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"It's a Battle You Are Never Going to Win": Perspectives from Journalists in Four Countries on How Digital Media Platforms Undermine Trust in News

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ABSTRACT

The growing prominence of platforms in news consumption has raised scholarly concerns about potential impacts on trust in news, which has declined in many countries. However, less is known about how journalists themselves perceive this relationship, which matters for understanding how they use these technologies. In this paper, we draw on 85 interviews with news workers from four countries in both the Global North and South to examine journalists' narratives—as metajournalistic discourse—about how platforms impact trust in news. We find that practitioners across all environments express mostly critical ideas about platforms vis-à-vis trust on two different levels. First, they describ platforms as disruptive to journalistic practices in ways that strain traditional norms on which trust is based. Second, they discuss platforms as altering the contexts in which journalistic texts and discourses about journalism circulate, weakening the profession's authority. Despite these reservations, most continue relying on platforms to reach audiences, highlighting the complex choices they must make in an increasingly platform-dominated media environment. As discourses connecting journalistic practice and meaning, these narratives speak to tensions within journalism as a profession around appropriate norms and practices, and challenges to the profession's claims to authority.

As growing numbers of people access news online via search engines, social media, and messaging applications, there has been increasing concern about the impact of digital platforms on trust in news, which has been declining in many countries around the world (Fletcher 2020). While some prominent critics have claimed platforms are responsible for having "eroded the integrity of content by undermining its provenance," in the words of News Corp's chief executive, Robert Thomson (News Corp, 2017), we know relatively little about how most journalists, editors, and other practitioners think about these challenges, especially in different countries where platforms perform a variety of functions.

In this study, we draw on in-depth interviews with 85 senior editors, journalists, and other news workers to analyze metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016) about how platforms matter for trust in a news media environment increasingly shaped by platforms such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, and their smaller competitors. Our work extends decades of research on journalists' assumptions about important parts of their work—e.g., about what news is (Gans 2004; Tuchman 1978) or what their audience is like (Nelson 2021; Christin 2020)—which argue that these assumptions are important to understand both in and of themselves as social facts, and because they are among the factors that influence how journalists do their jobs. We conducted interviews across four countries in the Global North (United Kingdom and United States) and Global South (Brazil and India) to bring a comparative perspective to these questions. We find consistent evidence in all four environments that journalists espouse mainly critical narratives about platforms and their impact on audience trust in news, even as they continue to invest often considerable time and effort in reaching online audiences via platforms. They considered platforms to be consequential for (dis)trust on two different levels. First, they described platforms as disruptive to journalistic work, both in terms of news content and relationships with audiences, in ways that strained traditional norms on which they believed trust was based. Second, they discussed platforms as altering the contexts in which journalistic texts and broader discourses about journalism circulate, weakening the profession's authority and legitimacy as an institution deserving of trust. These narratives articulate tensions around appropriate norms and practices, and challenges to the profession's claims to authority.

This study contributes to our understanding of how journalism practitioners make sense of the impact of platforms on trust in news as they navigate an increasingly platform-dominated media environment. Understanding how journalists relate to platforms requires understanding how they think about them in the context of their everyday work and the objectives they are trying to achieve, irrespective of whether their beliefs are backed up by research findings (as some beliefs identified here are) or not (yet). The fact that interviewees hold largely negative views of platforms when it comes to trust, even as journalists and news organizations continue to rely on them, demonstrates how different and sometimes competing considerations inform digital strategies and practices, suggesting other motivations— for example audience reach or commercial goals—may outweigh concerns about how platforms may erode trust in news.

The Relationship Between Trust in News and Digital Platforms

Trust in news has generated increasing academic and news industry interest, with recent surveys documenting significant declines in trust in many countries around the world (Fletcher 2020). Even after a boost to trust during the COVID-19 pandemic in some places, only 44% of people on average across the 46 markets covered by the *Reuters InstituteDigital News Report 2021* agreed they can trust "most news most of the time" (Newman et al. 2021).

As scholars examine what factors may be eroding trust, the role of digital platforms has come under scrutiny. While most scholarship has focused on the role of political and social factors such as elite cues, partisan polarization, and sociocultural influences (Fawzi

et al. 2021), some studies have suggested that changing audience behaviors around news consumption on platforms may be linked to decreasing trust (Park et al. 2020; Johnson, St, and Iii 2020; Xiao, Borah, and Su 2021). Growing numbers of people rely on them to find and engage with news. This "distributed discovery" differs from direct forms of discovery, such as visiting news websites directly or watching broadcast news (Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen 2018; Toff and Nielsen 2018; Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017). Such modes of accessing news may contribute to audiences disassociating the sources of information from their specific journalistic origin. As Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen (2018) show, people are less able to remember what brands they clicked on when accessing news via social media than directly.

This is a potential challenge for journalists and news media who, despite having reservations, often invest in using platforms to achieve strategic priorities ranging from additional audience reach and engagement to commercial goals (see, e.g., Bell et al. 2017; Nielsen and Ganter 2017; Sehl, Cornia, and Nielsen 2021). However, we know relatively little about how practitioners think about the implications platforms may have for audience trust in news, the question we focus on here. A small but growing number of studies have focused on trust as a product of "engaged journalism" practices (e.g., Wenzel 2020; Bélair-Gagnon and Usher 2021; Zahay et al. 2020); however, it is unclear to what extent newsrooms view platforms as simultaneously part of the problem of declining trust. Furthermore, we know little about how practitioners think about these issues beyond the US.

Focusing on how journalists talk about the role of *platforms* in trust in news matters because they are among the factors that inform how they navigate a changing media environment and try to earn public trust. As evidenced by research in the burgeoning field of platform studies, the tendency for social and economic traffic to be increasingly channeled through a global online platform ecosystem has in many ways changed how entire social sectors, including the news media, operate (Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). Scholarship on the "platformization" of news has analyzed, for example, the economic and normative impact of processes like the unbundling of news content on platforms and the datafication of audiences through metrics (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Van Dijck 2020; Jurno and de Brito d'Andréa 2021).

Research about how publishers relate to platforms has pointed toward several contentious areas. For example, news organizations experience tensions around trying to balance long-term risks and short-term benefits, fears of missing out, difficulties around evaluating results, and deep asymmetries in their relationship (Nielsen and Ganter 2017, 2022). Previous research documents that news organizations acknowledge the real opportunity platforms offer for expanding their reach, with the potential to build up new audiences, and continue to invest in platform-specific practices. At the same time, many express concern about the loss of editorial control the contingency on platforms entails and how to monetize content (ibid). Here, we extend this line of work by focusing on the question: How do journalists and editors in different contexts think the growing importance of platforms affects trust in news? More specifically, how do they think platforms contribute to reshaping journalistic practices implicated in trust and distrust? And how do they think the platforms impact trust by shaping the broader context in which journalism is embedded?

How Journalists Talk About Platforms and Trust

Examining how journalists articulate the challenges of building and maintaining trust in an increasingly platform-dominated media environment is empirically important, regardless of whether their beliefs are backed by evidence, because these considerations likely guide action and strategy in newsrooms. However, these narratives also matter symbolically as a form of what Carlson (2016) calls "metajournalistic discourse," a discursive field encompassing "public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception" (360). This perspective is informed by views of journalists as "interpretive communities" aimed at collective legitimation (Zelizer 1993), who possess a shared "occupational ideology" consisting of a "collection of values, strategies and formal codes characterizing professional journalism and shared most widely by its members" (Deuze 2005, 445).

Metajournalistic discourse is valuable as an object of inquiry because it connects "the creation and circulation of journalism's sociocultural meanings to the social practices surrounding news production and consumption" (Carlson 2016, 350). Here we extend the concept, which has previously centered on public expressions (e.g., Carlson 2016; Koliska, Chadha, and Burns 2020) to private conversations with journalists, which nonetheless shed light on how they connect the meanings of declining levels of public trust in news to the practices surrounding news in a platform-dominated media environment. Examining journalists' stories or narratives as a form of metajournalistic discourse thus encourages remaining attentive to the defense or negotiation of appropriate practices, norms, and actors implicated in their work. These cultural narratives matter because they reveal how journalists understand their relationship to the world and because these perspectives will sometimes be among the factors influencing their work—as previous research on news values, audience conceptions, and other issues has long demonstrated.

The shared narratives that many express around new technologies such as platforms—even across very different country contexts—are of particular interest as unique moments of "explicit meaning making," as actors negotiate the significance of emerging practices in relation to normative understandings of journalism (Carlson 2017). However, in examining platforms specifically, this study moves beyond scholarly analyses of tools and technologies that newsrooms can *adopt* because they exercise a great deal of control over them (e.g., websites) to empirically analyze their understanding of platforms that newsrooms to a larger extent have to *adapt* to (e.g., Facebook). Many of these narratives underscore the considerable power asymmetries that exist between large platform companies with hundreds of millions of users and generally much smaller media organizations.

Research Design

We use an inductive, qualitative, comparative approach including countries in both the Global North and South to examine how journalists and senior editors see the role of platforms when it comes to trust in news. We focus on four countries—Brazil, India, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US)—with wide-ranging sociocultural heterogeneity as well as political practices that vary in partisan and populist tendencies. There is also variation in the local media systems and uptake of digital platforms for news

consumption. As data from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* shows, much higher percentages of internet users in Brazil and India use social media and messaging applications for news than in the US and the UK (Newman et al. 2021). Lastly, the countries vary in their levels of trust. Compared to the average based on surveys in 46 different countries, Brazil has above-average trust in news in general, while India, the UK, and the US have below-average levels.

We combined purposive and snowball sampling to reach a broad cross-section of participants. We recruited people holding various roles in their organizations, some of them responsible for managing the newsrooms (e.g., editors-in-chief), others in middle-management positions (e.g., editors) as well as reporters. We used prior survey data (Aneez et al. 2019; Newman et al. 2020) to identify organizations from which to recruit. These included the top three most-used brands online and offline in each country as well as the top and bottom three brands in terms of audience trust (although we did not get responses from all). In addition, we contacted journalists and editors from selected local outlets. We complemented this approach by asking respondents to recommend other colleagues.

In total, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 85 journalists and senior managers in the four countries, although the proportion of interviewees from India was smaller than the other countries (See Table 1). All interviews were carried out via telephone or videoconferencing platforms.[1] During the interviews, we asked participants questions about trust in news, including what factors they thought contributed to eroding trust, what role they thought platforms played, and what they believed could be done to help cultivate trust. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis except where participants asked for conversations to be used only for background purposes. Although many interviewees consented to being named, since not all did, we chose to anonymize them all to maintain consistency.

We analyzed our data with NVivo software using an inductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2011). Following an initial reading of the interviews, the authors collectively discussed and developed a basic coding scheme highlighting salient and recurring thematic sections of interview transcripts that captured study participants' perspectives on the nature of audience trust in news as well as more specifically the role played by platforms. As part of our data reduction process, we focused especially on two broad observations study participants made concerning platforms as either beneficial or detrimental for trust. For the present analysis, we returned to the platform-related segments for a more focused coding, where we looked for further patterns in the data and refined our coding scheme. Through an iterative process, we identified several commonly shared sentiments present in these segments relating to: (1) perceived pressures to make news stand out on platforms, (2) strained relationships with audiences when engaging on platforms, (3) challenges around differentiation and misinformation on platforms, (4) concerns over echo chambers and polarization on platforms, and (5) beliefs about the pervasiveness of damaging discourses about news on platforms. We returned to these general themes to identify further differences and similarities, resulting in additional subthemes. We then organized the themes in relation to each other and two framing questions about the impact of platforms on trust in news: (a) How do platforms affect journalistic practices that matter for trust (i.e., intra-journalistic)? and (b)

Table 1. Characteristics of the Interview Participants.

Number	Country	Mode	Organization type	Role
1	Brazil	Digital	National news website	Journalist
2	Brazil	Print	Magazine	Editor-in-Chief
3	Brazil	Print	Local newspaper	Director of Journalism
4	Brazil	Print	National newspaper	Editor-in-Chief
5	Brazil	Print	Local newspaper	Editor of Special Projects
6	Brazil	Digital	National news website	Reporter
7	Brazil	Television	National television news	Senior Editor
8	Brazil	Television	National television news	Political Analyst
9	Brazil	Print	Local newspaper	Chief Editor
10	Brazil	Print	Local newspaper	Sub-Editor
11	Brazil	Print	Local newspaper	Executive Director of Journalism
12	Brazil	Digital	National news website	Executive Director
13	Brazil	Digital	National news website	Head of Content Delivery
14	Brazil	Print and TV	Local newspaper	CEO
15	Brazil	Print	Newspaper	Bureau Chief
16	Brazil	Television	National television news	Director of Journalism
17	Brazil	Television	National television news	Content Director
18	Brazil	Digital	National news website	Editorial Director
19	Brazil	Print	National newspaper	Editor-in-Chief
20	Brazil	Digital	National news website	Senior Editor
21	Brazil	Television	National television news	Newsroom Director
22	Brazil	Television	National television news	Director of Journalism
23	Brazil	Radio	National radio news	Executive Director
24	Brazil	Print	Local newspaper	Editor-in-Chief
25	Brazil	Radio	Local radio news	News Supervisor
26	Brazil	Print	National newspaper	-
27	Brazil	Television	National television news	Director of Journalism
28	Brazil	Television	National television news	Vice-President of Content
29	Brazil	Digital	National news website	CEO
30	Brazil	Television	Local television news	Reporter
31	Brazil	Digital	National news website	Managing Editor
32	Brazil	Digital	Local news website	Editor-in-Chief
33	Brazil	Television	Local television affiliate	Editor-in-Chief
34	Brazil	Digital	Local news website	Content Editor
35	India	Print	Newspaper	Correspondent
36	India	Print	Magazine	Reporter
37	India	Print	Newspaper	Reporter
38	India	Digital	Magazine	Executive Editor
39	India	Print	Newspaper	Columnist
40	India	Print	National newspaper	Editor
41	India	Print	National newspaper	Editor
42	UK	Print	National tabloid newspaper	Head of Social Media
43	UK	Television	National television news	Editor
44	UK	Television	National television news	Editor
45	UK	Television	National television news	Managing Editor
46	UK	Television	National television news	Head of Digital
47	UK	Television	National television news	Senior Controller
48	UK	Print	National newspaper	Political Editor
49	UK	Print	National tabloid newspaper	Reporter
50	UK	Print	Local newspaper	Editor
51	UK	Digital	National news website	Reporter
52	UK	Print	National newspaper	Editor
53	UK	Print	National tabloid newspaper	Reporter
54	UK	Print	National newspaper	Communities Editor
55	UK	Print	Local newspaper	Digital Editor
56	UK	Print	Local newspaper	Executive Editor
57	UK	Print	National newspaper	Reporter
58	UK	Print	Local newspaper	Deputy Editor
59	UK	Print	Local newspaper	Editor
60	UK	Print	Local newspaper	Editor-in-chief
61	UK	Print	National tabloid newspaper	Reporter

Table 1. Continued.

Number	Country	Mode	Organization type	Role
62	UK	Television	National television news	Reporter
63	US	Print	National newspaper	Senior Editor
64	US	Print	National newspaper	News Editor
65	US	Print	National newspaper	Columnist
66	US	Radio/Digital	Local public television station	Managing Editor
67	US	Print	National newspaper	Head of Audience Insights
68	US	Print	National newspaper	Editorial Page Editor
68	US	Television	Local television affiliate	Executive Producer
70	US	Digital	Website for media criticism	Columnist
71	US	Television	Local television affiliate	Reporter
72	US	Digital	Non-profit news website	CEO
73	US	Print	National newspaper	Media Columnist
74	US	Digital	Non-profit news website	Community Engagement Manager
75	US	Digital	Fact-checking organization	Executive Director
76	US	Television	Local television affiliate	Managing Editor
77	US	Television	Local public television station	News Director
78	US	Print	Publisher of Hispanic newspapers, websites, and magazines	Vice-president of Digital Content
79	US	Digital	Non-profit local news website	Reporter
80	US	Digital	Non-profit local news website	Managing Editor
81	US	Digital	Fact-checking organization	Director
82	US	Print	National newspaper	Senior Producer for Audio
83	US	Digital	National news website	Media Editor
84	US	Radio/Digital	Local public radio station	Senior management
85	US	Print	Regional newspaper	Director of Opinion and Engagement

How do platforms affect the broader information environment in ways that undermine trust (i.e., extra-journalistic)?

In the summary of findings below, we treat each of these as distinct narratives shared by journalists about platforms' disruptive or transformative role in relation to trust in news, but we note that many are not mutually exclusive; interviewees often simultaneously articulated several narratives about the role(s) they believed platforms play in undermining or fostering audience trust in news. We use the term "narrative" following Carlson's (2017) focus on metajournalistic discourse rather than more formally as in a narrative analysis (e.g., Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). The stories journalists tell about their work reveal the way they assert the legitimacy of their profession and its unique role in society. By focusing on journalistic narratives around the intersection of the profession and platforms, we highlight the degree to which these discourses, which largely reflect anxiety about the erosion of journalistic authority, are often shared across countries and media environments.

Results

In this section, we summarize the narratives about the impact of platforms on trust in news. While some participants spoke more favorably about platforms as sometimes complementary to building trust, most were on balance pessimistic, describing platforms as disruptive to journalistic work, both in terms of news content and relationships with

audiences, and as damaging to the contexts in which their own journalism, and discourses about journalism, circulate. While we note some small differences from one country to the next, the overarching narratives were largely consistent.

Intra-Journalistic Narratives About How Platforms Affect Trust

The first type of concerns related by journalists centered on how the incentives and logics of platforms exerted pressure over or transformed journalistic practices, which were believed to impact audience trust. These perceived changes involved (a) pressures to adopt problematic practices in vying for visibility and attention and (b) new ways of relating to audiences.

Making News Attractive on Platforms

First, interviewees emphasized how the need to make news appealing vis-à-vis the many other kinds of content that populate platforms encouraged the adoption of practices that damaged or risked the credibility of news organizations. There was widespread consensus that platforms such as Facebook were vital for driving traffic to news websites and reaching broader audiences, making them valuable in the short term from a commercial point of view, in line with the findings of Nielsen and Ganter (2017, 2022). As the head of social media for a large UK newspaper group noted, "there are benefits to sticking to the [Facebook's] rules and, you know, Facebook drives a hell of a lot of traffic for us, so we do want to play along." In other words, platform reward systems were described as encouraging practices that, while helpful for visibility and virality, strained norms on which many believed trust is based. Through these narratives, practitioners discursively reinforced certain normative practices while describing pressures they felt around sustaining these norms while using platforms.

Two kinds of pressures were mentioned most often. First, some maintained that platforms favored publishers using the most appealing or shocking headlines, which rubbed up against journalistic norms demanding a detached and impartial tone. As an editor at a UK broadcaster articulated it, platforms reward those "with the most outlandish delivery, with the most aggressive messages." A print editor from the UK expressed concern about having to use social media to amplify the "most sort of sexy bits of our content," despite acknowledging these practices may undermine their reputation. A UK social media editor described the challenge of trying to make headlines appealing without going too far:

> We've completely out-ruled clickbait, we never do anything like that, but if something is a little bit too teasy, is it worth it? … So, it's a fine balancing act, constantly, that I'm always trying to drill into my team is that they [audiences] need to trust us, they need to come back.

On platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, where news must compete for attention with many other kinds of content in a largely undifferentiated feed—much of it more entertaining than news, or from more proximate sources like friends and family—even publishers that have traditionally shied away from attention-grabbing headlines felt pressured to make their content more alluring.

A second, analogous complaint was that platforms favor sources who publish first, which some said augmented pressures to break news faster, straining editorial imperatives to independently verify information before publishing. Given the centrality of

accuracy as a journalistic norm, some feared that pressures to prematurely publish information could undermine audience trust if they got things wrong. While concerns about the time pressures of journalism are not new (e.g., Pavlik 2000), they were often articulated through the lens of platforms and their reward systems. For example, an editor at a regional UK outlet explained his insistence on resisting the "race to be quick, a race to rank within Google," given the high reputational cost of getting things wrong. One social media editor from the UK explained that while there are efforts to verify information, there is also "enormous pressure to get stories out when they break" because "you get rewarded by Facebook and Google if you are the first one," which they admitted could result in stories occasionally getting published "with less information than is ideal." Others, while aware of these pressures, said they held them at bay, or as one Brazilian editor put it, "we have a pact with the team to publish only what is known."

Connecting with Audiences on Platforms

In addition to emphasizing the perceived impact of platforms on news production practices, journalistic narratives also underscored the potential of platforms to transform relationships with audiences, creating new opportunities for individual journalists to stand out and inviting greater reciprocity between news organizations and audiences, echoing previous findings about engaged journalism practices (Zahay et al. 2020). While some interviewees articulated these relational shifts as potentially enabling more trusting bonds, in many cases, using platforms for this purpose came in hand with real limitations or challenges that could, to the contrary, damage trust.

The "Human Face" of Journalists

One way practitioners believed platforms could enhance trust was by enabling person-to-person connections between audiences and journalists as individuals. The supervisor at a Brazilian radio network explained, some "listeners who add us to social media are also looking a little bit at our lives, so I think it ties in a little bit the personal side of those who are working, which also helps to build this." A local US television reporter said her news organization required her to post on her professional Facebook page throughout the day: "They want you to try to post something about the story you're working on … and then share just something you find—so people get to know you." Likewise, an executive producer at another local TV station said his outlet encouraged anchors to show some of what goes on behind the scenes. Beyond promoting news content, he explained, "we hope that people see that so-and-so has a golden retriever and, 'Oh, I have one too,' and just make that connection with people." To the extent that platforms could be used to cultivate more intimate affective bonds and establish a sense of common ground, they were seen as supportive of trust.

Others observed that platforms, especially Twitter, allowed reporters to present themselves as accessible (if still authoritative) figures. The digital editor for a local UK news outlet maintained that Twitter's "real value" for building trust "is in having authoritative voices—our crime reporter, our court reporter, our political editor; being people who have distinct followings online—who can answer people's questions." In this way, individual reporters could (in theory) demonstrate expertise and therefore capitalize on the potential of the platform to tighten bonds with audiences.

These views align with earlier optimism around social media, yet they were often combined with pronounced reservations about how the personal use of platforms by journalists could be a double-edged sword. Some were concerned about how casual uses of social media could erode the aura of professionalism around journalists. One UK media editor noted that "one of the major things that causes people to lose trust is they see a Twitter feed where you're just talking bollocks about football all day." Others emphasized the risks of sharing personal opinions that could compromise normative commitments to impartiality. A bureau chief in Brazil regretted seeing colleagues "not resist the temptation of wading into the Twitter mob wars and sort of relishing the opportunity to ridicule people with whom they disagree ideologically." A UK editor acknowledged that "in this era, it's kind of crazy and potentially even detrimental to trust to not, kind of, show people where you're coming from," but was still a traditionalist in questioning the notion that "nailing their political colors to the mast in some way in their social media output, and expecting that that isn't going to affect the way that they're perceived when they're actually doing their jobs." The implementation of social media policies was thus fraught, raising questions about how journalists should comport themselves, and revealing tensions between closer and more open relationships with audiences and traditional interpretations of norms such as impartiality.

Many raised separate concerns about social media as conduits for harassment and abuse in ways that were clearly harmful to journalists, especially women and ethnic minorities, but also potentially meaningful for trust. A UK editor elaborated on how the burdens of this reality were unequally distributed as audiences brought their own prejudices to the table, noting audiences "make their own assumptions": "People are willing to go to further lengths to find out who's working on their stories but also just make up their opinion about who the person that's telling them the news". For this reporter, the foregrounding of journalists as individuals was seen as magnifying the role of characteristics such as appearance, race, gender, and religion as bases for trust, or more, frequently, distrust.

Cultivating two-way Relationships

A related narrative about changing relationships between journalists and audiences was that platforms could help cultivate trust by facilitating reciprocity in which audiences could feel heard. For many, platforms were the main channel for interacting with audiences, an increasingly salient task in the move toward a more engaged journalism. Like the journalists interviewed by Bélair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis (2019), the engagement strategies discussed by those we interviewed were not limited to online interactions. However, those who advocated for engagement often viewed platforms as important tools for strengthening relationships. "It's about using platforms to engage, to listen, to understand what matters most to them [audiences] and then using that information and producing content, news content for them," explained the news editor at a public television station in the US.

Sometimes these efforts resembled the "community building" approaches documented by Zahay et al. (2020) among engagement-oriented journalists. The community engagement manager at the US non-profit news organization maintained that her organization's personalized approach to social media had proven to readers that "someone from [organization] cares what I say, and if I have a problem with their story, they're

going to respond to me, they're not just going to delete my comment and move on', which absolutely builds trust." Some in Brazil believed platforms like WhatsApp allowed an intimacy with readers that was previously difficult to achieve. A multiplatform editor in Brazil explained that her organization kept their "WhatsApp channel open 100% of the time, and no message goes unanswered," actively following up on all listener queries. Beyond providing information, she spoke about the value of offering careful attention to audiences in "these lonely times", hinting at a broadening of journalistic roles in these spaces.

Some initiatives had little to do with news itself. For instance, an audience editor at a UK newspaper described a charity fund-raising activity hosted by her news organization involving a long hike. She recalled, "there was a Facebook group leading up to it where we all shared our worries and anxieties about doing 26-mile hikes with no training" and members of the staff were able to share "with different readers and got to talk to them a bit about life." This approach was not about involving readers in news production, but about building a two-way relationship.

However, many were quick to point out that reciprocity also meant being on the receiving end of negative interactions. As the reporter for a local non-profit news site in the US put it, "I'm not saying that someone can't crack that, but I think that a lot more damaging stuff gets said in the comments section there or on Twitter than you would ever really have in person." Furthermore, news organizations' limited ability to moderate interactions on platforms also made it difficult to keep toxic comments under control, which some warned could create a negative impression for bystanders. The editor at a local UK outlet recalled getting complaints about why they allowed these kinds of comments, when, "actually, the way that Facebook is geared up for us, it means that we don't have that ability to turn those comments off." This was feared to reflect poorly upon the brand. Such experiences led some to be skeptical of efforts to build community through platforms such as Facebook. Even if there are still traces of earlier optimism, our interviewees recognized the "ambivalent internet" (Phillips and Milner 2017) and saw the same affordances put to benign, ambiguous, and more malign use.

Furthermore, many noted that building trusting relationships with audiences via platforms involved considerable challenges. Aside from the sheer amount of time and resources required to sustain meaningful relationships, especially across multiple platforms and at scale, one concern was the perceived lack of control over access to audiences. Interviewees felt vulnerable to the whims of platform decision-makers and algorithms, as part of the broader "contingency" (Nieborg and Poell 2018) and "transience" (Barrett and Kreiss 2019) scholars argue characterize much of the platform environment. The head of digital content at a US outlet spoke with frustration about efforts to connect with audiences on Facebook and Twitter, only to see platforms "change the rules of the game completely randomly." Organizations responded differently to these perceived risks, some of them dedicating their energy to direct ways of engaging with audiences, such as newsletters.

Extra-Journalistic Narratives About How Platforms Affect Trust

A second subset of narratives emphasized the disruptive role of platforms not on the practices of journalism, but on the broader contexts in which journalism is embedded, in ways

believed to damage audience trust. Below, we examine journalists' concerns around two main issues: how platform-driven transformations of the information environment were believed to be damaging to audiences' abilities to differentiate between trustworthy sources of news and how platforms themselves served as important sites for the circulation of negative discourses *about* journalism, contributing to what many saw as widespread cynicism.

Platforms and the Changing Information Environment

The first subset of concerns centered on how platforms were believed to have altered the information environment, weakening audiences' ability to differentiate between quality news and other content, including misinformation, and leading audiences to live in polarized echo chambers.

Differentiation and Misinformation

One of the most common criticisms voiced about platforms was their lack of differentiation of content. Journalists suggested platforms made it "really easy to tar everybody with the same brush" (editor of a local outlet in the UK) or "hard to sort the wheat from the chaff" (editor of a regional UK regional publishing firm). An Indian columnist maintained users struggle to make basic distinctions on social media, as they are not always paying attention or equipped to sort through the many sources. Similarly, the head of social media for a large UK newspaper group reasoned that on social media, legitimate news sources appear alongside blogs and conspiracy theorists, and "you're seeing them one after the other, so why would you think that one is more trustworthy than the other?" The lack of differentiation was thus seen as weakening the role of news brands as heuristics for trust. Whether such narratives are accurate is not our concern, although one study has shown that people are less able to remember the provenance of news accessed via social media (Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen 2018). Rather, our purpose is to capture the nature of these concerns, which we heard in some form across all four countries.

Anxieties over differentiation were hard to disentangle from broader worries about misinformation, which also emphasized misplaced trust. An editor from Brazil recalled a recent conversation with a reader who was citing conspiratorial claims from social media, and who, in his view, was unable to discern trustworthy information from nonsense: "The guy had such a mess in his head, not knowing with what criteria to define reality. He is susceptible to believing anything." A UK reporter expressed unease about seeing even his own friends "posting their opinions about things, linking to some article that's highly unreliable at best, and it reinforces disinformation." Apprehensions about users' perceived inability to discern between trustworthy and untrustworthy sources was thus associated with the risk of people trusting undeserving sources, or as one Indian journalist said, exploiting trust built by news organizations.

Interviewees focused on different platforms in different countries. While Facebook was mentioned by practitioners across the board, in Brazil and India, worries about identifying and correcting misinformation in encrypted messages on WhatsApp were more salient and associated with a unique set of problems. For example, the supervisor at a Brazilian radio network explained, "the WhatsApp phenomenon is fundamental in this: they are networks that we do not monitor and (…) are spreading [information] in a way that

you can't measure." Other platforms were linked to distinct issues, for instance, the short-lived nature of information on Snapchat, popular among younger audiences. A reporter at a British tabloid alluded to this: "Whether it's TikTok, or Snap[chat], or whatever, stuff that circulates in a certain age group is much more difficult because I think it's more insidious. It's much more ephemeral; it's much more difficult to judge because it comes and goes so quickly."

Although most cited these issues as problems, some in Brazil and the UK especially argued that confusion about information on platforms presented opportunities for news organizations to perform a crucial service. As the managing editor at a UK broadcaster expressed, "we can be a place that people can come to and know that they're going to get trusted news" amidst "all of that information or misinformation [that] is swirling around." One interviewee, working for a television network in Brazil, expressed optimism about the rise of platforms giving "much more importance to the work of professional journalism" as the "guardian of information quality." On a similar note, another UK editor argued that the prevalence of digitally distributed disinformation made his news organization uniquely valuable:

> People will always be able to ignore what someone says on WhatsApp and check it against what [news outlet] says. And that's why I'm broadly quite optimistic, still, because I think although the world is in a terrible state, people are starting to realize that unchanneled digital distribution of variable to poor quality information has really serious implications.

These views are broadly aligned with the optimism that earlier scholarship identified around the perceived potential of social media (e.g., Singer et al. 2011), suggesting that growing distrust in information on platforms might benefit their organizations. They also signify an attempt to reassert the authority of journalism and its role as an important actor for democracy not only in spite of, but thanks to, the rise of platforms.

Echo Chambers and Polarization

Another frequently expressed narrative about platforms concerned the way they were presumed to foster "echo chambers" where audiences mainly encountered content aligned with their pre-existing views. A bureau chief in Brazil maintained that a "huge part of the problem" was the extent to which news content on social media was designed to pull users toward what resonated: "Most of the time that is content that they fiercely agree with, that plays to our own biases and passions, and then content that enrages us." An editor at a UK broadcaster also expressed concern about "the fact that you can tailor an ad to someone's psychological profile is an extremely dangerous thing, you're whispering into people's ears messages they want to hear." The content moderation practices of platforms such as Facebook were feared to manipulate and radicalize people, encouraging distrust of differing perspectives.

Others, however, remained agnostic about the extent to which platform-driven echo chambers were a widespread problem. One UK editor acknowledged that the "digital environment does make it a lot easier for people to sort of find news that suits them, whether or not it's true" but questioned if "maybe we get overexcited about how sort of central that kind of world is—to most people in Britain anyway." Indeed, studies suggest echo chambers are much less pervasive than commonly assumed (e.g., Fletcher, Robertson, and Nielsen 2021; Guess et al. 2018), and some practitioners were unsure

about whether platforms drove polarization or simply made existing divides more evident. The regional journalism director for a large Brazilian broadcaster suggested social media contributed to expanding polarization but took the phenomenon with "a certain naturalness" because "the world, in my view, has always been a world of extremes and conflict." Others, such as a US editorial page editor, questioned whether "it's more like the Internet just brought it out into the open for all to see, rather than itself doing the work of polarization."

Platforms as Sites for Damaging Discourses About Journalism

The second broad narrative about platforms was that they constituted key sites for the circulation of damaging discourses and commentary about journalism—that is, metajournalistic discourse from non-journalistic actors, such as media criticism from activists, politicians, and ordinary citizens. In so doing, these spaces were viewed as magnifying deep skepticism about the news media as an institution and specific brands in particular.

Promoting Cynicism

Many interviewees maintained that platforms eroded trust by amplifying the views of critics, particularly those seeking to delegitimize the news media. While some grievances about journalistic failures were acknowledged as legitimate, many also perceived that much of the discourse spread about them was inaccurate, in bad faith, or both. The executive producer at a local television outlet in the US recalled encountering Facebook posts claiming to show "the truth" news organizations purportedly hide, even when she had recently covered the same stories herself. The digital editor at a local UK outlet suggested a level of mistrust "was perhaps there before" but had only now "been given voice and then probably been harnessed by people who want to create disinformation." Yet, it was unclear if and how to respond.

These complaints were often voiced in relation to broader apprehensions about attacks on the press from high-profile politicians, especially in the US (Trump), Brazil (Bolsonaro), and India (Modi) where these problems have been uniquely salient. They viewed platforms as an integral part of "the toolbox that authoritarian leaders have grown accustomed to using," as a Brazil bureau chief put it. Discussing Trump's use of social media, the news director at a local TV channel in the US blamed some of the distrust in news on "the blatant lies from the Trump Administration and the president himself," which "continues to feed the skepticism and divide between the news media and the public that we seek to serve." Many spoke about how the term "fake news" had been weaponized by their countries' leaders to delegitimize their work.[2]

Others pointed out that attacks on the press sometimes came from within, in a highly competitive and, at worst, antagonistic environment. One UK editor mentioned that "if a rival organization makes a mistake, I am extremely aggressive with my staff not to celebrate their failure (…) especially on social media, but that's not the case with every other broadcaster and it's not the case with everyone." In the highly partisan US context, some expressed concern about efforts to tarnish the reputation of news organizations holding a different political stance. The media editor for a digital outlet in the US described this as a "self-attack" on the press from conservative media, who he viewed as having "a central legitimate beef, which is that conservatives and conservative ideas were not well-represented in American newsrooms for a long time." However, he explained,

they adopted a message claiming, "'You can't trust these other—this liberal media, you can't trust the press, you can only trust us.' That became a foundational belief and message in conservative media. And it's a destructive message to the press overall, but it serves a narrow band of interest."

Some suggested the silver lining of this hypercritical online environment was that it forced news organizations to be more rigorous than ever before. As a UK media editor put it, for the news profession, "Twitter has definitely raised a lot of accuracy standards because you just can't get away with lying because there will be some expert out there who will call you out on it, get a pile on, and it will get quite embarrassing." (This is a rare example from of our interviews of a point raised where platforms might undermine trust in a way that might partly reflect the limited trustworthiness of some journalism.) Similarly, a bureau chief in Brazil noted, "it's made me as a journalist very, very careful and very, very paranoid about things I'm seeing on social media." Here, the challenging environment was interpreted as one that reaffirmed the journalistic norm of accuracy and even bolstered practices ensuring compliance, making journalism better.

Content Manipulation and Commentary

In conjunction with concerns over meta-journalistic discourse on platforms were anxieties about the lack of control over how news gets circulated and commented on. Some expressed distress over seeing their content "spun" on social media (e.g., for political ends) in ways they feared damaging to their reputations. Such problems were seen as difficult to address. An editor at a Scottish newspaper discussed concerns about what happens to a news story "once it's out and how it might be spun by other people, and then shared in a certain way, and (…) then becomes something that it quite clearly isn't." He added:

> The various people that work in our social media obviously are probably exposed to that a lot more, and trying to combat some of the allegations which are harming the brand or false statements, claims of political bias where there is none. But, you know, to be honest, it's a battle you're never going to win.

A UK editor discussed having become "incredibly worried as well that people were ripping off our content, reshaping it, using it for different messaging, especially during the last election." Another talked about colleagues becoming "very reluctant to sort of say anything at all in those forums because they think that the chances of them being misinterpreted, or (…) used against you is seen as being so high." Another added that "we do talk explicitly about the way sometimes pieces of information are taken from our, sort of, output and twisted to promote one, sort of, view or another on social media maybe or in another context, and that can be really frustrating." Despite efforts to address specific instances, there was an overall sense of helplessness in resolving this broader issue.

Moreover, interviewees expressed concern about the degree to which they were competing in digital spaces with the opinions of people's friends and family who shared and responded to news.[3] One Indian reporter pointed out that although rumors might originate from strangers, ultimately they come from friends, making them harder to successfully debunk. As a UK editor put it, "I think the power of social media is that, because things are passed on by individuals and people that you know, there is a[n] … alternative (…) reason to trust that stuff." Thus, pervasive negative commentary about news on social

media platforms, which often escaped news organizations' control, was seen as further eroding trust.

Discussion

Drawing on 85 interviews with journalists, editors, and senior managers in news organizations in Brazil, India, the UK, and the US, this study examines how journalism practitioners in different media environments describe the effects of digital platforms on trust in news. We found that practitioners across all four countries shared largely negative narratives on balance about the rising prominence of platforms and trust in news. The first set of concerns centered on how platforms were believed to shape intra-journalistic practices ultimately important for trust. On the one hand, while platforms encouraged newsrooms to adopt strategies to attract audience attention, many felt doing so required elevating the wrong kinds of stories for fostering trusting relationships. On the other hand, while some spoke of platforms' potential to cultivate closer relationships with engaged audiences, such strategies came with clear risks and limitations. Second, practitioners described declining trust vis-à-vis broad changes to the information environment they attributed to platforms, diminishing audiences' abilities to differentiate between news sources, contributing to echo chambers and polarization, and amplifying bad faith attacks on the press. Some practitioner concerns are backed by research, such as findings around brand attribution in distributed environments (Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen 2018). Others are not (yet) backed by research, or are actually challenged by research, for example work questioning the prevalence of online echo chambers (e.g., Fletcher, Robertson, and Nielsen 2021; Guess et al. 2018). But as we have made clear from the outset, the narratives identified here are social facts, and their practical and intellectual importance does not rest on the question of whether they are backed by scientific evidence.

We identified small points of variation, for example, in relation to the platforms most associated with misinformation (e.g., the greater emphasis on WhatsApp in Brazil and India) and worries about concerning actors using platforms to leverage attacks on the press (e.g., greater emphasis on political leaders in Brazil, India, and the US), which reflect differences in the national contexts where platforms are taken up and the sociopolitical environments in which journalism is practiced. However, for the most part, we found considerable similarities in the concerns expressed by journalists across all four countries, which may be indicative of both the degree to which platform power and low trust are experienced with a certain degree of consistency across each of these four countries and the extent to which occupational norms are shared among those we interviewed across geographies.

As discourses connecting journalistic practice and meaning, the narratives about how platforms contribute to eroding trust in news speak to both tensions within journalism as a profession around appropriate norms and practices, and challenges to the profession's claim to being an authoritative creator of knowledge and fourth estate. Regarding the first point, trust erosions were often associated with changing journalistic practices on platforms that strained norms considered foundational for trust, such as impartiality, objectivity, and accuracy. The response to these threats mostly involved doubling-down on the significance of traditional norms for trust, illuminating the tensions between the

institutional stasis of journalism and technological change (Carlson 2017). However, for journalists pursuing more reciprocal relationships with audiences, there was also a degree of openness to considering alternative versions of the profession that also viewed trust as a byproduct of strategies such as humanizing journalists and acknowledging audiences as interlocutors through more affective processes. While such engagement strategies undoubtedly respond to commercial imperatives in addition to, and perhaps above, trust-building efforts, they nonetheless situate these actors as "pioneer journalists" (Hepp and Loosen 2019), who may be open to thinking about how alternative practices and roles may help address diminishing trust.

Regarding the second point, journalists' narratives about changes to the broader context in which journalism is embedded simultaneously voiced a sense of decreasing control and growing uncertainty in relation to traditional gatekeeping on platforms, which came in hand with anxieties about journalism's professional authority as an institution worthy of trust. In responding to these threats, many journalists sought to restore what Koliska, Chadha, and Burns (2020) call the "institutional myth" of journalism, articulating the "congruence between the values connected with their activities and the norms and expectations of the 'larger social system'" (1498). This involved discursively reasserting the key role of journalism as watchdog and fourth estate, while also claiming that journalism was more rigorous, and thus deserving of trust, than ever before.

Despite the tendency to understand these difficulties through platform incentives and affordances, many of these challenges are not new to journalism, although likely magnified by the high-choice media environment online, especially on platforms where content moderation decisions can considerably shape audience attention. Similarly, some challenges raised here about platforms, such as concerns about attacks on the press or misinformation, are not exclusively platform problems (just as interviewees often stressed other problems as more pressing than platforms), a point the interviewees often made explicit. Nonetheless, most believed platforms exacerbated these problems in meaningful and consequential ways.

Conclusion

Understanding journalistic narratives about how platforms impact trust in news is important for making sense of how news organization navigate an increasingly platform-dominated media environment. Our article contributes to a growing literature on how journalists approach digital media by going beyond a focus on tools and technologies they can *adopt* to suit their needs to also consider cases where they have to *adapt* to large and powerful platforms that audiences increasingly rely on to access, find, and engage with news. We furthermore focus on the specific issue of trust, which has declined in many places. Our findings document pervasive negative narratives about the perceived impact of platforms on trust in news, far from earlier optimism in some circles, even as they and the news organizations they work for often continue to invest in pursuing the opportunities platforms offer. This underlines the complex choices made, as different priorities are weighed against one another, and tangible short-term benefits (audience reach, incremental revenue, etc.) may seem to outweigh possible longer-term and more intangible risks (around, for example, trust). Clearly the journalists and editors

interviewed here were not naïve about the challenge platforms may pose when it comes to trust in news—they engage with them with open eyes.

Notes

1. Prior to beginning our fieldwork, we obtained approval from the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) at the University of Oxford.
2. Past research in the US suggests negative cues from elites increase public perceptions of media bias and distrust, even in the absence of substantive differences in coverage (Ladd 2012; Van Duyn and Collier 2019; Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Watts et al. 1999).
3. Prior research suggests social cues do play a significant role in how people evaluate information (Johnson, St, and Iii 2020; Turcotte et al. 2015).

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