations, have remained relatively stable, even if the references, technologies, collectivities, and conventions have changed. News as relational social practice provides a model that accounts for both, simultaneously.

A second dichotomy is the focus on either professional news associated with formal news organizations or amateur news and citizen practitioners. When considered together, it is usually to understand how professionals incorporate growing citizen involvement and pressures in formal news making. What is similar and stable between the two is often ignored and untheorized. I have argued that these practices share common emotional motives and meaning systems. By examining them as such, we may uncover a shared language of news that spans context, offering new ways to think about such things as why and how news values emerge above and beyond organizational interests, how these manifest in tensions between occupational and organizational goals, and what this suggests about the creation of new journalistic endeavors. Considering field theory, for example, we might question how the field of journalism changes, especially in times of crisis and instability, where need for news is high but output is low, and the power of deep culture (e.g., moral foundations, cultural codes) in these changes.

A final dichotomy extends beyond the scholarship on news and into social theory. Sociology, history, anthropology, and a good deal of communication scholarship tends to emphasize differences. Though psychology, neurosciences, and economics tend to emphasize similarities (Abend, 2012), meaning systems are complex and layered, communicating things we have in common and upon which we differ, stressing areas of conflict and of cohesion, often at the same time. As a social theory of communication (Carey, 2009), news as relational social practices offers a way of recognizing similarity and difference simultaneously, which may be helpful in engaging ongoing questions about boundary construction and breaching, the complexity of (media) rituals (Cottle, 2006; Couldry, 2003), social exclusion and inclusion (Alexander, 2006), and social control and change through dispersed and integrative practices of news and communication in general.

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