

# **Finding a Place in the Journalistic Field:**

***An examination of two digital native news organisations, BuzzFeed and Vice***

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Submitted in accordance with  
the requirements for the  
degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds  
School of Media and  
Communication

September 2018

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## Acknowledgements

There are so many people to thank – tangentially and directly – for their support, encouragement, friendship, patience, and loyalty during this process.

*Mum:* thank you for allowing me to move back home again and I'm sorry I have not cooked us anything the last two months. But I am forever grateful for your love and support and most of all your patience. You have, by very definition, lived this process with me. I simply couldn't have completed this work without you. Thank you.

*Shanice:* meeting you has been my single greatest joy of the PhD process. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for your words of encouragement and your never-ending belief in me. I love you and I can't wait to start our new chapter.

*Stephen and Cat:* I am not combining you because you're twins. But because your joint Stringer-brand of humour has kept me alive this whole process and made me see the funny side of everything. Thank you for the whisky, too.

*Chris and Julie:* thank you both for your patience, wisdom, and guidance during this process. I am indebted to each of you for the endless hard work you put in to getting me over the line. This thesis has been a collaborative effort from start to finish and so this work feels as much yours as mine.

*Smithy, AJ:* your friendship has been the salve to this whole process. I look forward to not cancelling so many of our plans in the future.

*Finally...* thank you to Leeds University and everyone from the School of Media and Communication. I was an undergraduate student at the school almost exactly ten years ago today, and what a wonderful decade of education it has been.

## Abstract

Over approximately the last decade, an interesting counterpoint to the dominant narrative of “crisis” has been the rise and entrenchment of digital native news organisations. In a fraught and challenging news environment, companies such as *BuzzFeed*, *The Huffington Post*, *Vice*, and *Vox* have grown in size and stature to the point where they now compete with legacy news media for attention and advertising.

Despite this, digital natives remain conspicuous by their absence in the journalism studies literature. As a consequence, much of what we know about these organisations relates their so-called status as “innovators” in news. By virtue of being new to the field it is often taken-for-granted that these organisations are *different* from traditional journalism. However, current discourse rarely expands upon this observation to explain precisely *how*.

This thesis focuses on two North American digital-native news organisations: *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. As two of the largest and most popular digital natives in the world, these organisations merit closer critical attention. Adopting a mixed methods approach, this research combines qualitative interviews with 24 journalists and a comparative quantitative content analysis to examine the organisation and production of news at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*.

Despite having reputations for being innovators in digital news, this research shows that both organisations remain surprisingly wedded to traditional norms, stemming from a combination of resource constraints, and a desire to be recognised as legitimate by peers and the public at large. Using Bourdieu’s field theory as a theoretical framework, the results of this research also provide the stimulus for a broader consideration about the field of journalism; both how it is changing, and, how, in many ways, it remains the same.

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# **Part 1**

## **Introduction**

## 1. Introduction

In the decade following the first phase of web development in newsrooms – which stretched roughly from 1994 to 2004 – a second wave of technological change began to unfurl (Bell et al. 2017). The spread and diffusion of broadband internet access, Web 2.0 technologies, and mobile devices precipitated a shift toward an increasingly digital, mobile, and social media environment that brought new challenges and opportunities to the field of journalism (Nielsen et al. 2016). While legacy media were generally slow to respond to these tectonic pressures, a wave of new, digitally native media companies would put these new technologies at the heart of their businesses. Among the most notable of these were US-based organisations such as *The Huffington Post*, *BuzzFeed*, *Vox*, *Business Insider*, *Quartz*, *Mashable*, and *Vice* – which arrived with aspirations to “disrupt” the industry by introducing new ideas and practices to the field (Carlson and Usher 2016).

Despite pursuing distinct editorial strategies, many of these aforementioned digital natives have pursued an “expansionist strategy”, optimising their content for search engines and social media platforms to build large, international audiences whose attention can subsequently be sold to advertisers (Nicholls et al. 2016). Since their launch in the mid-2000s, several digital natives have grown to occupy a prominent position in the news ecosystem, to the point that they now compete with legacy media for attention and advertising (Jurkowitz 2014; Nicholls et al. 2016; Nicholls et al. 2017; Newman et al. 2016; 2017; 2018). The growth and entrenchment of digital natives has served as an interesting counter-narrative to the notion of “crisis” that has permeated much of the discourse about journalism (Zelizer 2015). It is also for this reason that digital natives have become an object of industry fascination, with various journalists, scholars, and public intellectuals heaping praise on them for being “explicitly innovative and forward-looking” (Carlson and Usher 2016: 569).

While the buzz generated by digital natives is understandable, a fixation on “innovation” in the scholarship on digital journalism has often had the effect of

homogenising the discourse about these organisations (Kreiss and Brennen 2016). Little remains known, for instance, about the types of content that digital natives produce, or the routines, cultures, and practices that undergird their different sites of production. Given their expanding role in the contemporary information ecosystem, it is vital that scholarship does more to take this large and disparate group of social actors into account.

### **1.1. Research Gap**

To address this gap in research, this study focuses on two North American digital native media organisations: *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. Over the last decade, these organisations have grown become two of the most popular sources for news and entertainment on the web; particularly among younger generations (Moses 2014; comScore 2017; Newman et al. 2018). Despite this, they have received almost no critical attention from scholars<sup>1</sup>. Instead, research has primarily focused on understanding change through the prism of traditional news organisations (Craft et al. 2014; Steensen and Ahva 2015). While this work has generated important insights, it has largely failed to address issues of “difference, divergence, and diversity” in the contemporary news ecosystem (Witschge et al. 2017: 2), thus leaving many important actors unchecked.

This shared parochialism – which is a longstanding issue in journalism studies (Wahl-Jorgensen 2009; Zelizer 2009) – is becoming less tenable as the field grows ever more heterogeneous. In this regard, there is an urgent need for scholarship to embrace *complexity* (Witschge et al. 2018), and look for fresh or novel ways to explain the ongoing evolution of the field. Digital native news organisations would appear to present such an opportunity. Amidst larger media upheaval and a lack of an established paradigm for digital news, these sites have been gifted with an elevated platform to “compete to define what digital news should look like, reestablish the boundaries of journalism, and

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<sup>1</sup> For a few minor exceptions, see: Riordan (2014); Küng (2015); Tandoc and Jenkins (2017); Tandoc (2017).

determine strategies for legitimating news content” (Carlson and Usher 2016: 564).

## 1.2. Research Questions

With this context in mind, the purpose of this thesis is threefold. The first is to provide a holistic description of news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, paying close attention to the various norms and practices that structure news work at both organisations. The second is to consider the different endogenous and exogenous forces that have shaped *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s approach to journalism, such as technological, economic, and cultural factors. The third and final aim is to reflect on what these findings tell us about the field at large, and how it might, or might not, be changing.

These three interrelated research goals are reflected in the primary research questions of the thesis, which are as follows:

- 1) What are the major characteristics of news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*? And how, if at all, do they differ from traditional journalism?
- 2) How do various endogenous and exogenous forces shape *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s approach to journalism?
- 3) What do these findings tell us about the cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital of the journalistic field? And how, if at all, it might be shifting?

To answer these questions, this project adopts a mixed methods research design. The intent of mixed methods is to “obtain different but complementary data on the same topic” (Morse 1991: 122). In this study, qualitative interviews with journalists from *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* were combined with data from a quantitative content analysis of news content. This triangulation of method was deemed essential to building a holistic picture of news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, particularly because of the well-documented gap between rhetoric and practice in journalism (Mellado and Van Dalen 2013).

Despite calls to “blow up” the newsroom (Anderson 2011a), this project has also retained the organisational setting as the chief locus of research. The criticism that newsroom research tends to under-emphasise the external factors that shape news content is helpfully addressed by Bourdieu’s theory of “fields” (*champs*). As a theoretical framework, field theory is concerned with bridging the divide between macro-societal and micro-organisational approaches to examine “how meaning is produced *relationally*” (Benson 1999: 486, emphasis added). It is precisely by taking this reflexive approach that I hope to draw links between journalistic practices and the broader macro level structural forces that shape everyday news work (Willig 2012). Studying these relations provides the essential context for asking deeper questions about transformations in the field at large.

### **1.3. Thesis Outline**

This study is divided into two distinct parts. The first part constructs the theoretical and methodological framework for the study. Chapter 2 discusses the development of journalism’s professional ideology during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and introduces Bourdieu’s field theory as the framework for the study. Chapter 3 reviews the contemporary literature on digital journalism, tracing the effects of digitization on the core norms and practices of the field. Chapter 4 describes the research design and methods used in this research project and introduces digital natives as a distinct object of study.

The second part of the study discusses the major findings from the research, combining data from qualitative interviews with a comparative content analysis to address the key research questions of the project. Chapter 5 describes *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s arrival into the journalistic field and establishes some basic facts about the key characteristics of their news content. Chapter 6 describes the structure and organisation of news at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*: their business model, sources of funding, hiring practices, and news coverage. These different facets are critically interpreted using a Bourdieusian framework. Chapter 7 then goes inside the news departments of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* to examine the routines and structure of daily work, focusing predominantly on

issues of journalistic autonomy and the impact of the audience in the news process. Chapter 8, the final empirical chapter of the thesis, pays critical attention to the selection and presentation of news, focusing in particular on the norms of gatekeeping and objectivity and their interaction with the broader logic of digital media and culture. Finally, Chapter 9 summarises and reflects on the major findings from the thesis as well as offering some potential avenues for future research.

**Part 2**  
**Theoretical and Methodological**  
**Background**

## 2. Theoretical Framework

To examine the norms, values and practices of news workers at digital native news organizations, this study combines Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (1991; 1993;1998) and theory from the literature on the sociology of professions (Sarfatti-Larson 1977; Gieryn 1983; Abbott 1988; Waisbord 2013). This chapter begins by introducing field theory before moving on to discuss journalism's project of professionalization. These two strands of theory are then brought together and linked to recent research in the field.

### 2.1. Field Theory

Beginning with field theory, Bourdieu follows from Max Weber and Emile Durkheim in describing modernity as a "process of differentiation into semi-autonomous and increasingly specialized spheres of action – 'fields' (Willig et al. 2015: 3). The reason fields are *semi*-autonomous, rather than completely autonomous, is that they exist within a larger field of forces, the most significant of which in the case of journalism, are the economic and political fields (Vos 2016). For Bourdieu (1993: 162), the field is "an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning", or as he later put it, a social space with "specific logics or demands that differ from the conditions and sets of rules of other fields" (Bourdieu 2000: 99). These "rules", or *doxa*, to use Bourdieu's terminology, can be thought of as a set of shared understandings that help govern practices and define behavior within the field. As Bourdieu (1998: 37) puts it, those who inhabit a particular field share a "system of presuppositions inherent in membership in a field". In the case of journalism, the "rules" or *doxa* of the field include accepted institutional roles (e.g. adversarial, watchdog, disseminator), epistemological frameworks (e.g. objectivity, empiricism) and ethical standards (e.g. accuracy, fairness, respect of privacy) (see Hanitzsch 2007 for a detailed breakdown of these different constituents of journalistic culture). These shared presuppositions constitute the *cultural capital* of the



field<sup>2</sup>. Cultural capital is the primary source journalism's legitimacy; and it is this legitimacy, as Vos (2016: 391) writes, that "ultimately earns journalism its autonomy and power". Broad acceptance of these explicit and implicit rules and ways of "doing" journalism helps produce a certain degree of homogeneity within the field (Deuze 2005; Benson 2006). Though crucially, it is individual agents within the field who must accept the journalistic *doxa* in order for certain ways of doing journalism to become enshrined. The link between the field and its agents, between the micro and macro levels, is defined by the concept of *habitus*. *Habitus* refers to one's historical trajectory in the field, "a collection of personal and professional experiences accumulated from social positions that produces knowledge and understanding of the game" (Tandoc 2014: 562). An individual's *habitus* can both be a source of resistance to the established structures of the field, but also conformity. This helps explain why newer entrants to the field (both individuals and organisations), who are arguably less socialized to the "rules of the game" and come equipped with different forms of cultural capital, can be an important source of transformation (Vos 2016). Compared with print journalists, for example, online journalists have emphasized different norms, such as speed over rigor and greater loyalty to audiences than sources (Cassidy 2005; Steensen 2009; Agarwal and Barthel 2015). However, it is important to note that more often than not, activities by agents within the field largely reproduce its structure (Benson and Neveu 2005). It is largely because of this that we can speak of a dominant occupational ideology<sup>3</sup> in journalism, which crystallized as the field underwent a process of professionalization during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Deuze 2005).

The *doxa* of the field, however, should not imply the presence of a monolithic or static journalistic culture. As Bourdieu (1985: 734) argues, "every field is the site of more or less overt struggle over the definition of the legitimate principles of the division of the field". This "struggle" can be thought of as both an internal

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<sup>2</sup> Cultural capital is defined elsewhere as a collection of competencies, skills, expertise, knowledge, and other similar characteristics (e.g. Benson and Neveu 2005; Siapera and Spyridou 2012)

<sup>3</sup> In this context, ideology is defined as "a collection of values, strategies and formal codes characterizing professional journalism and shared most widely by its members" (Deuze 2005: 445).

battle to preserve or transform the “rules of the game” (Bourdieu 2005), and also, a battle for autonomy against various exogenous forces (chiefly the economic and political fields).

Throughout the course of history, journalism has participated in numerous struggles, some of which have changed the *doxa* and autonomy of the field. Western journalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, was more explicitly partisan than it is today (Nerone 2009), and hence was dominated by the political field. Since the 1970s, following the period of “high-modernism”<sup>4</sup> (Hallin 1992) in journalism, the field has become steadily more commercialised, and thus, subject to greater influence from the economic field (McManus 1994; Nadler 2016). There are concerns that as a result of these changes, news values, which are an important part of the journalistic *doxa* (Tandoc 2014), have become subordinate to commercial values, altering the form of news and compromising its democratic purpose (see Schudson 2011; McChesney 2013). Whether the internet has truncated or extended the commoditization of news is an issue that remains contested and will be discussed further later.

One of the biggest strengths of Bourdieu’s field theory is that it is a meso-level concept (Willig et al. 2015). The field environment is between the organizational level (micro) and the societal level (macro), which invites us to consider both the journalistic field in relation to other fields, and the individual agents within a field and their relation to one another. This can help transcend well-known binaries such as that between structure and agency; a notable issue in studies of news production (Wahl-Jorgensen 2009; Willig 2012). Perhaps one weakness of field theory, however, is that it does not explain in sufficient detail how fields come into being or where the shared rules or *doxa* of a field emerge (Anderson 2008). Anderson (ibid.) suggests one potential answer to this problem can be found in the work on the sociology of professions, and more specifically, the work of Abbott (1988), who argues that:

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<sup>4</sup> ‘High-modernism’ refers to a period of journalism that roughly began during the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and culminated in the 1960s, when journalism arguably enjoyed its highest degree of autonomy from the political and economic spheres (see Hallin 1992)

“A professional field begins when an occupational group or groups attempt to seize jurisdiction over a form of expertise via cultural work. The journalistic field emerges, in this instance, when an occupational group (‘journalists’) attempt to claim for themselves a monopoly on the provision of everyday public knowledge” (cited in Anderson 2008: 257).

Jurisdiction, to borrow Abbot’s (1988) terminology, is the link between an occupation’s “abstract” knowledge (what it *knows*) and its daily work (what it *does*). Successful jurisdictional claims are important because they grant professions exclusive *rights* that can be converted into various material and symbolic rewards. In the case of journalism, it has been observed that during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the occupation managed to establish jurisdiction over the collection and distribution of “factual” information about current events (or “news”). Quite how journalism achieved this has been the subject of extensive and intensive speculation (Schudson 1978; Chalaby 1996; Tumber and Prentoulis 2005; Waisbord 2013). Some of this work, including the literature on the sociology of professions, is discussed further in the following section.

## **2.2. The Professionalization of Journalism**

One could argue that the journalism’s professionalization project began around the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when legislative changes, technological innovation, and a subsequent period of commercialisation and industrialisation heralded the emergence of a mass press in the United States and Europe (Barnhurst and Nerone 2009). Journalism began to separate itself from other fields of related activity such as printing, literature, and politics, and develop its own norms and practices (Waisbord 2013). It was also during this period that “journalistic content became less centered on the dissemination of ideas and opinion...and more oriented to the reporting of recent happenings” (Waisbord 2013: 133). This, in effect, resulted in “news” becoming the primary subject of journalism during the middle-to-late-19<sup>th</sup> century (Barnhurst and Nerone 2009). It was also in this period that the press began to take on a more central role in the political

process, by acting as a “representative” of the people, which helped transform journalism into a recognisable “public good” (Hampton 2001). Perhaps the most important idea to emerge in this period, was the notion of journalism as a “fourth estate” – a term coined by Edmund Burke to describe the role of journalists in democracy as *watchdogs*, collectively tasked with keeping check on the activities of the powerful on behalf of society. It was through this more explicit orientation towards serving the public that journalism arguably made its strongest claim to professional status (Singer 2003).

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western journalism began to professionalize further. Press clubs and associations, and schools of journalism were founded, as well as general codes of ethics (Barnhurst and Nerone 2009). The adoption of ethics in newsrooms, based on principles of public service, social responsibility, neutrality and fairness, was particularly important to journalism’s claim to professional status (Waisbord 2013). Of all these ethical principles, however, it was *objectivity* that became the “cornerstone of the professional ideology of journalists” (Lichtenberg 1996: 225). While objectivity was “[not] the *only* occupational norm to both emerge from and buttress the professional project” (Schudson and Anderson 2009: 93), many scholars consider it to be the most important element in the professional development of Anglo-American journalism (Summers 1994; Banning 1999). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss objectivity in at great length (see Schudson 1978; Kaplan 2002; Maras 2013); however, the establishment of this principle had three major effects. As an ethical ideal, it gave journalism the illusion of scientific rigour, where a more explicit separation of fact from opinion helped distance the occupation from government propaganda, marketeers, publicity agents, and other actors who were seen to pedal a “distorted” version of the truth (Bourdieu 1996; Schudson 2001). Secondly, objectivity performed a social function; by enhancing journalism’s status as an independent institution, working for the good of society; and, in a Durkheimian sense, fostering internal solidarity and a sense of shared identity between group members (Schudson 2001). Finally, from a commercial standpoint, it was also critical in enabling newspapers to reach the broadest possible readership, and thus maximize revenue earned from advertising (Hackett 1984).

In reality, objectivity was always a contentious norm, for it implied journalists were neutral transmitters of events, who could provide a “true” account of reality to the public (Hackett 1984). This “idealised image of the journalist” (Anderson 2008: 250) formed the basis of many of the substantive critiques of news production that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Epstein 1973; Tuchman 1978; Schlesinger 1978; Fishman 1980; Soloski 1989; Gans 2004). Nonetheless, objectivity has remained a key element in the professional self-perception of journalists (Schudson 1978; 2001; Reese 1990; Mindich 1998).

While at least in Anglo-American journalism, objectivity came to be recognised as a core tenet of journalistic professionalism, it should be noted that this is not the only, or necessarily most important norm in journalism around the world (Chalaby 1996; Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Hallin and Mancini 2004). As several of the major surveys conducted on journalists around the globe have indicated, professional norms and standards are partly contingent on the media systems, news organisations, political structures, and cultures that are present in different countries (e.g. Weaver 1998; 2012; Deuze 2002; Donsbach and Patterson 2004). This being said, scholars have identified some similarities between journalists around the world. For example, research has indicated that journalists are relatively homogenous in terms of their key demographics: socio-economic background, educational level, age and ethnicity (e.g. Weaver 1998; Deuze and Paulussen 2002). In the West, the majority of journalists hold a degree, come predominantly from the established and dominant cultural group in society, and are typically male and between 25-44 years-old (Weaver 2005).

Meanwhile, the literature on journalists’ role perceptions indicates similarities and differences in the ways journalists describe and understand their work. In a well-known study on role perceptions, Janowitz (1975) identified the *advocate* and *gatekeeper*. The *advocate* believes their major task is to act on behalf of the audience, and consequently they select news according to its use-value for the social groups they choose to support. Conversely, the *gatekeeper* assumes the audience is more autonomous and able to pursue their own needs, and

thus selects news “exclusively according to their own professional criteria, such as the perceived news value” (Donsbach 2008). In a survey of American journalists, Johnstone et al. (1976) identified similar roles in the *neutral* and *participant*. Hanitzsch (2007) suggests these roles exist on a pole of interventionism, which ranges from passive (low) to interventionist (high). The *neutral*, along with the *gatekeeper* tend to merely perceive themselves as “disinterested transmitters of the news”, emphasizing neutrality and impartiality in reporting (Hanitzsch 2007: 372). The *advocate* and *participant*, by contrast, adopt a more “active and assertive role in reporting”, often acting on the behalf of a particular social group to advocate for, or promote change (Hanitzsch 2007: 373). This latter role underpins some of the thinking behind the public journalism movement of the early 90s, and also, the genres of peace journalism and development journalism.

Within the role conceptions literature, other scholars have tried, from a normative standpoint; to describe the social tasks that journalism should perform. Patterson (1995) highlighted four different roles, the *signaler*, *common carrier*, *watchdog*, and *public representative*. The *signaler* acts as an early warning system for society, while as the *common carrier*, journalists act as vessels of information between the government and the public. As *watchdogs*, journalists keep tabs on institutions, drawing attention to wrongdoing. And finally, as a *public representative*, journalists are spokespersons for the public and representatives of public opinion. These role conceptions carry different normative expectations about the relationship between journalists and the government. The *public representative* and *common carrier* are arguably more deferent to authority figures, accepting information provided by government sources as authoritative, legitimate and credible (Hanitzsch 2007). The *signaler* and *watchdog*, on the other hand, adopt a more adversarial role: they are more critical of social institutions and generally more skeptical of authority figures. In democratic countries such as the UK, Canada, Finland and the US, investigating government claims (an *adversarial* role) has traditionally been understood as extremely important (Weaver 2005).

More recent empirical research has highlighted that there might be a difference in the ways traditional and online journalists think of their roles. In interviews with digital journalists, Ferrucci and Vos (2017) found less support for the adversarial role, with digital journalists “defining their profession in terms of the close connection with a citizen-audience” (Ferrucci and Vos 2017: 880). They link this more with the *populist-mobilizer* role (Weaver et al. 2007), which is concerned with empowering the public with information so they can actively participate in public life. These findings, however, conflict with Agarwal and Barthel’s (2015) research, which found strong support for the *adversarial* role among online journalists. Hence, the roles of online journalists remain very much under construction.

Hanitzsch (2007) adds an important third dimension to the role of journalists, which concerns their relationship with the public. He labels this “market orientation”. In journalism cultures where market orientation is high, there is an emphasis on providing news that champions the values of consumerism, focusing on people’s everyday life issues and individual needs:

“Audiences are not addressed in their role as citizens concerned with the social and political issues of the day but in their role as clients and consumers whose personal fears, aspirations, attitudes, and emotional experiences become the center of attention” (Hanitzsch 2007: 375)

There is a strong argument to be made that since the 1970s, journalism has become more explicitly market oriented, treating people less like citizens and more like consumers (e.g. McManus 1994; Nadler 2016). Again though, much like the other roles described, the market orientation of different journalistic cultures is highly contextual, and based on several interlinked factors. Journalists therefore identify, to varying degrees, with different role conceptions and often believe they perform more than one role at the same time (Agarwal and Barthel 2015). This helps explain why there remains a lack of universal consensus on the different roles of journalism, both from a material perspective (what journalism ‘is’) and from a normative perspective (what journalism’s main

tasks should be). Nonetheless, they have remained an important part of how journalists understand and give meaning to their work (Ferrucci and Vos 2017).

### **2.3. Professionalism, Ideology and Field Theory**

Whilst journalism does not necessarily possess many of the archetypal “traits” of a profession, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, journalism certainly managed to make a strong claim to professional *status* (Tumber and Prentoulis 2005). As discussed above, important factors in this process included the emergence of journalism as a separate field of practice, and then following this, the gradual creation of ethical codes, norms, routines, and organisational structures to manage the production of news (Dooley 1997). For Deuze (2005: 444), the professionalization of journalism during the 20<sup>th</sup> century is typified by the “consolidation of a consensual occupational ideology amongst journalists in different parts of the world”. This ideology, according to Deuze (2005), can be categorized as a set of five discursively constructed ideal-typical values: *public service, objectivity, immediacy, autonomy* and *ethics* (Deuze 2005: 447). Deuze (2005) describes this ideology as the “cultural cement” of journalism, meaning they form the foundation of journalism’s identity (Hanitzsch 2007).

Connecting this with Bourdieu’s field theory, it is possible to make the case that professionalism, and its accompanying ideology, was integral to the formation of the contemporary *doxa* of the journalistic field. As a reminder, the *doxa* of the journalistic field refers to “a system of presuppositions inherent in membership in the field” (Bourdieu 1998: 37). As Hellmueller et al. (2013: 2) note, “these shared presuppositions – a shared understanding of institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies (Hanitzsch, 2007) – constitute the cultural capital of the field”. Journalism’s professional ideology, which includes assumptions about institutional roles (providing a public service), epistemologies (objectivity, empiricism) and ethical ideologies (a commitment to truth and sense of fairness) thus form an essential part of journalism’s cultural capital. The cultural capital of the field represents journalism’s primary source of legitimacy, autonomy and power (Vos 2016), and is what makes it “autonomous or distinct from other fields” (Vos and Craft 2016: 1507).



Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, journalism's cultural capital remained fairly consistent amidst constant pressure from various endogenous and exogenous forces (Champagne and Marchetti 2005). This, along with several important structural factors, helped journalism effectively establish a monopoly over the system of news provision. As Lewis (2012: 838) writes:

“For much of the twentieth century, both the business model and the professional routines of journalism in developed nations were highly stable and successful enterprises because they took advantage of scarcity, exclusivity, and control. In the local information market, news media dominated the means of media production, access to expert source material, and distribution to wide audiences – which translated to tremendous capital, both in gatekeeping authority (Shoemaker & Vos 2009) and economic power”.

Journalists benefited from this exclusivity and control, both materially (e.g. income, access to sources, audiences, and legal rights), and symbolically (e.g. social prestige, credibility, and authority). Only very recently has this exclusivity once again come under serious threat.

#### **2.4. The Digitization of the Field**

As a result of media digitization, information is “no longer scarce, hard to produce, nor difficult to repurpose and share” (Lewis 2012: 4). Citizens also no longer consume information in a linear way, but rather, “assemble information associatively by interacting with it online” (Peters and Broersma 2013: 4). A great deal of this information is “free” because of the huge reductions in costs of transaction and distribution online. These changes have upended the traditional business model of journalism, which relied on maintaining exclusivity, scarcity and control in the information market (Lewis 2012). Moreover, the new environment has given rise to a large number of new information providers, many of which seek to obtain a position within the journalistic field by openly challenging established norms (Broersma 2010). As

a result of these changes, many scholars and critics argue that journalism's "occupational monopoly on telling the news" is diminishing as journalists' exclusivity over different aspects of news production and distribution weakens (Anderson 2008: 248).

Exclusivity lies at the heart of any successful claim to authority and status made by an occupation. As Carlson (2007: 277) notes, "authority must be exclusive in order for journalists to separate their work from other modes of public information". This exclusivity, ultimately depends on journalists' ability to maintain control, "rhetorically and materially, over a body of knowledge" (expertise), not claimed by any other occupation (Lewis 2012: 5). In a Bourdieusian sense, this "body of knowledge" can be thought of as the field's cultural capital, which has long been predicated on journalists' maintaining a significant degree of *control* over news content (Lewis 2012). Digital media, by contrast, carry affordances that tend to privilege values such as transparency, participation, and interactivity. These changes, at least in theory, provide ordinary users with more power when it comes to creating, filtering and distributing information, blurring the lines between users and producers, amateurs and professionals, and news and other forms of communication.

It is for this reason that many have argued journalism is undergoing a period of "deprofessionalization" and beginning to lose its distinctiveness as a field of practice (Ryfe 2012). Yet at this stage it might be too early to suggest with such any degree of certainty that journalism is fading to irrelevance. As Bourdieu (1982: 470) argues, "every field is the site of more or less overt struggle over the definition of the legitimate principles of the division of the field", and in this respect, much like in response to television and radio, the cultural capital of journalism might be *shifting*, rather than disappearing altogether in the digital environment (Hellmueller et al. 2013; Zelizer 2015). The question of *how* it is shifting though, is key. For example, how are individual journalists and news organisations attempting to adapt to the new environment? What new norms, values and practices are gaining currency? How do these changes in journalistic capital help or undermine the field as it tries to protect its authority and preserve its public legitimacy? And finally, what, if anything, remains the

same? Some of the research conducted on online journalism has attempted to address these questions and this becomes the focus of the next section.

### 3. Literature Review

Changes to the field over the last two decades have been “substantive, pervasive and multifaceted” (Singer 2014: 2), and the wealth of academic literature on digital journalism reflects this. Of the many transformations that journalism has experienced, one of the most consequential has been the altering nature of news production and changes to the actual work of journalists (Picard 2014). A recurrent theme in this work has been on the subject of “convergence”; a somewhat vague term used to describe the “blurring of the limits between different media, professional skills and roles” (Domingo 2006: 3). Trends towards convergence have been enormously varied and highly dependent on different the contextual factors that shape technological adoption (e.g. Boczkowski 2004; Boczkowski and Ferris 2005; Klinenberg 2005; Colson and Heinderyckx 2008; Singer 2008).

First and foremost, scholars have been interested in how journalists’ work has been affected by what are seen to be the three core technological characteristics of the Internet: *hypertext*, *interactivity*, and *multimedia* (Dahlgren 1996; Deuze and Paulussen 2002; Deuze 2003; Domingo 2006). Findings commonly suggest that the Internet has created new pressures on journalists, as they are required to incorporate more tasks into their daily work and master new storytelling techniques, which undermines their ability to perform their normal functions (Bromley 1997). In addition, new pressures on speed and immediacy in reporting have been seen to lead to a general rise in the circulation of non-original material, either copied verbatim from news wire services and press releases, or “cannibalized” from other news websites, as journalists struggle to cope with the demands of publishing more stories per-day (Klinenberg 2005; Davies 2008; Fenton 2010; Bakker 2012; Philips 2012). As a result of these pressures, scholars have observed that online journalism is increasingly desk-bound, with being provided less time to go out in the field and conduct original newsgathering (O’Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Fenton 2010).

Research has shown that processes of convergence have generally created the most tensions among print journalists, and at news organizations with deep-seated “traditional” cultures. Even as journalists have begun to adopt new technologies such as Twitter into their working routines, and engage in new practices like interacting with social media users, Lasorsa et al. (2012) has observed that the trend is toward “normalization”, whereby new technologies and processes are coerced to fit existing organisational routines and professional norms (Singer 2005; Domingo et al. 2008; Singer et al. 2011; Hermida 2011). This is also true of sourcing practices, with research indicating a general reluctance among journalists to give up on traditional news sourcing techniques (Lecheler and Kruijemeier 2015). While the use of online sources, including those from social media, is common, they are seen to generally play a supportive role, with mainly “offline”, elite sources remaining centre stage (Machill and Beiler 2009; Knight 2012; Van Leuven et al. 2014). This has challenged early assumptions that the Internet would necessarily expand the public sphere by increasing the presence of non-elite sources in news coverage (see Cottle 2000; Borger et al. 2013).

### **3.1. Gatekeeping Research**

Beyond the news production process, the term convergence also refers to the technological structure of the internet, with journalists operating in a “converged” media space alongside other online users, who also have the means to produce, filter, reshape and distribute content. According to Quandt and Singer (2009: 132), this “broadening of the media space through user and community participation represents a form of convergence that is likely to be an even greater challenge to journalists than the one posed by the need to master new tools and techniques”. In research examining the changing relationship between journalists and audiences, scholars have often invoked notions of the journalist as “gatekeeper”: a term first introduced to journalism studies by White (1950) to describe journalists’ subjective power in the process of deciding what news and information should be disseminated to the public. The theory of gatekeeping has been revitalized over the past decade or so, as the jurisdictional claim by journalists to decide news for the public has been

seen to diminish. As Deuze (2005: 451) writes, “new media technologies challenge one of the most fundamental ‘truths’ in journalism, namely: the professional journalist is the one who determines what publics see, hear and read about the world” (2014: 13) In research on this topic, an important underlying question has been what level of gatekeeping control journalists are willing to relinquish over news content, in order to foster greater levels of participation from audiences in the news process (Lewis 2012).

What studies in this area have indicated so far is a general unwillingness on behalf of journalists to give up on established practices of publishing, filtering and selecting information (Robinson 2007; Domingo et al. 2008; Thurman 2008; Hermida et al. 2011). In this regard, Lewis (2012: 836) argues that journalists remain “caught in the professional impulse toward one-way publishing control”. This also helps to explain why user-generated content (UGC) has so far only occupied a marginal space in news coverage (Domingo et al. 2008). Such behavior is thought to be the result of journalists wanting to maintain control over familiar processes of newsgathering, in the fear that they might otherwise lose some of their public legitimacy and cultural authority (Lowrey 2011). There are also concerns regarding the accuracy and quality of UGC, and the ability of journalists to verify this content (Carlsson and Nilsson 2015). When user contributions are used, it is said to be mainly in the context of breaking news and “soft” news stories (Usher 2017). Similarly, when users are invited to directly participate in the news process, scholars have noted how this is usually in “token” form, for example, via “most-read” lists, “have-your-say” invitations, audience polls, “comments” sections or “send-in-your-pictures” requests (Peters and Witschge 2015). The current absence of more meaningful forms of participation has raised questions about the democratising potential of the internet and also highlighted the continuing power of journalists as gatekeepers. Usher (2017) argues that when it comes to selecting news content and deciding on the contributions of ordinary users, professional journalists remain overwhelmingly in control.

Nevertheless, other research has argued that the audience-journalist relationship might be slowly changing, and with it, the gatekeeping function of

journalism (Gillmor 2004; Lowrey, 2006; Singer 2006; Bruns 2008). This is partly attributed to the growing importance of social media in journalism, which has become an important channel of news distribution and also a new tool for journalists to engage with the audience day-to-day in their work (Hermida 2013). Distribution in these social networks relies heavily on users sharing content within their own personal networks, and in this respect, Singer (2013) has argued that Internet users have acquired more power in determining what news is circulated in wider society. Singer (ibid.) argues that the audience now effectively function as secondary-gatekeepers, who choose news “not only for their own consumption but also for the consumption of others, including those within their personal circle of acquaintances and those who are part of an undifferentiated online public” (Singer 2013: 22). She argues this shift toward “user-generated visibility” suggests a “new way of looking at one of the oldest conceptualizations of the journalist’s role in our society”, namely, that of the gatekeeper (Singer 2013: 22).

For Bruns (2008) the gatekeeping function of journalists is shifting to a new practice of “gatewatching”: “a form of reporting and commenting on the news which does not operate from a position of authority...but works by harnessing the collective intelligence and knowledge of dedicated communities to filter the newsflow and to highlight and debate salient topics of importance to the community” (Bruns 2008: 176-77). What these debates suggest is that audiences might slowly be reconfiguring the autonomy and authority of journalists, which might eventually lead to a more collaborative relationship between journalists and their publics. At this stage, however, it might be too early to conclude this is happening. Anderson (2011b: 564) is equally cautious, arguing that the present rhetoric around audience empowerment and participation, at least in newsrooms, often takes place in the context of audience analytics and metrics.

According to Tandoc (2014), it is in the context of economic instability and shrinking audiences, that news organisations are increasingly turning to web analytics to understand the preferences of their audiences, with the aim of increasing traffic to their websites and earning more revenue from advertising.

Those optimistic about such changes, like Usher (2010: 1), have argued that analytics enable journalists to “figure out who their audiences are, learn what they want, and in real time, track their behaviours in order to be more responsive to their needs”. However, others such as Anderson (2011b), Tandoc and Thomas (2015), and Cohen (2015), have expressed concern that the growing presence of web analytics in newsrooms is influencing news selection in ways that undermine traditional editorial judgement and journalistic values of autonomy. In his study of the Philadelphia news website, *Philly.com*, Anderson (2011b: 561) observed that “website traffic often appeared to be *primary ingredient* in *Philly.com* news judgement”, resulting in sports, gossip, and human-interest stories being selected, sometimes at the expense of more serious and complex news stories. Similarly, in a study of three online newsrooms, Tandoc (2014) noticed news stories and headlines were often being selected according to a “consumer-driven logic”, with audience metrics playing a key role in influencing editorial decisions. The debate over the use of metrics in newsrooms captures a central tension concerning journalism and its role in society. In their traditional roles, journalists select news based on their own professional judgement (a *trustee* model). The growing influence of web metrics, however, challenges this position, and encourages journalists to select news based on what audiences want (a *market* model) (see Welbers et al. 2016).

### **3.2. Objectivity, Emotionality, and Transparency**

Aside from the research on gatekeeping, a significant amount of attention has been directed towards studying the journalistic norm of objectivity. Many scholars have questioned the continuing relevance of objectivity in the digital environment, arguing that a paradigmatic shift towards transparency might be necessary (Karlsson 2011). The reasons for this are multifaceted, but essentially stem from criticisms of objectivity as a means of truth-telling. While objectivity is often associated with impartiality and detachment, transparency is linked with greater openness and accountability (Hellmeuller et al. 2013). A shift to transparency would mean journalists being more open about different news



processes, by “embedding in the news reports a sense of how the story came to be and why it was presented as it was” (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001: 83). Singer (2008: 74) links transparency with the transition to a networked digital environment, arguing that detachment, long associated with the objectivity norm, is “deeply isolating” when one inhabits “a world of fluid and interconnected information”. Some also suggest that transparency would help journalists establish a more mutually beneficial relationship with their audiences, revitalising their capacity to act as an “authoritative source of information” (Karlsson 2011: 292). It has also been suggested that transparency would allow journalists to cope better with the increased pressures of immediacy in online news, whereby audiences would be more tolerant of errors or unverifiable information in rolling news if journalists became more open about their use of sources (Karlsson 2010; Phillips 2010).

In empirical research, scholars have found some support for transparency, though it remains poorly defined. Studies that have analysed news content, for example, have cited features such as external links, time stamps, invitations to participate (e.g. commenting), author information, and an acknowledgement of errors, as signs of increased transparency in news reporting (Karlsson 2010). Other researchers like Robinson (2007) have conducted interviews with journalists to show how an “unfiltered look at the news” can build trust and credibility among audiences. In recent research, Vos and Craft (2016) examined the discursive construction of transparency in US trade journalism publications, finding an increasing level of support for transparency among journalists and a waning level of support for the traditional norm of objectivity. That being said, they also drew attention to one criticism of transparency, which is that it is sometimes associated with journalists being overly deferential towards audiences. A similar criticism has come from Lowrey and Anderson (2005), and also Robinson (2007), who have suggested that allowing “readers to peek past the institutional curtain to see the working parts of newsgathering”, might result in journalism inadvertently diluting its own authority. Vos and Craft (2016: 13) are more upbeat in their conclusions, arguing that “transparency is a form of cultural capital whereby the field foregoes a measure of autonomy to gain legitimacy”. While the idea of transparency is still relatively new in

traditional journalism, it is a fairly widespread practice in blogging (Thorson 2008) and also seems to be a common norm among emerging news providers, including digital natives (Riordan 2014).

Alongside transparency, a second major challenge to the professional norm of objectivity is seen to come from the rise of more emotional and personalised forms of storytelling in news (Steensen 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen 2016). Similar to transparency, the context for this trend has, in part, been precipitated by a shift to a “networked” media system. In this environment, traditional journalistic epistemologies that favour objectivity and distancing have been challenged by the rise of more personal technologies (e.g. mobile phones) and more personal forms of communication (e.g. social media) (see Castells 2007; Kormelink and Meijer 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen 2014; Beckett and Deuze 2016). While it is important to emphasise that the use of emotion has long been recognised as central to component of storytelling in news, it has often been associated with a decline in the standards of journalism and thus heavily criticised and neglected as an object of study (Bird 2009; Wahl Jorgensen 2013). However, in the online space, it has been noted that “many of the traditional dichotomies associated with journalism, such as hard/soft, fact/opinion and information/entertainment are becoming progressively blurred” (Peters 2011: 298). Peters (2011: 301) connects this trend with an “upsurge in news alternatives” and “an increased variety of “valid” news styles”, many of which set out to challenge established conventions of objectivity by shunning journalistic neutrality and detachment in favour of generating a deeper emotional connection with readers.

Though empirical research is still in short supply, some research studying the content of news stories has highlighted the important role that emotion can play in: deepening citizenship and engagement (Wahl-Jorgensen 2016); reducing the distance between journalists and audiences (Steensen 2016); and fostering emotional “counterpublic spheres” that blend public/private and political/public issues and concerns (Papacharissi 2016; Zou 2018). These various roles are seen as particularly crucial in the digital environment, where news organisations have to battle harder to attract and maintain users’ attention and

foster engagement (Singer 2013; Beckett and Deuze 2016). This also points to one issue concerning the rise of emotion in journalism, which is that the types of stories that are selected to drive emotional engagement are often seen to be provocative, attention-grabbing, and salacious, and bear little or no relation to issues of general public concern (Tandoc 2014; van Dijck and Poell 2013). However, in the absence of more research, it remains somewhat of an open question whether greater use of emotion in journalism is a normatively desirable development in the field.

### **3.3. Summary**

The preceding literature review has attempted to sketch some of the major ways in which the cultural capital of journalism might be shifting in response to new media. What should be clear from the discussion is that the news industry has undergone a period of profound and deeply unsettling change, leading to rapid changes in news work and “straining how journalists think about the field and its core values” (Ferrucci and Vos 2017: 869). New pressures on speed and immediacy in reporting have given rise to a number of practices that are said to undermine journalism’s core functions. Meanwhile, new technologies and platforms have had only limited impact in newsrooms, with most being co-opted to fit old norms and practices (Singer 2005). This is particularly evident in the research exploring online sourcing techniques, which points to the continuing importance of elite, ‘offline’ sources in coverage, despite the new possibilities afforded to journalists to include a “different cast of voices” in news (Harcup 2003: 360).

Along with sourcing techniques, other research has shown that journalists have continually struggled to break out of “the professional impulse toward one-way publishing control” (Lewis 2012: 836). This is most clear in the body of work examining the relationship between journalists and audiences, which has shown a clear reluctance on the behalf of journalists to “open up” the news process to ordinary users. This resistance is somewhat understandable, given the fact that much of journalism’s professional legitimacy and sense of

autonomy is premised on a significant degree of control over news content. Perhaps the area where the audience has made the most impact is via the use of analytics in the newsroom, which has raised concerns about journalists' ability to independently select the news (e.g. Anderson 2011b; Tandoc 2014; Welbers et al. 2016).

In spite of this evidence, other research has indicated that a "slow philosophical shifting" (Robinson 2010: 140) might be occurring in journalism, which could eventually lead to a revised logic for the field:

"[A revised logic] that preserves certain ethical practices and boundaries that lend legitimacy, abandons jurisdictional claims that have lost their currency in the new environment, and embraces fresh values, such as open participation, that are more compatible with the logic of digital media and culture" (Lewis 2012: 852).

Proof of such changes is perhaps most evident in the debates over objectivity with scholars indicating increased support for transparency as a new norm in journalism (Vos and Craft 2016). The nascent work on emotion in journalism also forms part of this questioning of the "meta-narrative of objectivity" (Peters 2011). One important and unanswered question in this debate is whether such changes would lead to a *reconstitution* or *dilution* of journalism's cultural authority (Anderson 2008), which, at this stage in online journalism's development, is difficult to answer.

While many questions loom large about the shifting state of journalism's cultural capital, one major issue with current research is its overwhelming focus on change at traditional news organisations. While this work has undoubtedly been valuable, such a narrow focus has largely failed to adequately capture the highly diverse and dispersed ways in which news is now produced, distributed and consumed online. At a time when journalism remains in a state of flux (Ryfe 2012), new actors are entering the fore in a bid to define the legitimate principles of the field. Many of these new entrants, including digital natives, are less socialized to the traditional "rules of the game", and thus come equipped

with different forms of cultural capital that have the potential to disrupt established ways of “doing” journalism (Vos 2016).

As Carlson and Usher (2016: 564) put it, these new players are “compet[ing] to define what digital news looks like, [trying to] reestablish the boundaries of journalism, and determine strategies for legitimating news content”. Studying these organisations – including *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* – is important because it has the potential to provide us with a fresh perspective on how news, and the various activities and discourses surrounding its production, is evolving online. This, in turn, might go some way to explaining what *new* boundaries journalists and news organisations are attempting to draw, in a bid to enhance and protect their seemingly vulnerable authority.

## 4. Research Design and Methods

To examine news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, this project adopts the case study as a research strategy. According to Eisenhardt's (1989: 534) oft-quoted definition, "the case study is a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings". For this reason, it has been widely used in studies of organisations, where researchers have been interested in examining how phenomena occur within a bounded context (Hartley 2004). Case studies can involve single or multiple cases, though fewer cases are generally seen as preferable, given their propensity to generate enormous volumes of data (Gomm et al. 2000). This is partly because case studies typically combine multiple methods of data collection, which can be "either qualitative, quantitative, or both" (Hartley 2004: 324). As such, researchers adopting a case study strategy have used methods as diverse as questionnaires, interviews, participant observation, and archival research to examine complex social phenomena within specific social or organisational settings (Stake 2003). This includes more recent research into digital news production (e.g. Boczkowski 2004; Painter 2008; Tandoc 2013; Hermida et al. 2014; Brooks 2016).

Case studies, however, are not so much defined by their research methods as their *theoretical orientation* (Hartley 2004). As Yin (1994: 27) argues, "theory development prior to the collection of any case study data is an essential step in doing case studies". This, he suggests, is one point of difference from related methods like ethnography and 'grounded theory', both of which typically "avoid specifying any theoretical propositions at the outset of an inquiry" (Yin 1994: 27). This particular project has used Bourdieu's field theory as a theoretical framework<sup>5</sup>, as well as borrowing key concepts from the literature on journalistic professionalism. For Hartley (2004), the presence of a theoretical framework in

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<sup>5</sup> Though scholars have rarely made the connection, the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu would seem particularly suited to case study research, given their overlapping aims. Case study research "places emphasis on understanding processes alongside their (organizational and other) contexts" (Hartley 2004: 324), while field theory is concerned with "bridg[ing] the epistemological divide between agent and structure and between micro and macro" (Willig 2012: 381).

case study research helps enhance the internal validity and generalisability of the results. This also draws attention to a major strength of case study research, which is that it is concerned with generating concepts and theories that have fidelity to reality (Yin 1994; Flyvbjerg 2006). For this reason, Eisenhardt (1989: 548-49) argues that case study research is “particularly well-suited to new research areas or research areas for which existing theory seems inadequate”. Hence, it is particularly relevant to this research project, which is interested in providing a fresh perspective on media change by advancing our understanding of digital native news organisations.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into sections that roughly correspond with Eisenhardt’s (1989: 533) procedure for doing case study research. The first section (4.1) deals with my selection of cases, and includes a brief overview of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* as companies. The second section (4.2) discusses the methodological approach and research design used in this study, as well as issues surrounding access. The third section (4.3) describes the interview method used in this project, including the process of data collection and analysis. The fourth section (4.4) explains the quantitative content analysis used in the study, including the key decisions made about which variables to investigate. The fifth and final section (4.5) addresses some of the limitations of this research.

#### **4.1. Case Study Selection**

According to Eisenhardt (1989: 537), the concept of a population is crucial when selecting cases, because the selection of an appropriate population: 1) “defines the set of entities from which the research sample is to be drawn”, and, 2) “controls extraneous variation and helps to define the limits for generalising the findings”. In this study, the population is defined as digital native news organisations. Digital natives are generally understood as media organisations founded in the internet-era, that produce news and other content for a predominantly online audience. It is difficult to determine precisely how many digital native news organisations now exist, but at least in the US and European

context there appear to be several hundred (Jurkowitz 2014; Nicholls et al. 2017).

There is huge variation between digital native news organisations in terms of size, target audience, the topics and issues they cover, and the ways in which they choose to deliver and present news. In a Pew study that analysed 438 different digital native news organisations in the US, Jurkowitz (2014) found that over half had a focus on producing local news, and that nearly three-quarters employed three or fewer full-time editorial staff. At the other end of the spectrum, there are large US-based digital media companies like *BuzzFeed*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Vice*, which employ more than 100 full-time editorial staff and tend to focus on producing national and international news stories for a global audience (Jurkowitz 2014)<sup>6</sup>.

To limit my population, I chose to focus on US-based digital native news organisations, and specifically, those residing in the sub-field of large-scale or ‘mass’ production<sup>7</sup>. I was initially drawn to this subset of organisations because of the wider impact they appeared to be having upon the field of journalism. At a time when notions of “crisis” permeated much of the discourse about journalism (Zelizer 2015), digital natives like *The Huffington Post*, *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, *Mashable*, *Quartz*, and *Vox*, appeared to be on the rise, growing in terms of size, audience, and revenue. However, while these organisations were generating plenty of excitement *within* the industry, they were virtually absent from academic discussions about journalism. Instead, scholars seemed generally more interested in theorising about digital journalism from the perspective of traditional organisations<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge, this is still the most extensive survey of North American digital natives to date.

<sup>7</sup> In Bourdesian terms, the sub-field of large-scale production or mass production is “oriented towards the making of ‘commercial’ cultural goods” for large audiences (Hesmondhalgh 2006: 214). This stands in contrast to the subfield of small-scale production, which tends to be more autonomous and oriented towards the production of ‘pure’ artistic products” for smaller, or more niche audiences (Hesmondhalgh 2006: 214).

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that this parochialism is a longstanding issue in journalism studies (Zelizer 2009).



To address this gap in research, I decided to study news production at two digital natives. While a larger study might have afforded me more resources to study multiple organisations, for practical and logistical reasons, I chose to limit my study to two cases: *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*<sup>9</sup>. It is important to provide a very brief overview of both organisations, before moving on to discuss the research methods used in this study.

#### 4.1.1. Vice

*Vice*, which initially began as a news and culture magazine in the 1990s in Canada, has grown to become an expansive global media company with a valuation of \$5.7 billion (Garrahan 2017). *Vice News* is a relatively recent addition to the *Vice Media* network, having only been founded in December 2013. The *Vice News* channel is one of 11 different digital channels that *Vice* own, and chiefly presents news in text and video format. *Vice News* is perhaps most famous for its video content, which is typically shot in a “lo-fi” documentary style, is presented by a revolving cast of young, multicultural reporters, and has explored topics as diverse as: life in North Korea (2011); the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq (2014); the sex industry in Bangladesh (2015); and the state of the mental health industry in America (2015); and the Ukrainian civil war (2016). *Vice* are seen to focus on reporting stories or issues that they deem to have been ignored by mainstream news organisations, which sometimes courts controversy (see Widdicombe 2013). Many of these videos have garnered millions of hits. For example, *Vice*’s 2014 documentary on the Islamic State has received nearly 13.2 million views on *YouTube* at the time of writing (Vice 2018). What would appear to make *Vice News* distinct from other news providers is its presentation style, which openly challenges the journalistic norm of impartiality to present news in a more subjective and involved way (Riordan 2014).

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<sup>9</sup> Note: in case study research, “random selection [of cases] is neither necessary, nor even preferable” (Eisenhardt 1989: 537).

This aesthetic has proven particularly popular with younger audiences, who are *Vice's* target market (Ip 2015a). Precisely why *Vice* content seems to resonate with young audiences is difficult to determine, but Costera Meijer (2007; 2013), who has conducted several studies on the news tastes of young people, has found they enjoy the experience of feeling “closer” to an event, and also tend to dislike the presentation style of conventional news. This in part, helps to explain the popularity of *Vice News*, however, another crucial factor relates to the fact they appear less burdened by the overheads, bureaucracy, regulations, and procedures of a legacy media organisation. This has enabled *Vice News* to expand its operations quickly, as well as continuously experiment with different ways of delivering content to users on new and emerging social platforms (See Küng 2015; Painter et al. 2017).

#### **4.1.2. BuzzFeed**

*Buzzfeed* is different to *Vice* in the sense that its business has always thrived on the use of social media platforms to promote content<sup>10</sup>. Initially, the company rose to prominence through the mass publication of ‘listicles’ (e.g. “21 signs you’re overly empathetic”), and quizzes (e.g. “Which pop star are you based on your Zodiac sign”), both of which still form a key part of the organisation’s output. However, more recently, *Buzzfeed* has started to invest more seriously in news and journalism. The motivation for establishing a news service, according to Jonah Perretti, is that *Buzzfeed* has “worked out that news content, not just lists, can be shareable and viral” (cited in Riordan 2014: 48). While such a statement risks trivialising *Buzzfeed's* ambitions to become a ‘serious’ news provider, it belies the seriousness of *BuzzFeed's* approach in understanding *why* content is shared. As one of the few researchers to examine *BuzzFeed's* operation in detail, Küng (2015) is worth quoting here at length:

“At heart, BuzzFeed is about data science, about analysing user data to decode how and why content is shared and distributed. User data are

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<sup>10</sup> One article published by *BuzzFeed* estimated that 75% of its total website traffic was derived from social media platforms (Isaac 2014).

captured, analysed and manipulated in a perpetual loop of analysis, interpretation, experimentation, feedback, and refinement. BuzzFeed's goal is to identify which characteristics have a predictive relationship with virality, maximise these and thus accelerate the 'spread rate' of its content" (Küng 2015: 58).

Crucially, *BuzzFeed* takes what it learns from this process and applies it to social advertising campaigns that it runs for an ever-expanding roster of clients. In this respect, news, alongside other, more popular entertainment content, all work in tandem to generate insights about the audience: their consumption habits, basic demographic profiles, tastes, search history etc, which are subsequently sold on to advertisers. Whether this trade-off of free content for data is fair or ethical, is something that has attracted a great deal of debate and criticism (e.g. van Dijck and Nieborg 2009; Fuchs 2011; Freedman 2012).

The news division of *Buzzfeed* has garnered a reputation for focusing on news stories relevant to its young audience, particularly issues related to social justice movements such as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual transsexual) rights, gender rights, and civil rights (Burrell 2014). Similar to *Vice*, *BuzzFeed* have placed a heavy emphasis on experimentation, with several teams constantly exploring new ways of presenting and sharing content using different media platforms (Lafrance 2012). Also like *Vice*, the company has expanded internationally at a fairly rapid rate, and now has editorial operations in countries such as Australia, Spain, Mexico, Brazil, India, and Germany, as well as New York-based BuzzFeed Español, which targets a Latin-American audience (Painter et al. 2017). A common strategy pursued in each of these countries is to start by creating cheap, highly shareable, "viral" content, and then use the revenue earned from this to fund more serious news production (Lichterman 2015).

## **4.2. Research Design**

As mentioned, one feature of case study research is that it typically relies on using a combination of methods (Yin 1994; Gomm et al. 2000). Initially,

ethnography and content analysis were determined as the best approach for answering the research questions. It was via these methods that I hoped to observe *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* journalists in their natural settings, comparing their “social meanings and ordinary activities” (Brewer 2000: 10) to the actual news content they were producing. I was also encouraged by the early ethnographies of news production, which, as Wahl-Jorgensen (2009: 21) notes, have “contributed tremendously to knowledge about news production processes and newsroom cultures, providing a rich description of journalists’ ways of life and work” (e.g. Epstein 1973; Schlesinger 1978; Tuchman 1978; Fishman 1980; Soloski 1989; Gans 2004).

In arranging to conduct ethnography at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, I entered myself into a fairly long and protracted negotiation to gain access at their (UK and US) sites of news production. This process, which began in around July 2015, lasted approximately nine months and ultimately ended without success. I was invited by the Editor-in-Chief of *BuzzFeed UK*, Janine Gibson, to spend one day in the London office of *BuzzFeed* to conduct some non-participant observation. However, I was unable to secure long-term access to either organisation. My repeated requests to gain access were either ignored or rejected by the people I had identified as the key ‘gatekeepers’<sup>11</sup> (see Appendix A for an example email requesting access). Based on the experiences of previous researchers, I had expected I might encounter this issue (e.g. Schlesinger 1980; Tuchman 2002; Puijk 2008; Usher 2014; Ryfe 2016). According to Lindlof (1995), the problem tends to be more acute at commercial organisations, which are less publically accountable, and like to “keep up their guards very high, perceiving proposed research as an intrusion into the proprietary nature of their activities” (Lindlof 1995: 107). A further hindrance to the process of gaining access might have been my own professional inexperience in the field of journalism. As Paterson and Zoellner (2010: 97) note, prior professional experience in the field of study is “increasingly becoming an essential criterion in gaining access for long-term ethnographic investigations”.

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<sup>11</sup> By ‘gatekeepers’, I am referring to the key people within both organisations who I determined had the power to grant me access on behalf of everyone to the key sites of news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* (see Lindlof 1995: 106).

### 4.2.1. Mixed Methods

Taking these challenges into account, I was able to build significant contingency into the research plan. To study news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, I decided upon a mixed methods research design. In their extensive synthesis of the literature on mixed methods, Johnson et al. (2007: 123) provide the following definition:

“Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration”.

Mixed methods is often referred to as a ‘third’ methodological or research paradigm, and is based on the premise “that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems that either approach alone” (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007: 5). Hence, mixed methods research is defined by a strong emphasis on *triangulation*, whereby a “combination of methodologies [are used] in the study of the same phenomenon” (Denzin 1978: 291). Morse (1991) describes two types of triangulation: simultaneous or sequential. Simultaneous triangulation occurs when the quantitative and qualitative methods of the study are conducted independently, and only mixed during the phase of interpretation. Sequential triangulation is “when a direct interaction exists between the quantitative and qualitative strands of the study. Through this direct interaction, the two methods are mixed before the final interpretation” (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007: 65). Triangulation, according to Mathison (1988), can produce three different results in findings: convergence, consistency, or contradiction. Each of these outcomes can lead to a superior understanding of the phenomena being studied and improve the general validity of results (Mathison 1988).

Given the well-noted gap between rhetoric and practice in journalism, or between “what journalists say they do” and “what they actually do” (Paterson 2008: 2), there is a strong case to make that triangulation is even more essential when studying news production. In this study, I chose to combine in-depth interviews with a quantitative content analysis of news content. On the interaction between these two methods, this research followed what Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) describe as an “exploratory sequential design”. The exploratory design, according to Creswell and Plano Clark (ibid: 86) is a “two-phase sequential design that can be recognized because the researcher starts by qualitatively exploring a topic before building to a second, quantitative phase”. While in my case, I knew of some of the basic variables I would like to examine in the quantitative phase of the project, I wanted to remain open to incorporating new variables into the content analysis as I progressed through the qualitative phase of my research. As Eisenhardt (1989: 539) argues, “overlapping data analysis with data collection not gives the researcher a head start in the analysis but... [gives them] the freedom to make adjustments during the data collection process”. This approach was particularly valuable in light of the fact I was studying new phenomena and therefore wanted to remain flexible during the process of discovery.

In the following two sections, I provide more detail about the two methods used in this project, discussing the rationale behind their selection, as well as the general process of data collection.

### **4.3. In-depth Interviews**

The interview is an established and widely used method of data gathering in social science research (King 2004). According to one classic definition, the interview is a “conversation with a purpose” (Bingham and Moore 1931: 3). Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the interview is a conversation that can fulfil several purposes. On the subject of qualitative interviews, Lindlof and Taylor (2010: 173) make the case that they are “particularly well suited to *understanding the social actor’s experience, knowledge, and worldviews*” (emphasis in original). Or as King (2004: 21) puts it, “the qualitative research

interview is ideally suited to examining topics in which different levels of meaning need to be explored". The interview thus seemed to fit well with my own research aims, which were partly concerned with understanding journalists' interpretation of their own practices and routines. Indeed, one of the strengths of qualitative interviews is that they aspire to understand participants "on their own terms and how they make meaning of their own lives, experiences, and cognitive processes" (Brenner 2006: 357). This endeavour can also generate an enormous wealth of data, particularly in the case of semi-structured or unstructured interviews where the conversation between the interviewer and interviewee is only loosely scripted.

In the case of this research, I chose to pursue semi-structured interviews because of my interest in pursuing "an active, open ended dialogue with interviewees" (Deacon et al. 2007: 67). Given the exploratory nature of my research, it seemed important to adopt an interview procedure that would allow me to be responsive to the situation at hand, and pursue interesting topics as they arose in conversation (Berger 1998). An obvious drawback to this approach was that interviewees could digress on one or more subjects for too long without addressing the core concerns of the research. To help mitigate against this problem, a comprehensive interview guide was developed (see Appendix B). The development of the guide was informed by the broader literature on digital journalism and news production, as well as my own exploratory work into the news cultures of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. To investigate the key research questions of the project (see section 1.2), interviewees were asked questions regarding their previous experience and current journalistic role; their organisation's approach to news; their daily routine and working practices; their use of social media in news work; their relationship with the audience; their use of data and metrics in news work; and finally, their thoughts on the role and purpose of journalism in society. Following the advice of King (1994) and others (Deacon et al. 2007), interviews generally started with a brief and polite introduction to the research, with general, non-threatening questions preceding more complex and detailed questions. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they could recommend any other colleagues for

interview. This technique of “snowball” sampling (Yin 2011: 89) proved to be an effective means of recruiting more participants to the study.

Based on an assessment of my email and social media communication, I estimate that during the course of my fieldwork (July 2015 - March 2017 approx.), I attempted to contact more than 90 different staff working for *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* in the US and UK (see Appendix C for an example email requesting interview). These staff varied significantly in seniority and experience, but were predominantly drawn from a purposive sample of editors and reporters, rather than technologists (e.g. programmers, project managers) and other technical or support staff working in news production (see Nielsen 2012). The recruitment phase of the project was challenging on a number of fronts. Frequently, journalists ignored my requests for interview. On other occasions, they would decline to participate in the study, either because they were not interested, or because they were concerned about the ramifications of speaking to an outsider about their organisation. This was particularly an issue when trying to contact US-based journalists, who generally seemed more guarded than their UK counterparts<sup>12</sup>. In fact, almost no current journalists from *Vice US* responded to my request for interview. Rather, I had to settle on interviewing mainly former employees, who, on the condition of anonymity, agreed to speak about their work for the company. As a rule, I offered anonymity to all participants in the study. This was to help protect their identities and prevent any potential blowback in case they disclosed any sensitive information during the interview process. The information sheet and participant form I sent to my participants can be found in Appendix D.

Overall, 24 journalists were interviewed for the project: 14 from *BuzzFeed*, 8 from *Vice*, plus 2 freelance journalists who had extensive experience writing for either or both organisations<sup>13</sup> (see Appendix E). Participants varied in terms of age and experience, ranging from the level of junior reporter to senior editor. For reasons already cited, most of these journalists were based in the UK. At

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<sup>13</sup> Note: this excludes the many conversations I had with various *BuzzFeed* staff during the limited time I was able to conduct non-participant observation.



*BuzzFeed*, however, a few of the staff I interviewed were on secondment from the US, and therefore possessed detailed knowledge about the US operations of the company. For practical and logistical reasons, 13 interviews took place over the phone. However, I was able to interview nine journalists face-to-face. Interviews lasted anywhere from 18 minutes to 101 minutes, averaging around 55 minutes. This added up to approximately 1303 minutes, or 21.7 hours of interview content in total.

Following each interview, I got in the habit of taking some brief notes on the most interesting points of conversation, including any early themes and issues that seemed to be emerging. This evolved into what grounded theorists commonly describe as a *constant comparative* approach (e.g. Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2006). Emerging data from interviews was continuously analysed for similarities and differences and placed into tentative categories. This process of ‘open’ coding (Corbin and Strauss 1990: 12) also helped shape ongoing qualitative work by giving me a stronger notion of the specific topics or areas of interest I wanted to pursue in interviews. In the week after conducting an interview, audio recordings were typed up into formal transcripts on *Microsoft Word* and uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software package, *NVivo*. After immersing myself in the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, I conducted an *iterative* analysis of the data (Tracy 2013). An iterative analysis, according to Tracy (2013: 184), is distinct from the grounded theory approach in that it:

“[A]lternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories. Rather than grounding the meaning solely in the emergent data, an iterative approach also encourages reflection upon the active interests, current literature, granted priorities, and various theories the researcher brings to the data. Iteration is... a reflexive process in which the researcher visits and revisits the data, connects them to emerging insights, and progressively refines his/her focus and understandings”.

In the case of this research, the 'etic' component of analysis was derived chiefly from the theoretical framework of Bourdieu as well as the literature on the sociology of journalism. Following the iterative framework of Tracy (2013), I coded the interview transcripts on *NVivo* using a two-step process. During the *primary-cycle coding* phase, interesting words, sentences, and phrases that appeared in interviews were assigned broad, mainly descriptive codes, or 'nodes' to use *NVivo*'s terminology. Using a constant comparative approach, codes were continuously created, reviewed, and modified to fit new data. Some of the codes generated at this stage also built on the tentative categories and themes that were developed during the data gathering phase of the project.

Following this first cycle of coding, I engaged in *secondary-cycle coding*. In this process, first-level codes were analysed in conjunction with the broader theory and literature on journalism, and organised, synthesised, and categorized "into interpretive concepts" (Tracy 2013: 194). Also referred to as 'axial' coding (Corbin and Strauss 1990), this procedure was primarily about identifying patterns among open codes, and then grouping these various codes under hierarchical 'umbrella' categories that made conceptual sense (Tracy 2013: 195). These 'umbrella' categories related to key concepts in the literature on journalism including objectivity, audiences, routines, gatekeeping, and transparency. The process of second-cycle coding ended when I decided I had reached a point of *theoretical saturation*, where no additional data could be found to further develop the properties of specific categories (See Glaser and Strauss 1967: 61).

#### **4.4. Quantitative Content Analysis**

As outlined in the research design, the second phase of this project utilised a quantitative content analysis for the purposes of testing and generalising findings from the qualitative part of the study. Sociologists have used content analysis to examine media content since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hansen et al. 1998). To borrow Berelson's (1952: 18) oft-quoted description, content analysis "a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication". While this description has been

subject to much criticism, it provides a useful starting point for understanding the broad purpose of content analysis. Building on this, Deacon et al. (2007: 119) suggest that the goal of content analysis is to “quantify salient and manifest features of a large number of texts”. It is, therefore, especially useful when one wishes to produce a wide ranging, descriptive insight into the characteristics and form of media content. This was one of my primary objectives in researching *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, partly for the reason that – as was clear from my literature review – no formal study of their news content had ever been undertaken.

This aside, it is worth recalling that individual news stories are the outcome of a variety of influences, including market pressures, editorial resources, journalist-source interactions, and decisions about presentational style, structure, emphasis, and language (See Riffe et al. 2014: 9). Thus, from the choice of headline in a news article to the decisions made about which actors to quote, studying the “materiality” of news (Carlson 2017) has the potential to provide an alternative glimpse into the routines, practices, and values that shape everyday news production. As Hansen et al. (1998: 91) and others (e.g. Neuendorf 2002; Cottle 2007) have argued, content analysis can be particularly effective when triangulated with evidence and findings from other methods. For Cottle (2007: 5) a general issue in the sociological literature on journalism occurs when “critics of the media make an illicit leap from a critical reading of media content to inferences about the motivations or explanations accounting for this output and, on this basis, quite often ‘get it wrong’”. This issue of “inference” was helpfully ameliorated by the data I had gathered from interviews, with the responses of journalists allowing me to transition from the ‘manifest’ meanings of news texts to an analysis of their ‘latent’ functions (Merton 1949).

At this stage, it would be remiss not to mention that the method of content analysis has come under scrutiny in recent years, with some questioning its appropriateness for studying online content (e.g. Karlsson 2012; Karpf 2016; Widholm 2016). Karlsson and Sjøvaag (2015: 180-181) surmise that content analysis methods on the web are problematic because:

- 1) Data no longer exists prior to the investigation so it has to be collected continuously or in real-time
- 2) Contrary to analogue analyses, *ex post* digital data collection is problematic because digital content is not necessarily preserved in the form it was published
- 3) Digital data collection is neither non-reactive nor unobtrusive. The fact that data processing of digital media content is performed by programming and can be stored on computer hardware puts greater demands on the researcher to be in possession of the tools that enable data protection and processing
- 4) Data structures are not neutral. Unlike analogue formats, digital data can go missing, automatic collection can be interrupted, systems can be hacked and news organisations can erect digital walls around content.

While all four of these points must be taken seriously, I was confident that with a few adjustments, it would be possible to produce a content analysis research design that could overcome each of these issues. Other scholars have made a similar argument, noting that with a few minor adaptations, content analysis can still work effectively in analyses of digital media content (e.g. Weare and Lin 2000; McMillan 2001; Herring 2010). It should also be noted that at the stage of planning my methods, newer approaches to studying online content such as *Big Data Analysis* (Lewis et al. 2013) and *Liquid Content Analysis* (Karlsson 2012) were still in their relative infancy, and thus lacked the established protocols, procedures and rigor of more established methods (see Karlsson and Sjøvaag 2015). In the following sub-sections, I outline the design of my content analysis in more detail.

#### **4.4.1. Design and Rationale**

As a reminder, the overarching goal of this project was to produce a holistic description of news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. Based on the fact no systematic analysis of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* news content had ever been taken,

it was decided that the focus of the content analysis should be individual news stories published online by both organisations. In addition, two traditional, 'legacy' news organisations were selected as supplementary cases for the content analysis. The two additional cases selected were the online versions of *The Guardian* and *BBC*. Commonly regarded as bastions of 'quality' and professional journalism, I determined that these two legacy organisations would make for an interesting point of comparison with *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, and help address the issue of how, if at all, news at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* might be *different* from traditional journalism.

From a broader population of news articles by *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, *The Guardian*, and *BBC*, published between September 2016 and March 2017, two separate weeks of news coverage were selected for study. These individual weeks were picked months apart to decrease the likelihood of the same kinds of stories being repeated across coverage. Given my interest in studying the UK and US news operations of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, content was selected from the UK and US websites of all four organisations in the study. To help narrow down the sample, the unit of data collection was limited to the first 10 stories that appeared on the homepage of each website, in order of prominence. The websites of all four organisations in the sample used some form of grid system to assign importance to stories, with the most important story typically being featured at the top, or top-left corner of the homepage, and also being given more physical space (in pixels).

In an effort to preserve news content in the form it was captured, I used the screenshotting tool, *NCapture* (by *NVivo*), to download every individual news article from each website in its entirety (images, video, etc.). A backup screenshotting tool was also used to limit any loss of data. To help "freeze the flow" of online news (Karlsson and Strömbäck 2010), the homepages of each of the websites were loaded in my internet browser at the same time, before being consecutively mined for news content. Overall, the process of capturing ten new articles from eight websites for one week (Monday – Friday) took me approximately one hour per day. For the purposes of consistency, these articles were collected at the same time every day, between approximately 3-4pm

GMT. This time was also selected because it was toward the end of the working day – a period when I anticipated the (UK) websites of each organisation would be changed or updated with less regularity. This did not apply to the US websites of each organisation, which inadvertently highlights one difficulty of doing comparative research in real-time. To highlight one other issue, during the coding procedure, the *Vice News* website underwent a redesign and became subsumed under a single *Vice.com* homepage. For this reason, the second week of content collected from *Vice* contained some cultural content as well as news content.

This procedure, performed over two separate weeks, in October 2016 and March 2017, yielded a total of 800 articles (100 per organisation in each country).

#### **4.4.2. Coding Variables**

To design the appropriate general and medium-specific variables for the content analysis, I relied upon a combination of theory, past research, and a “grounded” or “emergent” process of variable identification (see Neuendorf 2002: 95-110). In the first instance, coding variables were developed that corresponded with the very basic features of news stories: their publisher, date of publication, authorial information, headline, word count, and URL. Given both digital natives’ reputations for employing a young and diverse editorial staff, it was deemed important to record the gender and ethnicity of journalists for every story.

Beyond this, I sought to design coding variables that would allow me to make inferences about the routines and practices of news workers at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. To assess the editorial priorities, division of labour, and availability of resources at both organisations, mutually exclusive variables were developed to examine the topic, format, storytelling style, and sources of news stories. To learn more about the division of news coverage at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, an exhaustive list of news topics was developed for the ‘news topic’ variable, with a final category of “can’t tell” being used in case of uncertainty. The same

process was followed for the 'news format' variable, with a list of commonly occurring formats (reports, features, investigations, interviews, etc.) being developed for the coding procedure. Here, I was particularly interested in exploring to what extent both digital natives experimented with content formats in daily news production. For this reason, unconventional categories such as 'quiz', 'game', and 'listicle' were added to the list of formats to be coded. A third variable was developed to examine the storytelling style of news stories. This was borne from an interest in interpretive journalism (Strömbäck and Salgado 2012; Fink and Schudson 2014), or journalistic "sense-making" (Singer 2008), with scholars arguing that in the digital era, journalists have "not been replaced but displaced, moved higher up the editorial chain from the production of initial observations to a role that emphasises verification and interpretation" (Anderson et al. 2012: 22). For this reason, a variable was developed to assess the dominant 'style' of news reports. Under this variable, stories were categorised according to whether they were *mainly descriptive* or *mainly interpretive*, with a final category of 'can't tell' being added in case of uncertainty. These categories were informed by the previous work of Strömbäck and colleagues (e.g. Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007; Strömbäck and Aalberg 2008; Strömbäck and Salgado 2012).

A fourth set of variables were developed to examine sourcing in individual news stories. In the broadest sense, a source is an individual, organisation, or document, that provides a journalist with information for a news story. There is an extensive literature demonstrating that journalists gravitate toward 'elite' sources when constructing news stories (Cottle 2000). In this respect, I was interested in exploring whether *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* mirrored or challenged these practices. For the purposes of clarity, this project defined a source as a provider of *attributed* textual information (e.g. the president *said*, it was *reported*, the officer *believed*), that appeared in *quotation* marks in a news story (any attributed text that *not* quoted was not recorded). A variable was developed to count the number of quoted sources that appeared in each article, and also the number of sources from social media that were quoted (including embedded content from specific social media accounts). Sources were also categorised according to *name*, *type*, *gender*, *age*, *ethnicity*, *exclusivity*

(exclusive or non-exclusive), and whether or not they were obtained from *social media*. This process would be time-intensive and so a smaller sample of stories (n=160) was selected for coding sources.

Based on an extensive reading of the literature on digital journalism (see Chapter 3), several coding variables were also developed to examine key normative issues relating to objectivity, gatekeeping, transparency, and participation. Concerning objectivity, I was particularly interested in exploring the extent to which *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* embraced more subjective, personal, and emotional forms of storytelling in news. Building on the work of other scholars (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013; Blom and Hansen 2015; Palau-Sampio 2016), several variables were developed to examine the presence of emotionality in news content. The first of these concerned *headline language*, with headlines being categorised as either 'straight' or 'emotional', depending on the presence of different linguistic techniques such as forward-referencing, personalization, and special punctuation. A second variable was designed to examine the lead paragraph of news stories. Here, stories were categorised according to whether they employed a conventional, objective 'inverted pyramid' lead paragraph, or used a more emotional 'anecdotal' or 'narrative' lead. A final third variable was developed to assess the presence of personalised storytelling in news stories, described by Wahl-Jorgensen (2013: 135) as a "narrative form which draws on the personal experience of a particular individual caught up in a story to dramatize a broader social issue".

Finally, several variables were developed to explore the related issues of gatekeeping, transparency, and participation in news. It is often assumed that by virtue of being 'native' to the digital environment, digital native news organisations have embraced new values like transparency and participation in reporting. However, these assertions have rarely been quantified or supported with other forms of empirical evidence. Following Karlsson (2010) and colleagues (Hellmueller et al. 2013; Hedman 2016), I developed variables that corresponded with two different forms of transparency: *disclosure* and *participatory* transparency. Disclosure transparency "is concerned with whether news producers are being open about how news is being produced thus



relating to making journalistic routines discernible (Tuchman, 1972) and communicating standards to but not necessarily with the audience” (Karlsson 2010: 537). Meanwhile, participatory transparency “aims at getting the audience *involved* in the news production process in various ways” (Karlsson 2010: 538, emphasis added).

To examine disclosure transparency, a number of exclusive variables were developed to study transparency features of news stories. The first variable related to the use of time stamps in news articles, with individual stories being assessed for how much information they provided about the time of their publication. The second variable concerned the amount of authorial information disclosed in news stories, ranging on an ordinal scale from no authorial information, to an author’s name and contact details. A third, fourth and fifth variable were also developed to examine the use of hyperlinks in news stories. The first of these variables simply counted the number of hyperlinks that appeared per article. The second, split across two variables, assessed whether these were internal or external links, and counted the number of each. Moving on to participatory transparency, one variable was developed to examine various ways in which the audience was invited to participate in the news, via activities like *commenting* and *sharing* (see Peters and Witschge 2015). This variable was divided into seven categories, corresponding with different degrees of participation

In total, 37 mutually exclusive variables were developed to analyse content produced by *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, *The Guardian*, and *BBC*.

#### **4.4.3. Coding Scheme and Codebook**

Following the development of coding variables and corresponding categories, a formal coding scheme was constructed to assist with the process of data collection (see Appendix F). This was accompanied by a codebook that explained the goals of the study, specified the content to be examined, and provided definitions of each of the variables, including instructions on how to code content to particular variables and categories (see Appendix G). This

project relied on human coding, rather the computer coding. However, the actual process of coding was performed using the statistical software package, *SPSS*.

#### **4.4.4. Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis for this research project is defined as a single news story.

#### **4.4.5. Pilot Study**

Reliability, according to Neuendorf (2002: 141), “can be defined as the extent to which a measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials”. Reliability is considered essential in quantitative content analysis; partly because of its emphasis on the objectivity of the researcher and partly because “without reliability, a measure cannot be considered valid” (Neuendorf 2002: 141). To establish reliability, a pilot study was conducted on a small sub-sample of news articles. This was performed with the help of two coders external to the project. Coders were trained with the help of the codebook, and any key concepts or variables that required further clarification were explained and updated accordingly. Coding was performed on a randomised sample of 40 news articles (10 from each outlet), or 5% of the total sample. The test resulted in a percentage agreement ranging from 72.5% to 100% across variables. The most contentious variable was source exclusivity (72.5%), where coders sometimes had difficulty identifying whether a source was obtained exclusively by the journalist, or indirectly, via another source. One category measuring ethnicity of journalists and sources (‘mixed race’) was dropped because of imprecision in the coding. Also, several variables measuring news values (see Harcup and O’Neill 2001), were dropped from the study because of poor reliability.

#### **4.4.6. Results and Analysis**

Once all news content was coded, *SPSS* was used to generate various descriptive statistics about the data. These results were initially studied in

isolation, before being recombined with the data from the qualitative interviews. This triangulation of methods was performed to look for evidence of convergence, consistency, or contradiction in the findings (Mathison 1988).

#### **4.5. Limitations**

Before proceeding to discuss the empirical findings, it is important to acknowledge some limitations of this study. First, although every effort has been made to provide a *holistic* description of news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, the problems of gaining access to observe journalists' work first-hand, means that some detail on the minutiae of everyday news work is missing from this study. These interactions, as Ryfe (2016: 46) notes, can provide "an extraordinary window into the culture of journalism". On this point, there is also a strong case to make that the culture of journalism has expanded in recent years to include a more diverse cast of workers, in particular technologists (project managers, computer programmers, user-experience designers, etc.), whose position in news production has been elevated in a converged media environment (Nielsen 2012). These actors – who were certainly present in the news production process at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* – were not included in this study. Instead, reporters and editors were prioritised as interview subjects.

On the quantitative strand of this study, one limitation relates to the fact the content analysis only focused on news articles that appeared on the homepage of the websites of *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, *The Guardian*, and *BBC*. This does not accurately represent the full breadth of news content published by all four organisations. In a single day, a large online news organisation will typically post hundreds of individual pieces of content (text, images, video, etc.) across a multitude of platforms. This is particularly true of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, which, by virtue of being 'native' to the digital environment, have always relied upon platforms like *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *Google*, to reach audiences (Nicholls et al. 2017). Hence, this study can only claim to offer a snapshot – albeit an important one – of the news content published by both organisations. Finally, the conclusions drawn in this study about *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, do not speak for

*all* digital native news organisations. Simply put, this group of actors are too heterogeneous to be ever be discussed or represented in a unitary fashion.

## **Part 3**

# **Findings and Discussion**

## 5. Building News: BuzzFeed and Vice's arrival in the journalistic field

There is no tried and tested formula for building a news organisation in the digital era. Rather, in this period of “mind-blowing uncertainty in the evolution of journalism” (Domingo et al. 2015), the field has been the subject of manifold experiments, ranging from small to large; from local to global (Jurkowitz 2014; Carlson and Usher 2016; Nicholls et al. 2016). Among the most noteworthy of these are *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, which, along with other digital natives like *The Huffington Post*, *Quartz*, *First Look*, and *Vox*, have been widely praised for being “innovators” in digital news (Küng 2015; Carlson and Usher 2016). As a catch-all term, innovation is used expansively in the literature to refer to “business models, collaborations, technologies, practices, and content” (Kreiss and Brennen 2016: 306). It is often taken-for-granted that digital natives are doing something *different* in these areas, though usually in the absence of any serious or sustained critical analysis.

To help remedy these shortcomings, this chapter provides a detailed overview of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s trajectory into the field of journalism: their origins, business models, audiences, and content strategies. This is followed by a description of some of the formal characteristics of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s news content, based on results from the content analysis. The findings from this exploratory chapter help foreground the rest of the study, and are referenced at different points throughout the thesis.

### 5.1. Green Shoots

Perhaps the first thing to note about *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* is they are “reverse-entrants” to news, meaning they “discovered news while focusing on other strategic agendas” (Küng 2015: 4). For several years, both organisations remained outside the field of journalism – though still inside the larger field of mass cultural production – producing mainly entertainment content for young

audiences aged approximately 18-34<sup>14</sup>. Although *Vice* is often recognised as a digital native, it began as a free magazine in Montreal in 1994, reporting on the counterculture of the 1990s in a typically “adolescent, male, and proudly boorish” manner (Widdicombe 2013). In 2006 – the same year *BuzzFeed* launched – *Vice* signed a deal with *MTV* to produce video content, which was made accessible for free on the *VBS.tv*<sup>15</sup> online platform and also distributed by *Vice* across several other online platforms, most notably, *YouTube*. *Vice*’s first foray into online video was widely regarded as a turning point for the organisation, and ultimately led to the production of several short documentary films, focusing on subjects as diverse as heavy metal music in Baghdad (2010), North Korean labour camps (2011), the weapons trade in Pakistan (2011), and cannibalism in Liberia (2012). These videos were typically shot in a “lo-fi” documentary style, and employed an “ostensibly raw aesthetic” (Ip 2015a) to draw the viewer closer to the action. *Vice* have described this documentary style as “immersionism”, which Kevin Sutcliffe, the former head of programming for *Vice News*, explains as follows:

“You might call it more relaxed. It’s involved, it’s embedded, it’s responsive, it has an emotional connection between the reporter and the people who are consuming it. Those things make it seem fresh and less part of a corporate enterprise, which a lot of news feels like” (cited in Riordan 2014: 53).

If *Vice*’s merging with digital technologies was somewhat serendipitous, *BuzzFeed*’s was more deliberate, with Jonah Peretti, founder of *BuzzFeed* and former co-founder of the *Huffington Post*, engaging in a series of experiments

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<sup>14</sup> This age-group has colloquially been referred to as “millennials”, though the term is becoming less accurate as time progresses. According to Dimock (2018), a millennial would qualify as “anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (ages 22-37 in 2018)”. In this respect, it would be more accurate to say *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* target a cross-generational audience, including those born *after* 1996 who nonetheless still comfortably fit within the 18-34 age bracket.

<sup>15</sup> *VBS.tv* was a joint-funded venture between *Vice* and *Viacom*, who also own *MTV* (Levine 2007).

to learn more about how media could spread and “go viral” on the Internet<sup>16</sup>. These experiments were part of a side project known as *BuzzFeed Labs*, which Peretti set-up while still working for the *Huffington Post*. One of the first products he created was *Buzz Bot*, an instant messaging programme designed to track trends in the online blogosphere and then send its users a link to the most popular stories of the day (Shontell 2012). The website, [BuzzFeed.com](http://BuzzFeed.com), was launched in 2006, and after AOL purchased the *Huffington Post* in 2011, Peretti left the organisation to focus full-time on growing his own business. In this same period, *BuzzFeed* also began moving away from aggregation to producing its own original content. In keeping with Jonah Peretti’s interest in virality, this was underpinned by a strong emphasis on data science. As Küng (2015) explains:

“At heart, BuzzFeed is about data science, about analysing user data to decode how and why content is shared and distributed. User data are captured, analysed and manipulated in a perpetual loop of analysis, interpretation, experimentation, feedback, and refinement. BuzzFeed’s goal is to identify which characteristics have a predictive relationship with virality, maximise these and thus accelerate the ‘spread rate’ of its content” (Küng 2015: 58).

This translated into the creation of multiple viral content experiments, most notably “listicles” (e.g. ‘21 signs you’re overly empathetic’), and quizzes (e.g. ‘Which pop star are you based on your Zodiac sign?’). An essential ingredient in this process was social media networks, particularly *Facebook*, which became the bedrock of *BuzzFeed*’s “distributed” approach to content (Nguyen 2016). By 2015, Jonah Peretti had arrived at the conclusion that the best way to maximise the spread and reach of online content was to aggressively

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<sup>16</sup> The period in which Peretti conducted these experiments has sometimes been referred to as a “second-wave” of technological development, when the wider diffusion of broadband and rise of web 2.0 technologies (including social media platforms) made it possible for media organisations to reach new audiences and interact with them in new ways (see Bell et al. 2017: 16).



promote it off-site, on social media platforms<sup>17</sup>. At one point, it was estimated that 77% of *BuzzFeed*'s content views occurred outside its website (Morrissey 2016). More recently, the company has been trying to diversify its approach (Peretti 2017a).

In the first decade of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s online development, spanning 2006-2016, both companies grew to the point where they began attracting huge amounts of publicity and significant commercial interest. This materialised in several major investments from venture capital firms, as well as strategic partnerships with various media brands and digital intermediaries. Beyond these irregular injections of economic capital, a more sustained source of revenue for *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* has been income earned from advertising. As their primary source of revenue, advertising has largely dictated *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s business model, which as Nicholls et al. (2016: 7) note:

“[U]ses a combination of on-site and off-site distribution, often involving aggressive search engine optimisation and social media promotion coupled with content that is free at the point of consumption, to build large audiences across multiple countries, generally on the basis of a much leaner organisation than most legacy media”.

Perhaps what distinguishes *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* from other advertising-based media is that they attract a young audience<sup>18</sup>. *Vice*, for instance, have described themselves as a “network...built around millennial passions”, and claim to reach twice as many 18-34-year-olds compared to other media channels (Vice 2016a). *BuzzFeed*, meanwhile, has a global audience of approximately 650 million and claims to reach three out of five U.S millennials monthly (BuzzFeed

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<sup>17</sup> While social media sites also make up a significant portion of *Vice*'s total traffic (Corcoran 2017), the company has a more diversified publishing strategy, producing its own monthly magazine as well as content for various television networks around the world, including its own channel, *VICELAND*, which launched in the UK and US in 2016.

<sup>18</sup> The main target audience of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* – young people – represent an attractive and highly coveted demographic for advertisers, partly because of their size in terms of overall population, and secondly, because of their estimated purchasing power (Bazaarvoice 2012; comScore 2012; James 2016).

2018a). For this reason, they have been particularly attractive to advertisers, who have offered significant amounts of revenue in exchange for audience data<sup>19</sup> and the use of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s production expertise and platform. In recent years, for example, the advertising divisions of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have partnered with major brands like *Intel*, *Verizon*, *Samsung*, *Warner Brothers*, and *Nike* to create quizzes, games, videos, articles, and other forms of sponsored content<sup>20</sup> using their signature style.

## 5.2. Investing in News

Buoyed by the growth of their entertainment businesses, in December 2011 and December 2013, respectively, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* began investing in news, first at home, in the US<sup>21</sup>, and then later, abroad. This decision seemed to be based on a simple premise: that young people had particular needs and interests that could be exploited for news, as well as entertainment purposes. According to the leaders of both organisations, there was an obvious gap in the market for a youth-focused news brand, with the current crop of media being criticised for failing to adequately cater to the needs and interests of young people<sup>22</sup>:

“For news, I was saying to my staff, it’s sort of a crazy time to be alive, but no better time to launch a news platform. We’re one of the fastest growing news platforms in the world for a reason, and it’s because there’s a lot of news out there. Like the Cold War built *CBS*, *ABC* and *NBC*, and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq built *CNN*, this sort of

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<sup>19</sup> By user data I am referring to “information about their uploaded data, social networks, their interests, demographic data, their browsing and interaction behaviour”, which “is sold to the advertisers as a commodity” (Fuchs 2012: 704).

<sup>20</sup> I discuss the issues surrounding sponsored content in a separate section entitled “Funding and Partnerships” (6.2) which can be found in the next chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Although *Vice* was founded in Montreal, Canada, its headquarters and main news operation is located in Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>22</sup> There is at least some evidence to suggest that these critiques have an empirical foundation. Several studies in recent decades have pointed to the issue of younger audiences being increasingly turned off by the style, presentation, content, and delivery of traditional news (e.g. Buckingham 2000; Mindich 2005; Costera Meijer 2007; Banaji and Buckingham 2013; Costera Meijer and Kormelink 2014).

economic turmoil, this social chaos and this generational de-stratification is what is fuelling the rise of *Vice News*... I think that where we find our place in that is, basically, just being the voice of a very disenfranchised [population] ... I think that going forward, as Generation Y gets more and more powerful, we're going to be [their] voice" (Smith 2016a).

"Despite the struggles of the traditional media, there remains an insatiable desire for great reporting, entertaining content, and powerful storytelling. Facebook, Twitter, and other Silicon Valley-based social sites are amazing distribution platforms, but user generated content alone isn't enough to fill the hole left by the ongoing decline of print newspapers and magazines. The world needs sustainable, profitable, vibrant, content companies staffed by dedicated professionals; especially content for people that grew up on the web, whose entertainment and news interests are largely neglected by television and newspapers" (Peretti 2013).

On this basis, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* began investing in several different areas of news coverage, focusing on a mixture of traditional beats such as politics, crime, business, international affairs, and technology, as well as subjects more specific to their audience, for example, issues concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, gender equality, drugs, and civil rights issues (Ip 2015b; Küng 2015; Painter et al. 2017). This investment was supported by the recruitment of a large number of "young, versatile, tech-savvy, high energy staff" (cited in Phillips et al. 2009: 78), as well as several high profile and experienced journalists, who were hired to help lead their respective news operations. For example, former *Politico* reporter, Ben Smith, was appointed editor-in-chief of *BuzzFeed News (US)* in 2011 and former deputy editor of *The Guardian*, Janine Gibson was hired in 2015 to lead *BuzzFeed's* UK news team (its first foreign venture). Other major hires included Mark Schoofs, a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist who joined the *BuzzFeed US* from *ProPublica* in 2013, and the award-winning *Sunday Times* journalist, Heidi Blake, who was hired in 2015 to lead *BuzzFeed's* investigative journalism team in the UK. Similarly, early on in the development of *Vice News*, several experienced reporters and

editors were hired from legacy media such as *Channel 4*, *NME*, *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

As “reverse-entrants” to the field (Küng 2015), *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* looked to import many of the principles that had led to their success as entertainment producers, and apply them to news. For *Vice*, this meant a strong emphasis on video-based content, and on so-called “news from the edge”<sup>23</sup>, typically centring on dangerous and war-torn locations around the world to explore topics like: political defectors in North Korea (2013); The rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (2014); The heroin epidemic in Iran (2014); and the civil war in Ukraine (2014). Much of this content was presented in *Vice*’s signature “immersionist” style, which has drawn comparisons with the gonzo journalism of the 1970s, popularised by figures like Hunter S. Thompson (see Widdicombe 2013). By contrast, *BuzzFeed* appeared more interested in applying their expertise in data science to journalism, because, according to Riordan (2014: 48), Jonah Peretti had “worked out that news content, not just lists, could be shareable and viral“. This gave rise to a news process shaped strongly by the affordances and algorithms of social platforms; leading to an interest in creating news that people wanted to *share* (Küng 2015). Much like *Vice* and their style of immersionism, this motive seemed to push *BuzzFeed* toward pursuing a style and form of news that eschewed traditional journalistic conventions, emphasising, for example, subjective, emotional and personal narratives over more “objective” styles of news (Riordan 2014; Tandoc 2017).

The main point here is that – owing to a combination of technological factors and audience considerations – *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have entered journalism with ideas and values that would appear to “clash with the prevailing norms of production and the expectations of the field” (Bourdieu 1993: 57). In the second half of this chapter, I begin to provide an empirical basis for this hypothesis by examining some of the basic features of news content at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*.

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<sup>23</sup> This phrase comes from the tagline *Vice* used in their *HBO* television documentary series.

This is compared with news produced by two traditional news organisations: *The Guardian* and *BBC*.

### **5.3. News Content at BuzzFeed and Vice**

As outlined in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the quantitative portion of this study is based on an analysis of 800 news articles, gathered over two separate weeks in October 2016 and March 2017. These articles were collected from the UK and US websites of *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, *The Guardian* and the *BBC*, and coded according to a pre-defined set of variables (see Appendix F). Stories that were repeated by the same outlet across more than one day were discounted from the sample, which left a total of 753 news articles. In the results below, data from the UK and US outlets of each news website are combined, except in instances where significant differences between the two outlets have been recorded. It should also be noted that the following analysis is mainly descriptive, with a more detailed discussion of these findings taking place in the other empirical chapters of this thesis. Articles are examined according to authorship, format, topic, and word count.

#### **5.3.1. Authorship**

The first variable examined concerned the authorship of news articles. The objective here was to see if there were any notable differences in the demographic makeup of journalists' working for *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. Where possible, the personal bylines of news articles were coded according to gender and ethnicity. The age of authors proved too difficult to validate, and so this variable was not used in the final coding procedure. Articles that contained more than one author were also coded, and form part of the combined totals below:

**Table 1: Author gender of news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>VICE (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Male (%)	46.2	60.8	60.2	65.7
Female (%)	53.3	39.2	39.8	34.3
Can't tell (%)	0.5	0	0	0
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

At *Vice*, *The Guardian*, and *BBC*<sup>24</sup>, male journalists authored more stories than female journalists, by a difference of around 20%. These findings are largely consistent with the existing literature on gender in (Anglo-American) journalism, which has shown that the profession is generally dominated by males (National Council for the Training of Journalists 2013; Willnat and Weaver 2014; Thurman et al. 2016). In this regard, *BuzzFeed* represented somewhat of an outlier, with female-authored reports outweighing male-authored reports by just over seven percentage points. This difference was more extreme at *BuzzFeed US*, where female-authored news articles made up 60.6% of total coverage; almost an exact inverse of the male-female ratio at the other three outlets in the sample. Following gender, authors of news stories were also categorised according to their ethnicity:

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<sup>24</sup> One important caveat here is that the *BBC* generally published no authorial information in their news articles, meaning the sample size of authors for the *BBC* was very small (35 authors in total).

**Table 2: Author ethnicity of news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>VICE (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
White (%)	78.0	83.3	84.9	82.8
Black (%)	5.6	1.9	0.9	0
Asian and Indian (%)	10.8	3.1	6.2	0
Hispanic (%)	1.4	1.2	0.9	2.9
Can't tell (%)	4.2	10.5	7.1	14.3
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

As the data shows, white authors dominated across all outlets, featuring the most in stories published by *The Guardian*, followed by *Vice*, *BBC*, and *BuzzFeed*. Again, this is largely consistent with the data on the demographic composition of journalists, which has shown that the profession is dominated by whites (National Council for the Training of Journalists 2013; Willnat and Weaver 2014; Thurman et al. 2016). *BuzzFeed*, however, did publish a notably higher number of Asian, Indian, and black journalists, compared to the other three outlets in the sample. The results of this analysis closely match diversity statistics published by *BuzzFeed* this year, which indicated that 7.9% of its US news team was black, and 13.8% Asian (Peretti 2018a). Demographic data on its UK operation has not been made public.

### **5.3.2. Format**

Secondly, articles were categorised by format. Based on digital natives' reputation for experimenting with non-traditional content formats (Carlson and

Usher 2016; Usher 2017), I hypothesised that greater format variation might be found in news articles published by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*.

**Table 3: Format of news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>VICE (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Report (%)	71	34.5	83.5	85
Feature / investigation (%)	21.2	29.9	7	2.5
Interview (%)	1.1	10.3	0.5	1
Comment / opinion (%)	0.6	12.5	2	3.5
Review (%)	0	1.2	0	0
Listicle (%)	3.9	0	0	1
Quiz (%)	0	0	0	0
Game (%)	0	0	0	0
Aggregated content (%)	1.1	5.8	0.5	4
Live blog (%)	1.1	0.6	5.5	1.5
Other / can't tell (%)	0	5.2	1	1.5
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

Generally speaking, both digital natives leaned toward using traditional news formats in daily coverage, while unconventional formats such as “listicles” and quizzes barely featured. This being said, both *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* showed



greater variation *between* formats compared to *The Guardian* and the *BBC*. For example, while the standard “report” format dominated news published by the two legacy organisations, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* devoted significantly more resources to formats like features, investigations, interviews, and opinion or comment pieces. This was particularly true of *Vice*, which only employed the “report” format in about a third of news stories.

### 5.3.3. News Topic

News articles were also coded by topic. The purpose here was to see if coverage by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* varied significantly by subject matter, compared to the two legacy organisations in the sample.

**Table 4: Topic of news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>VICE (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Government / politics (%)	31.9	22.4	37.5	37
Social issues, rights, and protests (%)	18.4	22.4	11	7
Crime and terrorism (%)	8.9	14.4	17	21.5
Science, education, and technology (%)	8.9	1.7	4	4.5
Health (%)	2.8	1.7	2	2.5
Business and economy (%)	8.4	2.9	14.5	11
Entertainment and arts (%)	12.3	18.4	8.5	9

Lifestyle (trends, fashion, travel) (%)	0	6.9	0	0
Accidents and disasters (%)	2.8	0.6	1	3.5
Energy and environment (%)	1.7	0	3.5	1
Other / can't tell (%)	3.9	8.6	1	3
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

There were some notable similarities and differences in news topics covered by each organisation. First, all organisations dedicated a substantial portion of resources to covering what might very broadly be described as “hard” news topics: government, politics, business, the economy<sup>25</sup>. Still, *The Guardian* and *BBC* covered these subjects more often than *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. Conversely, both digital natives published significantly more news about social rights, issues, and protests. *Vice* also featured more news about arts and entertainment – a difference which can be explained by the fact that stories were collected from the *Vice.com* website, rather than the *Vice News* website, during the second week of coding<sup>26</sup>. Taking only the first week of *Vice* content into account, stories on the subject of entertainment and arts did not feature at all on either their UK or US website. Outside these observations, there were no significant differences in news topic between each news organisation. *BuzzFeed* covered slightly more news about science and technology. Meanwhile, stories about crime and terrorism featured heavily in coverage by *The Guardian*, *BBC*, and *Vice*. News about lifestyle, health, energy and the environment, all hardly featured.

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<sup>25</sup> Although there is wide disagreement on what constitutes “hard” and “soft” news, Reinemann et al. (2011: 11) suggest that, generally speaking: “Foreign and domestic politics, economy and finance are usually regarded as hard news. News about sports, celebrities, royal families, crime, scandals and service are regarded as soft news”.

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 4 (section 4.4).

#### 5.3.4. Word Count

Finally, articles were assessed by word count<sup>27</sup>. Based on *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s interest in producing news for mobile devices and for social media, it was hypothesised that news stories by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* would be shorter in length than *The Guardian* and *BBC*.

**Table 5: Word count of news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=177)</b>	<b>VICE (n=173)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=189)</b>	<b>BBC (n=197)</b>
Mean word count	1139.9	990.3	812.9	522.5
Median word count	648.5	941	715.5	499

The results generally seemed to disprove this hypothesis. In fact, *BuzzFeed*'s articles had the highest *mean* word count (1139.9), while *Vice*'s articles had the highest *median* word count (941). One obvious explanation for this was the relatively high number of features and investigations published by both organisations, which typically had higher word counts than standard news reports (see section 5.3.2.). Comparing the mean word counts of news reports in isolation, the following results emerge:

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<sup>27</sup> Note: news stories in the "live blog" format were discounted from this sample because of their ever-changing word counts.

**Table 6: Word count of news reports**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=127)</b>	<b>VICE (n=60)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=167)</b>	<b>BBC (n=170)</b>
Mean word count	576.5	483.4	725.8	492.63

As shown, there was no substantial difference between *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, and the *BBC*, although *Vice* did technically publish the shortest news reports on average. *The Guardian* was the major outlier, averaging around 150-200 more words per article compared to the other three outlets in the sample.

## 6. Organising News: The Structure and Organisation of News at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*

Having traced *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s passage into journalism and described some of the basic features of their news content, this chapter moves on to examine the structure and organisation of news at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. Several points from the preceding discussion are revisited, including *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s motivations, goals, business model, audience, staff, and news coverage. Collectively, these "invisible structures" play an important role in shaping journalistic norms and practices, and have the potential to reveal more about "the objective power relations that structure the field" (Bourdieu 1998: 39-40). Their exposition also provides the groundwork for the later chapters of this thesis. Key aspects of the enquiry include:

- a) How *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* 'arrived' at news, their journalistic ethos and continuing trajectory in the field
- b) The underlying motives behind staff recruitment and the arrangement of news into particular 'beats' and topic areas
- c) The position of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* in the journalistic field at large.

The findings of this chapter introduce qualitative data from interviews conducted with 24 news staff at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. This data has been combined with a variety of secondary sources, which have proven particularly valuable in light of the already-documented problems gaining access to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*<sup>28</sup>. Nonetheless, while this information has been helpful, the general lack of public information about *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* (the number of staff they employ, their yearly revenue, their various sources of funding, etc.), has come at a cost to providing a more detailed explanation of the operations of both companies. This would seem indicative of a general issue in researching commercial, privately-owned media, as noted in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

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<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the issues pertaining to access, please refer back to section 4.2 of this thesis.

Despite these limitations, this chapter makes an important intervention by revealing the “hybrid” (Chadwick 2013) structure of news at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. As two organisations regularly lauded for being “innovators” in digital news (Küng 2015), this analysis shows that *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* place an equally high emphasis on culturally sanctified journalistic forms and practices, in an effort to boost their professional and public legitimacy. The opening section of this chapter (6.1) begins by describing the key motivating factors behind *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s entry into journalism. Following this, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s primary sources of funding are broken down and analysed (6.2). From here, the news operations of both organisations are examined in reference to their staff (6.3), and division of news coverage (6.4), principally from a Bourdieusian perspective. Finally, I provide a short conclusion (6.5) summarising the key findings from the chapter.

## 6.1. Motivating Factors

“When we first started, the way that people were connecting with each other online was internet memes and humor and cute animals...Then what we saw was that social became much bigger, and people started to do that with news... When people started to share news we said, ‘Wow, we’d love to be in the news industry. We’d love to make news’. We didn’t think we could because people weren’t sharing news. All of a sudden, we started to see news on Facebook and Twitter, and it made us realize we could go into that business. We’ve evolved along with the way consumers have evolved and the way social interactions have evolved online” – Jonah Peretti, founder and CEO of *BuzzFeed* (Peretti 2017b).

"Our audience is actually saying make more news. We tell stories that a lot of other people don't tell, and we tell them in a different way. That's what's really been resonating with our audience. So, we're going to double down" – Shane Smith, co-founder and former CEO of *Vice* (Smith 2013).

When considering first about *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s motivations for entering the field, it is helpful to view these factors in Bourdieu's terms, as related to the pursuit of different forms of *capital*<sup>29</sup>, or resources. The first and most obvious of these is economic capital, with both organisations recognising news as a potentially effective way of enhancing their public recognition, "measured by numbers of readers, listeners, or viewers, and therefore, in the final analysis, by sales and profits" (Bourdieu 1998: 70). In seeking to capitalise and expand their existing audience, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have also been motivated to introduce *new* forms of cultural capital to the field; that is, specialist skills, knowledge, expertise, and tastes – honed during the process of making entertainment content – which were deemed to have significant migratory value in the journalistic field. A third and final and important motivating factor relates to the symbolic capital<sup>30</sup> of the journalistic field *in toto*. Discussing this aspect, Painter et al. (2017: 18) argue that the economic promise of journalism was secondary to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s assumption that being associated with its practice might quickly "add reputation and credibility to their brands". There is a certain logic to this if one considers that the subfield of journalism is generally higher in symbolic and cultural capital compared to the broader field of cultural production (Hesmondhalgh 2006). In an interview with *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jonah Peretti acknowledged this, recognising that news brought certain "reputational benefits" to *BuzzFeed*'s brand that would be harder to earn if the company was solely focusing on entertainment (Peretti 2018b). Although Shane Smith of *Vice* has been less explicit in making this argument, many of my interviewees from *Vice* similarly cited the symbolic benefits of journalism as a major factor behind *Vice*'s initial decision to invest in news<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> As a reminder, "capital" concerns not only material resources like currency and assets, but also less tangible forms of capital like knowledge, reputation and prestige (Bourdieu 1986).

<sup>30</sup> As a reminder, symbolic capital refers to "symbolic forms of power, such as prestige and status" (Siapera and Spyridou 2012: 81).

<sup>31</sup> I discuss these responses in more detail later in this chapter.

## 6.2. Funding and Partnerships

In principle, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have relied on two major sources of revenue to fund their businesses: 1) external investment, chiefly in the form of venture capital and content partnerships, and 2) native advertising, elsewhere referred to as sponsored or branded content. A potentially useful way of thinking about *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s approach to funding and partnerships is in terms of *integration*. As Gade and Raviola (2009) write, in response to economic uncertainty, changing markets, and new technologies, media firms have tried to become more "structurally integrated...[reducing] organizational barriers both within and among firms in ways that spur innovation" (Gade and Raviola 2009: 88). This shift has had implications on how organisations interact with one another (*inter-firm integration*), and structure themselves internally (*intra-firm integration*). In this section, I consider these two aspects of integration from the perspective of field theory, looking at how partnerships and sources of funding are premised on different exchanges of *capital*, or resources, which have brought various benefits to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, while also being a portend of wider change in the field.

### 6.2.1. Inter-Firm Integration: Investments, Partnerships, and Deals

Since their launch, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have relied on a range of investments, strategic partnerships and deals to help support their operations. A major portion of this funding has come from venture capitalists and legacy media organisations. For example, *Vice*'s investors now include established media such as *21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox*, who own a 5% stake in the business, and *A&E Networks* (50% of which is owned by *Disney*), who paid \$250 million for a 10% share of *Vice* in 2014 (Küng 2015). Similarly, *BuzzFeed* has attracted investment from *NBCUniversal*, a subsidiary of the telecommunications conglomerate, *Comcast*, which has invested \$200m in the company on two occasions, most recently in 2016 (Kafka 2016). In recent years, both companies have also agreed to various partnerships with other media brands such as *HBO*, *The Guardian*, *NBC Universal*; and also with digital intermediaries including *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *YouTube*. These "strategic alliances" have



involved “sharing knowledge, resources, and access to markets” (Gade and Raviola 2009: 90), or various forms of *capital*, to put it in Bourdieu’s terms. For *Vice* and *BuzzFeed*, these alliances have typically been premised on an exchange of editorial expertise for money, or cultural capital for economic capital. For instance, in 2014, the video sharing platform, *YouTube*, launched a major campaign to promote the *Vice News* channel on its own platform, both online, and via press and television (Griffith 2014). The following year, *Vice* announced a major partnership deal with the television network, *HBO*, that allowed the company to “vastly expand its reporting capabilities” by providing the funding for a daily newscast as well as numerous video documentaries which were made available on *HBO’s NOW* online streaming service (*Vice* 2015a). Many journalists I interviewed described *Vice’s* deal with *HBO* as a major turning point for the organisation, a “graduation of sorts into the [journalistic] field” that led to *Vice* being recognised as a “potential player in the emerging digital sphere” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*). As one journalist put it:

“*HBO* came with big money for a deal, and so [*Vice*] chased that and the *YouTube* money went away...I also think that Shane [Smith] is driven a lot by prestige. I think he’s got a chip on his shoulder, where, you know, he feels like no one takes him seriously as a journalist or as a business man and *HBO* is a real credible platform, it’s a kind of blue-chip prestige channel here in the States...So first and foremost *HBO* gave [*Vice*] a tonne of money I’m sure, but secondly it feeds into his desire to be legitimate” (Respondent J, editor, *Vice US*).

Similar to *Vice*, *BuzzFeed* also signed a number of deals with other media to help propel the growth of their business. Given the centrality of social media to their business model, many of these deals have involved entering partnerships with large social platforms, with *BuzzFeed* delivering fresh entertainment and news content to these sites in exchange for new advertising opportunities and

expanded audience reach<sup>32</sup> (economic capital). Very recently, *BuzzFeed* agreed a partnership with the social platform, *Twitter*, to produce a weekday morning show called *AM to DM*, which debuted in September 2017 and is said to receive approximately one million viewers per episode (McAteer 2018).

Outside these deals, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have occasionally entered into partnerships with legacy news organisations, sharing expertise, revenues, and audiences<sup>33</sup>. For example, in 2016, *The Guardian* announced a partnership with *Vice*, which included the production of various “co-branded special reports” as well as other forms of news content targeted towards younger audiences (Sweney 2016a). Likewise, *BuzzFeed* have entered into agreements with legacy organisations like the *BBC* to produce a series of special, one-off, joint news investigations (Burrell 2016; Ridley 2016). One journalist from *BuzzFeed* outlined the various ways in which this partnership benefited each organisation:

“[The *BBC*] get the advantage of having a properly resourced investigations team... who can, you know go through the documents, track people down; all those key investigative skills...The other thing we bring to traditional press, like the *BBC*, is a [young] audience...So we are reaching an audience they are struggling to reach...We’ve never regretted a collaboration with the *BBC* because of the impact and weight of having them on side...I think having the *BBC* backing has gotten [stories] to such a wide audience...So it’s been really good in terms of reaching influential people in order to have some kind of impact” (Respondent A, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

In this manner, journalists reflected on *BuzzFeed*’s partnership with the *BBC* much in the same way journalists from *Vice* discussed the business deal with

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<sup>32</sup> For a useful account of the relationship between news organisations and social platforms, see Bell et al. (2017).

<sup>33</sup> The trend of inter-organisational partnerships is a phenomenon that has been remarked upon in the media industries at large. Mendelson (2000) makes the distinction between the present “information-age architecture” of organisations and the “industrial-age architecture”, prevalent for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Information-age architecture, he argues, involves “network[s] of firms bound together by information sharing and reciprocity, rather than ownership and control” (Mendelson 2000: 520).

*HBO*, drawing particular attention to the symbolic benefits of partnering with news organisations that already occupied a powerful position in the field<sup>34</sup>. One might consider this an example of what Brooks (2016: 131) calls “the proximity paradigm”, which describes the way new entrants to the field gain “reputation, distinction, and/or prestige” through affiliation with individuals or organisations rich in symbolic capital.

### **6.2.2. Intra-Firm Integration: Native Advertising**

Alongside external forms of support and funding, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have contributed a significant amount of their own economic capital to fund their respective news operations. A major source of this capital has been revenue earned from native advertising<sup>35</sup> (sometimes referred to as ‘sponsored’ or ‘branded’ content). Native advertising is distinct from other forms of advertising because of the way it is designed to mimic editorial content. For this reason, it has been controversial from its outset, particularly in the field of journalism where some scholars have argued that it might contribute to the erosion of institutional credibility by weakening journalistic autonomy (Carlson 2015; Schauster et al. 2016; Amazeen and Muddiman 2017; Amazeen and Wojdyski 2018). Despite these concerns, native advertising has steadily grown to become a significant source of revenue for many new and established media organisations, and an important part of the online advertising ecosystem in general (Fullerton 2017). The success of native advertising is a product of several interlinked trends which it is only possible to sketch here. First, native advertising tends to yield higher returns on investment compared to traditional online formats like display advertising. Second, there has been a general rise in the number of people using ad-blocking software, which native advertising

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<sup>34</sup> In Bourdieu’s terms, the most powerful actors within any social field are those that manage to combine high economic capital with high symbolic capital (Marlière 1998). It is these players, according to Bourdieu, who have the greatest power to “consecrate”, that is, “deform the space” around themselves so that their particular ideas and values are considered “worthy of wider consideration” by other members of the field (Benson 1999: 469).

<sup>35</sup> According to one report in the *Wall Street Journal*, the lion’s share of total revenue earned by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* in 2016, was derived from native advertising (Marshall and Alpert 2016).

can evade by seamlessly blending with other editorial content. Third, more people are accessing news and other information via their mobile phones, which has encouraged a move away from advertising formats that feel overly intrusive or disruptive to the experience of the individual user (Newman and Austin 2015). Finally, and perhaps more tangentially, there is a general sense among advertisers that people have become more sceptical about advertising and brand messages, and in this regard, native advertising has been seen as a better way of getting past people's so-called "bullshit detectors" (Benady 2014).

As two pioneers of native advertising, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have often been credited for introducing this format to other actors in the field (e.g. Oakes 2015; Rodriguez 2016). Perhaps to avoid controversy, journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* rarely acknowledged or spoke about these issues. This might also be because they were also not generally asked any direct questions about native advertising in interviews (see Appendix B). One editor from *BuzzFeed UK* insisted that they knew "nothing about the mechanics of the advertising side other than they seem to be making money", suggesting that there remained a "strong Chinese wall" between the business and editorial sides of the organisation (Respondent L, editor, *BuzzFeed UK*). At *Vice*, a couple of editors from the US suggested that the company had practiced "questionable ethics" in its fledgling years, which improved as the organisation matured (Respondent D, reporter, *Vice US*). Referring to this early period, one editor mentioned that when they first joined the organisation, they had received an email from the advertising department about a story they were working on because it "implicated [redacted brand name] and other Western brands" (Respondent J, editor, *Vice US*). The story was never published although they could not confirm whether this was directly because of commercial concerns.

Publically, there have also been moments at both companies where the "Chinese Wall" between business and editorial has become porous. To highlight one case, in April 2015, *BuzzFeed's* editor-in-chief, Ben Smith, shared an internal memo he sent to employees with the news and entertainment website *Gawker*. In the memo, he acknowledged that on at least three

occasions, published posts had been deleted following complaints by advertisers (Trotter 2015). In the UK, *BuzzFeed* were also reprimanded by the Advertising Standards Authority in 2016 for failing to adequately label an advert for laundry detergent as a piece of sponsored content (Sweney 2016b). In the past, *Vice* has also been accused by ex-employees of terminating stories because of “brand-partner concerns”, and encouraging writers to seek approval from senior management before writing about brands (Sterne 2014). *Vice* responded to some of these criticisms in a strongly-worded post entitled “*Vice to Gawker: Fuck You and Fuck Your Garbage Click-Bait Journalism*”, though the company never directly refuted the claims made against them (Vice 2015b).

Despite the lack of clarity concerning *BuzzFeed*'s and *Vice*'s relationship with advertisers, the limited evidence available would suggest that both organisations have sometimes overstepped traditional boundaries between advertising and editorial. While this alone might be a cause for concern, a larger issue relates to the broader *cultural* impact of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, and the role they have played in normalising closer integration between editorial and advertising in journalism. This was evident in the discourse of some interviewees, who seemed to broach native advertising with a degree of acceptance, recognising it as one potential path toward financial salvation. For example:

“[If you] are given lots of money by Ford to make some adverts and then you go and take that money and invest it in real journalism, it has its quandaries, it has its questions, concerning that model [of native advertising], but it's one of the only ways that *Vice* has been able to keep itself going” (Respondent F, editor, *Vice UK*).

“You know, for the past five years [there's been] cuts in newsrooms everywhere...I don't know much about the commercial side because we're kept separate but obviously we use native advertising, we use sponsored ads...that's quite a new funding model...So, I think we're going to have to look at ways of attracting audiences in different ways,

beyond viewing figures and circulation, to keep the money coming in” (Respondent A, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

These comments are consistent with observations made by other scholars, who have similarly noted a creeping degree of acceptance among journalists regarding native advertising and other forms of intra-firm integration (Gade and Raviola 2009; Carlson 2015). For Cornia et al. (2018) this amounts to a full-blown normative shift: from *separation* (between editorial and business interests) to *integration*, as journalists and organisations become more comfortable with “combining established editorial values with the values of collaboration, adaptation and business thinking” (Cornia et al. 2018: 3). While the separation of editorial and business interests has always been a somewhat of a tenuous commitment (Coddington 2014), these findings would collectively seem to suggest that editorial autonomy might also be waning as a normative aspiration, as organisations trade in some of their cultural capital and autonomy in exchange for greater economic sustainability.

### **6.3. Staff**

Having spent some time discussing funding and partnerships at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, this section moves on to examine their recruitment strategies. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have experienced fairly rapid growth, and in the process, hired large teams of staff to help support their operations (Jurkowitz 2014). According to their own website, *BuzzFeed* currently employ around 1300 staff globally (BuzzFeed 2018b). One recent report in the *Atlantic* suggested that around 460 of these employees worked in editorial, though this figure has been difficult to corroborate (Meyer 2016). *BuzzFeed*'s own website suggests there are 250 reporters and editors working in their US newsroom, as well as editorial teams of various sizes working across different international territories (BuzzFeed 2018b). In the UK, *BuzzFeed* employs 204 staff, with 138 of these working in editorial<sup>36</sup> (BuzzFeed 2016).

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<sup>36</sup> Note: this data is based on financial statements filed to *Companies House* by *BuzzFeed UK* in 2016.

One recent report, citing spokespeople from *BuzzFeed's* management team, claimed that 76 of these staff worked specifically in news (Kanter 2017).

*Vice* is larger than *BuzzFeed*, and, according to several news reports, employs approximately 3000 people worldwide (e.g. Spangler 2017; Steel 2018). Similar to *BuzzFeed*, *Vice* has expanded into numerous new territories over the last few years, with one recent study estimating that the company now has a news presence in 25 different countries<sup>37</sup> (Painter et al. 2017). In the UK, *Vice* employs 208 staff<sup>38</sup> (Vice 2016b). One report from the *Guardian* estimated that around 18 of these staff worked solely in news (Quinn and Jackson 2016), though this number is likely to have increased based on *Vice UK's* more recent investments in video production (Clarke 2018).

### 6.3.1. Staff Demographics

Compared to industry averages, there are several notable differences in the demographic composition of news workers at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. The first and most obvious is age. While in the US and the UK most journalists tend to be middle-aged (National Council for the Training of Journalists 2013; Willnat and Weaver 2014; Thurman et al. 2016), at *Vice*, the average age of a journalist is reported be around 25<sup>39</sup> (Adams 2013). Despite the lack of accurate information about the average age of the *BuzzFeed's* editorial department, anecdotal evidence points to an equally young workforce (Peretti 2018a). This was corroborated somewhat in my own research, with more than half of the people I interviewed from *BuzzFeed* being in their 20s.

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<sup>37</sup> *Vice's* "about" page on its main website lists 25 physical addresses for different *Vice* offices, three of which are part of the same jurisdiction (United States). This would give *Vice* 22 foreign bureaus (Vice 2017a)

<sup>38</sup> Note: this data is based on financial statements filed to *Companies House* by *Vice UK* in 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Information based on an interview conducted between Shane Smith, CEO of *Vice*, and Tim Adams of the *Guardian*. In a 2016 interview, Shane Smith also repeated this fact, stating that "the average age at *Vice* is 25 across the board, globally" (Smith 2016a). However, I have not come across any statistics or publically-available data to support these statements.

At *BuzzFeed*, gender and ethnicity also appear to diverge from the standard. In data published in 2017, Jonah Peretti, the founder and CEO of *BuzzFeed*, reported that the company was made up of 55% women globally, and that 35% of its employees identified as non-white (Peretti 2017c). These percentages map very accurately to the findings of my content analysis<sup>40</sup>, which indicated that 53% of *BuzzFeed*'s news stories were authored by women, and 17.8% of stories were published by non-white authors. Moreover, of the 14 staff that were interviewed from *BuzzFeed*, 10 were women and three identified as non-white.

Generally speaking, there is a shortage of publically available information on the demographics of *Vice*'s employees<sup>41</sup>, though the company has been criticised for its perceived lack of diversity in the past (Ip 2015a; Martinson 2015; Vice 2017b). This was also reflected in the content analysis, which showed that male journalists authored 60.8% of stories in total, and non-white journalists authored 6.2% of news stories. Of the eight *Vice* employees I interviewed, all but one was male.

In summary, news workers at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* are generally younger in age compared to the rest of the journalistic field. *BuzzFeed* has a more female-dominated editorial team and employs significantly more people from non-white ethnic backgrounds. *Vice*, on the other hand, appears to be more male-dominated and less diverse. Collectively, these characteristics would seem to partially reflect the demographic composition of the audience, with both organisations reaching a core demographic of young consumers (Moses 2014), skewed toward women in the case of *BuzzFeed* (Morrison 2015; Hwong 2018), and men in the case of *Vice* (Vice 2016a). This also corresponds with Bourdieu's (1984) observation that the producers and audiences of cultural products tend to be homologous with one another and thus share a similar *habitus*<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 5 (section 5.3) for a breakdown of news stories by author.

<sup>41</sup> *Vice* has rarely been forthcoming about revealing the diversity of their own employees (e.g. James 2015), though the company has been criticised for its perceived lack of diversity in the past (Ip 2015a).

<sup>42</sup> As a reminder, *habitus* refers to one's "predispositions, assumptions, judgements and behaviors" which are accumulated via an ongoing process of socialization; first



### 6.3.2. Hiring Practices

Statistically speaking, evidence would suggest that the demographic composition of staff at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* differs from industry standards. These findings, however, do not explain *why* both organisations have chosen to populate their news departments with young journalists, nor do they provide a complete picture of specifically *who* *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* decided to hire in the early stages of their development. Based on data from interviews conducted with staff, this section looks in more detail at the motivations behind *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s hiring practices, focusing on the development of their news operations in the UK and US. In line with Bourdieu, staff are imagined as possessing different forms of *capital*, co-opted by both organisations in the pursuit of different material and symbolic rewards. What emerges from this analysis is a hiring strategy marked strongly by *hybridity*, where the desire for distinction is strongly constrained by the need to be recognised as legitimate by fellow peers and the public at large.

### 6.3.3. Senior / Experienced Staff

“I think when you're recruiting young reporters the thing that people really want is an editor. That's a huge luxury. We have very strong editors and that's a big part of how we operate” – Ben Smith, editor-in-chief of *BuzzFeed US* (Smith 2014a).

Despite evidence indicating that *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* employ an overwhelmingly young staff, in the early stages of their development, they caught the attention of the wider field by hiring a number of high-profile and experienced journalists to help lead their news departments. As agents already in possession of high amounts of cultural and symbolic capital, these journalists seemed to be

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in the family, and then through other social structures such as education and work (Benson and Neveu 2005: 3).

principally valued for their reputations and sense of professionalism that they brought to their organisations As one editor from *BuzzFeed* explained:

“If you look at the profile of our news editors it’s extremely traditional... The Head of Breaking News spent twelve years at the New York Times, our investigations editor has two Pulitzer prizes...[these people] are obsessed with not getting things wrong and are also very good at verifying” (Respondent K, editor, *BuzzFeed UK*).

At *Vice*, similar connections were made between experience (in the field) and professionalism. For example, one senior editor saw it has his role to make the news department more of a “viable journalistic operation” by “getting staff up to speed on the fundamentals [of journalism]” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*). This included procedures associated with fact-checking, accuracy, and performing due diligence with sources. Several journalists I spoke with seemed to take a deep pride in their commitment to certain ethical principles. As one senior staff member from *Vice* argued: “News is a discipline. And [at *Vice*] there were a lot of conventions I was comfortable with throwing away, but not the ethics and the proper way to gather news” (Respondent J, reporter, *Vice US*).

The professional ideology of more experienced journalists seemed to have a trickle-down effect on younger journalists at *Vice*, who felt they benefited from the mentorship of certain senior editors in the organisation. As one reporter from the UK office explained:

“To be honest, I owe a lot to [name redacted], he’s been incredible, he made *Vice News* what it is, [and] almost single-handedly, brought [the whole team] up to speed and really taught us all a lot. [Name redacted] is brilliant, I wouldn’t know half of what I know now...He’s very rational, very decisive; really what you need from a boss, really *experienced*, you know?” (Respondent A, reporter, *Vice UK*, my emphasis).

While some young staff seemed grateful for the opportunity to work with more experienced journalists, some senior editors from *Vice* highlighted the

frustrations that arose from trying to mentor a relatively youthful staff. As one editor said:

“[At Vice News] there was a lack of experience and a lot of naivety, and hubris, you know. You needed to mentor most of the people on staff because this was their first rodeo, you know. And a lot of them could grasp that, and their writing would improve, and their grasp of certain fundamentals would improve. But they’d still neglect to call this source, or you’d point out inaccuracies in their stories...So definitely that was a cultural difference and not just limited to one or two individuals” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

Beyond the sense of professionalism that senior journalists brought to news, younger journalists could also appreciate the social and symbolic value of having high-profile figures working for their organisations. For one reporter from *BuzzFeed UK*, this was a persuasive factor in them deciding to join the organisation as a reporter:

“I never thought about going for [the job at *BuzzFeed*] until I saw Heidi Blake had been appointed editor. And obviously she’s got a brilliant reputation and is really well-known to the field. So, I thought wow, they must be serious about investigative journalism” (Respondent A, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

These responses helpfully draw attention to the different kinds of *capital* that experienced journalists brought to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. These journalists were valued by staff and their organizations at large because of their *illusio*, or strong “feel for the game” (Bourdieu 1990: 66). Experienced journalists brought important cultural capital to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* – knowledge, expertise, and skills, accumulated from time spent in the field – which were put to the service of advancing journalistic professionalism in their organizations<sup>43</sup>. Among

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<sup>43</sup> In a survey conducted with journalists from 243 newspapers in the US, Gade (2008: 384) made a similar observation, noting that editors played an important role as

younger interviewees, their own inexperience heightened the importance of this function, with senior editors acting as mentors to those less socialised to the field's dominant norms and practices. In this way, senior journalists acted as a strong force of conservation inside their organisations, ensuring a level of consistency in journalism's traditional norms and practices – even if, at times, this pedagogical role could lead to cultural clashes with younger members of staff.

There is a strong case to make that experienced journalists also had an important symbolic function, bringing a sense of credibility and prestige to their organisations by virtue of their general reputations in the field. As Bourdieu (1998: 70) notes, it is those who “internalize most completely the internal ‘values’ or principles of the field” that stand the best chance of being recognised as legitimate by peers. Here, experienced journalists played an important role in communicating internally and to the rest of the field that *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* were ‘serious’ about journalism. This was apparent in conversations with certain reporters and has also been noted in reactions from other members of the field (Tandoc and Jenkins 2017).

Finally, and though not directly acknowledged in interviews, it is likely that experienced journalists also brought a certain degree of social capital to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. As a reminder, social capital refers to one's membership in different formal and informal networks (Siapera and Spyridou 2012). Based on their experience in the field, many senior journalists develop networks of sources and other contacts which can be utilised during various stages of the news process; particularly at the initial stage of access and observation (see Domingo et al. 2008). This type of capital is arguably more valuable to new entrants in the field, which tend to be poorer in social capital compared to more experienced members of the field.

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“organizational bridges and buffers, attempting to advance journalism professionalism throughout [their organizations]”.

#### 6.3.4. Young Staff

“[A] ‘healthy newsroom’ [combines] “a mix of very experienced people who know what they’re doing and extremely hungry people who didn’t learn any rules and don’t know they’re breaking them” – Janine Gibson, editor-in-chief of *BuzzFeed UK* (Gibson 2016).

As mentioned towards the beginning of this chapter, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have entered the field of journalism with the dual ambition of growing their audience share and advertising revenue (economic capital) and adding social status and prestige to their brands (symbolic capital). While the previous section demonstrated the important role played by senior journalists in enhancing both organisations’ *symbolic* capital, this section is more concerned with exploring the role played by young journalists in *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s news departments. As newcomers to the field, younger journalists seemed to be valued for being more amenable to accepting new methods and styles of working, and also for their basic homology with the audience. These two qualities both seemed to support *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s goal of increasing their economic capital via *public recognition*<sup>44</sup>.

One area where this was particularly apparent was tastes and aesthetics. Many interviewees recognised the important role played by younger journalists in helping their organisations “adopt a distinctive editorial voice” (Benson 1999, 468) that appealed to their specific audience. As one editor from *Vice UK* put it: “You know, our style was different to everyone else, because...the hosts, the presenters, the people doing it [were] much younger, because our audience [was] much younger” (Respondent F, editor, *Vice UK*). One senior editor from *Vice US* was more explicit, suggesting that “by [hiring] kids who were bred and moulded in the network news system we were able to genuinely and authentically create our own voice” (Respondent J, reporter, *Vice US*). This “voice” seemed partly a reaction to the objective style of traditional journalism,

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<sup>44</sup> As Bourdieu (1998: 70) states, public recognition, “is measured by numbers of readers, listeners, or viewers, and therefore, in the final analysis, by sales and profits”.

which one editor criticised for “lecturing” the reader, and “present[ing] material in a kind of didactic way” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

Owing to the homology between producers and audiences, some journalists also reflected on how they found it “easy” to write for the audience in a way that appealed, because they shared similar tastes and interests (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*). Another reporter commented on this, while drawing attention to the cultural differences between older and younger journalists:

“I think the internet can sniff out authenticity versus disingenuousness. You can feel when there’s a sad journalist who’s been told by their organization: ‘You have to write like BuzzFeed! You have to write internet speak’, and it’s so uncomfortable. Whereas... [our staff] they are so natural” (Respondent G, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

The relative ease at which young reporters could communicate using “internet speak” was beneficial because according to one editor, it allowed *BuzzFeed* to “speak to specific audiences with more *authentic* voices” (Respondent D, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*, emphasis added). In this context, authenticity seemed to be closely related to new norms of online media discourse, that, as Chadwick notes (2013: 176), “privilege conversational styles of expression and a certain communicative egalitarianism”. As one *BuzzFeed* reporter explained: “If you were telling someone about a story you had read, how would you actually say it to another human being? ... it’s about sound[ing] more human and not talking from your lofty perch of being a ‘serious’ journalist” (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed*).

Aside from tastes and dispositions, younger journalists also seemed to be valued by their organisations for their knowledge of, and expertise with, different digital platforms and technologies. As one *BuzzFeed* reporter argued: “We’ve all had Tumblr accounts, Twitter, Instagram, etcetera. We know how these [social media platforms] work a lot better than someone who’s maybe in their early 30s...I think that’s something that’s quite innate in younger journalists” (Respondent M, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*). Mastery over such

platforms was often linked to evolving practices in news gathering, giving *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* reporters a competitive advantage over traditional media, which were critiqued for their supposed lack of proficiency with digital technologies. As one editor from *BuzzFeed* said: “[Our journalists] will spot the [story] before it trend[s] is on Facebook. By the time something is on Facebook it is done. And that’s often when The Independent will write a story about it” (Respondent K, editor, *BuzzFeed US*). A reporter from *Vice* made a similar point, suggesting that “a lot of [*Vice*’s] sourcing” for stories had come from young journalists in the organisation “being able to network really well and build trust with different people [online]” (Respondent C, editor, *Vice US*).

Based on these responses, it was apparent that younger journalists played an important role in supporting *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s goal of introducing new forms of cultural capital to the field. This capital consisted of “technical expertise, general knowledge, verbal abilities, and artistic sensibilities” (Benson 2006: 189), some of which arrived in “embodied” form (Siapera and Spyridou 2012), and some which seemed strongly conditioned by broader endogenous and exogenous forces. In terms of embodied cultural capital, young journalists came equipped with specialist skills, knowledge, and know-how concerning digital technology, which seemed to complement the exigencies of news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. By virtue of their inexperience, young journalists also seemed to share less of an *Illusio* or investment in the “game” of journalism, which made them ideologically predisposed to accepting new methods and styles of working. This supported *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s goal of adopting a distinctive editorial voice, which seemed strongly tied to emergent norms in online discourse; based around ideas of journalism being less detached, and more emotionally authentic, subjective, unvarnished, and personal (see Wahl-Jorgensen 2016)<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Note: I discuss the issue of emotion in news in Chapter 8 (section 8.3) of this thesis.

## 6.4. Topics and Beats

“At BuzzFeed, we really think of identity as being very complex, and trying to understand and have empathy for the broadest range of experience we can and trying to make media that allows people to have their own identity validated but also to have appreciation and understanding of other people's identities. That, I think, is why we have done so much reporting on things like sexual assault on campuses or LGBT issues or why diversity in media is so important to us. Being able to be broadly empathetic and broadly sensitive to different people's experiences I think is hugely important. I think that will lead to less polarisation if we do that well” (Peretti 2017d).

In this final section, I wish to consider the role played by news coverage in *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s development. As mentioned earlier, upon entering the journalistic field, both organisations invested resources into covering a mixture of traditional and non-traditional beats, focusing on subjects like politics, crime, and business, as well as alternative topics like civil rights, gender rights, and mental health. This was also supported in the content analysis, which demonstrated that both organisations divided resources between a mix of traditional and niche news topics<sup>46</sup>. As with staff recruitment, this balance of coverage can helpfully be understood from the perspective of field theory, with different beats working to generate different forms of *capital* for their respective organisations. Mirroring the findings on hiring practices, the results of this research demonstrate strong hybridity at both organizations. While from the outset, there has been a clear interest in reporting on alternative subjects relevant to young people, the desire for legitimacy and credibility has been a strong countervailing force, pushing *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* towards covering traditional “beats”; albeit in a manner more tailored to the specific needs and wants of their target audience. Before beginning the analysis, it is worthwhile providing a rough description of how news and other content is divided at both organisations.

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<sup>46</sup> See Chapter 5 (section 5.3) for a more detailed breakdown of news content by topic.



### 6.4.1. Vice

Beginning with *Vice*, the division of the company into different content “verticals” makes it more complex to isolate where precisely news begins and ends. For example, although *Vice News* constitutes a separate vertical, there is also *Motherboard*, which focuses on technology and science stories, *Broadly*, which focuses on gender and women’s issues, and *Tonic*, which mainly explores wellness and health issues. Consequentially, many stories covered by *Vice*’s other channels bleed into news and current affairs. At the time of writing, the US and UK version of the *Vice.com* is divided into **eleven** distinct categories: *Politics*, *Entertainment*, *LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer)*, *Drugs*, *Opinion*, *NSFW (Not safe for work)*, *Photos*, *Shop*, *Magazine* (Vice 2017c). If a US or UK user requests to only see content from the *Vice News* vertical<sup>47</sup>, they are taken to a page which is divided into eight discrete categories: *Vice News Tonight*, *Money*, *Donald Trump*, *Technology*, *Immigration*, *Drugs*, *Features*, and *Terrorism* (Vice News 2017d). As this suggests, *Vice* organise news in an atypical way, approaching both traditional and alternative topics thematically rather than by employing a clear “beat” structure. This was also confirmed in various interviews with reporters and editors from the UK and US office of *Vice*. As one US reporter explained:

“Organisationally, I think what I found almost everywhere...was that most newsrooms have some sort of beat designation, where you’re the Middle East guy or you’re the homeless guy, or covering courts, police. Things definitely seem to be more general assignment type-stuff here. You do what you want to do, so there’s less specialisation at *Vice*, definitely” (Respondent J, reporter, *Vice US*).

Similarly, one reporter from the UK office explained how the office was not organized into “specific beats” (Respondent A, reporter, *Vice*), rather, individual

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<sup>47</sup> There is now no specific page for *Vice News* on the UK version of *Vice*’s website. Users are re-directed to the US news homepage if they click the ‘*Vice News*’ tab on *Vice*’s UK website. This is a fairly recent change.

reporters tended to be generalists; flexible and adept at covering various issues deemed relevant to *Vice*'s audience.

#### **6.4.2. BuzzFeed**

*BuzzFeed* is less complex than *Vice* in that the company is broadly divided into three divisions: *BuzzFeed News*, *BuzzFeed Entertainment*, and *BuzzFeed International* (which includes *BuzzFeed UK*). The US news operation is by far the most developed, and compared to *Vice*, appears to have a higher degree of beat specialisation, employing reporters with expertise in areas such as politics, technology, the media, business, and health. However, similar to *Vice*, *BuzzFeed* has also pursued more thematic coverage, focusing on alternative topics like lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues, gender equality, and civil rights (Ip 2015b). The UK operation of *BuzzFeed* is significantly smaller, but still employs a dedicated team of political and investigative reporters, as well as more experienced editors with expertise in science, business, media, and European affairs. As of 2015, they have also had an LGBT editor, and employed several reporters with experience writing about issues affecting different minority groups. Outside of its UK and US offices, *BuzzFeed* have smaller teams of reporters based around the world, working for various international editions of the brand. They also have a dedicated world news team, which is partly composed of foreign correspondents covering the Middle East, East Africa, West Africa, Asia and Latin America. Again, these reporters appear divided between more traditional subject areas like politics and health, as well as alternative subjects such as gender and LGBT rights (Herman 2017).

Despite the higher degree of beat specialisation at *BuzzFeed*, the general impression given to me by interviewees was that, like *Vice*, *BuzzFeed* largely favoured generalist reporters with particular interests or passions, as opposed to traditional beat reporters who were viewed as less flexible. As one reporter from the UK office explained:

“We have a lot of general reporters grouped into junior reporters and senior reporters depending on your level of expertise. And we sort of cover everything. We’re not beat reporters, we do have particular subject areas of interest and people will gravitate towards different things...In the same day I might write about the EU referendum, and then a local issue in London, a crime story, or something funny...So it’s quite a range” (Respondent B, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

This ability of *BuzzFeed* reporters to “code-switch”, as one editor from the US put it to me, was highly valued in a context where reporters might be asked to cover a range of subjects, some more serious than others, on any given day (Respondent K, editor, *BuzzFeed US*). Lisa Tozzi, global news director for *BuzzFeed*, alluded to this in a recent interview, suggesting that “at *BuzzFeed* News specifically, and for journalists in general, it really helps to be flexible and to experiment with different types of reporting and writing styles” (Tozzi 2018). Similarly, *BuzzFeed*’s investigations editor, Mark Schoofs, has previously spoken about the importance of placing “bets on people, not beats” by giving reporters the “latitude to tackle a wide variety of stories” (Schoofs 2016).

#### **6.4.3. Traditional Beats**

Since the launch of their news operations, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have both devoted a significant proportion of their editorial resources to covering traditional beats. For *BuzzFeed*, perhaps the two most significant areas of investment have been political and investigative reporting<sup>48</sup>. According to Ben Smith, editor-in-chief of *BuzzFeed*, it was investigative reporting, along with reporting on politics, that offered *BuzzFeed* the greatest opportunity to “break through” and achieve wider recognition (Smith 2016b). In a similar sense, Shane Smith of *Vice* seemed to recognise that traditionally esteemed genres of reporting might be the best way for his organisation to make an impact. This was most apparent in *Vice*’s early international current affairs coverage, which,

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<sup>48</sup> This is true of news both in the UK and US.

as discussed, often focused on dangerous locations and hostile territories around the world to bring viewers so-called “news from the edge” (Reid 2014).

In interviews, journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* frequently discussed these areas of coverage using terms like “reputation” and “credibility”, drawing attention to the symbolic benefits that these highly-regarded genres of reporting brought to their organisations. For example, considering the value of *BuzzFeed*’s investigations unit in the UK, one reporter reasoned that “we want people to take BuzzFeed news seriously as a brand...the aim is to get BuzzFeed’s name everywhere, to get awards, to make an impact” (Respondent A, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*)<sup>49</sup>. A *Vice* reporter spoke about foreign reporting in similar terms, arguing that despite it always being a “loss-leader” you did it to “earn a reputation”, which also helped “sell advertising” (Respondent D, reporter, *Vice US*). Beyond the promise of symbolic rewards, then, others recognised the commercial potential of investing in these subject areas: “there is obviously brand reputation. [But] there is [also] a business case for it in that advertisers...[they] really want the full package of coverage. Before, it was harder to sell our product against just ‘here’s funny stuff we found on the Internet type content’” (Respondent L, editor, *BuzzFeed UK*).

Aside from foreign affairs and investigative reporting, journalists from *BuzzFeed*, and to a lesser extent, *Vice*, also spoke about the importance of politics coverage. Here though, journalists were keen to extoll other benefits, beyond just symbolic and economic rewards. As one editor from *BuzzFeed* explained, regular contact between reporters and political sources delivered more tangible benefits such as *access* (to elites) and exclusive information (“scoops” in journalistic parlance):

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<sup>49</sup> In one interview, Heidi Blake, investigations editor for *BuzzFeed UK*, put forward a similar argument about the importance of investigative reporting. As she explained: “The project we are all engaged in is building BuzzFeed into a major serious news brand that people trust, and feel is a vehicle if they are whistle-blowers with stories to tell” (Blake 2016).

“You have to display a certain level of commitment [to political reporting] ... there is an extent to which it is a demand for people who control access to politicians... we want to have credibility with those people and politics coverage helps you with that, because credibility once again is how you get scoops... it’s because your name is trusted by somebody [that] you get your stories” (Respondent L, editor, *BuzzFeed UK*).

This same editor explained that an organizational focus on scoops<sup>50</sup> was “partly a carry-over from America”, where the editor-in-chief, Ben Smith, had continually emphasised “scoop-getting” as a way of breaking into the political establishment and “building [one’s] reputation very quickly” (Respondent L, editor, *BuzzFeed UK*).

The reciprocity between credibility, scoops, and access is perhaps best illustrated in the number of high-profile and exclusive interviews *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have managed to secure in recent years. High-profile political figures such as Barack Obama and Justin Trudeau have both granted exclusive interviews to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. Meanwhile, in the UK, both organisations have conducted interviews and ran several live events with figures from many of the major political parties. Although journalists I interviewed rarely made references to these specific events, one producer from *Vice UK* expressed a certain degree of scepticism about *Vice*’s courting of high-profile figures, questioning whether their reputation as an “edgy” news brand might ultimately be harmed:

“Vice is seen a little outside the mainstream sphere so hasn’t had to play the [political] game so much. It’s only really the past few years that it’s got involved in this kind of thing, so it’s early days for that kind of reporting for it as a company... We obviously have spoken to politicians and there have been some trying interviews that the company has put out with senior politicians that people weren’t necessarily happy with. Erm, both within and outside the company... *Vice* often looks at things

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<sup>50</sup> Note: I discuss the relevance of scoops at *BuzzFeed* (and *Vice*) in more detail in Chapter 8 (section 8.1) of this thesis.

in terms of what a high-profile interview could do for the company, as in ‘will this get us loads of press, great’, is that the only thing we care about? Does [the company’s] relationship with high-profile figures change because they actually want to speak to them and have a relationship with them? So, you know, that may change. Whether that’s a good or a bad thing I guess we’ll have to wait and see” (Respondent F, editor, *Vice UK*).

This seemed to be less of an issue for journalists at *BuzzFeed*, perhaps because the organisation has never branded itself as particularly “edgy” or outside the mainstream. Rather, breaking into the political field seems to have been an ambition for *BuzzFeed* since the launch of its news operation; Ben Smith, editor-in-chief of *BuzzFeed US*, being an important early proponent of this strategy (Smith 2014a).

In the same vein as their hiring of experienced journalists, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s investment in traditional areas of journalistic coverage seemed to be rooted in a desire for public and professional legitimacy. This helps explain both organisations’ focus on culturally revered genres and forms – high in cultural and symbolic capital – and therefore capable of conferring journalistic excellence as well as social status and prestige (Tunstall 1971). As Lowrey (2011: 67) notes, “a legitimated journalism can sanctify and render credible...[an organisation’s] messages”, which, from the perspective of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, has been particularly important given their status as new entrants in the field. Yet based on the comments of some interviewees, it also seemed clear that these high-status forms of journalism were being mobilized by both organisations for commercial purposes, as a means of boosting the status of their brands to attract premium advertisers. Naturally, this should invite a degree of scepticism about the purity of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s motives, or, indeed, their long-term interest in funding costly beats such as foreign affairs and investigative journalism. As one former editor reflected: “Vice News was a promotional vehicle for Vice... Rather cynically now I can reflect that it wasn’t like ‘oh shit, we need to save journalism from itself” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

Beyond foreign affairs coverage and investigative journalism, the *political* beat was also referenced by some journalists as a high-status journalistic genre, capable of bringing intangible, symbolic benefits like prestige and credibility to their organisations. Others, however, drew attention to the tangible benefits that came with producing regular politics coverage, including access to powerful actors and the ability to get scoops. In this way, the political beat appeared to fulfil mixed reporting goals. As Skovsgaard and van Dalen (2013: 375) note, the political beat is also attractive to organisations because it tends to be “less affected by commercial pressure than...other prestigious beats”. Hence, it can function as a particularly cost-effective means for organisations to “get themselves known and recognized [and]...make a name for themselves” (Bourdieu 1993: 59). Collectively, these factors help explain why *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have made the political beat a central feature of their news coverage.

#### 6.4.4. Niche Topics

“Now we do a lot of research, globally, on our hundreds of millions monthly users. And do you want to know what their top passions points are? Music, number one; number two: the environment; number three: civil rights; number four: income and inequality; number five: social justice; and number six: LGBT issues. Now Gen Y knows what side of history they want to be on. But are they getting the kind of media that serves these passion points? Simply put, no” – Shane Smith, co-founder and former CEO of *Vice* (Smith 2016c).

“If you look at the way media is structured, around both ethnic minorities and LGBT people, you have traditional, kind of strong niche publications, and these are treated as second-tier stories at mainstream publications. And really, I had always covered marriage very aggressively, because I think for a lot of people of our generation, that isn’t a niche story. And when I was at *Politico*, there was this guy, Chris Geidner, who was just beating me on stories quite regularly, so he was one of the first people I hired at *BuzzFeed*. And then, you know, 2013, marriage — it was

probably the biggest story in the country” – Jonah Peretti, CEO and founder of BuzzFeed (Peretti 2015).

Alongside traditional areas of coverage, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have invested editorial resources into covering alternative news topics, often based around progressive political issues including civil rights, gender equality, LGBT issues, and mental health. For *Vice*, stories on drugs (particularly cannabis legislation) and about strikes and protests have also featured prominently. This was supported in the content analysis, which showed that stories about social rights, issues, and protests accounted for around a fifth of total news coverage<sup>51</sup>.

Unlike traditional areas of reporting, these areas of coverage appeared more explicitly tied to the affordances of digital technology, and the needs and wants of the audience. In interviews, journalists were cognisant of this too, recognising that covering topics like mental health, LGBT issues, and gender issues, was partly a “deliberate strategy” aimed at reaching younger audiences, who had different interests compared to “standard paper audiences” (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*). As one freelance journalist for *Vice* surmised:

“*Vice* is slightly younger and are quite progressive and tuned into the kinds of subjects that young people are interested in. Things like – you mentioned mental health and LGBT issues – which are being talked about much more generally among young people” (Respondent G, freelancer, *Vice UK*).

One reporter from *BuzzFeed UK* offered a similar summary of the audience: “We obviously know our audience is millennials, and they’re often left-leaning. There’s a complete gender mix. But they’re quite open, liberal, and young basically” (Respondent A, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*). As a consequence, one reporter explained that *BuzzFeed* had taken quite a “dedicated position” to issues like LGBT rights and mental health, partly because of their “general importance”, but also because they “always [did] well with [*BuzzFeed*’s]

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<sup>51</sup> See Chapter 5 (section 5.3) for a detailed breakdown of news by topic.



readers” (Respondent B, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*). That some journalist seemed to possess distinct knowledge about what subjects “did well” with readers seemed to point to the growing importance of data and metrics in news (Zamith 2018). One reporter from *BuzzFeed UK* for example, spoke about how, in a quantifiable sense, issues like “mental health, LGBT, housing” performed very well with audiences, which reinforced the need to “do more” of these stories (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*). Another reporter from *BuzzFeed* who specialised in social media news, suggested that stories based around identity issues (race, gender, sexuality, etc.) could be particularly effective at driving online engagement, because of their ability to “provoke emotion...whether it’s finding it funny, finding it sad, or making [the audience] feel as though we’re making them angry and wanting to support a social justice cause” (Respondent M, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

At *Vice*, journalists also recognised the mutually reinforcing relationship between certain subjects and audience engagement. One senior editor, for instance, spoke about the decision to hire journalists who specialised in covering “civil rights... gender bathroom rights...queer rights”, who had “a sense of what was shareable [on social media]”. When asked if journalists sometimes selected stories based on what data and analytics had shown to be successful in the past, one editor responded: “I mean, to a little extent. For example, our audience really like stories about weed, so like, fairly often, we’ll say ‘hey, what’s up on the weed beat’” (Respondent C, editor, *Vice US*). There was also a certain commonality or “homology” (Benson 1999), between producers and audiences that gave reporters a perceived advantage when writing about these subjects. For this reason, interviews with reporters on issues like civil rights, LGBT rights, and mental health, frequently transitioned into more personal reflections on their general importance, sometimes because reporters themselves identified as a member of the particular community they were writing about, or, more generally, because of their emotional investment in a particular topic or cause. As one reporter from *BuzzFeed* explained:

“I like to think that there’s stories that we cover that other people wouldn’t. Like, we write about different communities, for instance, we

have [name redacted], who reports on the British Muslim community, and not as erm, like, a white person looking in. But writing from within a community. We write just not about things that matter to our audience, but they are written by people who also care about it from within those stories...What I want to write about as a topic, often [reflects] how other people feel also, especially about things like race, gender...[and] it's not a pandering thing. You're not going to write about something well unless you also care about it" (Respondent G, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

Accordingly, journalists from *BuzzFeed* felt they were able to speak on certain subjects with more "authentic voices" (Respondent D, editor, *BuzzFeed*, emphasis added). At *Vice*, the reporters I interviewed seemed less willing to personally identify with particular topics, however, one editor from *Vice* made the observation that it was "very difficult to distinguish the interests of the staff with those of the audience" which helped *Vice* appear more authentic on certain subjects<sup>52</sup> (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

Beyond these technological and audience-related factors, some senior journalists discussed these subjects in more strategic terms, recognising their importance in the context of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice's* struggle to distinguish themselves from other members of the field. As one editor from the US office of *BuzzFeed* argued: "*BuzzFeed* has certain beats that we do better than anyone else, like LGBT, and we would often break news relating to what's going on with transgender rights in the US that would not be featured anywhere else" (Respondent K, editor, *BuzzFeed US*). Similarly, an editor from *Vice* made the case that the organisation had been at the "vanguard" of civil rights coverage in the US, reporting on various protests and the activist group *Black Lives Matter*, before other media picked up on the phenomenon (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

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<sup>52</sup> These references to authenticity by *Vice* journalists connect with comments made by Kevin Sutcliffe, managing director of *Vice Studios UK*, who described authenticity, rather than trust, as the "new battleground" for online media (Sutcliffe 2015). I return to the idea of authenticity later in this section and also in the section on objectivity, which can be found in section 8.3 of this thesis.

Taking these various responses in to account, it is worth briefly retuning to Bourdieu (1984) who, writing in *Distinction*, argues:

“[E]very change in tastes resulting from a transformation of the conditions of existence and of the corresponding dispositions will tend to induce, directly or indirectly, a transformation of the field of production, by favoring the success, within the struggle constituting the field, of the producers best able to produce the needs corresponding to the new dispositions” (Bourdieu 1984: 231).

Unpacking this observation, Bourdieu (ibid.) makes the case that exogenous forces condition individual dispositions (judgements, tastes, habits, and behaviours), which agents in the field of cultural production can respond to by producing goods that correspond with these emerging needs. This provides a useful lens through which to understand *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s investment in alternative news subjects, which can be interpreted as a response to broader technology-based changes, as well as corresponding transformations in the sociocultural conditions of news consumption. Specifically, the focus on broad issues pertaining to identity seem strongly informed by the new, “connective affordances” of digital media, which have given rise to what Papacharissi (2016: 310) describes as “networked” publics – online communities populated by “like-minded individuals” and “sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity”. It would seem no coincidence that these online spaces are heavily populated by young people – *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s principle audience – who, according to research, increasingly turn to news for self-validation, fulfilment, and sense of belonging (Bennett 2008; Costera Meijer and Kormelink 2014; Drok et al. 2017).

As new entrants to the field, both organisations have been well placed to seize upon these transformations, “rethink[ing] beat structures from scratch” (Smith 2014a), and in the process, introducing *new* forms of cultural capital to the field. This capital has helped *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* differentiate themselves from competitors, many of which have remained wedded to news subjects

associated with the traditional ‘beat’ structure of news<sup>53</sup>. A vital part of this equation has been younger journalists, whose homologous relationship with audiences and personal interest in such issues has enabled them to appear more *authentic* when discussing these subjects. That *personal* experience was sometimes valued over *professional* experience speaks to the complex ways in which personal and professional identities tend to converge in the digital environment<sup>54</sup> (Steensen 2016). This would also seem indicative of a broader trend towards more personal, emotional, and identity-driven forms of news gaining currency online (Ip 2015b; Beckett and Deuze 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen 2016).

Finally, it is important to not neglect the political-economic factors behind *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s decision to focus on these specific news subjects. As several journalists alluded to in interviews, part of the appeal of issues like LGBT rights, gender equality, and civil rights was that they were particularly effective at driving audience engagement. As Carlson (2018: 411) notes, this interest in engagement “results in the quantified audience – the reduction of a news user to a set of monitored and recorded characteristics in order to extract economic value”. This also supports that niche subjects at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* played an important role in growing their public recognition, “measured by numbers of readers, listeners, or viewers, and therefore, in the final analysis, by sales and profits” (Bourdieu 1998: 70).

## 6.5. Conclusion

Fields are generally defined by two forms of power, which exist in opposition to one another: economic capital and cultural capital. As Benson (2006: 189-90) writes, “economic capital, on the whole, is more powerful but cultural capital is always needed to transform good fortune into ‘legitimate’ fortune”. This chapter

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<sup>53</sup> This situation, however, does gradually seem to be changing (e.g. Ip 2015b).

<sup>54</sup> In one interview, Jonah Peretti, CEO of *BuzzFeed*, seemed to allude to this, suggesting that “whole areas of coverage” had been opened up because of *BuzzFeed*’s emphasis on their employees “lived” experience, as well as their professional experience in the field (Peretti 2015).

has described *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s attempts at managing this feat. As discussed, the structure of both organisations would seem to reflect a duality of concerns with achieving two forms of recognition: public recognition, "measured by numbers of readers, listeners, or viewers, and therefore, in the final analysis, by sales and profits" (Bourdieu 1998: 70), and peer recognition, afforded to those who "internalize most completely the internal 'values' or principles of the field" (Bourdieu 1998: 70). This fits with DiMaggio and Powell's (1983: 149) general observation that organisations "compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 149). It has also had a demonstrable effect on the way *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have structured news: their funding and partnerships, recruitment strategies, and the division of news coverage – which, in Bourdieu's terms, collectively generate and are constitutive of, different forms of *capital*.

Dealing first with strategies related to public recognition, it is worth recalling that in moments of upheaval, success tends to favour those producers "best able to produce the needs corresponding to the new dispositions" of the audience (Bourdieu 1984, 231). The disruption caused by digital technology has produced such a moment, which *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have capitalised on by introducing new forms of capital to the field. The hiring of young staff and the pursuit of non-traditional subject areas has helped both organisations develop a distinct editorial voice, colonise new areas of expertise, and differentiate themselves from competitors in the field. Collectively, these strategies have helped *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* reach new audiences, whose particular dispositions seem to reflect some of the broader social and structural changes that are reshaping expectations about the style, subject, and form of news online (Steensen 2016).

While these more market-driven forms of legitimation have supported *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s desire for public recognition, a simultaneous desire to be recognised as legitimate by peers has led to an emphasis on traditional journalistic norms and practices. This is evident in the hiring of experienced journalists, along with an investment in traditionally-esteemed areas of

reportage, which, in contrast to strategies aimed at public recognition, appear more strongly connected to the promise of intangible rewards such as status, credibility, and prestige. This reinforcement and avowal of journalism's traditional cultural capital ultimately has a conservative effect on the field, ensuring a degree of continuity in journalism's established "rules" or doxa. There is an important practical basis for this too. As so-called "agents of innovation" (Carlson and Usher 2016), digital natives often introduce new practices to journalism, which, by virtue of being *new*, lack the legitimacy afforded to more traditional methods of gathering and producing news. In this way, an emphasis on long held norms and practices helps mitigate against some of the risk posed by innovation.

While these findings suggest a strong degree of *hybridity* in the way *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* construct norms and practices, it is important to try and avoid viewing these changes in simple, binary terms; in terms of "new" versus "old" (Zelizer 2015). Rather, a more accurate term to describe these changes comes from the early part of this chapter, which discussed the emerging norm of *integration*, and the way established editorial values have become more closely imbricated with commercial interests (Gade and Raviola 2009; Cornia et al. 2018). This was initially observed in *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s use of native advertising as a primary source of funding; a practice which has since found purchase among other members of the field. However, there is also a strong case to make that other features of news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* – the rise in generalist rather than specialist reporters, the transition away from a traditional "beat" structure, and the proclivity for more personal and emotional news subjects and narrative styles<sup>55</sup> – similarly reflects a growing imbrication of editorial and business interests. While I am cautious about falling into the trap of dismissing more emotional and personal styles of discourse as somehow less valid, it is also the case that many of the aforementioned characteristics of news production point to a form of journalism more beholden to market principles, and based around less substantive forms of journalistic expertise. Ultimately,

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<sup>55</sup> Note: I discuss this specific aspect of news coverage in more detail in Chapter 8 (section 8.3) of this thesis.

this has the effect of undermining journalistic autonomy, as journalists become more subjugated to market demands and the need to drive higher (quantifiable) forms of engagement in the news (expressed via common metrics like *page views, time spent, shares, likes, and referred traffic*).

## 7. Producing News: The Routines of News Production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*

Having spent the previous chapter exploring some of the structural and organisational factors that influence news content at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, this chapter moves one layer deeper to study news production at the level of routines – defined by (Shoemaker and Reese 2014: 165) the “patterned, repeated practices, forms, and rules that media workers use to do their jobs”. Routines emerge from a practical need to manage media production, helping organisations ensure that stories are produced on time and in an efficient, predictable manner. However, as many substantive ethnographies of the 1970s and 80s demonstrated, routines also play a more unconscious role in structuring news content, helping to explain “the relatively standardised form of news produced across news outlets, and also the ideological nature of news and its orientation towards social and political elites” (Cottle 2007: 4; see, for example Tuchman 1972; Hall et al. 1978; Schlesinger 1978; Soloski 1989; Gans 2004).

In the ensuing years, and with a few notable exceptions (Boczkowski 2004; Born 2004; Ryfe 2012; Usher 2014), routines have not been studied with the same energy or enthusiasm, due in no small part to the well-documented problems of gaining access to sites of media production (Paterson and Zoellner 2010). Nonetheless, from what little information can be gleaned, it is clear that digital technology has had a profoundly disruptive effect on the established rhythms and routines of news production (e.g. Deuze 2004; O’Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Phillips et al. 2009). This has been most pronounced at legacy news organisations, where, contrary to the expectations of some scholars, organisations have “clung to institutionalized routines that traditionally have served news professionals”, or only engaged in change efforts that are “fleeting, skin deep, [and] merely ceremonial...leaving core practices, competencies, and products intact” (Lowrey 2011: 65-67). In short, the particular affordances and cultures of digital technologies have not necessarily incited major shifts in the field’s cultural capital or doxa, as was once predicted (see Borger et al.



2013 for a discussion of some of the normative ideas underpinning these predictions).

However, as Bourdieu (1998: 41) observes, fields are competitive spaces where actors engage in a more or less *constant* struggle “for the transformation or preservation of the field”. As the subfield of online journalism has matured, there have been signs that the cultural capital of journalism might be slowly shifting as new norms and practices begin to gain purchase (Karlsson 2011; Hellmueller et al. 2013; Zeller and Hermida 2015; Beckett and Deuze 2016). In this context, digital native organisations have emerged as major sites of speculation about changes to news production, both among industry commentators and scholars (e.g. Bakker 2012; Riordan 2014; Küng 2015; Carlson and Usher 2016; Nicholls et al. 2016; Usher 2017). Although empirical evidence remains in short supply, research has indicated that the professional routines of journalists working for these organisations might be different from those working in other mediums, or in workplaces with more traditional cultures. For example, digital journalists tend to approach stories more holistically compared to their print counterparts (Ferrucci and Vos 2017); they tend to value speed over rigor (Cassidy 2005); and also display greater loyalty to audiences than sources (Steensen 2009; Agarwal and Barthel 2015).

This chapter interrogates these claims by shedding light on the organisational dynamics of news work at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, focusing predominantly on the routine practices of news reporters and editors. Four research questions have been developed to help steer the discussion:

- 1) How do the three major sources of routines<sup>56</sup> – audiences, sources, and organisational factors, shape news work at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*?
- 2) What role does technology play in shaping routines at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*?
- 3) How do routines both constrain and enable certain forms of news work at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*?

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<sup>56</sup> As defined by Shoemaker and Reese (2014: 168).

4) In what way do routines at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* challenge or reinforce the entrenched cultural capital of the journalistic field?

To address these questions, I rely on findings from qualitative interviews with reporters and editors from both organisations. The primary interest of this chapter is to explore how routines are discursively constructed and articulated by journalists and editors at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. If any changes are occurring to journalism's core professional practices and norms, then, as Vos and Singer (2016: 145) suggest, this should be evident in the "discourse of the journalistic field, which will cast some new practices and ideas as legitimate and some as illegitimate". This chapter consists of one overarching section (7.1) on routines. This section is then divided into several subsections which explore key aspects of daily news work: the structure of routines (7.1.1); multiskilling (7.1.2); reporters' autonomy from internal influences (7.1.3); reporters' autonomy from external influences (7.1.4); and the impact of audience analytics and data in the news process (7.1.5). Unless otherwise stated, the following account of routines applies to both the US and UK offices of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*.

## **7.1. Routines**

Perhaps the first and most obvious thing to note about *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* is that they mainly produce news content for the web, which has a significant impact on the spatial and temporal dimensions of daily news work. In contrast to the print or television news cycle, where news production tends to follow an "industrial" logic, the rhythm and organization of online news is more fluid, decentralised, and flexible, with publishing taking place continuously throughout the day (Gade 2011; Anderson et al. 2012). This was certainly the impression given to me by journalists from *Vice* and *BuzzFeed*, though the unpredictable and erratic quality of the news cycle arguably created a stronger organisational imperative to manage and routinise certain aspects of news work.

### 7.1.1. The Structure of Daily Work

At both organisations, the day typically began with the morning editorial meeting, which took place somewhere between 9am and 10am. In the case of *BuzzFeed (UK)*, I had the opportunity to observe one of these meetings first hand when I spent a morning inside the company's London office. In this instance, Stuart Millar, the head of news at *BuzzFeed UK*, led the discussion, with Janine Gibson, editor-in-chief, overseeing. The meeting began with a discussion of the day's previous news. Stories that had performed particularly well across *BuzzFeed's* various social media channels were singled out for special praise. At the time, this included a major investigation into corruption in tennis (Blake and Templon 2016), which had been published that week by the investigative team and shared widely on social media. Various news staff then took it in turns to update the room on what stories they were working on, with editors occasionally chipping in to offer their own suggestions. Some staff also offered ideas for new stories, which they received feedback on, or flagged up for a more detailed conversation later in the day. Editors also used the morning meeting as an opportunity to guide other staff on the day's news, mentioning particular events to look out for that might be newsworthy. At this stage, there was less discussion of logistics. Instead, following a brief discussion of stories and potential events, editorial staff dispersed and returned to their own desks.

Based on interview responses from various editors and reporters, a similar routine appeared to be in place at *Vice*. Early on in the morning, editorial staff would gather and writers would pitch ideas for stories to editors. Editors would also assign stories to writers and set deadlines for publication. On occasion, discussions of longer term projects would also take place, with reporters offering rolling updates on the status of their stories. Perhaps one more unusual feature of the pitching process at *Vice*, was that writers were encouraged to suggest headlines for stories during the editorial meeting and *before* stories were formally commissioned. As one editor from *Vice* explained:

“One thing that we do which I think is a common new media thing, is we decide the headline before the article...So we'll decide the focus of the

article and how we're going to package it before it's written, which I think is a new thing, and definitely not what I was taught to do in journalism school!" (Respondent C, editor, *Vice US*).

This same editor was keen to delineate between what they saw as "clickbait"<sup>57</sup> and practices such as the one described above which they viewed as a legitimate strategy for maximising the impact of a news story. However, they also recognised that this practice was not what they had been "taught to do in journalism school", implying these new criteria for newsworthiness (based on the audience) might be interpreted negatively because they did not conform to normative ideals of journalistic autonomy.

Following on from the morning meeting, news stories would move into the development stage, where individual reporters would work on their particular assignments, occasionally drawing on the expertise of technologists (e.g. website developers, data scientists, videographers), presentation staff (e.g. designers, illustrators), and various editors (e.g. homepage editors, social media editors), to assist with the development of news stories. The presence of continuous deadlines meant that there was technically no "end-product", and thus stories developed "all the time and in the moment" as one reporter from *BuzzFeed* explained (Respondent C, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

To help with the coordination of this work, staff from both *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* spoke in real-time, using the instant messaging software, *Slack*<sup>58</sup>. This helps explain why during the day I spent at *BuzzFeed UK*, the office seemed remarkably quiet. Many reporters wore headphones plugged into computer monitors, and often, the only audible sound was typing on keyboards<sup>59</sup>. In a

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<sup>57</sup> "Clickbait" is a colloquial term in the news industry often used to describe content that is deliberately misleading or fails to deliver on what it promises the reader (e.g. Hamblin 2014)

<sup>58</sup> For a broad overview and description of *Slack*, refer to Better (2016).

<sup>59</sup> My own observations have been further corroborated by one employee from the UK office, Andy Dangerfield, the social media editor for *BuzzFeed UK*. In an opinion piece written for *The Drum*, he described *BuzzFeed's* newsroom as "far less noisy than the BBC, as most communication – from the sharing of gifs to breaking news – takes place on messaging system Slack" (Dangerfield 2017).

conversation with one editor, he described *Slack*, as a “rolling news conference [and]...the beginning and end of news production” (Respondent L, editor, *BuzzFeed UK*). Another editor from *BuzzFeed* described it as “instant chat on steroids” and particularly essential for communication between offices based in different time zones (Respondent E, editor, *BuzzFeed UK*). This, for example, would include the London office reporting to the New York office on the day’s news events, including any stories that might merit further development or need additional promotion. At *BuzzFeed*, *Slack* also functioned as a space for communication between specific groups of employees (e.g. the politics team), as well as a space for activities such as sharing important information on stories, allocating editorial resources, and discussing different performance-related aspects of news like impact.

Similarly, although *Vice* staff mentioned *Slack* less often to me in interviews, in a report published in May 2016, *Motherboard*, the technology-focused vertical of *Vice* explained how the organisation sent approximately “5000 messages a week in eight *Slack* channels” (Jeffries 2016a). *Vice* described *Slack* as a space for reporters and contributors to “pitch story ideas and ask for edits”, as well as “share interesting links” and even “vote on headlines” for stories (Jeffries 2016a). Perhaps nothing demonstrates the centrality of *Slack* to the production process better than the fact one team at *Vice* experimented with abandoning *Slack* because it was deemed too much of a distraction to reporters (Jeffries 2016a; Jeffries 2016b).

While constant communication via these online channels certainly helped structure the daily routines of news workers, beyond fixed events like the morning editorial meeting or individuals making occasional appointments to discuss production or scheduling issues, the general impression given in interviews was of a news production process that seemed less tightly controlled and more fluid and decentralized<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>60</sup> This has been acknowledged publically by various senior members of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. For example, describing the organization of news at *BuzzFeed*, Ben Smith, editor-in-chief, explained: “You know, I think we’re very decentralized, and that’s the reason we’ve been able to build very fast, with very high quality. For instance, I don’t

At times, this was contrasted with “older” methods of organising news work, which were often criticised for being slow, inefficient, and overly-bureaucratic; “a tottering, petering pile of management on top of management”, as one editor put it to me (Respondent N, editor, *BuzzFeed*). As a consequence, journalists frequently made out the news process at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* to be more nimble, reactive, and efficient, partly because a “flat[ter] organisational structure” meant stories that did not have to move through “as many layers of hierarchy” (Respondent L, editor, *BuzzFeed*). At *Vice*, one US editor offered a slightly more haphazard description, suggesting that the news process was a “soupy mess of collaboration...of having various people doing various things and having it all just kind of come together; that’s what *Vice News* was” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

### 7.1.2. Multiskilling

Working under fewer layers of hierarchy (e.g. mid-level management such as assignment, assistant, pictorial, and copy editors), individual reporters at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* appeared to approach stories “more holistically” (Ferrucci and Vos 2017: 879), taking on more responsibility for their own work. As one reporter from *BuzzFeed* explained:

“When you work for print you just have to write, so you send off your stuff and then you’ve got the subs desk to re-read it and put the headline on it, you’ve got the picture desk and stuff. And now, obviously we have editors who check our own work but I have to correct my own typos and I’m the one creating the article in the CMS [Content Management System] so I have to put in my own pictures and headlines as well” (Respondent J, reporter, *BuzzFeed*).

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necessarily approve what any team publishes. They have the power to do that. People know what we want, but also the decision-making is very distributed” (Smith 2015a). Similarly, Kevin Sutcliffe, former head of news programming for *Vice*, explained how *Vice* was “leaner and quicker... [and less] subject to bureaucratic pressures” compared to traditional media organizations, which he suggested made the news process more efficient (Sutcliffe 2015).

Similarly, another reporter from *BuzzFeed* suggested their routine consisted of “mostly independent work”, apart from the occasions when they would seek out “help and advice” from superiors, or contact specialists to develop story assets like interactives, pictures, and illustrations (Respondent C, reporter, *BuzzFeed*). For one reporter, the nature of work at *BuzzFeed* was indicative of a broader trend in journalism, toward “multiskilling”<sup>61</sup>:

“Now, I think [journalists] are not just specialist trainees [in one medium], but have these skills to write stories for every platform...So it’s changed in that you’re expected to do more. You can’t just write news stories [in one medium] ...You’ve got to be much more multi-skilled and better with technical equipment” (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

An emphasis on multiskilling, was also evident at *Vice*, with individual reporters taking ownership over different aspects of the news process. Two news producers from the UK and US offices discussed with me at length their working process for creating video dispatches:

“In *Vice*, we are always operating in small teams, partly due to budget constraints, partly due to working in a hostile environment. As a producer at *VICE* you have all the responsibilities basically. It’s not like we often got to work with APs: assistant producers, associate producers – because there weren’t any, at least in the UK office. [So] if it’s your story, you’ve got to own it...you’ve got to write the treatment, you’ve got to put together a budget, you’ve got to figure out fixers, drivers security, if necessary, you’ve got to make sure you’ve all got the right safety equipment...If you are doing dispatches from the field you’re bringing back footage to the editor in the hotel and you’re there with them, cutting

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<sup>61</sup> “Multiskilling” is a term that generally describes how, as a result of declining resources, journalists have had to become more adept at taking on new roles and managing new tasks in the news process (Bromley 1997; Deuze 2004; Klinenberg 2005).

it, putting it together, making sure it goes out” (Respondent F, reporter, *Vice UK*).

“[I would spend] my days reading, researching, phone calls, picking [stories]... a lot of meetings, a lot of trying to win people over to what I wanted to do...If I had video I shot, getting back, trying to edit it, working with an editor, writing scripts...it differed a lot. Some days or weeks were laid back...But I would go off somewhere and work very very hard, really strain myself and then take a little break and then edit” (Respondent D, reporter, *Vice US*).

Another news reporter from the UK office described a similarly onerous set of responsibilities during the news production process:

“I do everything from reporting on the ground to the research to the sorting things out. If I have a story I’ve got to research it all myself, get all the contacts myself, go out, do it; it’s really a lot of work man” (Respondent A, reporter, *Vice UK*).

While journalists from *Vice* admitted this could be taxing work, they generally seemed to appreciate the being given additional responsibilities. According to one editor, journalists’ early exposure to different “methods, workflows, and ways of doing things” was an inherent part of *Vice*’s appeal. As he put it, “I think a lot of people were attracted to coming and writing for [*Vice*] because you could [wear] so many different hats...at other places it would be way more regimented. You’d be way more typecast as a video person, or whatever” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

### **7.1.3. Autonomy (Part I)**

In the context of these working arrangements, reporters I interviewed from both organisations generally felt they had a significant degree of autonomy in day-to-day work. Often, this was discussed in the context of pitching stories, with



journalists determining they generally had more opportunities to pick stories in-line with their own preferences, rather than those of their superiors. As two journalists from *Vice UK* explained:

“ “[Vice] are always open to new ideas, so if you’re keen [on a story], they’ll let you give it a go [and] that was always a big appeal. Knowing friends at other places who didn’t have that kind of freedom you always felt you were having a better time of it in that regard.... You had this freedom...being able to go to these places and do what I always wanted to do was such a massive appeal for me” (Respondent F, editor, *Vice UK*).

“The upward mobility here, if you put the work in, if you work hard [then] you can get places. Within a month [of joining Vice] I’d made a doc...I mean, we [still] have a lot of checks which is good...So if you’re pitching to the UK office then the US office have to sign it off. But, compared to other places. You know, I’ve got friends who are like ‘oh it took me a year to get this signed off’ and I’m like ‘it took me two weeks’...We don’t know how lucky we are...It’s really fluid [here]. You can literally get up, walk to your boss, and be like ‘here you are, I’ve got this idea’ and he’s like ‘yep, that sounds good, write me a one-sheet’ and then the next day, budget, booked, gone...It can be that quick...I pretty much cover whatever I want to really” (Respondent A, reporter, *Vice UK*).

As above, these examples were sometimes contrasted with the fortunes of journalists at other media, who were perceived to enjoy less individual autonomy as a result of stricter hierarchies and additional layers of bureaucracy.

This being said, feelings of autonomy were not necessarily uniform across the whole organisation of *Vice*. On the contrary, several journalists I interviewed

from the US office implied stronger top-down control from news editors<sup>62</sup>. As one reporter commented:

“Sometimes I produced [stories] myself. I would pitch stories, I would be assigned stories, it was about fifty-fifty...I would [spend time] trying to win people over to what I wanted to do” (Respondent D, reporter, *Vice US*).

In fact, one editor cited the lack of time for reporters to work on their own stories as one reason why the US office had experienced a general dip in morale:

“[The] people who we had on staff, who we had in our newsroom, they were cracking it...and people got tired of that pace. We did what we could, morale-wise, to ensure that each member of our staff, would, apart from the daily stuff, get to work on original stuff that had conceived themselves, that they were personally invested in...I think that worked for a while, but ultimately, morale began to dip” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

At *BuzzFeed*, journalists also suggested that despite editors having the “last word on everything” (Respondent J, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*), they were given an ample degree of latitude in news work. As one UK reporter said:

“If there’s a big breaking news story or we see something that has been developing for a while, my editor might say ‘maybe watch this and see if there’s something we can do with it’. Less so in my role on story day-to-day and being like ‘can you write this up’ A lot of the time, I’m very lucky to have my editors believe in my judgement. If I see something that I

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<sup>62</sup> One possible explanation for this is that by virtue of being larger and better resourced, *Vice US* could afford to employ more staff (including editors), compared to *Vice UK*. Another reason for higher degrees of editorial control might relate to the fact that most senior members of *Vice*’s news team were based in its US office, in Brooklyn, New York. On a couple of occasions, *US* editors spoke about this, suggesting that these managerial figures sometimes played a part in decisions about what news stories to commission.

think will work, or they come to me and say – ‘do you think this will work on the website?’ – they’ll trust me. Mainly because being a 20-something female, I kind of represent a demographic of BuzzFeed readers” (Respondent M, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

As per the comment above, *BuzzFeed* reporters were perhaps more inclined than *Vice* reporters to view their autonomy as a direct consequence of their homology with the audience. An editor I spoke with elaborated on this point during one interview:

“[At BuzzFeed, we think] it’s okay to employ talented people in their early 20s and give them a go of it and give them good editing and guidance and they’ll have ideas. And so, from those background assumptions that the traditional media maybe does not have... The traditional media likes people to serve their time a bit because all the senior people did, so bloody hell, everyone else is going to have to, and the traditional media likes to say... ‘what stories we’ll cover what stories are important is’...tends to flow top-down. And...[while] we value experience and our editor-in-chief and our head of news do have final say about what stories we do, there is a slight inversion of that...Reporters should be able to pursue things they think will work. Hire people that are like your target audience, you know. They can...they will have good ideas and will do them well and trust them to do that” (Respondent L, editor, *BuzzFeed*).

In this light, autonomy was not only an outcome of the specific conditions of news production, but also a product of the similarity in dispositions between reporters and audiences. Reporters were trusted to self-select news because of their ability to integrate audience preferences into their own sense of news judgement. This would seem to stand in direct contrast to much of the earlier literature describing the relationship between reporters and editors, which has typically portrayed reporters as more source-oriented and editors as “more conscious of what will have audience appeal” (Reese 2009: 288; also see Gans 2004: 89-90).

#### 7.1.4. Autonomy (Part II)

For the most part, then, autonomy was understood by journalists to mean a degree of independence from *internal* or organisational influences. Yet this leaves the influence of external actors largely unaccounted for. As the literature on news production routines has shown, both *sources* (e.g. Fishman 1980; Gans 2004; Strömbäck and Nord 2006), and, more recently, *audiences* (Steensen 2009; Agarwal and Barthel 2015; Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc 2018), have played an important role in shaping autonomy in news organisations. To address these issue, interviewees were asked questions about their daily routine, including how they generated news stories and what kind of influence the audience had on their daily work (see Appendix B).

Here, perhaps the first general observation to make is that the relative autonomy of journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* seemed partially dependent on 1) their specific role within the organisation, and, 2) the particular events of the day. For example, those reporters with a beat specialisation who experienced regular contact with sources, likely encountered more constrains in news work, both via informal means (e.g. off-the-record conversations, leaks) and formal means (e.g. interviews, press conferences, briefings). One reporter from *BuzzFeed* seemed to acknowledge this, suggesting that reporters working in beats like politics were “slightly [more] anchored” by “fixed events” compared to generalist reporters (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*). Beyond beats, routines could also be constrained by random occurrences like breaking news events. For example, incidents like natural disasters and terrorist attacks typically demanded a rapid diversion of organisational resources to focus efforts on time-sensitive activities like researching and verifying information, and on-the-ground reporting.

Aside from these more obvious constraints, journalists were not particularly forthcoming in speaking about other external factors that encroached upon their autonomy and news judgement. That one of journalism’s core normative commitments involves maintaining a degree of independence from political and economic pressures (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001), this made sense as a

rhetorical strategy. At the same time, it was possible to glean from interviews that journalist's image of independence in news work might be more illusory than they wished to imply.

This was most apparent when journalists spoke about their relationship with the audience. Several reporters and editors I interviewed seemed to possess specific knowledge about the habitus of the audience – their particular wants, habits, interests etc. – that they habitually factored into their decisions about news selection. This newfound knowledge was often attributed to digital technologies, which provided new tools and techniques for quantifying and measuring audience behaviour (see Carlson 2018; Zamith 2018). Reporters from *BuzzFeed* were perhaps most explicit on this subject, explaining how:

“The huge advantage of writing digitally is that we know exactly what our readers are reacting to because you can see it for each individual story...We can see what people care about and what people want to read and cater to that and that's super important” (Respondent I, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

That catering to audience's needs was seen as “super important” was partly attributed to a rise in audience autonomy<sup>63</sup>. Reporters were aware that the “people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen 2006) had acquired more power in self-selecting the news, and consequentially, felt a stronger need to tailor content to their particular needs and preferences. As the same reporter above argued: “The big difference with the Internet...is that you can't tell people what they want any more...You have to work out what people want and give it to people in the form they think they want it” (Respondent I, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

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<sup>63</sup> The term audience autonomy, as Napoli (2012: 84) suggests “refers to how contemporary characteristics of the media environment—ranging from interactivity, to mobility, to on-demand functionality, to the increased capacity for user-generated content—all serve to enhance the extent to which audiences have control over their interactions with media”.

In contrast to *BuzzFeed*, reporters at *Vice* were generally less revealing about how the audience factored into their sense of news judgement. However, there were definite signs that the audience were treated as an important constituent in the news process. One reporter, for instance, was critical of the apparent insularity of traditional news organisations, which he argued were preoccupied with “making journalism for other journalists”, while at the same time, neglecting the more immediate needs of the audience (Respondent A, reporter, *Vice UK*). However, it was not completely clear from interviews precisely *how* the audience shaped *Vice* reporters’ sense of news judgement. Individuals were certainly cognisant of the audience in terms of their tastes and interests, which appeared to affect certain decisions regarding the style and aesthetics of news. As one reporter commented:

“Vice had gathered this young audience who were mainly here for cultural stuff, art, music...and my feeling [with news] ...was that we need to tell [stories] in a way that they get it. Give them the information they need but also make sure they are invested in it emotionally...And so, you know, our style is different because we’re making this stuff for sixteen to maybe thirty-year-olds...our style was very different to everyone else” (Respondent F, editor, *Vice UK*).

On the other hand, perhaps because of the basic homology between reporters and audiences, it was also assumed that “what interested [reporters] would interest the audience” (Gans 2004: 229). In this way, reporters from *Vice* appeared less audience-oriented than reporters at *BuzzFeed*<sup>64</sup>.

However, while some *reporters* from *Vice* conveyed a degree of independence from external influences, senior figures offered a different assessment. One reason for this might relate to the basic division of labour at *Vice*, with editors

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<sup>64</sup> One important caveat here is that several of the journalists I interviewed from *Vice* seemed to spend more time producing video content than textual content. It is possible that reporters producing text-based coverage would have been subject to different kinds of pressures compared to video reporters, owing to their substantially different production schedules.

appearing to take on more responsibility for making the news “acceptable to the audience” (Gans 2004: 89). This covered a range of activities, from deciding the appropriate framing of an article, to monitoring the performance of stories using *Vice*’s internal analytics. Collectively, these activities were about ensuring stories “reach[ed] their full potential in terms of impact”, according to one editor (Respondent C, editor, *Vice US*).

With editors from *Vice* appearing to shoulder most of the responsibility for making stories appealing to the audience, reporters were more insulated from integrating the audience into their own sense of news judgement. As the editor above noted:

“I think all editors pay attention [to analytics] but we actually try have our writers not to be too invested in how many hits their stories get because I don’t think that’s what they should be worrying about” (Respondent C, editor, *Vice US*).

“Worry” was a suitable word here, because by and large, most journalists I spoke with – and in particular, more senior figures from *Vice* – seemed troubled by the audiences’ newly acquired power in the news production process. As one former editor from *Vice US* reflected:

“So, your point about the audience...and this is particularly true of digital upstarts, or upstarts in the news media world, that they’re keenly aware of the audience and keenly aware of catering to the audience to some degree...And I don’t necessarily mean in terms of puppy videos or listicles or things of that sort, but nevertheless, being like, ‘look, we’ve got mouths to feed’. I’m not sure how much the New York Times’ editors wake up and be like ‘we’ve got mouths to feed’. They’re more like, ‘look, we’ve got stories to cover’ and then [the production process] sorts itself out...Whereas at *Vice*, it was like, ‘this is a business’, and we have phantom subscribers...that subscribe to this brand of *Vice* and we need to make them feel at home” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

From the perspective of this editor, *Vice's* responsibility to the audience was partly a consequence of being a new entrant to the field, which produced a deficit in certain assets, that other, more established news brands could rely upon as capital<sup>65</sup>. Here, it was telling that *Vice* was contrasted with the *New York Times*, which was cited favourably as an organisation where news judgement remained under the jurisdiction of journalists. By contrast, *Vice* was pejoratively referred to as a “business”, implying that commercial pressures (or having “mouths to feed”) might be encroaching upon editors’ professional sense of news judgement. Similarly, another reporter from *Vice* expressed concerns that journalism had become more driven by a “looming idea of audience engagement”, meaning organisations had to work harder to be “seen and heard more...through titillation, some sort of ideological affinity...or [by establishing] a voice or brand that appeals to a particular segment” (Respondent J, reporter, *Vice US*).

At *BuzzFeed*, interviewees similarly noted a link between their status as a new entrant and the need to cater to the interests of the audience. However, they generally appeared less concerned about this development compared to journalists from *Vice*. As two reporters explained:

“I think one thing that you’re aware of [at *BuzzFeed*] is that there is no automatic audience. We don’t get a tonne of front-page [traffic] and so you’ve got to actually think, ‘is this important? ... Is this a story that people want to hear? Or should hear and might share?’” (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

“Yeah, so someone from [legacy publication] – I asked him recently what he liked better about writing at the [legacy publication] versus for us, and he said what he liked at [legacy publication] was that if his news story was put on the homepage, it was guaranteed 100k traffic or something,

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<sup>65</sup> As Nicholls et al. (2016: 11-12) argue, “digital-born news media organisations...have to establish themselves without the assets that legacy media have, including brand reputation, loyal audiences, and revenues generated by print and broadcast activities”.



and his editor saying to him ‘well done’. And it was ultimately the editor’s choice what went on the homepage. [Whereas] here, he actually has to think about what people actually want to read. *The world is your editor*” (Respondent G, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*, emphasis added).

Given there was no “automatic audience” for news, reporters at *BuzzFeed* appeared relatively comfortable with the idea of factoring audience preferences into news judgement, connecting this positively with a greater sense of independence<sup>66</sup>. Moreover, unlike many journalists from *Vice*, reporters from *BuzzFeed* appeared to find the idea of a journalism more tailored around the needs and wants of audiences *normatively desirable*. In this manner, audience choice functioned as the “seemingly more democratic...substitute for the internal standards” by which journalists judged news stories (Bourdieu 1998: 73). In a more recent article discussing the impact of audience analytics, Tandoc and Thomas (2015: 248) discussed this feature of contemporary news production, noting how the “broader trend in media toward customization and choice”, was interfering with journalists’ ability to independently select the news.

#### **7.1.5. Audience Analytics and Metrics**

Whether or not journalists were supportive of these changes, new considerations about the needs and wants of audiences at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* brought new questions to the fore regarding how to judge the newsworthiness of particular issues or events. Often, such considerations were expressed in the language of audience metrics<sup>67</sup>, with terms like *traffic*, *hits*, *clicks*, *views*, and *shares*, being regularly deployed in discourse. Yet in the same way opinions on audiences diverged between journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, so did attitudes regarding audience data and metrics and their implementation in

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<sup>66</sup> This comes across slightly paradoxical, but, as mentioned, reporters’ ability to integrate audience preferences into news judgement seemed to provide them with a greater degree of freedom from superiors in deciding for themselves what stories to cover.

<sup>67</sup> A metric refers to a single, discrete type of data (e.g. page views; number of comments; number of shares), usually derived from a broader suite of analytics software (see Cherubini and Nielsen 2016 for a good overview).

the news process. At *Vice*, there was a definite awareness among editors and some reporters of audience metrics, the most prominent being web traffic, which subsequently had an influence on decisions about news selection. As one reporter from *Vice* explained:

“As far as traffic numbers, [there was] not day-to-day [pressure], but there was definite concern...it wasn't necessarily relayed on the news staff but on the editors or supervisors. There were weekly traffic meetings where they looked at the traffic numbers, analysed, figured out where they were deficient and so there was some pressure there, I think. I just don't know how it was projected on day-to-day work” (Respondent J, reporter, *Vice US*).

Editors from *Vice* were helpful in expounding further how traffic pressures manifested in daily work. One interviewee from the US office, worth quoting in full, described their routine as follows:

“We had to get cracking on the site immediately and so [stories] would be assigned, deadlines would be assigned. Much of the turnaround would be day of...We had to be highly selective. Whatever we thought was trending [on social media] the most in the morning that wasn't already spent [or] something that had hit the wires within a reasonably short amount of time; there was still room to carve some space out on that. That was the rationale for much of morning assignments...We [also] did a fair amount of enterprise reporting...but that wasn't going to generate 10 million monthly uniques...If you're going to get 10 million unique visitors a month, you're doing it by covering Obama day of, you're doing it by covering Trump day of. The Italian earthquake day of, like, within an hour or two. You're jumping on every mass shooting that's taking place in the United States, which we did, you know what I mean... So, we needed to be on top of breaking news. If something happened, the quicker we were on top of that with incremental coverage we would publish and push out on Twitter, the more we would get out of it, you know what I mean... That's how you get indexed on Google News. We

were trying to get our SEO [search engine optimisation] up. Otherwise, with your original enterprise reporting, the very Vice-y, sort of niche, you know, when you find the real under the radar story, unless it is very explicitly tied to something super relevant in people's minds, you've got to promote the hell out of it for people to know that it's a thing! It's going to be harder to make hay out of that stuff consistently whereas the stuff that's however many thousand tweets on Twitter, you know, if you can get something in there, that's in the flow, in that feed, in the continuum where millions of people are already looking for that sort of thing, then you're going to get a lot more aggregated traffic out of it. So, it's just logic" (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

As this description suggests, the presence of data and metrics in the newsroom (and the concomitant pressures of meeting preordained traffic targets), encouraged an emphasis on editorial practices oriented around the coverage of breaking news events and trending topics, both of which promised to deliver high returns in traffic and attention. By contrast, "enterprise" or original reporting was deemed riskier, given its unpredictability in attracting a large audience. From this perspective, it is easier to appreciate why editors at *Vice* expressed scepticism about the involvement of the audience in the news process. As a "quantifiable, rationalizable, largely consumptive aggregate" (Anderson 2011b: 550), the audience were primarily viewed through the prism of data and metrics, using reductive terms like "traffic", which had material consequences on the daily work of journalists by stripping them of some of their autonomy in deciding what news to cover. As the editor above explained:

"There were always traffic targets, but then as far as the extent to which they would always be made plain to us, or there would always be a fire under our sheets, that wasn't really the case you know. Sometimes we would be just shy, sometimes we'd hit it better, and we understood that whenever a traffic target was made plain to us, it always seemed very aggressive, if you know what I mean... Ultimately, we were always trying to tell interesting stories and predicating our day to day on the idea that doing what we did well would result in the kind of hits that they were

looking for... And we knew what kind of material spiked and we would jump on those kinds of stories and we would want to tell them well” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

Given that editors seemed to possess most of the responsibility for fulfilling these targets, reporters rarely spoke about data and metrics in interviews; and when they did, it was chiefly to note that they paid little attention to them.

At *BuzzFeed*, journalists’ attitudes towards data and metrics appeared to flow from their attitudes towards the audience, with reporters seemingly happy to integrate their knowledge of the audience into decisions about different aspects of news stories. Their relative contentment also seemed to feed a general curiosity in the uses of data and metrics, beyond broad references to metrics such as “traffic”. This was most evident in discussions on the metric of “sharing”, which, as Jonah Peretti (2014) has suggested, underpins much of *BuzzFeed’s* thinking about content creation:

“[For *BuzzFeed*] sharing has always been the biggest metric because it shows that someone thinks a piece of content is worth passing on to a friend...Word of mouth is the distribution [of content] ...You are getting so much data back about what people like and what people share and that can immediately inform the media you create”.

For journalists at *BuzzFeed*, sharing was held in similar esteem and recognised as distinct from other metrics, which were often reproached for being linked to cruder forms of audience measurement and more culturally debased practices like news aggregation (Anderson 2011c; Bakker 2012). As editor-in-chief of *BuzzFeed UK*, Janine Gibson, commented once in an interview:

“It’s a fundamental mistake that people make about *BuzzFeed* that we are all about getting traffic. If an article is shared by relatively fewer people but really speaks to them, that’s incredibly important to us...*BuzzFeed* journalists, editors, and video-makers study relentlessly what will cause their audience to share their content. We don’t deal in

big round numbers, we deal in metrics of sharing...The key to the success of news is working out how to marry those learning with more traditional journalistic skills of running down a story, finding out who's doing a bad thing and trying to cover it up" (Gibson 2016).

Reporters I spoke with generally echoed these sentiments, discussing how factors related to the metric of sharing fed into decisions about newsworthiness:

"Seventy-five percent of our traffic comes through social media referrals. Not homepage clicks which is extremely rare. Like, the BBC, Guardian; most of their traffic comes through homepage clicks. But BuzzFeed is not a destination homepage. You don't wake up in the morning and be like 'Oh I'm interested in the news, let's see what BuzzFeed is writing about'. You're going on Twitter, on Facebook, and then you go 'oh that story's interesting' and click through that way. So, when we're doing investigations or commissioning one, we're always thinking 'okay, is this something people are going to talk about? Is this something people are going to want to share?'" (Respondent A, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

It would be fair to assert that working out what news people felt compelled to share was not an exact science, but rather, an evolving and ever-changing discipline that relied on user data being "captured, analysed, and manipulated in a perpetual loop of analysis, interpretation, experimentation, feedback, and refinement" (Küng 2015: 58). As a result, many journalists carried certain notions about what made stories shareable, ranging from the broad to the specific. One reporter, for example, emphasised that sharable news typically had to contain a "human relatable element", whether this concerned an issue relating to personal identity (e.g. race, gender, age), or a subject likely to provoke a strong emotional reaction in readers<sup>68</sup> (Respondent C, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*). Beyond these broad observations, it was apparent that many reporters also carried a mental stock of more detailed knowledge about

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<sup>68</sup> I discuss the use of emotion in news in more detail in the next chapter of this thesis.

particular tactics and strategies that heightened the possibility a news story being shared. Various reporters discussed the reinforcing relationship between sharing and, for example:

a) particular news subjects

“[It’s partly] about working out what articles have done well in the past...So like, if it’s something to do with mental health that tends to do quite well. If it’s something to do with women then that tends to do quite well. Erm, periods do quite well! There’s little things, like, little tick boxes in your heard, like ‘yes, it’s a woman, it’s about mental health’; you create tick boxes as you go along” (Respondent C, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

b) images

“Stories that are visual [tend to do well]. Obviously, every story that we publish we create an image thumbnail for it, and we try, with that thumbnail, to either put an image which will hook someone or explain the story quite quickly. A lot of the time, stories with a very strong image, like the image of a woman, or something that will make people emote...do very well” (Respondent M, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

c) headline framings

“We’re always thinking about headlines, different headline framings. We have these spreadsheets and documents that we’re putting them in, down to like, what adjective seems to be doing really well...We’re always learning, and then if we hit on something, we will keep using it. We know it’s something that works, and then eventually people kind of get sick of it. But also everyone’s on the lookout for the next formulation that works, or topic, erm, or anything like that” (Respondent G, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

d) and, specific demographic groups

“BuzzFeed is known for having good internal analytics. It’s about keeping a bit of a sense of it, you know: what’s connected and what hasn’t. You know, anything that fact-checks an anti-Corbyn story [and says it was] wrong is going to do brilliant because Corbyn is shared. Corbyn supporters share, SNP supporters share, Tories and mainstream Labour don’t...Women share more than men, gay people share more than straight people...straight white men tend to be a less important demo for BuzzFeed than for others because they share less on social media...and since everywhere else is catering to them anyway, it doesn’t matter if they’re slightly less served here” (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

Based on interviews alone, it was difficult to decipher how this knowledge was operationalized in every day routines. However, it seemed clear that data and metrics were a significant factor, if not a “primary ingredient” (Anderson 2011: 561) in news judgement at *BuzzFeed*, affecting the manner in which journalists thought about stories, ranging from what subjects to cover to what presentational devices to employ in order to maximize the reach and impact of stories. As one *BuzzFeed* reporter said: “We are build[ing] up this institutional knowledge of what works and what doesn’t” (Respondent G, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

## **7.2. Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to provide an account of news production routines at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, paying close attention to the three major constituents of routines – audiences, sources, and organisational factors – and the role they play in enabling and constraining certain journalistic practices (Shoemaker and Reese 2009). This discussion has taken place against a backdrop of broader social, economic, cultural, and technological trends. The shift from modernity to postmodernity (Gade 2011); from industrialisation to “informationalization” (Hardt and Negri 2000); from solidity to liquidity (Deuze 2009b); all suitably describe a societal transition away from more centralized, hierarchical,

bureaucratic, and stable forms of industrial production, towards more fluid, decentralised, flexible, networked, and individualised modes of work (Deuze and Witschge 2018).

While these exogenous pressures have brought disruption to traditional routines and ideals (Robinson 2007) – that is, the established cultural capital of the field – digital natives, by virtue of being native to these conditions, have been able to rethink routines from scratch, developing new practices and workflows that, over time, “generate identities, behaviors, roles and values that are seen as appropriate” (Ryfe 2006: 140). This was certainly borne out in my observation of routines at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, which had less in common with the classic “assembly line” model of news (Gans 2004), but rather, seemed to bear many of the commonly cited traits of multimedia content production (Deuze 2009a). Accordingly, day-to-day news work at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* was characterised by a high degree of fluidity, flexibility, integration, and collaboration, with individual journalists assuming more responsibility for their own work and operating under only occasional supervision from editors and other senior staff. This being said, the news process was still subject to constant evaluation, revision, and refinement, but most of this activity took place behind the domain of a computer screen, via virtual messaging applications like *Slack*.

Under this arrangement, and as observed in a multitude of other newsrooms, practices like speed, flexibility, and multiskilling were important facets of news work (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski 2009). While much of the literature so far has largely focused on the negative impact of these changes in traditional newsrooms, among the journalists I interviewed it was clear that these nascent trends were “less a source of disruption than...a potential new source of identity” (Ferrucci and Vos 2017: 3). Partly owing to their limited professional trajectories in the field, journalists from *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* were less cognitively and emotionally attached to “old” ways of making news, which benefited their organisations in the sense they were more ideologically predisposed to accepting new methods and styles of working. This was evident in the way that these practices were naturalised in discourse, with younger



journalists, in particular, recognising that the ability to working with new technologies, publishing across multiple platforms, managing competing workloads, and – accepting these were inevitable came with digital journalism - features of news work were important emerging forms of cultural capital in online journalism (Siapera and Spyridou 2012). Accordingly, certain news processes linked to the established cultural capital of the field were disparaged for being overly rigid, bureaucratic, and hierarchical.

A major part of the appeal of these new forms of news work was that they appeared to imbue individual reporters with a greater sense of ownership and control over news stories. Somewhat paradoxically, then, these new practices connected with a deeply traditional desire for autonomy (Maras 2013). At first glance, these findings seemed to contradict much of the literature on contemporary news work, which has shown how multiskilling, flexibility, and accelerating production cycles has led to more pressurised working arrangements, tighter deadlines, and less time to do the “core” work of journalism such as research and on-the-ground reporting (Ornebring 2009). Yet in making the distinction between internal and external autonomy, this chapter has shown how perceptions of increased autonomy were primarily judged against the threat of *internal* constraints, such as oversight from superiors or formalised publishing protocols. In the absence of these forms of top-down control, reporters often felt emboldened to independently pursue and pitch stories to editors that they found personally interesting, based on the knowledge that “what interested them would interest the audience” (Gans 2004: 229).

However, while these newer forms of cultural capital led to increased *perceptions* of autonomy, it is important to recall that values like speed, flexibility, and multiskilling in contemporary news work have not emerged in a vacuum, but rather, are closely linked to broader processes of commercialisation aimed at rationalising resources, reducing costs, maximising productivity, and being more responsive to the needs of the market (Cohen 2015). These processes have occurred in tandem with an “almost exclusive emphasis on individualised responsibilities” in the workplace; a trend often

cloaked in organisational and broader cultural discourses of 'enterprise', which stress empowerment, flexibility, entrepreneurialism, and autonomy (Deuze 2009a: 84). While much of the literature uncritically celebrate these new facets of work (Kreiss and Brennen 2016), for Deuze (2009: 85), these discourses amount to a "deliberate managerial attempt to regulate professional identity as a form of organizational control", leading workers to uncritically accept their own subjugation and normatively embrace more precarious, contingent, pressurised, and exploitative modes of labour. Among journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, there was a definite sense of these values being internalised in discourse, so much so, that they seemed to form an integral part of their professional identities. Perhaps this also helps to explain why some senior journalists I interviewed seemed more perturbed by these changes, connecting them with a loss, rather than gain, in autonomy.

Aside from these internal constraints, external factors, filtered through organisational imperatives, played a major role in shaping journalistic routines and individual understandings of autonomy. A key constituent in this process was the audience, whose particular "informational wants and needs" (Beam 2001: 467) seemed to have an important role in shaping routines at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. This would appear indicative of audience-oriented publications in general, where, as Van Zoonen (1998: 136) notes, "it is it is not so much the relation with sources that circumscribes journalistic practice, but the requirements of the market or the community that is catered for". Nonetheless, what distinguishes the current era from earlier periods is the relative abundance and availability of digital technologies that "give journalism outlets unprecedented ability to track, measure, and quantify audience activity" (Cohen 2015: 108). Consequentially, older conceptions of the audience as the 'missing link' in news production (Schlesinger 1978) have been rendered less apposite, as journalists' intuitions about the audience have steadily been replaced by a rhetoric of the 'active' audience, "laying the groundwork for a vision of the professional reporter that is less autonomous in his or her news decisions and increasingly reliant on audience metrics as a supplement to news judgment" (Anderson 2011: 550).

At *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, this rhetoric animated many conversations about the audience, albeit in ways that were specific to both organisations. While at *Vice*, journalists seemed generally more sceptical about metrics, connecting them with a loss of autonomy in work, *BuzzFeed* journalists seemed to embrace them, viewing metrics like “sharing” as effective substitutes for audience wants. These developments inevitably raise concern about the nature of editorial autonomy, suggesting that journalist’s “gut feeling” about news is being encroached upon by the “quantified” audience (Schultz 2007; Anderson 2011; Carlson 2018). Although there are many legitimate reasons to criticise professional news judgement as a means for deciding the news (e.g. Hall 1978; Soloski 1989), this tacit knowledge has long been considered an “essential skill for journalists” and thus an important part of their cultural capital (Cohen 2015: 109). Moreover, there are legitimate questions to ask regarding the extent to which metrics can be interpreted as a genuine reflection of what the audience want, or indeed, *need* (Boczkowski and Peer 2011). Rather, metrics would seem to support a very narrow definition of consumer choice (Tandoc and Thomas 2015), ultimately driven by an institutional need to extract more (economic) value from the news process (Anderson 2011; Cohen 2015; Carlson 2018).

## 8. Making News: News Production Practices at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*

Having outlined some of the key constituents shaping routines at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, this chapter goes deeper to investigate different facets of news content. Despite the very limited evidence, a general claim made about digital natives is that the content and character of their news is fundamentally different from other news providers (Riordan 2014; Küng 2015). Based on the findings presented so far, these claims would appear to have some purchase, though this must be balanced with the knowledge that certain elements of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s news operation remain quite traditional in structure and scope.

To move the discussion forward, this chapter addresses what many scholars consider to be *the* defining tension in the field at present, namely, that between the emergent participatory culture and journalism's professional logic of control over content (Lewis 2012). While journalism has long been understood as a "very weakly autonomous field" (Bourdieu 2005: 33), perhaps what sets apart the present era is "the ease with which individuals may participate in the creation and distribution of media" (Lewis 2012: 846, emphasis in original). This shift is seen to strike at the core of journalism's authority and self-definition (Netzer et al. 2014: 620), which, for the better part of a century, has relied on maintaining a strong degree of exclusivity and control over information to earn its autonomy and power.

To explore this broad issue, the following discussion examines some of the key sites where the participatory-professional boundary is being negotiated, paying close attention to the role of journalistic norms in mediating the acceptance, reconfiguration, and rejection of more audience-centric practices. To guide the discussion, three research questions have been developed:

- 1) To what extent do journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* express a desire for gatekeeping control over news content? How is this manifest in news production?

- 2) Do *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* challenge or uphold traditional sourcing techniques?
- 3) What is *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* journalists' relationship with the objectivity norm? How is this manifest in news content?

In answering these questions, this chapter hopes to shed light on the various ways journalism's cultural capital might be responding to the participatory logic of digital media. The remainder of this chapter is divided into three main sections. The first examines gatekeeping and exclusivity (8.1), looking at the various processes involved in gathering, selecting, and filtering the news. The second section (8.2) examines sourcing practices at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. The third and final section examines journalists' relationship with objectivity (8.3); both at a rhetorical and practical level.

### **8.1. Exclusivity and Gatekeeping**

Despite the relative abundance of information and increased means that ordinary people have acquired to participate in the news process, it would be fairly uncontroversial to suggest that news selection – or 'gatekeeping' – "remains one of the fundamental activities of any journalist or editor" (Bruns 2008: 175). Decisions about what news to cover; how to frame and collate information; where to invest resources; and what sources to use; all contribute to the process of gatekeeping, which, at a basic level, is concerned with what information is selected and rejected in the process of becoming news (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). While the contemporary media environment has multiplied and expanded the number of gates and gatekeepers through which information reaches the public (Singer 2008), this should not detract from the central role still played by the news media in producing most of the public's information about news and current affairs (Nielsen 2016). It is for this reason, however, that many scholars have expressed concern about the current state of information provision (Fenton 2011; McChesney and Pickard 2011; Phillips 2012; McChesney 2013). Contrary to early predictions that the internet would improve the quality and diversity of news content (see Curran et al. 2012), many empirical studies have pointed to a rise in what Bourdieu (1998:20) would call

the “uniformity and banality” of news. This has been attributed to a combination of greater pressures on speed and immediacy in reporting; fiercer competition between news providers; and a general lack of resources available to produce in-depth, well-researched, original content (e.g. Boczkowski and De Santos 2007; Paterson 2007; Davies 2008; Quandt 2008; Franklin and Carlson 2011; Phillips 2011).

These practical challenges aside, the shift to a “networked” system of communication has raised philosophical questions about journalism’s role and purpose (Lewis et al. 2010; Peters and Broersma 2013; 2017). As Deuze (2005: 451) writes, “new media technologies challenge one of the most fundamental “truths” in journalism, namely: the professional journalist is the one who determines what publics see, hear and read about the world”. For some, this loss of exclusivity and control – or “jurisdiction” over the news (Abbott 1988; Lewis 2012) – make it imperative that journalism begins to “redefine its relevance” (Broersma and Graham 2013: 461). These suggestions range from the modest to more radical, but tend to be predicated on the same assumption: that journalism needs to reimagine its relationship with the audience, and, to varying degrees, become more participatory, open, and inclusive (Kreiss and Brennan 2016). While many of these ideas predate digital media (Anderson 2011), they have often been borne from observations made at traditional news organisations. This has come at a cost of providing a more holistic picture of how gatekeeping might be changing in the digital era. Little is known, for instance, how digital natives have dealt with the “perceptual and practical threat” of participatory culture – that is, if participation is perceived to be a threat at all (Lewis 2012: 850).

### **8.1.1. Scoops and Exclusives**

Dealing first with the more practical elements of gatekeeping, it was clear that journalists from *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, at least rhetorically, placed some emphasis on exclusivity in news production, suggesting it remained an important doxic news value (Schultz 2007). At *Vice*, discussions about exclusivity frequently centred on long-form content such as features and

investigations, where significant resources were diverted to gathering and producing original news<sup>69</sup>. It was thus harder to determine what kind of emphasis was put on original reporting in every day news production. When asked to describe their daily routine, one journalist from *Vice UK* mentioned that one of their main responsibilities was to “come up with exclusives” for either themselves or other reporters, though it was not clear if this was a daily activity or took place within another timeframe (Respondent B, reporter, *Vice UK*). When asked what distinguished news production at *Vice* from traditional media, another reporter from the UK was more revealing:

“I think in many ways it’s the same, you know, because ultimately we want to be covering big news stories, so story selection isn’t that different. If we see something like [the civil war in] Ukraine, for example, we’re like ‘okay, well this is definitely a big story. We should be doing something’. But then the question is what are we doing that will be different. So, for news, *Vice* always wanted to look at underreported, or complete unreported stories when it was making its films and doing its journalism. But obviously when you move into the news realm, you have to do that but you also have to cover what everyone else is doing, because those are the biggest stories of the day, or of the week, or whatever” (Respondent F, reporter, *Vice UK*).

This description quite artfully describes *Vice*’s dual interest in originality and similarity in news. That this journalist saw it as “obvious” to cover what everyone else was doing adds further credence to claims that the “pack” mentality of journalism, first described by Crouse (1973), has maintained its importance as a routine in the digital news environment, despite a proliferation of new actors. This was corroborated by another journalist from the *US* office of *Vice*, who similarly alluded to the need to “balance the benefits derived from pack routine with the benefits of the ‘exclusive’” (Shoemaker and Reese 2014: 184). To repeat an earlier quote:

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<sup>69</sup> Please refer back to Chapter 5 (section 5.3) for a breakdown of news by format.

“We did a fair amount of enterprise reporting, [but] the thing is it took time to get off the ground, and then you push publish, and push it out on Facebook and Twitter or whatever, and sometimes the piece would hit maybe great, and other times less...We had to be highly selective. Whatever we thought was trending [on social media] the most in the morning that wasn't already spent [or] something that had hit the wires within a reasonably short amount of time; there was still room to carve some space out on that. That was the rationale for much of morning assignments...If you're going to get 10 million unique visitors a month, you're doing it by covering Obama day of, you're doing it by covering Trump day of. The Italian earthquake day of, like, within an hour or two. You're jumping on every mass shooting that's taking place in the United States, which we did, you know what I mean... So, we needed to be on top of breaking news. Otherwise, with your original enterprise reporting, the very Vice-y, sort of niche, you know, when you find the real under the radar story, unless it is very explicitly tied to something super relevant in people's minds, you've got to promote the hell out of it for people to know that it's a thing! It's going to be harder to make hay out of that stuff consistently whereas the stuff that's however many thousand tweets on Twitter, you know, if you can get something in there, that's in the flow, in that feed, in the continuum where millions of people are already looking for that sort of thing, then you're going to get a lot more aggregated traffic out of it. So, it's just logic” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

As this comment suggests, enterprise coverage had to be balanced with pack coverage because they essentially served different purposes<sup>70</sup>. While original reporting was primarily valued for its cultural and symbolic function – as a means of enhancing the prestige and status of the *Vice* brand and

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<sup>70</sup> The impression given to me in interviews was that this balance was far from even. As the editor quoted above acknowledged, the pressure of trying to “keep pace with the daily news juggernaut” often meant that reporters had very limited time to work on “original stuff they had conceived themselves” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).



communicating journalistic excellence – the hit-or-miss nature of exclusives seemed to warrant a strong focus on news that could attract large audiences. In this way, pack coverage was primarily valued for its ability to generate economic capital, in the form of public recognition, “measured by numbers of readers, listeners, or viewers, and therefore, in the final analysis, by sales and profits” (Bourdieu 1998: 70).

At *BuzzFeed*, journalists were arguably more dismissive of pack coverage. As one reporter from *BuzzFeed UK* explained: “You can’t just report on news that everyone else is reporting on because it doesn’t guarantee people will come to your article when everyone has already written about it” (Respondent C, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*). Instead, there appeared to be a stronger imperative to seek out exclusives – both in “enterprise” journalism, and in daily reporting via “scoops”. Several journalists I spoke with traced this ethos back to Ben Smith, editor-in-chief of *BuzzFeed US*, who has spoken on several occasions about his affinity for scoops, maintaining that they remain a valuable part of the journalistic routine.

“I think I don’t, really. I think reporters who really get this ecosystem get that a piece of churned, aggregated content, nobody’s going to read it, nobody’s going to share it, nobody’s tweeting, “Wow, you guys did a great job writing this thing The New York Times broke. It’s half as good, and it only took you three hours. Congrats...The stuff that breaks through is scoops and maybe that can be very, very fast and very short, but it’s something that adds real value” (Smith 2014a).

“[What I’m looking for in journalists] is just basically raw aggression...that you’re breaking stories, that you’re breaking news, getting scoops, other people haven’t gotten, that’s the core of it right?” (Smith 2016d).

This ethos seemed to have a trickle-down effect among other *BuzzFeed* journalists, with various editors and reporters discussing the importance of

scoops in daily news coverage. As McKay Coppins, a former political reporter for *BuzzFeed US*, once explained:

“The thing is, Ben Smith came from a fairly traditional journalism background. I mean, he was a blogger right before he came to BuzzFeed but he had worked at the New York Observer, and had written for a lot of newspapers, The New York Daily News, and he wanted scoops. Like, his whole thing was, like, ‘just break news. It can be the tiniest scooplet but we just want new information...I don’t care about aggregation, I don’t care about writing the thing that everyone else is writing’...there’s a certain genre of campaign journalism which is writing the ‘day’ story, which is like, ‘this is what the candidate did today’...He was like ‘I don’t need any of that. I just want new information. So, like, short little scooplets and then we’ll occasionally take big swings, like profiles and features, or whatever’” (Coppins 2016).

Similarly, journalists I interviewed from *BuzzFeed* suggested that the pursuit of new information was a “huge priority” in daily reporting, both in the US and UK (Respondent B, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*). According to some reporters, the benefit of this focus was two-fold. One, *BuzzFeed* were able to counteract the “pack” mentality of traditional media, by avoiding the reproduction of stories being covered elsewhere:

“Papers still act as if they have to cover all the issues of the day, even though a lot of that is a 600-word commodity news story that PA [Press Association] has done, that every other newspaper has done, and they still have to put a reporter on it for three hours because they don’t like having wire [copy] in the paper. But that fills so much time and so much production effort...If you have 15 versions of the same story then what’s the point? [Our editors] are like ‘yeah, this is quite important, but everyone’s done it, so let’s do our own thing’” (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

“I think we’re more focused [at BuzzFeed]...Thriving original reporting and original angles on stories, versus just repeating something that’s already been covered elsewhere” (Respondent D, editor, *BuzzFeed UK*).

And two – in a similar manner to *Vice* journalists’ discussions of “enterprise” reporting – *BuzzFeed* journalists’ saw publishing small and large scoops as an effective means of quickly growing the reputation and credibility of the *BuzzFeed* brand:

“[The focus on scoops] is partly a carry-over from America I think. Obviously the Editor-in-Chief...Ben Smith, his background is as a scoop-getting...the term scooplet or micro-scoop gets banded around, that is his mode...[That was] the way they built up that credibility in America...You build up a huge amount of credibility when you’re getting these scooplets, and that spreads out to a very big [political] industry over there. I think our [political system] is smaller, not just in terms of country but I think our industry is just smaller...[so] a lot of those micro-scoops are not in fact, quite as useful. [But] if you get yourself in a position where you are a trusted provider of those little nuggets of information that can build your reputation very quickly” (Respondent L, editor, *BuzzFeed UK*).

“But there’s also people, like, our politics team, with the goal of trying to make sure people take us seriously within British political reporting, being on Sunday morning politics shows, erm, having scoops that other media organizations are forced to credit, even though they hate crediting us. Like, someone to be like ‘BuzzFeed reported this’, erm, they’re building up credibility, erm, and so for them, being taken seriously in those circles is important” (Respondent G, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

As these two quotes imply, the pursuit of scoops was deemed particularly important in the arena of politics; an area of reporting that journalists surmised

to offer the best opportunities for *BuzzFeed* to quickly grow their reputation and earn important symbolic capital. This aside, another potential reason why the political beat was deemed valuable is that it could efficiently provide a steady stream of information, including scoops, but at a fraction of the cost compared to other areas of reporting<sup>71</sup> (see Skovsgaard and Dalen 2013).

In the interest of learning more about how exclusivity was routinised in daily newswork, a randomised sample of 40 news stories<sup>72</sup> from the UK and US websites of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* was compared with news stories produced by two legacy news organisations: the *BBC* and *The Guardian*. In the first instance, the primary source of each story was coded for exclusivity, with the aim of determining how often stories were based on material obtained directly or first-hand by journalists:

**Table 7: Source exclusivity in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=40)</b>	<b>VICE (n=40)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=40)</b>	<b>BBC (n=40)</b>
Direct / exclusive (%)	25	55	22.5	17.5
Indirect / second-hand (%)	70	45	70	70
Ambiguous / Can't tell (%)	5	0	7.5	10
Not applicable (%)	0	0	0	2.5
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

<sup>71</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the political beat, please refer back to Chapter 6 (section 6.4) of this thesis.

<sup>72</sup> Note, the stories selected in this sample were daily formats, meaning features and investigations were excluded from the sample.

As the data shows, both *Vice* and *BuzzFeed* used more exclusive primary sources in daily news stories compared with the *Guardian* and *BBC*. This was most strongly pronounced at *Vice*, where over half of coverage (55%) was based on exclusive primary sources; more than double any other outlet. One explanation for why this percentage was so high relates to the coding procedure, which categorised the primary sources of comment and opinion pieces – mostly the organisations’ own journalists – as exclusive. At *Vice*, these formats made up 12.5% of total coverage<sup>73</sup> – considerably higher than any other outlet – which affected the results of this particular sample. When the primary sources of comment and opinion pieces were re-coded as non-exclusive, a slightly different set of results emerged:

**Table 8: Source exclusivity in news articles (opinion and comment articles re-coded as non-exclusive)**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=40)</b>	<b>VICE (n=40)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=40)</b>	<b>BBC (n=40)</b>
Direct / exclusive (%)	25	30	20	10
Indirect / second-hand (%)	70	70	72.5	77.5
Ambiguous / Can't tell (%)	5	0	7.5	10
Not applicable (%)	0	0	0	2.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Although *Vice* still used the most exclusive primary sources in news stories, this percentage (30%) was much closer to *BuzzFeed* (25%) when opinion pieces were recoded as non-exclusive. However, given the emphasis that

<sup>73</sup> Please refer back to Chapter 5 (section 5.3) for a breakdown of news by format.

*BuzzFeed* journalists placed upon scoops, it was somewhat surprising to see the organization being outperformed by *Vice*, where journalists from both the UK and US had given the impression that chasing exclusives was less of a priority because of the pressure of trying to stay on top of pack coverage. Nonetheless, both digital natives outperformed the two traditional media organisations in the sample; by a small factor compared to *The Guardian* and a larger degree in the case of the *BBC*.

In a more general sense, these findings would appear to at least partially corroborate the opinion of journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* that beyond more time-consuming formats like features and investigations, there was some emphasis on generating scoops and exclusives in daily news work. This supports observations made in other (mainly traditional) organisational settings, which have shown journalists' strong normative desire for gatekeeping control leads to an emphasis on exclusivity in the news process (Schultz 2007; Lasorsa et al. 2011; Williams et al. 2011; Messner et al. 2012). It would also appear to contradict the rather trite claim that "online sites...simply [disseminate] what [is] being produced by traditional old media" (McChesney 2012: 685). In fact, there is a case to make that exclusives took on a heightened importance at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, owing to their status as new entrants to the field. This was evident in journalistic discourse, which suggested that exclusives performed a vital symbolic and cultural function, helping both organisations differentiate themselves from competitors, enhance their status and prestige, and increase their recognition among fellow peers.

Yet, despite there being at least some emphasis on gathering exclusives in news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, this should not conceal the fact that the basis for most stories was information obtained indirectly or second-hand from other sources. Across all four outlets, journalists habitually used second-hand information as the basis for news stories in daily reporting. Indirect or second-hand sources were used by all four outlets a minimum of 70% of the time, with *BBC* journalists relying on non-exclusive primary sources the most (77.5%) out of all four organisations. This is consistent with general

observations made about online news, which show journalists often rely on second-hand information as a means of coping with increased pressures in daily work (Davies 2008; Lewis et al. 2008; Phillips 2011). This situation has arguably worsened since the advent of social media, with the “ambient” social media-news nexus (Hermida 2010) putting greater pressure on individual journalists to “monitor and match” the activities of competitors (Chadha and Wells 2016: 1027). Ultimately, these trends have the effect of undermining the diversity of news and journalism’s public service ideals, increasing “content homogenization” (Boczkowski and De Santos 2007: 168), and depriving people of new information and knowledge about the world<sup>74</sup>.

### **8.1.2. Redefining Exclusivity**

This, however, calls to attention a second and less-discussed aspect of exclusivity, which concerns the way news making now involves “managing multiple fast-moving flows of information already in circulation”, in addition to “locating and sharing ‘new’ news” (Boyer 2013: 2). While this aspect of news work has often been subsumed by concerns about the overall decline in original reporting, others have taken more nuanced position, recognising the emergence of these practices as a logical response to the changing spatial and temporal dimensions of news. As Van Hout and van Leuven (2016: 118) observe:

“Technological innovations support the transition from traditional, on-the-spot reporting to a combination of filtration and curation of existing information, and, to a lesser extent, slow journalism or long form journalism...analysis and contextualization of events are increasingly viewed as the main task of journalists, while the direct reporting of facts is ‘outsourced’ to wire services and PR services”

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<sup>74</sup> In his book, *On Television*, Bourdieu (1998) also remarks on this issue, noting how the news media often engage in the practice of monitoring each other’s stories. For a journalist, he argues, “to know what to say, you have to know what everyone else has said” (Bourdieu 1998: 24).

Under these conditions, Anderson et al. (2012: 22) suggest that the journalist has been “moved higher up the editorial chain from the production of initial observations to a role that emphasises verification and interpretation, bringing sense to the streams of text, audio, photos and video” that circulate continuously online. This emphasis on “sense-making” – “helping people understand, interpret, and use information, rather than merely giving them access to it” (Singer 2008: 65) – is said to be transforming notions of exclusivity, and could augur a shift in journalism’s gatekeeping role, as journalists become less focused on being “first”, and more concerned with presenting existing information in novel or “fresh” ways (Pavlik 2001; Matheson 2004; Møller Hartley 2013; Usher 2014; Agarwal and Barthel 2015).

At *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, it was apparent that these practices were integral to every day news work. Due to the speed of the news cycle and a finite amount of resources, journalists acknowledged it was often impossible to be first to break a news story, which seemed to lead them to redefine exclusivity as in terms of being able to offer a fresh take on information already in circulation, in ways that made sense to their particular audience. As one *BuzzFeed* reporter explained:

“Our priority isn’t to quickly get something up first before the BBC and Guardian, because everyone’s going to have it up within half-an-hour anyway. With some breaking news, there is an exception to that. Or if it’s a subject we’ve covered quite heavily then we will have someone on top of that all the time, but it’s generally, ‘how can we move this forward?’ Original reporting is a huge priority for us. If we do miss the breaking line, it doesn’t mean we won’t do the story, it will be a reaction with our own quotes and our own take on something” (Reporter B, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

Thus, journalists seemed to mitigate against a loss of exclusivity by thinking of ways to repurpose existing news, sometimes by looking for “different angles” into ongoing stories (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*), or by “getting original quotes” (Respondent C, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*) to build on stories in



an iterative manner. A similar process seemed to be in place at *Vice*, where reporters were often required to: “[Find] the fresh angle into the ongoing story; show the particular view that [wasn’t] shown, and make a story their own, aesthetically, stylistically, or whatever” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*). Or, as another reporter from the *UK* office of *Vice* explained:

“So, once you’ve identified the story [published elsewhere], you then have to, sort of, think what you’re going to be doing that’s different. And, you know, our style was always different to everyone else...because we’re making this stuff for maybe sixteen to maybe thirty-year olds” (Respondent F, reporter, *Vice UK*).

As this quote implies, the audience were an important factor in journalists’ decisions about how to repackage existing content. This was certainly true at *BuzzFeed* too, with two reporters describing the process of taking already published information, and repurposing it to make it more useful and relevant to their own readers:

“You might cover the same issues [as traditional media] but it’s whether you can lead on it or not. So, on the doctor’s strike: Firstly, junior doctors are in the BuzzFeed age group, they read us, they already read us, but our audience are interested too...So it was very easy for us to get traction with the doctors as well as the audience. And so, it’s an issue all the papers are covering but we weren’t just doing every slip and move...We could sort of decide which bits we were going to do, and what days we were really going to go in on an issue...And so, some things you decide to do but do them in a BuzzFeed way and others you just go ‘yeah, this story is good, it’s interesting, but it’s not for our audience and everywhere else has done it quite well” (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

“We like to do things that are ‘debunky’, things that...There was this awful phrase that The Spectator used...‘news you can use’, but if it’s just sort, things that are explained or put into context...[Like] ‘here’s what the

scientists say and what that risk actually means for you'. For example, there were a few papers last year reporting on some woman who had stage one breast cancer and was trying to treat it with a vegan diet, so it's things like that...any [situation] where we feel like somebody is getting a lot of attention but the readers aren't actually being served useful information" (Interviewee N, editor, *BuzzFeed UK*).

*BuzzFeed*, then, could afford to be more selective in news that they covered. These decisions routinely centred on whether particular issues could be made fresh and relevant for the audience at hand. In interviews with online journalists from various US-based news outlets, Agarwal and Barthel (2015) made a similar observation, noting that one way journalists dealt with "the difficulty of producing new information in the online environment" was by defining exclusivity as "*exclusive to [their] particular audience*" (Agarwal and Barthel 2015: 382, emphasis in original). This, they argue, "points to a normative environment in which speed or freshness has replaced exclusivity. The goal is not to be first, but to be the most useful to the audience" (Agarwal and Barthel *ibid.* 382).

This aside, other scholars have drawn attention to the practical advantages of approaching stories in this manner. For Møller Hartley (2013: 579), the process of journalists posting "additional facts and angles [to stories] in an accumulative manner" was a strategy that helped journalists manufacture a sense of urgency and relevance in news stories, even if these stories concerned subjects that did not correspond with classic definitions of breaking news. In Usher's (2014) case, the desire for "freshness" in news effectively operated as a synonym for immediacy, whereby "fresh" came to denote "a quality that Web producers and others charged with online journalism associated with their presumed sense of what the audience wanted: something new, something different" (Usher 2014: 109). According to Usher (*ibid.*: 109), determining what was "fresh" was "one way to explain how journalists tried to make sense of the constant presence of a never-ending deadline in the digital age".

In terms of how these ideas manifested in news coverage<sup>75</sup>, it was apparent that many stories published by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* placed a strong emphasis on news analysis or interpretation (the *why* of an event), rather than plainly descriptive stories (the *what* of an event). To provide a few sample headlines from interpretive news stories:

**Table 9: Example headlines in news articles published by BuzzFeed and Vice**

Outlet	Headline	Date
Vice (UK)	Why the huge increase in the number of UK graduates is bad for everyone	11/10/16
Vice (UK)	Female immigrants explain what shocked them the most about Britain	08/03/17
Vice (US)	The second presidential debate, decoded	10/10/16
Vice (US)	Is Trump prepared for the next epidemic?	09/03/17
BuzzFeed (UK)	6 things you need to know about the budget	08/03.17
BuzzFeed (UK)	Here's why Australia just took a big step away from marriage equality	12/10/16
BuzzFeed (US)	9 reasons why Samsung is in big trouble	12/10/16
BuzzFeed (US)	This is how people around the world feel about travelling to the US right now	09/03/17

As these examples demonstrate, some stories produced by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* seemed concerned with moving “beyond descriptive, fact-focused and source-driven journalism” to embrace forms characterized by “a prominent journalistic voice; and by journalistic explanations, evaluations, contextualizations, or speculations going beyond verifiable facts or statements by sources” (Salgado and Strömbäck 2012: 154). To add further empirical weight to these preliminary observations, stories from all four outlets in the sample were analysed for evidence of interpretive journalism. Following the approach of Salgado and Strömbäck (2012), stories were coded as “mainly descriptive” if they described events in a straightforward manner, while stories were coded as “mainly

<sup>75</sup> Note: I am referring here to *all* news coverage, rather than any specific formats.

interpretive” if the journalist “analyzed, evaluated or explained a situation while also describing it” (Salgado and Strömbäck 2012: 148).

**Table 10: Presence of interpretive journalism in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>VICE (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Mainly descriptive (%)	59.8	25.9	73	70
Mainly interpretive (%)	37.4	64.4	21	20.5
Ambiguous / can't tell (%)	1.1	1.1	6	7
Not applicable (%)	1.7	8.6	0	2.5
Total	100	100	100	100

As shown above, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* routinely employed interpretive styles of storytelling in news. This was most pronounced at *Vice*, where nearly two-thirds of stories (64.37%) we coded as “mainly interpretive”. One explanation for this relates to the high number of features, investigations, and opinion pieces that appeared in both *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s sample<sup>76</sup>, with these formats appearing to lend themselves to more interpretive styles of storytelling. At *The Guardian* and *BBC*, interpretive styles of storytelling appeared in around one fifth of news articles – a lower percentage than the two digital natives but still significant enough to suggest that both organisations saw value in this approach<sup>77</sup>. In an opposite sense to *Vice*, these higher percentages might be explained by *The*

<sup>76</sup> See Chapter 5 for a more complete breakdown of news by format.

<sup>77</sup> This finding is consistent with other empirical research that has highlighted the growing importance of “interpretive” or “contextual” reporting in journalism over the last few decades (e.g. Patterson 1993; Barnhurst 2011; Fink and Schudson 2014).

*Guardian* and *BBC*'s routine use of the "report" format, which contributed to 83.5% and 85% of coverage, respectively<sup>78</sup>.

To gain a better understanding of the *context* in which interpretive reporting appeared, stories were subsequently broken down by subject:

**Table 11: Interpretive journalism versus topic**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=67)</b>	<b>VICE (n=112)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=42)</b>	<b>BBC (n=41)</b>
Government / politics	32.0	23.2	52.4	65.8
Social issues / rights / protests	27.6	25	17.9	9.7
Crime / terrorism	6.0	10.7	10.7	4.9
Science / technology	14.9	1.80	2.3	2.4
Health	3.0	1.80	0	4.9
Business / economy	6.0	1.80	9.5	7.4
Entertainment / arts	6.0	17.0	0	4.9
Lifestyle (trends, fashion, travel)	0	8.9	0	0
Accidents/ disasters	1.5	0	0	0

<sup>78</sup> See Chapter 5 (section 5.3) for a more complete breakdown of news by format.

Energy / nature / environment	1.50	0	7.2	0
Other	1.50	9.8	0	0
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

For three out of the four outlets in the sample, the topic of government and politics was subject to the most interpretive reporting. This was particularly pronounced at the two traditional news organisations, where news about government and politics accounted for more than half of interpretive stories in total. At *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, news about government and politics, as well as social issues, rights, and protests, made up nearly half of both organisations' interpretive coverage. This was in accord with findings presented earlier in this thesis, which signalled these were two important news topics for both organisations<sup>79</sup>. Beyond these subjects, *BuzzFeed* also featured a high number of interpretive stories focused on science and technology. Meanwhile, *Vice* used interpretive storytelling fairly frequently in stories about entertainment and arts. Finally, in the interest of seeing how often interpretive reporting featured in the daily news cycle, articles by all four outlets that followed the standard "report" format were isolated and assessed for the presence of interpretive reporting.

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<sup>79</sup> See Chapter 5 (section 5.3) and Chapter 6 (section 6.4).

**Table 12: Interpretive journalism in news reports**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=127)</b>	<b>Vice (n=60)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=167)</b>	<b>BBC (n=170)</b>
Mainly descriptive (%)	81.1	65	80.2	78.8
Mainly interpretive (%)	18.1	28.3	12.6	10.6
Ambiguous / can't tell (%)	0.8	0	7.2	8.2
Not applicable (%)	0	6.7	0	2.4
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

As these results demonstrate, interpretive storytelling was far less prevalent in daily reporting across all four outlets. Naturally, this raises questions about the extent to which interpretive journalism was routinised in every day news work. For *Vice*, this might have partially been offset by the regular publication of comment and opinion pieces, all of which were coded as “mainly interpretive” and made up 12.5% of total coverage. This aside, the absence of interpretive journalism in daily reporting heightens the possibility that, at the routine level, all four organisations were regurgitating information published elsewhere, rather than adding anything “new” by including further interpretation, analysis, or explanation for their particular audience.

These findings add an additional layer of complexity to the broader discussion around gatekeeping. In accord with other research, journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* seemed interested in redefining exclusivity to mean offering something “fresh” or novel – a new take on events – fashioned explicitly around the particular tastes and interests of their audience. Although much of literature has treated this as a recent development (Møller Hartley 2013; Usher 2014; Agrwal and Barthel 2015), it is in fact a decades-old phenomenon. For example,

discussing the decline of event-centred reporting in three American newspapers, Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) write that:

Most predictions on the demise of newspapers depend entirely on the loss of novelty (Katz 1994). Upon losing their monopoly on timeliness, newspapers found a way to prop themselves up. They made their narratives richer by adding more news analyses (Donovan and Scherer 1992). If they could not scoop competitors with what editors call the ‘first day story’, which tells what happened, they could instead write a ‘second-day story’, which keeps the story alive and maintains its value in the marketplace, by telling the story better, with greater depth, explanation, and background” (Barnhurst and Mutz 1997: 46).

There are clear parallels between this description and the contemporary challenges to journalistic exclusivity; which has seen journalists double-down on the idea of “telling the story better, with greater depth, explanation, and background” (Barnhurst and Mutz *ibid*: 46). Yet the specific affordances of new technology have had consequences on how journalists articulate these ideas, with words like “freshness” being used to describe the process of making stories exclusive for one’s own audience (Agarwal and Barthel 2015). More cynically, this could be seen as journalists’ rationalising their own loss of autonomy, whereby market pressures are leaving less time and money for original reporting and forcing journalists to become more creative with the limited resources they still possess. As one *BuzzFeed* reporter put it to me:

“You have to be quite creative as well. So, when something happens on Twitter, for example, everyone can report on it, The Independent, The Daily Mail, even Twitter now has Twitter Moments, and people are talking about it so it’s no longer news. So, you have to sort of find ways to make people want to come to your article instead” (Respondent C, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

This, though, is premised on journalists being given time to *be* creative. As shown in this section, despite journalists’ rhetorical emphasis on “freshness”, it



seemed most daily reporting still involved a more straight-forward and descriptive account of information already in circulation. The motivation for covering such stories seemed strongly driven by audience and market considerations (economic capital), with breaking news and trending topics offering higher returns on traffic and attention compared to more under-the-radar stories.

While these observations would appear to reinforce notions that the field is becoming further subjugated by the “forces of commercial heteronomy” (Bourdieu 2005: 43), it is important to view the trend towards content homogenization and continuation of “pack” behaviours in the context of broader sociocultural and technological trends. For instance, in a news environment where consumption is increasingly atomized (Associated Press 2008), and young people, in particular, feel alienated from traditional forms of politics and civic participation (Banaji and Buckingham 2013), perhaps certain forms of “pack” journalism can usefully raise *awareness* among certain publics of issues that might otherwise have been ignored. As Phillips (2011: 50) argues “if routine reporting was abandoned and public relation professionals ignored, citizens would undoubtedly be deprived of a great deal of the information they need to stay informed about the operations of government and business”. In respect to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, this argument would seem to carry more weight, given both organisations’ interest in reporting on various social and political issues – news seen to be in the “public interest” – as opposed to the usual gamut of news topics that one might associate with strongly market-oriented or reader-driven news (see Hanitzsch 2007).

## **8.2. Sourcing Practices**

Moving away from the subject of exclusivity, a second, essential element of gatekeeping concerns the diversity of sources in news coverage. As Phillips (2010: 87) argues, “the question of who journalists speak to, how they obtain information, how they evaluate it and whose stories they choose to repeat is critical to any examination of the changing role of the news media”. The arrival of new information and communication technologies is seen to have changed

relations between journalists and sources on several fronts. The internet, according to Heinrich (2012: 767), is a space where:

“...many information providers meet in a digitally connected global arena. A large array of potential new sources can now be reached via many connection points other than (traditional) official sources such as governmental institutions or press offices. Instead of a rather ‘closed’ system of newsgathering, production and distribution, in which only a limited number of partakers had the power to make and shape news, the network journalism sphere is an open space of information exchange”.

Changes to the communications infrastructure have fuelled hopes of journalism becoming more inclusive, diverse, and participatory, thus tipping the balance of news coverage away from elites, toward previously disadvantaged and marginalised social actors (Downey and Fenton 2003; Dahlgren 2005). In particular, the rise of social media platforms has fuelled hopes of a more egalitarian and “networked public sphere” (Benkler 2006). While on the one hand, this is seen to “[threaten] journalism’s claim to provide an authoritative and legitimate representation of the social word”, on the other hand, it has the potential to “open up journalism to new voices, topics and publics” (Broersma and Graham 2013: 448).

Yet, despite the internet theoretically opening up opportunities for journalists to include a “different cast of voices” in news (Harcup 2003: 360), empirical research has shown that journalists largely remain intent on “guarding the gates” (Singer et al. 2011) and sticking to their traditional doxa. As a consequence, elite sources still tend to dominate news coverage, meanwhile, newer technologies like social media are “normalized” to fit with traditional routines and ideals (Singer 2005; Singer et al. 2011; Knight 2012; Lasorsa et al. 2012; Moon and Hadley 2014; Lecheler and Kruikemeier 2015). The continuation of traditional sourcing techniques has dampened hopes of the internet reinvigorating and extending the public sphere (Hardy 2014). Only under very specific circumstances does the traditional “hierarchy of credibility” (Becker 1967) in sourcing appear to become upended. Breaking news events,

for example, have been shown to facilitate the formation of new, “networked publics” that can promote non-elite voices and counter-hegemonic narratives that challenge and disrupt the dominant discourse (e.g. Lotan et al. 2011; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012; Hermida et al. 2014).

In the admittedly small pool of research on online sourcing practices, digital native media have hardly featured. Some research has drawn attention to potential differences between online and traditional journalists in how they might perceive and practice sourcing (Shin and Cameron 2003; Cassidy 2007; Agarwal and Barthel 2015). However, with a couple of minor exceptions (Painter et al. 2017; Tandoc 2017) these claims have rarely been investigated empirically.

### **8.2.2. Sourcing Rhetoric**

On the subject of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*; their staff, news coverage, and target audience<sup>80</sup> all suggest potential avenues for different approaches to sourcing. Rhetorically, both organisations have emphasised the importance of reaching audiences “ignored” by the mainstream media, particularly young people of which women and minority groups have sometimes received lip service. In a memo written to staff at *BuzzFeed* in August 2017, editor-in-chief Ben Smith reasoned that diversity was “obviously an asset in the core business of getting and telling killer stories from diverse sources to a diverse audience” (Smith 2017a). Similarly, in a blog post entitled “2017 update on diversity at BuzzFeed”, CEO and founder of *BuzzFeed*, Jonah Peretti, explained that (staff) diversity was not “just a moral imperative”, but a “competitive advantage” because it allowed *BuzzFeed* to build a “closer connection [with audiences]” and “communicate across diverse cultures... and understand the experience of [the audience] and how they use content in their actual lives” (Peretti 2017c). Shane Smith, CEO of *Vice*, has similarly promoted the organisation as the “voice” of ‘Generation Y’ – “a highly educated, ethnically diverse, global-

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<sup>80</sup> Please refer to Chapter 6 for a detailed breakdown of each of these organisational features.

thinking, hard-to-reach generation” (Smith 2016c), which he has claimed to attract by focusing on underreported stories and non-traditional subject areas such as LGBT rights, civil rights, and gender issues<sup>81</sup>.

In interviews, general questions about newsgathering processes and routines often led to journalists touching upon different aspects of sourcing and the wider issue of diversity in news. For instance, speaking on the role of journalism, one reporter from *BuzzFeed UK* argued that:

“Journalism...can be a voice for many more minority groups than it was before [sic]. A lot of the reason I like doing my job at BuzzFeed...is that I can talk about slightly nicher stories, slightly weirder stories, that maybe don't typically make the headlines” (Interviewee M, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

Another reporter from *BuzzFeed* made a similar case, though was more explicit in highlighting the link between *BuzzFeed's* staff, their audience, and organisational sourcing practices:

“Often, you'll hear a voice [at BuzzFeed] you don't hear elsewhere. Obviously young people is one, [but] we have a very diverse news team as well. So, we're very aware of not just speaking to middle-aged white men... So, whether we do a quick story or get the reaction to something...[the] voices we represent in our pieces is different and when we go out to cover stories we'll seek out different voices on the ground that reflects our audience” (Interviewee A, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

For one editor, this approach meant *BuzzFeed* was able to act as a form of “alternative” journalism (Atton and Hamilton 2008), by providing a platform to individuals or groups marginalised by traditional media:

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<sup>81</sup> This claim was part corroborated in the content analysis of this study, which showed that stories about social rights, issues, and protests, accounted for around a fifth of total news coverage (see section 5.3).

“I would say one thing [BuzzFeed are successful at] is giving a voice to individuals or groups who do not traditionally get their voice heard, allowing them to speak in their own words, rather than mediated through...a traditional media lens” (Interviewee L, Editor, *BuzzFeed UK*).

At *Vice*, interviewees similarly recognised the homology between staff and audiences. One *Vice* editor hinted this affected how the organisation approached sourcing, but was not totally clear in their description:

“The hosts, presenters, the people doing it [at *Vice*] are much younger, because our audience is much younger. So, you know...our style is different because we’re making this stuff for 16 to maybe 30-year-olds. We’d focus on young people’s stories, young people’s interests... [The audience] don’t want to hear from me the whole time, you know...Ultimately it’s about having other voices in news and making sure that [our] audience got their information from them” (Interviewee F, editor, *Vice UK*).

Aside from this remark, *Vice* journalists generally spoke about sourcing in vague terms, or in regard to other aspects of the news process such as verification and accuracy.

### **8.2.3. Sourcing Practices**

To get a better understanding of how sourcing materialised in practice, an extensive examination of sources was conducted on news content produced by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. This was compared with sources that appeared in news content published by *The Guardian* and *BBC*. To help limit the number of articles being examined, a randomised sample of 160 news stories was studied (40 per organisation, 20 from their respective the UK and US websites)<sup>82</sup>. Given the interest in exploring how sourcing occurred at the *routine* level, long-form

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<sup>82</sup> Note: this is the same subset of data that was used in the previous section of this chapter to analyse exclusivity in sources.

content (features, investigations) and as well as aggregated content and live blogs were excluded from the sample. Any instance where significant differences were noted between the UK and US websites of each outlet are highlighted.

### 8.2.3.1. Basic information

To establish some basic statistics about sourcing at all four outlets, the mean and median number of sources per article was recorded, along with the mean and median number of sources from social media that appeared in each news article:

**Table 13: Summary of sources in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=40)</b>	<b>Vice (n=40)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=40)</b>	<b>BBC (n=40)</b>
Total number of sources	175	191	211	201
Mean number of sources	4.4	4.8	5.2	5.0
Median number of sources	3.0	3.0	5.0	5.0
Mean number of sources from social media	0.8	1.0	0.5	0.5

As the data shows, both legacy media used a higher number of sources overall, which corresponded with a higher mean and median number of sources per article compared to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. This difference was most notable in the median, with *The Guardian* and *BBC* quoting an average of two more sources per article. This would suggest journalists from both legacy media generally approached daily reporting with more rigour, consulting a greater

number of sources in the newsgathering process<sup>83</sup>. Practically, this might be explained by the amount of resources made available for news reporting, with journalists from *The Guardian* and *BBC* being given more time to work on news stories compared to their digital native counterparts. There also might have been a greater discrepancy at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* between the resources made available for daily reporting, and those provided for in-depth formats like features and investigations. This aside, there is the issue of access. As two established media, it would be safe to presume that *The Guardian* and *BBC* possess higher amounts of social capital<sup>84</sup> compared to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, permitting them access to a greater range and depth of sources, particularly from the government and other major institutions.

Moving on to sources from social media, all organisations made some use of social media in daily sourcing. This accords with other research suggesting these platforms have become an “important part of the everyday toolkit of journalists” (Hermida 2013: 296). Both digital natives used a higher average number of sources from social media per article, although this number was not significantly higher than either legacy outlet. Given the centrality of social media to news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, this finding was somewhat surprising. However, it is also possible that that social media functioned more as an “awareness system” for journalists, alerting them “to trends or issues hovering under the news radar”, rather than a reliable or consistent source of quotes (Hermida 2010: 302). Indeed, only 25% of stories from *Vice*, and 35% of stories from *BuzzFeed*, featured any quotes from social media. This was fairly similar to *The Guardian* and *BBC*, who used quotes from social media in 20% and 30% of stories, respectively. One reason for journalists’ reluctance in using quotes from social media seemed to relate to the problem of verification – an aspect of digital reporting that other scholars have highlighted (e.g. Bruno 2011; Schifferes et al. 2014). As one *BuzzFeed* editor put it: “Social news

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<sup>83</sup> To some extent this was supported in the content analysis, with *The Guardian* publishing stories with the highest word count among all four outlets. *The BBC*, however, was more comparable with *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* (see section 5.4).

<sup>84</sup> Social capital is defined by Bourdieu (1986: 248) as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition”

stories can be very, very difficult to verify because people lie on social media quite a lot...a lot of the time we try to stick to stuff that uses images or video<sup>85</sup> because it's a lot easier to verify" (Respondent K, editor, *BuzzFeed US*).

### 8.2.3.2. Source Characteristics

To examine sources in more detail, the individual characteristics of sources were coded. Sources were analysed according to *type*, *age*, *gender*, and *ethnicity*. To begin, I provide a brief and largely descriptive account of this data, followed by a more in-depth analysis and discussion of the key findings.

**Table 14: Type of sources in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=40)</b>	<b>VICE (n=40)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=40)</b>	<b>BBC (n=40)</b>
Government / politicians / law	38.9	34.6	44.1	45.3
Police / military	1.1	4.2	0.5	8.5
Business people / organisations	9.1	4.2	6.6	1.0
Civil society members / organisations	9.1	5.8	7.1	3.5
Own media	4.0	4.7	1.9	6.0
Traditional media	10.9	12.6	6.6	9.5
Other media	2.3	6.3	1.9	6.0
Celebrities / entertainers	0.6	1.6	2.8	3.5

<sup>85</sup> On this point, another reason why a lower number of social sources might have been recorded is that only textual content from social media was counted as a source in stories, not video or images.



News agencies	1.1	0.5	3.3	0.5
Analysts / experts	3.4	4.7	13.3	6.5
Ordinary citizens	17.1	19.9	10.4	7.5
Other	2.3	1.0	1.4	2.5
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

As the results show, government officials, politicians, and legal professionals were quoted significantly more in news reports than any other source type. This was true of all four outlets, with only a small difference being observed between the two legacy outlets and digital natives. The relative high number of government sources used by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* would seem to fit with other findings of this study, which have demonstrated the importance of the political beat to both organisations, in journalists' rhetoric and directly in news coverage<sup>86</sup>. To a lesser extent, all organisations routinely drew from other elite groups and institutions such as the police, military, analysts and experts, and business leaders. Collectively, these results would appear to support recent research on sourcing practices that has highlighted the durability of established professional standards and routines in dictating sourcing practices (De Keyser and Raeymaeckers 2012; Moon and Hadley 2014; Van Leuven et al. 2014; Lecheler and Kruikemeier 2015).

This being said, all four outlets, but particularly *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, showed an interest in quoting from non-elite sources. This was most apparent in the number of ordinary citizens quoted in news coverage, with *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* featuring ordinary citizens nearly twice as often as *The Guardian*, and more than twice as often as the *BBC*. These sources were best represented in the news about social issues, rights, and protests. Sources from civil society such as charity workers and NGOs were featured the most by *BuzzFeed* (9.1%), followed by *The Guardian* (7.1%), *Vice* (5.8%), and the *BBC* (3.5%). Finally, all

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<sup>86</sup> See Chapter 5 (section 5.3) and Chapter 6 (section 6.4).

organisations routinely relied upon quotes produced by other media in news reporting, particularly traditional media sources.

Secondly, sources were coded by *gender*:

**Table 15: Gender of sources in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=40)</b>	<b>VICE (n=40)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=40)</b>	<b>BBC (n=40)</b>
Male (%)	42.3	46.6	59.7	59.2
Female (%)	28.0	28.3	20.4	19.9
Can't tell (%)	12.6	9.4	3.3	4.5
Not applicable (%)	17.1	15.7	16.6	16.4
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

As the data indicates, there was a fairly high degree of homogeneity in news coverage in terms of gender representation. Among all four outlets, male sources were quoted the most, though they appeared more frequently in stories produced by *The Guardian* and *BBC* (59.7% and 59.2% of the time, respectively). *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* quoted marginally more female sources than both legacy media (about eight percent). Owing to this gender imbalance, male sources generally dominated coverage across specific news topics. In stories about government and politics, for instance, females made up under one-fifth of sources in coverage by *The Guardian* and *BBC*, and around a quarter of sources in coverage by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. One exception to this pattern was stories on the subject of social rights, issues, and protests. In this category, *Vice* featured almost as many female sources as male sources, meanwhile, *BuzzFeed* featured *more* female sources than male sources. This was not true of *The Guardian* and *BBC*, which quoted at least twice as many male sources as female sources in stories on this subject.

Regardless, none of the four organisations produced coverage resembling the gender of the UK or US population as a whole, which, according to census data, is split fairly evenly between males and females (Office for National Statistics 2011; United States Census Bureau 2017)<sup>87</sup>. These findings tend to corroborate the literature on gender in journalism, which has shown news is consistently biased in favour of male sources (e.g. Liebler and Smith 1997; Zoch and Turk 1998; Armstrong 2004). In the case of *BuzzFeed*, these results are arguably more surprising, given the relatively high number of female journalists employed by the organisation<sup>88</sup>. While there is mixed evidence for the link between gender and sourcing (Steiner 2009; Hanitzsch 2012), this would suggest that the female journalistic habitus was not necessarily an accurate predictor of source selection, with other organisational and institutional factors playing a more determinative role.

Thirdly, sources were also coded by *age*, which produced the following results:

**Table 16: Age of sources in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=40)</b>	<b>VICE (n=40)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=40)</b>	<b>BBC (n=40)</b>
0-10	0	0	0.5	0
11-20	0	0.5	0	0
21-30	2.9	2.1	3.8	3.0
31-40	3.4	4.2	12.3	2.0

<sup>87</sup> There is a question, of course, of the extent to which *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* might be expected to produce news that is representative of the population as a whole when their main target audience is young people. Data suggests, however, that gender parity exists *across* age categories in the UK and US, meaning the demographic composition of young people is also roughly even in terms of gender (Office for National Statistics 2011; United States Census Bureau 2017).

<sup>88</sup> See Chapter 5 (section 5.3).

41-50	5.7	10.5	12.3	11.9
51-60	9.7	4.7	9.0	11.4
61-70	15.4	13.6	13.7	24.9
71+	0.6	6.8	8.1	3.5
Can't tell	45.1	41.9	30.3	26.9
Not applicable	17.1	15.7	16.6	16.4
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

Sources aged 61-70 were quoted the most in news reports by all four outlets, in particular, by the BBC (24.9% of total sources). The next best represented age category was 41-50 for *Vice*, *The Guardian*, and *BBC*, and 51-60 for *BuzzFeed*. Overall, then, middle-aged to older sources were quoted the most in news coverage. This was somewhat surprising in regard to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, which have both branded themselves publically as a “voice” of youth culture. As above, this was also supported in my interviews with journalists, who spoke about the importance of providing a platform to those traditionally marginalised by the media, including young people. One important caveat, however, is that it was often difficult to tell the age of sources, particularly individuals categorised as “ordinary citizens”, who were frequently quoted by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* in news coverage. In fact, only 6.67% and 15.8% of ordinary citizens were assigned age categories, with the remainder being coded as “can’t tell”.

In instances where it was possible to code younger sources, one potentially revealing point of difference was the *context* in which these sources appeared. In coverage by *the Guardian* and *BBC*, sources aged 40 and under were quoted

the most in news about crime and terrorism<sup>89</sup>; at least three times as often as any other news topic. By contrast, in *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s coverage, more than half of quotes by sources aged 40 and under appeared in news about social rights, issues, and protests.

Finally, sources were analysed according to ethnicity. In some instances, this was difficult to determine, hence the slightly higher number of sources coded as "can't tell":

**Table 17: Ethnicity of sources in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=40)</b>	<b>VICE (n=40)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=40)</b>	<b>BBC (n=40)</b>
White (%)	51.4	53.9	59.7	62.2
Black (%)	0.6	4.2	2.8	5.5
Asian and Indian (%)	4.0	2.6	8.1	7.0
Hispanic (%)	0	0.5	1.4	0
Can't tell (%)	26.9	23	11.4	8.0
Not applicable (%)	17.1	15.7	16.6	17.4
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

White voices dominated news coverage across all four outlets. Again, this fits with other research which has found evidence of a bias towards whites in news coverage (e.g. Campbell 1995; Kurpius 2002). The *BBC* (62.2%) followed by the *Guardian* (53.9%), featured the highest number of white sources, while

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<sup>89</sup> These findings connect with other research that has shown that young people tend to be overrepresented by traditional media in stories about crime (Griffin 2004; Devlin 2006; Wayne et al. 2008).

*BuzzFeed* (51.4%) and *Vice* (53.9%) featured between six and eleven percent less. This, however, did not correspond with an increase in non-white voices. In fact, the *Guardian* (12.3%) and *BBC* (12.5%) used more non-white sources<sup>90</sup> in news reports compared to *BuzzFeed* (4.6%) and *Vice* (7.3%). This can be explained partly by *The Guardian* and *BBC*'s more extensive coverage of international politics, which quoted a relatively high portion of Asian actors<sup>91</sup>. This aside, the *BBC* quoted a relatively high number of black sources in stories about government and politics. However, two-thirds of these sources came from a single story examining statements made by the American politician, Ben Carson. Given the low number of non-white sources used by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* in news coverage, it was more difficult to identify any discernible pattern to their coverage. News by *Vice* on the subject of social rights, issues, and protests, featured half of all non-white sources, closely followed by news about government and politics (46.2%). In *BuzzFeed*'s coverage, non-white sources were fairly evenly split between news on government and politics, and social rights, issues, and protests.

#### **8.2.4. Analysis and Discussion**

Examined collectively, the empirical data on sourcing practices at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* demonstrates a significant chasm between rhetoric and practice. Despite claiming to be a “voice” for young people, these findings demonstrate a clear “pattern of access, credibility, and news practices” (Kurpius 2002: 853) across coverage, resulting in the dominance of a fairly “narrow white male perspective” in news (Costera Meijer 2007: 178). That white, male, middle-aged officials appear to dominate news coverage is consistent with the historic literature on sourcing practices, which has shown that the media routinely provide a platform for cultural and political elites, privileging those in power over other, “non-elite” actors such as activists and ordinary people (e.g. Sigal 1973; Hall et al. 1978; Tuchman 1978; Soloski 1989; Gans 2004). Added to the fact that a relatively low number of sources from social media were used in news

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<sup>90</sup> Note this is a cumulative percentage taken from combining the three non-white source categories together.

<sup>91</sup> These stories were focused in particular on North Korea.

coverage, it would seem that, even at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, there was not a fundamental shift occurring in journalism's gatekeeping role or professional sourcing standards and routines.

Perhaps the only exception to this was *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s use of ordinary citizens in news coverage, who made up nearly a fifth of total quoted sources. The high prevalence of these sources in coverage about social rights, issues, and protests suggests that, in some circumstances, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* might have played a role in extending the public sphere by stimulating a form of bottom-up, "sub-politics" (Beck 1997), whereby ordinary citizens and activists were given voice in coverage based around particular social causes and issues (see Dahlgren 2005). This, however, must be parsed with the knowledge that *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* featured very few sources from civil society, and a scarce number of young and/or non-white sources. As a result, it would be difficult to herald *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s reporting as a truly "radical popular" style of news – the kind commonly associated with alternative forms of journalism (see Harcup 2003; Atton and Wickenden 2005; Atton and Hamilton 2008).

These findings generally problematize claims made by some scholars that the internet will necessary "expand the public sphere by introducing more balanced news access for a wider range of sources" (Van Leuven et al. 2014: 851; see Dahlgren 2005; Castells 2008; Gans 2011). They also feel especially discordant in relation to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, given they are "native" to the digital environment and carry reputations for being ideologically progressive, editorially diverse<sup>92</sup>, and interested in a broad spectrum of social rights issues that concern ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups. On this note, I wish to end this section by considering some of the major reasons why these factors do not seem to have significantly impacted sourcing practices.

The first and perhaps the most obvious reason relates to efficiency. As media sociology has explicated, news is less an individual activity than an "organisational accomplishment", designed to guarantee news stories are

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<sup>92</sup> Here, I am specifically referring to BuzzFeed.

produced “on time and to a predetermined form” (Cottle 2007: 3). Institutional sources such as government spokespersons and politicians assist with this process by providing a reliable, steady stream of easily verifiable and credible information to journalists, which they proffer in exchange for publicity<sup>93</sup> (e.g. Sigal 1973; Hall et al. 1978; Gans 1979; Gandy 1982). Related to journalists’ reliance on official sources, another possible explanation for an imbalance in representation relates to what Armstrong (2004) describes as a “mirror” effect in news coverage. Sources from key institutions such as the government, police and courts tend to be disproportionately white, middle-aged and male – with this imbalance being reproduced by journalists who quote these actors in news. Finally, there is a strong possibility that journalists from *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* would consult a broader range of sources in non-routine, or “enterprise” reporting, such as features and investigations, which were not analysed in this particular study (see Hansen 1991).

Outside the immediate locale of the newsroom, another potential influence on source selection relates to the broader journalistic field. News routines, as established several decades ago, are as much the product of a shared “professional ideology”, as they are a consequence of individual and organizational factors (Hall et al 1978: 249). As alluded to above, ethics and standards are one important facet of journalistic professionalism, but an arguably more significant norm is objectivity, which, as Soloski (1989) contends, functions like a “control mechanism”, guiding journalists on what counts as newsworthy and who counts as a valid news source. The literature in this area suggests that journalists regularly seek out quotes from authoritative sources, because the act of outsourcing opinion and facts to outsiders, helps insulate journalists from criticism or accusations of bias in reporting (e.g. Cook 1998). This “strategic ritual” (Tuchman 1972) also seemed to be in place at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, with journalists possibly using institutional sources as a source of “facts” to avoid accusations of inaccuracy or bias. In *Vice*’s case, their reputation for producing highly subjective news seemed

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<sup>93</sup> Somewhere around here, I just want to add a Tuchman reference, when she talks about the ‘news net’.



incongruous with this finding. At the same time, the mixing of “facts” and “opinion” might not necessarily have precluded the ability of journalists to still present news in a more subjective and opinionated style.

One final and important facet of the relationship between journalists and elite sources rests in the symbolic power of news language. As both Bourdieu (1991) and Carlson (2017) have observed, one reason why journalists are recognised as culturally authoritative is because of their adherence to certain narrative conventions – “[objective writing] ...the inverted-pyramid style-account with few adjectives and frequent attribution to sources” (Carlson 2017: 59) – which journalists deploy to “promote themselves as authoritative and credible spokespersons of ‘real life’ events” (Zelizer 1992: vii). In a Bourdieusian sense, these now familiar narrative conventions have become an integral part of the field’s cultural capital and doxa. One consequence of this, as Vos (2016: 388) writes, is that journalists are inclined to accept that “authoritative news comes from authoritative sources”, leading to a reproduction of elite opinion in news texts. There is a case to make that these practices are even more relevant to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, which, lacking in the symbolic capital of traditional organisations, follow the established journalistic doxa to heighten their chances of being recognised as legitimate – both by fellow peers and the public at large.

### **8.3. Objectivity**

Having spent some time discussing the norm of gatekeeping and the various processes of gathering, selecting, and filtering the news, the remainder of this chapter looks more closely at the *form* of news; that is, the various design elements, participatory affordances, and narrative conventions that undergird news stories at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. While the routines associated with these different elements are worth studying in their own right, understanding the materiality of news is doubly important in that it helps reveal how journalists structure knowledge and convey their authority. As Bourdieu (1991) recognised, news discourse is equipped with an “almost magical” symbolic power: the “power of constituting the given through utterances, of making

people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself” (Bourdieu 1991: 170).

In the digital era, numerous critics, commentators, and scholars have expressed concern that this symbolic power might be waning. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this partly relates to journalism’s apparently loss of gatekeeping control; or diminished capacity to determine what the public “see, hear, and read” about the world (Deuze 2005: 451). Another aspect concerns the occupational norm of objectivity, which, by many estimations, has been *the* defining norm of Anglo-American journalism over the last century (Schudson 1978; 2001; Lichtenberg 1996; Mindich 1998). In recent years, a growing mass of critics, both from inside and outside the industry, have begun to question the viability of objectivity as an authoritative means of truth-telling (e.g. Singer 2008; Rosen 2010; Peters 2011; Hellmueller et al. 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013). At its core, this critique is concerned with problematising the traditional epistemology of journalism, or journalism’s established “ways of knowing” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2016: 129), which is seen to clash with the open, participatory logic of digital media and culture (Lewis 2012).

While these boundary disputes have sparked concern about journalism’s ongoing role and relevance (Broersma and Graham 2013), more recent evidence would suggest that the cultural capital of journalism might be shifting in response to the exogenous “shock” (Nielsen 2012) of digital technology. Scholars highlight new and emerging forms of journalism, premised on the affordances of digital technology, that emphasise values such as emotion, authenticity, transparency, and subjectivity (Karlsson 2011; Zeller and Hermida 2015; Beckett and Deuze 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen 2016). From an epistemological standpoint, these forms diverge from objectivity in that they all seek to establish a different “authority relation” with the audience (Carlson 2017). While objectivity has been viewed as a relatively “closed process” that accentuates distance, detachment, and didacticism (Hellmueller et al. 2013), the values of transparency, participation, and subjectivity, imply openness and accountability, congregating around the idea of the journalist speaking “from a

position of parity with an informed audience rather than as a member of a detached elite” (Chadwick 2013: 176). In this section, I consider these values in turn, exploring how journalists from *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* discursively constructed their relationship with the objectivity norm, both in rhetoric and in practice.

### 8.3.1. Transparency

While it was evident that journalists were broadly supportive of objectivity as a “strategic ritual” (Tuchman 1972)<sup>94</sup>, they appeared to harbour stronger doubts about objectivity as an epistemic basis for news. This seemed partly borne from the recognition that the internet had provided ordinary people with more means to criticise, question, and interrogate journalistic methods and styles of constructing news stories. As one editor from *BuzzFeed* put it:

“What [the internet] has done is made much more visible how the sausage gets made, and that makes a lot of people very uncomfortable...I don’t think there has been a universal collapse of the wall between journalists and the audience. [But] in general, more journalists are exposed to audience feedback in more ways than they were before” (Respondent K, editor, *BuzzFeed US*).

Similarly, a reporter from *BuzzFeed UK* felt that journalists had to be “much more accountable” online, not just because it was “good practice and ethics” but because people had the ability to “Google every bit of [a story] and tell you when it’s not [correct]” (Respondent I, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*). Yet while *BuzzFeed* journalists could identify some of the potential roots of discontent between journalists and audiences, they were less forthcoming in explaining *how BuzzFeed* practically aimed to address these issues. Ben Smith, editor-in-chief of *BuzzFeed US*, has perhaps been most explicit, arguing for the need to embrace *transparency* in news reporting, “sharing...knowledge and sources”,

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<sup>94</sup> Please refer to the previous section (8.2) on sourcing practices.

while rejecting “traditional reporting procedures of ostentatious, and sometimes false, balance and voice-of-God authority” (Smith 2017b).

At *Vice*, journalists similarly recognised the need for transparency, but spoke about this more in regard to the form of news. One editor, for example, contrasted *Vice*'s approach with the objective style and presentation of traditional nightly news broadcasts:

“What I don't like about nightly news that I think turned a lot people off was this artifice, and I believe it is an artifice, of a reporter at the top of the segment saying here's what happened today. Their hair looks great, they're probably wearing a flack jacket if it's a warzone, they're probably standing away from the action...what you're losing is a lot of the interesting stuff, what it [feels] like to be there, the process of actually gathering news...I think that's [partly] why people...gravitated to *Vice*. I think people want to be informed, and I think they want to feel like they're not being patronised...you can't legislate authenticity but I do think *Vice* felt authentic and people liked that” (Respondent J, editor, *Vice US*).

Providing readers or viewers of *Vice News* with “a sense of how the story came to be and why it was presented as it was” (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001: 83), was considered an important aspect of reporting by many *Vice* journalists. One reporter felt that news at *Vice* portrayed “reality as it is [sic]”, even if, at times, this was “unpleasant for the audience” (Respondent H, reporter, *Vice EU*). In fact, one editor went as far as to label this the “big innovation” that *Vice* introduced to the wider field of journalism. As they put it:

“I think the big innovation was being transparent and showing a reporter gathering the news or trying to make sense of what was going on in the world and bringing viewers along for the ride...sort of seeing the process...that's what I think *Vice* did really well (Respondent J, editor, *Vice US*).

While most discussions about transparency seemed to take place in the context of *Vice*'s video content, another editor spoke about this value in regard to *Vice*'s textual output:

“I think the posture of [*Vice*] and the presentation of a lot of the material, was on a level, if you will, with the audience. More so than your typical newswire copy is going to seem at first blush, or whatever” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

In this sense, transparency also emerged from a desire to establish a different kind of “authority relation” with the audience (Carlson 2017). As one reporter explained, being transparent was about bringing a more “raw” aesthetic to reporting; one which aspired to present information “truthfully” by getting closer to the subject at hand, rather than adopting a more distanced, “objective” posture. This style, he argued, particularly resonated with younger audiences, who were apparently bored of conventional news formats that “overlooked them”, and were seeking a more “in-depth [and] personal guide” to current affairs (Respondent A, reporter, *Vice UK*).

#### 8.3.1.1. Disclosure Transparency

While from a rhetorical standpoint, transparency seemed to be valued by journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, this does little to reveal how it was routinised in practice. Given the lack of an adequate framework for studying transparency, the content analysis portion of this research settled on comparing several manifest features of news stories from *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, with content produced by *The Guardian* and *BBC*. The purpose here was to ascertain a) how transparency was routinized in every day practice, and b) how, if at all, transparency features varied between *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* and traditional media organisations.

To begin, two very basic features of news stories were analysed: *authorial information* and *timestamps*. The objective here was to see how much

information each organisation routinely provided about the origin and province of their published news articles.

**Table 18: Authorial information in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>Vice (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Author's name only (%)	3.4	37.4	56	12.6
Author's name with contact details (%)	96.0	51.7	33.5	2.0
No authorial information (%)	0.6	10.9	10.5	85.4
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

**Table 19: Time stamps in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>Vice (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Date of publication only (%)	0	38.5	0	10.6
Time of publication only (%)	0	0	0	88.9
Date and time of publication (%)	100	60.3	100	0.5
No time stamp (%)	0	1.2	0	0

TOTAL	100	100	100	100
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These findings provide some evidence that the transparency norm had a material impact on the routines of news production at each organisation. This was most obvious in the use of timestamps in news articles, with all four outlets making some use of the affordances of digital technology to display the time (and date) of publication of a story. *BuzzFeed* and *The Guardian* were the most transparent in this respect, always displaying the time and date of publication of their news articles. *Vice* were generally more inconsistent, sometimes listing a date of publication and other times listing a date and time of publication for their stories. There was no discernible pattern in regard to why some stories were more transparent in their use of timestamps compared to others. At the *BBC*, partly because of the frequency at which news stories were published, most articles indicated just their time of publication. This, however, might also have been a strategic attempt by the *BBC* to emphasise the immediacy of news, giving the impression to readers that they were a source of the most up-to-date information on breaking news and recent events.

Moving on to the use of authorial information in news stories, both digital natives generally provided readers more opportunities to contact a news story's author(s) directly, though *BuzzFeed* did this far more consistently than *Vice*. This would seem to fit with previous assertions made by journalists from both organisations, particularly those at *BuzzFeed*, who felt that the online environment had given people more opportunities to “monitor, check, criticize and even intervene in the journalistic process” (Deuze 2005: 455). This aside, there is a technology-based argument to make why *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* might have been more forthcoming about the authorship of their news articles. As Steensen (2016) has observed, social media platforms are contributing to an individualization, intimization, and personalization of journalism, which calls for the need to accentuate the “personal brands” of journalists above the “institutional brands” of organisations. This might also explain why *BuzzFeed*,

more so than *Vice*, was transparent about the authorship of its articles, given its seemingly heavier dependence on social media as source of traffic.

In contrast to the two digital natives, both *The Guardian* and *BBC* appeared more wedded to maintaining a degree of distance between reporters and the audience, downplaying a “subjectivization of facts” (Schudson 1978: 144). In the *BBC*’s case, an organisational emphasis on impartiality in reporting might have been one contributing factor, with the organisation looking to minimise perceptions of authorial jurisdiction over individual news stories (see BBC 2018a). In addition, the *BBC* has a separate area on their news website for readers to leave feedback, report errors, or make complaints about news stories, which might have mitigated against the need to delegate some of these responsibilities to individual journalists (BBC 2018b). Likewise, at *The Guardian*, interactions seemed more formalised, with a “small pool of dedicated moderators” mediating communications between journalists and readers, primarily through the activity of commenting on articles, rather than contacting journalists directly (Guardian 2009). This might explain why most stories published by *The Guardian* only listed the name of an author and omitted their contact details. This also draws to attention the importance of resources in circumscribing transparency practices. In the absence of support from more formal feedback mechanisms, it is possible that journalists at *BuzzFeed*, and to a lesser extent, *Vice*, were required to take more responsibility for their own stories, becoming more accountable *by default*, rather than because of some overarching ideological commitment.

Moving beyond these more basic features of news articles, transparency was also operationalized by examining the use of hyperlinks in news stories. Hyperlinks are commonly regarded as one of the pre-eminent features of digital communications and have been frequently lauded for their potential to improve the quality and credibility of journalism online. As Steensen (2011: 313) observes:



“The general assumption of researchers interested in hypertextual online journalism is that if hypertext is used innovatively it would provide a range of advantages over print journalism: no limitations of space, the possibility to offer a variety of perspectives, no finite deadline, direct access to sources, personalized paths of news perception and reading, contextualization of breaking news, and simultaneous targeting of different groups of readers”.

Several of the above features of hypertext have been connected with ideas of journalistic transparency. Coddington (2014: 141) argues that “links can help reinforce a report’s facticity by connecting readers directly with sources and showing readers how journalists know what they know”. In this way, hyperlinks are seen to bridge the epistemological divide between journalistic expertise and the lay audience, letting ordinary people peek “behind the curtain” (Lowrey and Anderson 2005) to observe and assess news gathering practices. Research generally suggests that hyperlinking has become an institutionalised practice in online journalism, although differences have been observed between the way different actors use links in news stories (e.g. Quandt 2008; Tsui 2008; Napoli 2010; Coddington 2012; 2014).

For this study, two very basic factors relating to hyperlinks were examined: the number of links used per news article and the source of these links (internal or external to the news site).

**Table 20: Hyperlinks in news stories**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>Vice (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Total no. of hyperlinks	1236	994	1167	816
Mean no. of hyperlinks per article (%)	7.0	5.8	6.2	4.1

Beginning with the total number of hyperlinks used in news stories, all four organisations routinely used links in news stories; though some more than others. *BuzzFeed* had an average of 7.0 links per news story – the highest in the sample – although this result was slightly skewed by the appearance of two stories that contained 143 links, and 112 links, respectively. This was also an issue in the sample of stories by *The Guardian* (US) and *Vice* (US), which both contained one story with an unusually high number of links. With these outliers discounted, a slightly different set of results emerged:

**Table 21: Hyperlinks in news stories (adjusted)**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=177)</b>	<b>Vice (n=173)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=199)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Total no. of hyperlinks	981	911	1065	816
Mean no. of hyperlinks per article (%)	5.6	5.3	5.7	4.1

Based on these results, *The Guardian*, not *BuzzFeed*, published stories containing the highest average number of links per article (5.7). This was very closely followed by *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, which both still featured over five links per article on average. Only the *BBC* contained less than five links per article (4.1), but nevertheless made routine use of links in coverage. In addition, this number would have likely been higher if the coding procedure had included links that appeared *outside* the body text of news articles. At the *BBC*, it was common for links to appear in widgets next to articles, rather than as part of the main text of a story. One final observation relates to differences in the total number of hyperlinks between the UK and US websites of all four news organisations in the sample. Once again, discounting the four stories with the unusually high number of hyperlinks, the following results were obtained:

**Table 22: Hyperlinks in news stories (UK and US split)**

	<b>BuzzFeed UK (n=96)</b>	<b>Vice UK (n=82)</b>	<b>Guardian UK (n=100)</b>	<b>BBC UK (n=100)</b>
Total no. of hyperlinks	4.10	362	455	352
Mean no. of hyperlinks per article (%)	4.3	4.4	5.0	3.6
	<b>BuzzFeed US (n=81)</b>	<b>Vice US (n=91)</b>	<b>Guardian US (n=99)</b>	<b>BBC US (n=100)</b>
Total no. of hyperlinks	571	549	610	464
Mean no. of hyperlinks per article (%)	7.1	5.3	6.2	4.6

As the results show, the US websites of all four organisations used a higher mean number of links per article compared to their UK counterparts. This difference was most pronounced at *BuzzFeed*, where stories published by *BuzzFeed US* used on average nearly three more links per article compared to *BuzzFeed UK*. One simple explanation for this difference was that journalists from the US had a much larger pool of external sources to draw upon, given the size and diversity of the US news ecosystem compared to the UK news ecosystem. In respect to *The Guardian* and *BBC*, another reason for this discrepancy might have related to more resources (compared to their much larger UK operations), with both organisations having to rely on more external sources of information to make up for a shortage in editorial resources. To add more nuance to these findings, links from each story were examined according to whether they pointed to an external or internal source:

**Table 23: Internal and external hyperlinks in news stories**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>VICE (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Total no. of internal hyperlinks	243	275	766	577
Mean no. of internal hyperlinks per article (%)	1.4	1.6	4.1	2.9
Total no. of external hyperlinks	993	717	392	232
Mean no. of external hyperlinks per article (%)	5.7	4.2	2.1	1.2

As the data shows, there were clear differences between the two digital natives and two traditional news organisations in the use of internal and external links in news stories. Beginning with *The Guardian* and *BBC*, internal links were used on average twice as often in news stories compared to external links. This chimes with findings from other research, which has shown that traditional news organisations generally prefer to link to internal sources of information, rather than direct users to external online sources (e.g. Barnhurst 2002; 2010; Dimitrova et al. 2003; Termayne 2005). This is often attributed to professional journalism’s normative desire for control over news content, which has proven an awkward fit with the participatory logic of digital media and networked aspects of communication (Singer 2008; Lewis 2012).

Another reason, however, might relate to the fact that *The Guardian* and *BBC* imposed stricter internal constraints on linking practices, encouraging journalists to link to “supposedly dispassionate, factual information provided by established, authoritative, and largely professional media sources” in an attempt to minimise the conflict arising from including more “opinion voices and

partisan sources...that might be perceived as a threat to the norm of journalistic objectivity” (Coddington 2012: 149). This was certainly apparent in the *BBC*’s case, who state explicitly in their editorial guidelines that external links must be “editorially justifiable” by normally being “factually accurate and of high quality”, for example, pointing to newspaper sites and “reputable” blogs (BBC 2018a). The *BBC*’s commitment to impartiality in reporting also means that any source that has a clear “editorial standpoint” should be balanced with a “reasonable range of [other] editorial perspectives” so as to avoid bias (BBC *ibid.*).

At *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, the majority of links in news stories pointed to external sources, rather than internal content, which was true for both the UK and US websites of each organisation. This difference was sharpest at *BuzzFeed*, where external hyperlinks appeared roughly four times as often as internal hyperlinks in news articles. One explanation for this is that compared to *The Guardian* and *BBC*, both *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* had a far less extensive archive of internal sources to draw upon, leading to a higher dependence on external sources to add information and context to stories. Unlike both traditional news organisations, there also appeared to be less formalised procedures for linking to sources at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, which seemed to correspond with a higher average number of external links appearing in each news article. The practice of linking out also helped validate the view from journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* that openness and transparency were normatively desirable values in online journalism. Rather than linking inwards and “erecting walls” around journalistic products and processes (Singer 2008: 75), journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* seemed comfortable letting audiences “peek behind the curtain” to observe news gathering processes (Lowrey and Anderson 2005). This approach can be traced back to the antecedent practices of bloggers, whose “culturally embedded obligation to link to the [external] sources of their information” has been an integral part of their doxa and cultural capital since the earliest days of web-based writing (Carlson 2015: 8). Ben Smith, editor-in-chief of *BuzzFeed US* has acknowledged this previously, discussing in one post entitled “My Life in the Blogosphere” the influence of blogging on the news culture at *BuzzFeed*:

“Indeed, the strongest new news outlets...have also co-opted and professionalized the tools and ethos of bloggers — fast, direct publishing; an informal voice; a commitment to transparency. We've pulled in some of the adaptable stars of that era. And we believe those people, tools, and values can serve our unchanging commitments to immediate, well-told, fearless, compelling, and independent journalism” (Smith 2015b).

While *Vice* have followed a somewhat different trajectory into journalism (see Chapter 5), the principles of blogging that Smith (*ibid.*) refers to above – “fast, direct publishing; an informal voice; a commitment to transparency” – would similarly seem to bear an imprint on the style and methods that *Vice* use to construct news stories, including their linking practices.

Based on these results, it was clear that certain aspects of disclosure transparency were routinised in daily news work at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. These processes were normatively valued by journalists because they supported a collective desire to appear more transparent by “being open [with audiences] about how news [was] being produced” (Karlsson 2010: 537). Based on this evidence, there were signs that objectivity, at least from an epistemological standpoint, was ceding some ground to transparency.

#### 8.3.1.2. Participatory Transparency

Nonetheless, it is important to recall that transparency is not one “thing”, but rather, a set of practices and values that exist on a spectrum (Karlsson 2010). If disclosure transparency is about revealing more to the audience about how news is gathered and assembled, then participatory transparency is more radical in that it “aims at getting the audience *involved* in the news production process in various ways” (Karlsson 2010: 578, emphasis added). Ideas of journalism becoming more participatory connect with broader normative arguments advanced by various scholars and public intellectuals in the literature on digital journalism (e.g. Gillmor 2004; Jenkins 2004; Jarvis 2006; Rosen 2006; Shirky 2008). This work – which has its basis in theories of

participatory and deliberative democracy; Habermasian and Deweyan ideals of public communication; as well as the antecedent practices of public journalism (Anderson 2011) – generally argues that greater participation of audiences in the news “harbors the potential to democratize both journalism and society at large” (Borger et al. 2013: 125).

Despite these bold claims, research generally indicates that journalists have been unwilling to surrender this level of gatekeeping control over the news, viewing the encroachment of audiences in the news process as a threat to their professional status and autonomy (e.g. Domingo et al. 2008; Hermida and Thurman 2008; Wardle and Williams 2010; Hermida et al. 2011; Jönsson and Örnebring 2011). As a result, organisational efforts to resolve the professional-participatory tension have mainly focused on offering users’ greater means to participate in the news *after* its publication, through activities like commenting, voting, and sharing. Whether such forms of participation promote “greater inclusivity or “thicker” forms of citizenship” is highly debatable (Peters and Witschge 2015: 20). On top of this, there is the more difficult but oft-neglected question of whether handing control to “the people formerly known as the audience” will necessarily improve the quality of journalism or diversify to the public sphere at large (Kreiss and Brennen 2016).

To explore these issues, news articles were assessed for different forms of participation. While not an exhaustive list of features<sup>95</sup>, these categories provide an insight into the ways in which *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* have attempted to accommodate audiences in the news process – that is, beyond being more “open about how news is being produced” (Karlsson 2010: 537).

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<sup>95</sup> Please refer to Appendix D for an explanation of each of these categories.

**Table 24: Participatory features in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>VICE (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Share (%)	100	100	100	100
Comment (%)	100	43.2	37.1	12.9
Poll (%)	1.9	0	0	0
Quiz (%)	0	0	0.6	0
Submit content (%)	1.3	0	0.6	2.3
Reader contributions published (%)	0.6	0	0.5	0
Reader news (%)	0	0	0	0

As the above table illustrates, audience interaction with news stories was largely restricted to activities like sharing and commenting across all four organisations. Readers were very rarely invited to submit content and their contributions<sup>96</sup> were almost never featured in news stories. *BuzzFeed* offered the option to comment and share on every one of its news stories while for *Vice* and *The Guardian*, the ability to comment was offered in less than half of news articles. At the *BBC*, users were given the option to comment on only 12.9% of

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<sup>96</sup> By audience contributions, I am referring to instances where readers have been previously asked to send in their own content, and these contributions now explicitly form part of the news story. This is different to journalists simply quoting ordinary citizens as sources in news stories – an aspect of reporting covered more extensively in the previous section (8.2) on sourcing practices.



news stories<sup>97</sup>. No news stories were presented as wholly written by readers, with journalists generally retaining control over the writing and editing phase of news production.

Thus, in line with findings from other research (Domingo et al. 2008; Hermida et al. 2011), it appeared that *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* were predominantly interested in facilitating participation at the *distribution* (sharing news on social media) and *interpretive* (commenting on articles) phases of news production. This was also reflected in interviews, where journalists generally spoke about their interactions with the audience in terms of receiving feedback or comments on articles. It was not always clear whether journalists valued these forms of feedback. As two *BuzzFeed* reporters commented:

“You can’t hide from people online! [laughs]. They find you. I get emails, sometimes. It’s easier for them to interact with you as well. And as a woman, I would say, you get much more criticism. You get used to it [laughs]... That said,, it is nice when people acknowledge the work you’re doing...I do get some positive feedback” (Respondent C, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

“I mean, a lot of the time when people share stuff we get mentions and we see it and its 90% positive... It’s people going like “look at this story...you’ll love this”. I try not to read the comments on a lot of the articles. If someone directly messages me on twitter or directly emails me I’ll look at it. But I feel like, I’ve learnt from writing online, people who actually comment on the articles a lot of the time are just looking for fights and will say something deliberately inflammatory or go deliberately

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<sup>97</sup> This relatively low percentage would seem to accord with Williams and Wardle’s (2008) research into the integration of user-generated content (UGC) in news production at the *BBC*, which found that journalists were generally sceptical of the value of audience comments in news. It should also be noted that the *BBC* have a separate, dedicated website called ‘Have Your Say’, which actively invites readers to submit content (BBC 2018b). This also might help explain why users were not generally invited to comment on daily news stories.

against the idea of your story...A lot of the time, I try stay away from that” (Respondent M, reporter, *BuFeed UK*).

Two reporters from *Vice* appeared to have similarly mixed feelings about feedback from the audience:

I do [interact with the audience] now and then. I get a lot of people tweeting me saying “I really like that” and I’ll go “oh thanks, what do you like about it? Because it’s nice to know. But you always get, like, a lot of morons as well you know. Like I actually enjoy reading YouTube comments sometimes because it’s really funny. You’re just like “what kind of maniac is writing this stuff. But every now and again you get a real insight” (Respondent A, reporter, *Vice UK*).

“Thanks to social media, we get feedback often... There was a lot of kind of mad stuff... [But] I think it makes you better at your job too, and understand the responsibility you have because it’s obviously having an effect...Sure, you’ll get some abuse, but if you’re used to covering a warzone a bit of internet abuse isn’t a problem. So yeah, always a lot of feedback that you take on board, whether it’s positive or negative” (Respondent F, editor, *Vice UK*).

In some cases, then, journalists were sceptical, even hostile towards certain forms of feedback – particularly direct comments on articles. Other times, they seemed to value working in an “ambient” (Hermida 2010) media environment, with various social media heightening incidental exposure to feedback from the audience. Nonetheless, there was a distinct lack of interest, both rhetorically and structurally, in facilitating more maximal forms of participation. As a result, transparency only seemed to lead to subtle shifts in journalists’ cultural capital – not the “full-blown epistemological shift” (Vos and Craft 2016: 2) imagined by some advocates of participatory journalism.

### 8.3.3. Emotion

Aside from providing new opportunities for journalists to be more open and accountable, the rise of digital media also appears to have engendered a cultural shift towards forms of storytelling that privilege more personal, emotionally involved, and subjective modes of discourse (Zelizer 2009; Peters 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen 2016). In the wake of the so-called “affective” turn in social sciences (Clough and Halley 2007), there has been a growing interest in these forms of expression, extending to ideas about “affective” news, “constructed out of subjective experience, opinion, and emotion, all sustained by and sustaining ambient news environments” (Papacharissi 2015: 34). For some, these changes could portend an epistemological shift in journalism’s “ways of knowing”, as more ‘objective’ claims to knowledge and truth-telling give way to more “personalized, subjective, and emotional forms of narrative” in news (Wahl-Jorgensen 2016: 132; also Pantti 2010; Peters 2011; Beckett 2015; Beckett and Deuze 2016).

At *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, journalists expressed clear rhetorical support for this shift in journalism’s epistemology. Here, older journalistic forms were frequently pitted against newer styles of storytelling, as a way of explaining the superiority of more emotionally involved, personal, and subjective forms of news. As one reporter from *BuzzFeed UK* explained:

“I think we try to write in quite an engaging style. We don’t want to be like a *Times* article; we try not to write in a dry style. If you compare *BBC* online copy, for example, which is known to be very straight and ‘just the facts’ compared to our style [sic]. We almost try to write with a bit more vigour and colour...to try and make it a bit more engaging” (Respondent A, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

In a similar manner, one editor from *Vice* used the example of traditional news to explain how *Vice* looked to establish more of a “peer relationship” with readers, in an effort to draw them closer into stories:

“The narrative [of our news] would sort of compel the viewer along...it wasn’t necessarily one that ‘lectured’, you know, or presented material in a kind of didactic way. It was a lot more casual, it was more of a peer relationship in a way [while] at the same time still serving the purposes of being informative” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

On the subject of the journalist-audience relationship, another editor from *Vice* explained how in news coverage, reporters were encouraged to act as “representatives, or avatars, for the viewers”, which helped make them appear more “authentic and not omniscient” (Respondent J, editor, *Vice US*). At *BuzzFeed*, reporters similarly strived to establish a closer connection with readers, but spoke about this more in the context of the *language* of news stories, suggesting that more informal, conversational styles of reporting could help craft a greater “experience of involvement” in the news (Peters 2011). As two reporters explained:

“If you were telling someone about a story you had read, how would you actually say it to another human being?... It’s not like it’s dumbed down, it’s just why not say it like someone would say it...makes [the story] sound more human and not talking from your lofty perch of being a ‘serious’ journalist” (Respondent H, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*)

“People still want expertise, but it’s about presenting it to the way people are thinking. And that’s the same with news. People don’t want to feel like they’ve been dumbed down to” (Respondent B, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

Here, “objective” styles of news were criticised for their seemingly top-down, elitist posture, while styles of discourse that aspired for greater parity with the reader were favoured. Considering the appeal of these forms, some journalists moved beyond the realms of their own habitus to consider the relationship between these kinds of news and the broader communications environment. Some, for example, drew attention to the link between more personalised and

emotional forms of news and the growth of social media. To repeat an earlier quote from Chapter 6:

“Seventy-five percent of our traffic comes through social media referrals, not homepage clicks...so when we’re doing investigations we’re always thinking ‘okay, is this something people are going to talk about, is this something people are going to want to share? And generally, you just want something really shocking or really emotive...People share something if they feel something” (Respondent A, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

An emphasis on emotional news was partly, then, a result of *BuzzFeed*’s own publishing model, which was heavily dependent on social media for traffic and in particular, the metric of *sharing*<sup>98</sup>. In this way, emotionality in news was also shaped by organisational imperatives, which seemed to push reporters towards integrating emotion into their own sense of news judgement. Comparing their experiences with working for a legacy news organisation, one reporter from *BuzzFeed* explained:

“At [legacy news organisation] I wasn’t really thinking about readers having an emotional reaction to [stories]...Where [sic] with *BuzzFeed*, I’m thinking of an emotion that I want to get out of the person, like, of this is really bad, this is really funny, that sort of thing...You want to get a reaction out of people because you want them to share” (Respondent C, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

At *Vice*, journalists also made the link between the status of emotion in reporting and the broader goals of their own organisation. One such goal was reaching younger audiences, who, according to one *Vice* editor, were “overwhelmingly male, with a sort of appetite for adventure, for inanity and absurd things, for really shocking scenes...[and] vivid coverage” (Respondent J, editor, *Vice US*). An awareness of these tropes was linked with a need to

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<sup>98</sup> For a more detailed discussion of sharing, please refer back to section 7.1.5.

create entertaining and viscerally engaging content. On the subject of *Vice*'s war coverage, for example, one reporter said:

“People might [look at our coverage] and say, ‘I think there shouldn’t be so many gunshots in there’, and I get it...But it’s the Internet age man, the Playstation generation. We’re making stuff that’s valid for them and we’re still making it accurate and right” (Respondent A, reporter, *Vice UK*).

Another, more experienced reporter, who had spent time working for a range of American news publications, compared the practices at *Vice* to those of tabloid outlets, who would “manipulate things and do whatever they could do to get punch, to be sensational, to get as much attention as possible” (Respondent D, reporter, *Vice US*). In this manner, conversations about emotion at *Vice* were sometimes inflected with a small, but creeping sense of cynicism about journalism becoming overly reader-oriented. One editor, for example, seemed to bemoan the ways that journalism had become more driven by a “looming idea of audience engagement”, which had put pressures on news organisations to capture audiences’ attention, whether through “titillation, some sort of ideological affinity...or a voice or brand that’s appealing to [a particular] segment” (Respondent J, editor, *Vice US*). Other *Vice* interviewees, however, seemed to take a longer view, with one editor arguing that journalism had always “sought to sensationalise, to inform, to sway, to persuade, and to entertain” (Respondent E, editor, *Vice US*).

Taking these contributions into account, the content analysis portion of this study sought to explore how emotion was operationalised in practice at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. As discussed in the methods chapter of this thesis, there is no clear procedure for studying emotion in journalism<sup>99</sup>. Perhaps the most

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<sup>99</sup> While this is an issue that extends beyond journalism (e.g. Edwards 1999), it would be reasonable to suggest that the lack of an established procedure for studying emotion in journalism has been strongly hindered by scholars’ historic aversion to non-objective news forms (see Peters 2011: 299-303 for a good overview).

developed methodology for studying emotion in journalism has come from Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), whose study of emotionality in Pulitzer prize-winning articles has provided the basis for some the analytical constructs used in this section.

To begin with, the language of headlines used in news articles was examined. In traditional journalism, “objective” news headlines tend to focus on ‘just the facts’ (Mindich 1998), offering a straightforward, impersonal, and mainly descriptive account of news events. By contrast, more emotive headlines employ a number of different discursive features to create a heightened “experience of involvement” in the news (Peters 2011). This includes techniques like “forward-referencing” (Blom and Hansen 2015), where a headline alludes to information contained within a story, typically using words like “this”, “how”, and “why” to arouse curiosity in the reader. For example:

**Table 25: Examples of forward referencing in headlines**

<b>Outlet</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Date</b>
Vice (UK)	What does Nigel Farage get out of supporting Donald Trump?	11/10/16
Vice (US)	What Wells Fargo knew	10/10/16
BuzzFeed (UK)	Meet the people who say their firms were destroyed by RBS	12/10/16
BuzzFeed (US)	How anti-science forces thrive on Facebook	07/03/17

Aside from this, headlines were categorised as “emotive” if they used *personalisation*, by addressing the reader in the second-person (e.g. ‘6 things you need to know about the budget’ – *BuzzFeed UK*), or, if they used special punctuation such as questions, or exclamation points to get readers’ attention (e.g. Surprise! Republicans’ Obama Care replacement would hurt the poor – *Vice US*).

**Table 26: Headline language in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>Vice (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Straight (%)	54.8	31.0	90	82
Emotive (%)	41.9	62.1	8.0	17
Ambiguous / can't tell (%)	3.3	6.9	2.0	1.0
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

As the data shows, both digital natives used emotive headlines far more frequently in news stories compared to *The Guardian* and *BBC*. This was most pronounced at *Vice*, where more than half (62.1%) of news articles used emotive headlines. In contrast, less than a fifth of news stories from the *BBC* used emotive headlines (17%), and, at the *Guardian*, emotive headlines were used only 8% of the time<sup>100</sup>. These findings would appear to reaffirm comments made by journalists from *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, who spoke about embracing more conversational and personal forms of language in news, in lieu of more objective, impersonal discourses. To get a better understanding of how emotion was *routinised* in news, the use of different headlines was cross-referenced with data on news formats. The aim here was to see to what extent emotionality extended beyond “narrative” forms of journalism like features and investigations, and bled into daily news formats such as reports and opinion pieces.

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<sup>100</sup> On this note, there was also a small, but perceptible difference between the UK and US editions of *The Guardian* and *BBC*. While the UK editions of *The Guardian* and *BBC* employed emotive headlines only 5% and 13% of the time, respectively, these percentages rose to 11% and 21% for their US editions.



**Table 27: Emotive headline versus news format**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>Vice (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Report (%)	25.2	50	4.8	8.2
Feature / investigation (%)	86.8	75	28.6	100
Interview (%)	50	77.8	0	100
Comment / opinion (%)	0	81.8	100	100
Review (%)	0	50	0	0
Listicle (%)	100	0	0	100
Quiz (%)	0	0	0	0
Game (%)	0	0	0	0
Aggregated content (%)	100	10	0	50
Live blog (%)	0	0	0	0
Other / can't tell (%)	0	55.6	0	66.7

As the data shows, emotive headlines were more commonly employed in 'formats like features and investigations, which was true for all outlets. In terms of daily reporting there was a significant difference in the use of emotive headlines between the two traditional news organisations and the two digital natives. While emotive headlines featured in just 4.7% and 8.2% of news reports by *The Guardian* and *BBC*, respectively, this number was higher at *BuzzFeed* (25.2%), and significantly higher at *Vice* (50%). Still, nearly three-quarters of news reports used a straight headline at *BuzzFeed*, which would seem to suggest that emotionality, at least at the level of daily reporting, was the exception for journalists, rather than the rule. At *Vice*, on the other hand,

emotionality appeared more strongly embedded in routines, with journalists employing emotive headlines in half of all published news reports.

In the interest of providing a more comprehensive analysis of emotionality, two further analytical constructs were developed. Building on the work of Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) and others (e.g. Thomson et al. 2008; Fink and Schudson 2014; Moon and Hadley 2014) news stories were analysed for whether they employed an ‘emotive’ lead paragraph or used personalised storytelling, in an effort to add emotional resonance to a particular subject and heighten readers’ sense of involvement in the news. An ‘emotive’ lead paragraph was defined as a paragraph that jettisoned the “inverted pyramid” style of news presentation<sup>101</sup>, and instead opened with an anecdote or story to engage the reader. News stories that featured “personalized storytelling” focused on the emotions or experiences of individuals to add context and emotional weight to a particular subject or issue.

**Table 28: Lead paragraph in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>Vice (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Inverted Pyramid (%)	58.7	18.4	74	85
Emotive (%)	30.7	62.1	15	8.0
Ambiguous / Can't tell (%)	9.5	19.0	6.0	6.0
Not applicable (%)	1.1	0.5	5.0	1.0
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

<sup>101</sup> The “inverted pyramid” is widely regarded as a common discursive feature of journalistic objectivity (Mindich 1998; Pöttker 2003). According to this style, the most important information, or the ‘who-what-why-when’ of a story comes first, with other information then appearing in descending order of importance.

**Table 29: Personalised storytelling in news articles**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>Vice (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Yes (%)	14.5	24.1	4.5	4.0
No (%)	83.3	74.7	90.5	95
Ambiguous / Can't tell (%)	1.1	0.6	0	0
Not applicable (%)	1.1	0.6	5.0	1.0
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

As these two tables show, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* used emotive narrative features in news stories more frequently compared to *The Guardian* and *BBC*. This difference was most pronounced at *Vice*, where nearly two-thirds of stories used an emotive lead paragraph (62.1%), and nearly a quarter of stories made use of personalised storytelling (24.1%). At *BuzzFeed*, these percentages were demonstrably lower, but news stories nevertheless made frequent use of emotive lead paragraphs (30.7%), and some use of personalised storytelling (14.5%). By comparison, *The Guardian* and *BBC* featured non-conventional lead paragraphs in 15% and 8% of stories, respectively, and generally made minimal use of personalised storytelling in news.

To add further nuance to these findings, data on lead paragraphs and personalised storytelling was cross-referenced with data on news formats. Here, the purpose was to observe the level to which emotive narrative techniques were routinised in daily reporting:

**Table 30: Emotive lead paragraph versus news format**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>Vice (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Report (%)	11.8	41.7	10.2	3.5
Feature / Investigation (%)	81.6	84.6	71.4	40
Interview (%)	100	66.7	100	0
Comment / Opinion (%)	100	86.4	25	71.4
Review (%)	0	50	0	0
Listicle (%)	57.1	0	0	0
Quiz (%)	0	0	0	0
Game (%)	0	0	0	0
Aggregated content (%)	100	0	0	25.0
Live Blog (%)	0	0	0	0
Other / can't tell (%)	0	77.8	50	33.3

**Table 31: Personalised storytelling versus news format**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>VICE (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Report (%)	0	8.3	0.6	2.9
Feature / Investigation (%)	65.8	50	35.7	40
Interview (%)	50	11.1	100	0
Comment / opinion (%)	0	22.7	25	14.3
Review (%)	0	0	0	0
Listicle (%)	0	0	0	0
Quiz (%)	0	0	0	0
Game (%)	0	0	0	0
Aggregated content (%)	0	10	0	0
Live Blog (%)	0	0	0	0
Other / can't tell (%)	0	33.3	50	0

Much like the cross-referenced data on emotive headlines, findings here demonstrate that emotive techniques were reserved in principle for news formats that lent themselves to more “narrative” styles of storytelling, such as features and investigations<sup>102</sup> (Bird and Dardenne 2009). That being said, *Vice*

<sup>102</sup> This finding also might help account for the large difference in use of emotive techniques between *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, and the two traditional news organisations in the sample. At the two digital natives, formats like features and investigations made up a *higher portion of total coverage*, compared to *The Guardian* and *BBC*, and it was

still displayed a proclivity for routinising emotion in daily reporting, with emotive leads appearing in close to half (41.7%) of all news reports. By comparison, *BuzzFeed*, *The Guardian*, and *BBC*, used emotive leads and personalised storytelling fairly infrequently in daily reporting, across both their UK and US websites. This suggests that, by and large, objectivity remained an important epistemic basis for news writing, at least at the day-to-day level of news production. One explanation for this might relate to efficiency, with the core discursive elements of objectivity providing a reliable and predictable toolkit for journalists to use to craft stories in a timely and efficient manner.

One final observation worth making relates to the use of emotive techniques across different news *subjects*.

**Table 32: Emotive story lead versus news format**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>VICE (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Government / politics (%)	28.3	62.2	23.0	14.8
Social issues, rights, and protests (%)	42.4	62.2	31.6	16.7
Crime and terrorism (%)	25.0	58.3	13.8	2.5
Science, education, and technology (%)	18.8	33.3	12.5	14.3
Health (%)	50	100	0	40
Business and economy (%)	13.3	80	7.4	4.5

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these types of formats that most commonly employed emotive features (see Chapter 5).

Entertainment and arts (%)	31.8	75	5.9	5.6
Lifestyle (trends, fashion, travel) (%)	0	91.7	0	0
Accidents and disasters (%)	20	0	0	0
Energy and environment (%)	66.7	0	0	0
Other / can't tell (%)	57.1	15.3	0	0

**Table 33: Personalised storytelling versus news subject**

	<b>BuzzFeed (n=179)</b>	<b>VICE (n=174)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=200)</b>	<b>BBC (n=200)</b>
Government / politics (%)	28.3	62.2	23.0	14.8
Social issues, rights, and protests (%)	42.4	62.2	31.6	16.7
Crime and terrorism (%)	25.0	58.3	13.8	2.5
Science, education, and technology (%)	18.8	33.3	12.5	14.3
Health (%)	50	100	0	40
Business and economy (%)	13.3	80	7.4	4.5
Entertainment and arts (%)	31.8	75	5.9	5.6
Lifestyle (trends, fashion, travel) (%)	0	91.7	0	0

Accidents and disasters (%)	20	0	0	0
Energy and environment (%)	66.7	0	0	0
Other / can't tell (%)	57.1	15.3	0	0

Perhaps the first observation to make is that emotive strategies were not restricted to “softer” news subjects (for want of a better term<sup>103</sup>), with emotive leads and personalised storytelling featuring in news on government and politics, as well as topics like international affairs, science, and technology. That being said, only *Vice* frequently used non-conventional leads for stories relating to business affairs and economics, with the other three outlets mostly covering stories of this nature using the conventional inverted pyramid structure. Somewhat ironically, it was “softer” stories relating to entertainment and the arts that were mostly written using conventional lead paragraphs and without personalised storytelling techniques. The exception to this, again, was *Vice*, which used emotive leads in 75% of its coverage on entertainment.

These findings would seem to complicate notions of a clear line between “hard” and “soft” news; or information and entertainment. Rather, they add weight to the growing consensus that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the “traditional dichotomies associated with journalism...are becoming progressively blurred” (Peters 2011: 298). In interviews, a few *BuzzFeed* journalists I spoke with alluded to this. One editor, for example, suggested that they found the supposed division between entertainment and news “overwhelmingly arbitrary and unhelpful” (Interviewee K, editor, *BuzzFeed US*). Similarly, a reporter from the UK argued that one of *BuzzFeed’s* specialities was writing “high-brow stuff in a low-brow way, and low-brow stuff in a high-brow way”, further complicating any sense of a line between serious and non-serious forms of news (Interviewee G, reporter, *BuzzFeed UK*).

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<sup>103</sup> See Reinemann et al. (2011) for a detailed overview of the theoretical debate over “hard” and “soft” forms of news.



Finally, among all four news outlets, stories covering social rights issues, strikes, and protests, most frequently employed emotional leads and personalised storytelling. This makes sense in light of the fact that many of these stories were centred around the experiences of individuals; often members of minority groups whose own opinions were used to dramatize broader issues relating to race, gender, mental health, and sexuality. The mutually beneficial association between these subjects and emotionality offers another reason as to why *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* might have chosen to build a large portion of their coverage around these issues.

#### **8.4. Conclusion**

The goal of this final empirical chapter has been to explain how *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* approach content selection and presentation; paying close attention to the connection between rhetoric and practice. As stated in the introduction, there is little doubt that digital media “bring new potentialities to how journalists connect to news audiences as well as create new challenges in managing the flood of available content” (Carlson 2017: 74). Yet precisely how these changes affect the shape of news is highly contingent on various endogenous and exogenous factors, including organisational structures, working practices, understandings of the audience, and broader “social, especially political and economic, conditions in which [journalistic production] is organized” (Champagne 2005: 50).

Taking into account these factors, this chapter has made an important contribution by demonstrating, once again, the important role of traditional norms in structuring practices at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. Thus, while efforts were made by both organisations to introduce *new* forms of capital to the field, these attempts were strongly circumscribed by the “latent ideals” of journalistic professionalism (Anderson 2011b: 552), or those shared presuppositions regarding institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies that constitute the cultural capital of the field (Vos et al. 2012). This was perhaps most evident in journalists’ rhetorical desire for gatekeeping power over

content, based on the assumption that the “process of making decisions about what is news and how that news should be reported”, should remain under their jurisdiction and control<sup>104</sup> (Hermida et al. 2011: 16). This was bolstered by a news process that favoured elite sourcing routines and only provided minimalist means for users to participate in the news. Thus, much like their traditional counterparts, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* seemed committed to upholding a gatekeeping role, despite the internet theoretically opening up new opportunities for audiences to participate in the news.

While media sociology would attest to the importance of the ‘routine’ in determining this approach (Cottle 2007), a major contention of this chapter has been that in respect to *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, the reproduction of these traditional discourses and practices of professional control are deeply connected to the organisational pursuit of prestige and status, or symbolic capital; the kind earned by, for example, breaking exclusive stories or being seen in close proximity with elite sources. As Williams et al. (2011: 86) note, the routines associated with traditional newswork “are durable partly because they are so important to the continuing authority of journalism: they not only construct external events as news, but they are self-legitimizing practices”. This would also seem to be the case for *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, where professionalism (and its associated routines) “provides an extra-organizational set of guidelines” for achieving journalistic legitimacy, or *peer recognition*<sup>105</sup>, to use Bourdieu’s (1998) terms.

Yet it is the very presence of these professionalised norms and practices that expose *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* to the same sorts of criticisms levelled at traditional media: that they are elitist; overly reliant on official voices; fail to promote diversity and foster civic participation; and generally reinforce, rather than challenge, the dominant status quo (Cottle 2007). These criticisms are hard to

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<sup>104</sup> Although as shown in the previous chapter, editorial judgement is being encroached upon by the ‘quantified’ audience (Anderson 2011), expressed via data and metrics.

<sup>105</sup> As a reminder, peer recognition is generally afforded to those who “internalize most completely the internal ‘values’ or principles of the field” (Bourdieu 1998: 70).

parse with the knowledge that *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* target a predominantly young audience, employ a diverse editorial staff<sup>106</sup>, and have shown an interest in covering progressive political issues tied to the concerns of specific minority groups. These factors alone might be seen as logical precursors for an approach to news less focused on the institutional side of society, or one that might promote more diverse viewpoints from non-elite actors. Yet this would only seem to underline the importance of the professional paradigm in structuring digital news – *particularly* for new entrants, who seek to “[mirror] dominant practices and forms” to bolster their public and professional legitimacy (Lowrey 2011: 66). As Benson (1999: 468) notes, “entry into the journalistic field requires acceptance of the basic rules of the game, which themselves are a powerful force of inertia”.

This being said, new entrants also seek to differentiate themselves by introducing “dispositions and position-takings which clash with the prevailing norms of production and the expectations of the field” (Bourdieu 1993: 57). This was evident in *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*’s orientation toward the audience, which despite being rhetorically and structurally opposed to more direct forms of audience participation, seemed concerned with fostering participation in *epistemological* terms, signalling the desire to create a different “authority relation” with the audience (Carlson 2017). This was manifest in journalists’ interest in transparency and emotionality, both of which were viewed as superior “ways of knowing” compared to the dominant epistemology of objectivity. In practice, however, efforts by journalists to “craft an experience of involvement” in the news were uneven (Peters 2011: 299). Perhaps the clearest endorsement of a shift in journalism’s epistemology was in the use of certain transparency techniques to construct news stories. These practices were more pronounced at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, where the relatively “closed process” of objectivity seemed to give way to greater accountability and openness (Hartley 2013). For want of a better phrase, journalists seemed concerned with demonstrating a kind of *epistemic humility*, recognising their own limits, and

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<sup>106</sup> As shown in Chapter 5 (section 5.3), *BuzzFeed* was significantly more diverse than *Vice*.

indeed, the limits of news texts themselves to provide a definitive account of what was happening in the world.

This was also evident in journalists' rhetorical embrace of emotionality in news discourse, which borrowed from certain ideas of participatory journalism to imagine the journalist-audience relationship as less didactic or lecturing, and more of a dialogical conversation between two equal parties (e.g. Benkler 2006; Jarvis 2006; Bruns 2008). Yet in practice, more emotional and personalized discourses were highly situational, and varied significantly according to news subject and format. Accordingly, objectivity still retained its relevance as a "strategic ritual" (Tuchman 1973), particularly in daily reporting. This would suggest that claims of a full-blown epistemological shift in journalism have been overstated. As Kreiss and Brennen (2016: 305) note, "there is, a simple question of the resources available for the routine and reliable provision of public information that haunts much of the literature around digital journalism". Hence, even if digital media might emphasise the need for more personal and emotional discourses in journalism, the problem of routinising these practices creates a need for the more stable and efficient routines of objectivity in newswork.

## 9. Conclusion: *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* in the Field of Journalism

*“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past”* – Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, (1852: 115).

If a week is a long time in politics then what constitutes a long time in digital journalism? Nearly four years have passed since the commencement of this research project, and in that time the industry has continued to experience profound and unsettling change. *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* are still making news, but many of their contemporaries have disappeared or remain in decline. Technology platforms have continued to grow more powerful at the expense of publishers. There has been a ‘pivot to video’, quick followed by a ‘pivot to reality’ (Moses 2017). And, perhaps more profoundly, there has been a growing cultural backlash against elites and experts, including journalists, driven by a populist political surge in many Western democracies.

Taking stock of these rapid transformations, one would be forgiven for thinking the job of studying change in journalism is an exercise in futility. However, if my experience in the field has taught me anything, it is that “nothing has changed and yet everything is different”, to quote the famous line of Jean-Paul Sartre. Indeed, even a cursory glance at previous technological revolutions – be it television, the telegraph, or radio – suggests that change is far more gradual than conventional discourse often implies (Zelizer 2015). Moreover, the tendency to frame the subject in before/after terms, often neglects what new institutionalists call “path dependency”, which describes the way decisions about the future are historically contingent, shaped strongly by longstanding norms, which are themselves the product of previous struggles. This is as true for new entrants as it is for established members of the field. As Bourdieu (1996: 206) observes:

“The stakes of the struggle between dominants and pretenders [within any given field of cultural production, including journalism], the issues they dispute . . . depend on the state of the legitimate problematic, that is, the space of the possibilities bequeathed by previous struggles, a space which tends to give direction to the search for solutions and, consequently, influences the present and future of production”.

This is an insight I have found myself returning to, time and again, during the course of this research project. One challenging aspect of researching digital natives is their imbrication with normative discourse on “innovation” in digital journalism – what Kreiss and Brennen (2016: 306) describe as “a ‘catch-all’ term that spans the development of novel business models, collaborations, technologies, practices, and content”. Consequentially, digital natives have frequently been celebrated for “disrupting” the field; introducing new ideas and practices that are viewed as normatively better than older ways of doing journalism, simply by virtue of being “new” (Kreiss and Brennen 2016). This discourse has come at the cost of providing a more balanced assessment of digital natives, which are undoubtedly concerned with changing the field, but do so within historically bound parameters and continued recourse to the field’s established cultural capital and doxa (Møller Hartley 2013).

Based on this knowledge, this thesis has sought to provide an in-depth case study of news production at two of the largest and most renowned digital native news organisations: *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. The research has been based on interviews conducted with 24 journalists and a comparative quantitative analysis of news content published by *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, and two legacy news providers: *The Guardian* and *BBC*. In very simple terms, this study has been interested in exploring what, if anything, makes news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* *different* from traditional journalism. Three primary research questions have guided this enquiry:

- 1) What are the major characteristics of news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*? And how, if at all, do they differ from traditional journalism?

- 2) What do these findings tell us about the cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital of the journalistic field? And how, if at all, it might be shifting?
- 3) How do various endogenous and exogenous forces shape *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*'s approach to journalism?

In answering these questions, this project has looked to provide a fresh perspective on how journalism, and the various activities involved in its production, might or might not be changing in the digital environment. The remainder of this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section provides an overview of my key research findings, while the second adopts a more macro-level perspective, considering the subject of journalistic autonomy and the role of normative theory in structuring how we think about the field and its core values.

### **9.1. Overview of research findings**

In the ongoing struggle to define the “legitimate principles” of the field (Bourdieu 1985: 734), new agents can take up positions “aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 30). A major finding of this thesis is that in regard to digital natives, this process is less dichotomous than one might first assume. While frequently lauded by scholars and industry commentators for bringing *new* forms of cultural capital to the field, this study has shown that digital natives emphasise historically contingent norms to: 1) mitigate against some of the risks posed by innovation 2) and, enhance their legitimacy, credibility, and status among other field members and the public at large. *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* bring a hybrid approach to news (Chadwick 2013) in that they are concerned with both conserving and transforming the established cultural capital of the field. This overarching conclusion is based on a detailed analysis of the structure and organisation of news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. By identifying the various forms of resources or “capital” intrinsic to their news operations, this research has been able to demonstrate precisely *where* both organisations might be challenging the traditional boundaries of journalism, and

indeed, where the traditional cultural capital and doxa of the field is being preserved.

This dynamic was initially studied in the context of *BuzzFeed* and *Vice's* entry into the journalistic field. Notwithstanding vague rhetorical gestures toward making a “difference” or an “impact”, it appeared that both organisations were primarily drawn to journalism because of its high symbolic status and potential to add “reputation and credibility to their brands” (Painter et al. 2017: 18). At the same time, there was a clear economic basis for entering the field, with young people – *BuzzFeed* and *Vice's* primary audience – representing a potentially lucrative and neglected demographic of consumers to target with news. As observed in Chapter 6, this dual pursuit of economic and cultural/symbolic capital seemed to correspond with an approach to journalism that strived for two different forms of legitimacy; one intellectual and the other economic (Champagne 2005). Dealing first with practices oriented around the intellectual pole, this was evident in *BuzzFeed* and *Vice's* focus on culturally sanctified practices like in-depth reporting and investigative journalism, as well as the hiring of several high-profile journalists, who brought important embodied cultural capital to their respective organisations. In principle, these strategies seemed oriented around the pursuit of symbolic capital, bolstering *BuzzFeed* and *Vice's* prospects of being recognised as legitimate by their fellow peers.

Yet as Carlson and Usher (2016: 7) note, “digital news startups must balance institutional mimicry with being explicitly innovative and forward-looking. It is not enough that they exist as entities within a competitive news market; they need to differentiate themselves from existing news”. In this regard, *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* also seemed eminently concerned with introducing *new* forms of capital to the field, based more explicitly around public recognition, and/or the pursuit of economic goals. Evidence of this was found in the shift from traditional “beat” subjects to issues based more explicitly around reader-identified interests. This was supported by the hiring of a young, diverse, and technically-proficient staff, who seemed to occupy a homologous position to their own readers, which gave *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* an advantage in appearing “authentic” on certain issues of pertinence to their own readers. By virtue of



being “new” to the field, young journalists also seemed more willing to break the “rules” or doxa, embracing, for instance, more conversational and emotional forms of journalistic storytelling while rejecting more conventional, “objective” styles of news.

However, it was also young journalists’ lack of socialization that led them to uncritically accept different methods and routines of newswork. This aspect was discussed at length in Chapter 7, which explored the effects of post-industrialism on the organisation of news work at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. In contrast to the “assembly line” model of work most commonly associated with mass media production (Gans 2004), news production at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* was more decentralised, defined by values like flexibility, adaptability, fluidity, and collaboration. Under these conditions, journalists were expected to take more responsibility for their own work, “multiskilling” to engage in a variety of news processes and produce a range of news content across multiple platforms throughout the day. While these changes have created major cultural clashes inside traditional news organisations (Singer 2004; Deuze 2008; Paterson and Domingo 2008), for journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, these new modes of work seemed “less a source of disruption than...a potential new source of identity” (Ferrucci and Vos 2017: 870). Indeed, there is a strong case to make that values like flexibility, adaptability, fluidity, and collaboration now constitute a legitimate part of the field’s cultural capital (Siapera and Spyridou 2012), as expressed by numerous journalists from *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* who seemed to embrace these new modes of work, connecting them positively with a greater sense of individual freedom and autonomy. A second, related finding of this chapter was that reporters’ autonomy at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* seemed to also stem from their homologous relationship with audiences. Accordingly, news judgement was less of an individualised activity and instead, something that journalists felt increasingly comfortable sharing with the “quantified” audience (Anderson 2011b; Carlson 2018). This seemed more pronounced at *BuzzFeed*, whose interest in the metric of *sharing*, in particular, seemed to constitute an important and ever-evolving factor in news selection. At *Vice*, it was apparent that editors, rather than reporters, took more responsibility for managing audience metrics and they generally seemed more sceptical about their impact.

While these findings suggested that journalists were willing to cede some control to the audience, Chapter 8 reverted back to emphasising the importance of traditional journalistic norms in structuring the selection and presentation of news at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. From an ethical standpoint, objectivity, with its ethical connotations of accuracy, fairness, and independence, seemed to retain its status as a “sacred belief” among journalists at both organisations (Norderstreng, 1995: 115). Similarly, journalists expressed a strong desire to maintain gatekeeping control over content, which was supported, structurally, by a production process that only provided very limited means for users to participate in the news. These factors were also shown to contribute to the preservation of traditional sourcing techniques, with newer technologies being ‘normalized’ by journalists at *BuzzFeed* and *Vice* to fit with established routines (Singer 2005). Perhaps the strongest evidence of a shift in journalism’s cultural capital was observed in journalists’ discourse on transparency and emotionality as alternative epistemologies to objectivity. Here, journalists expressed a certain dissatisfaction with the relatively “closed process” of objectivity (Hellmueller et al. 2013), as well as criticising it for its tendency to create unnecessary distance between reporters and readers. Consequentially, journalists sought to develop a new authority relation with readers, premised on greater openness and accountability, and by presenting facts and information using more emotional, subjective, and personal narrative styles of storytelling. In practice, however, engagement with these new forms of discourse were uneven, with emotionality, in particular, generally being reserved for certain formats and news subjects, rather than routinized in every day news work. These findings suggest that claims about a shift in the epistemology of journalism are perhaps overstated, and only changing incrementally in response to digital media and its attendant culture.

## **9.2. Journalistic Autonomy or “What is Happening to the Field?”**

To understand what is happening in the field, writes Bourdieu (2005: 43) “one has to understand the degree of autonomy of the field and, within the field, the degree of autonomy of the publication that a journalist writes for”. Based on this

assertion, and in an effort to tie the various strands of this thesis together, I wish to reflect on what is happening in the field by considering the broad normative issue of journalistic autonomy. As noted in Chapter 2, “[a]utonomy is a core ideal of the standard model of professional journalism” (Waisbord 2013: 43). It is also *the* defining component of field theory, with Bourdieu valuing “most highly those forms of intellectual and artistic production sheltered from external economic or political pressures” (Benson 2008: 3). However, owing to journalism’s status as a “very weakly autonomous field” (Bourdieu 2005: 33), it is important to recall that the field has always been “strongly dictated by the social, especially political and economic, conditions which it is organized” (Champagne 2005: 50). For this reason, journalism has always had to construct its own sense of autonomy against the external forces of heteronomy, with the respective power and influence of neighbouring fields rising and falling at different points in history (Schudson 2005; Vos 2016).

Certainly, since the passing of the “high-modernism” period of journalism in the 1960s (Hallin 1992), the field has become more homologous (or overlapping) with the economic field (Benson 1999). As a result, journalists’ exclusivity or “jurisdiction” (Abbott 1988) over the news has diminished, contributing to an overall decline in the cultural capital of the field (Bourdieu 2005). Following the preceding period of “post-professional” journalism (Nadler 2016), there is a strong case to make that we stand amidst entering a “third wave” of techno-commercial development, “characterized by the development and rapid proliferation of low-cost, automated systems that can capture, link, and organize large amounts digital trace data that reflect non-purposive feedback from all consumers of digital media products” (Zamith 2018: 421).

These developments, combined with the lack of an adequate business model for digital news (Nielsen 2016), seem to be paving the way for a new set of “hybrid” news practices – premised on the new norm of *integration* – that “[combine] established editorial values with values such as collaboration, adaptation and business thinking”. The growth and entrenchment of native advertising is perhaps the most visible example of this trend (Carlson 2015). This aside, general observations made about news production at *BuzzFeed*

and *Vice* would seem indicative of a shift toward the closer imbrication of editorial and business interests; or the cultural and economic capital of the field. This was evident in journalists' routines; in practices such as multiskilling and flexibility, and in their willingness to abdicate some of their own editorial autonomy to the "quantified" audience, which, at times, became the "seemingly more democratic...substitute for the internal standards" by which [journalists] selected the news (Bourdieu 1998: 73).

Taken together, there should be little doubt that these various facets of news work threaten journalistic autonomy and expertise. Perhaps the worst-case outcome of this situation, as Tandoc and Thomas (2015: 251) note, is a complete "drift away from journalism ethics, toward an audience-centered free-for-all governed by market logic". At the risk of sounding reductionist, this could leave journalism as "nothing but" the emanations of underlying economic forces (Schudson 2005: 214), contributing to a loss of jurisdiction that would risk causing irrevocable damage to the autonomy of the field and its wider institutional authority.

Leaving aside these more apocalyptic predictions, it is important to also consider that the cultural capital of the field might be *shifting* in response to these aforementioned pressures, rather than declining altogether (Anderson 2008). As Vos and Craft (2016) recognise, this can be challenging to parse with field theory, which understands journalism's cultural capital, autonomy, and legitimacy to all be mutually constitutive of one another. Paradoxically, new practices like emotionality and transparency represent "a form of cultural capital whereby the field willingly foregoes a measure of autonomy to gain legitimacy" (Vos and Craft 2016: 13). This helpfully forces us to consider the ways in which a less autonomous journalism (i.e. one more subservient to its readers), might in fact be a prelude to news playing a more relevant and useful role in people's lives.

To illustrate this point, it is helpful to think about *BuzzFeed* and *Vice's* coverage, which despite being strongly influenced by the logic of the market, did not focus on the usual gamut of subjects associated with heavily commercialised

media<sup>107</sup> (e.g. sex, scandal, celebrity, sports). Rather, both organisations chose to make news about progressive political issues – civil rights, gender equality, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights (LGBT) – central to their news coverage. Naturally, this complicates arguments that market-driven news necessarily leads to a “race-to-the-bottom” in news coverage, or that market-oriented editorial strategies are inherently incompatible with a commitment to public service journalism (McManus 1994). Instead, various trends such as the ongoing fragmentation of audiences (Napoli 2012); the growing mobility and personalization of the media (Beckett and Deuze 2016); the rise in personal and emotional forms of discourse (Wahl-Jorgensen 2016); and the proliferation of hybrid spaces that blur “public and private, civic and consumption based, collective and personal narratives” (Papacharissi 2014: 25), have made it possible – and more crucially, profitable – to target audiences with content that might stimulate alternative forms of “sub-politics” (Beck 1997; Downey and Fenton 2003; Dahlgren 2005). In this regard, it is important to not foreclose the possibility of more heteronomous forms of journalism making a positive contribution to citizenship, despite them being ultimately beholden to the logic of the market. As one editor from *BuzzFeed* put it to me:

“[In terms of the subtler] goods that [journalism] can do...to the extent that a cohesive society relies on there being a degree of empathy with people who are not you and not like you, people in different situations to yourselves. To the extent that making an informed decision in electoral terms would ideally, involve considering more than just what is specifically better for you...to the extent that all of these things are the case, there is a low-level but very important good that journalism, along with other things like popular drama, can achieve in terms of...telling other people’s stories, of letting people understand that lives are lived differently to theirs but with as much hope and fear and joy and validity as their own. Just gently nudging up the degree of empathy and awareness of people in society” (Interviewee L, editor, *BuzzFeed UK*).

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<sup>107</sup> See Franklin (1997); Sparks (2000).

These specific contradictions underline the need to study the field *in context*, whether this be particular situations or specific social actors. Simply put, journalism is too heterogeneous, complex, and inconsistent to be discussed unitarily any longer, or using simple binary terms: hard versus soft, popular versus serious, emotion versus reason, professional or amateur, fact versus opinion, commercially or publically oriented, information versus entertainment. Rather, like Witschge et al. (2018: 6), I am advocating for an understanding of journalism as made up of both continuities and inconsistencies – the kind best appreciated by reflexive and empirically grounded research.

## **Appendix A: Sample email requesting newsroom access**

Dear [insert name],

My name is Paul Stringer and I am a PhD student from the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds. I was getting in touch because I think you might be a good person to speak to regarding my research project.

My PhD is about how news journalism is changing because of technology, and I am interested in examining how news and current affairs stories are produced at [Vice/BuzzFeed]. The ultimate aim of my project is to contribute to clearer understandings of how leading net-native news organisations are challenging traditional understandings of journalism.

The research would ideally involve me spending some time inside the key news production locations of [Vice/BuzzFeed], speaking to journalists and other staff, and learning more about their day-to-day work. In the first instance, it would be great to see if you think this might be possible. I would welcome the opportunity to meet to discuss this research in more detail, and explain what I am hoping to accomplish.

Thank you for your time, and I'll look forward to hearing from you at your convenience.

All the best,

Paul Stringer

## Appendix B: Interview guide

For the purposes of clarity, the following interviewee is understood to be an employee of BuzzFeed:

- Opening questions (to establish basic information about interviewee)
  1. Let's start with your job...Could you tell me what your job title is, and describe to me what you do for BuzzFeed?
  2. How long have you been working for the company?
  3. And more generally, how long have you been working as an \_\_\_\_ (insert job title here)
  4. Have you had any sort of formal training for your role? (university, diplomas etc.)
  
- Company questions (to establish some basic information about BuzzFeed)
  5. Based on your experience, could you tell me about what it is you think that BuzzFeed do?
  6. And if you can, could you describe BuzzFeed's approach to news? Are there any specific features of a BuzzFeed news story that distinguishes it from content produced by other news organizations?
  7. How are decisions made regarding what news stories BuzzFeed cover? Are there certain topics / issues that tend to be deemed more important than others?
  
- Questions about routines and practices
  8. What is your daily working routine? Can you describe it to me? What does a typical working day look like for you?
  
- Social Media
  9. Could you provide a breakdown to me of how you use different social media platforms in your day-to day work? What purpose does each platform serve?



10. Is social media is an important tool for generating news stories? If yes, then could you describe to me how social media helps you decide what news stories to write? Is it a matter of looking at what's trending, where the prominent conversations are, etc.?
11. In what other ways do BuzzFeed generate news stories? Do you use wires / press releases / scheduled media events? Are any reporters assigned to particular beats?
12. Do you think it's necessary for BuzzFeed journalists to have a significant social media presence? If so, why?

- Questions about the audience

13. How would you describe an average reader of BuzzFeed news?
14. What topics or issues do you think your audience is most interested in reading about?
15. And what about journalists at BuzzFeed, what kinds of news stories do you think matter most to them?
16. Do you interact with your audience regularly in your work? If so, how?
17. Does audience feedback have any impact on the stories you write? Can you give me an example?

- Data / Analytics

19. Do you use data or analytics in your work? If so, how?
20. What kind of data matters most to you when trying to evaluate the success of a news story? Is it shares, number of minutes spent on article, or another kind of metric?

- Questions about journalism / news in general

21. What purpose do you think journalism serves in society?
22. Do you think the news BuzzFeed produces matches up to that ideal?
23. Do you think the role of journalists has changed over the last decade, or has it stayed the same?
24. Are you optimistic about the future of journalism?
25. Finally, is there anything else you'd like to add or share with me?

## **Appendix C: Sample email requesting interview**

Dear [insert name],

I hope you're well. My name is Paul Stringer and I am a PhD student from the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds. I was getting in touch because I think you might be a good person to speak to about my research project.

My PhD is broadly about how journalism is changing because of technology, and the main focus of the project is on how net-native news organisations like BuzzFeed are challenging traditional understandings of journalism.

As part of the research, I am looking to interview several members of the [Vice/BuzzFeed], team. If it can be arranged, I would love the opportunity to be able to meet and speak with you about your role as a senior reporter for BuzzFeed. I wouldn't need much of your time and your contribution would be enormously valuable to my research.

I'm based in London at the moment, and can be very flexible in terms of organising times / dates to meet. Alternatively, if it's easier to talk via email, or over the phone, then that's no problem.

Thank you for your time and all the best,

Paul Stringer

## **Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form**

**Research Project: Making News at Digital-Natives**  
date]

[insert

### **Project Information for Participants**

- You are being invited to participate in a research project about how news production and journalism is changing because of technology.
- Please read the information in this document carefully to understand why the research is being done and what being a participant on this research project might involve for you.
- If you have any questions about your own participation, or this project in general, then please get in touch with me using the contact details provided in this document.

### **What is this project about?**

In journalism studies, a great deal has been written about the impact of the Internet on news production. However, most academic research has focused on how news production has changed at traditional news organizations like *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

In contrast, relatively little remains known about how news and current affairs are produced at digital native organizations like [*BuzzFeed/Vice*]. Understanding how news is made at such organizations is critical if we want to gain a better understanding of how online journalism is evolving and how the day-to-day work of journalists is changing.

This research will involve me interviewing you about your work, asking you about different aspects of journalism and the news production process at [*BuzzFeed/Vice*].

### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen to take part in this project because you are an employee of [*BuzzFeed/Vice*] and contribute to the news production process.

### **What do I have to do?**

If you are interviewed for this project, then I will require between 30 minutes and an hour of your time. During the interviews I will be asking questions about your day-to-day work, and also more general questions about your role as a journalist (if you are one) and what you think that means. You are free to refuse to answer any interview questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

I will require a small amount of your time if you are being interviewed for this research project. In terms of fixing a date and a time for this to take place, I will always try and be as accommodating as possible to limit any disruption this might cause.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those participating in this research project, by taking part you will be helping to advance academic and public knowledge about journalism and the changing nature of news production.

### **Do I have to take part?**

No. It is completely up to you to decide whether or not you wish to take part in this research project. You do not have to give a reason to withdraw from this research project.

### **Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

Personal information (your full name, email address, and job title) that is gathered as part of this project will be stored securely and only be accessible to the project research team.

In line with previous research, I will not identify by name any people unless I have their specific permission to do so. For participants who are anonymised in my research, one risk worth acknowledging is that you might still be identified based on your job title, particularly if you are a more senior employee.

### **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The results of this research will be published in academic journals, which will be freely available on-line. You can request a copy of the published results from the researcher (Paul Stringer). The data collected during the course of the project might be used for additional or subsequent research; however, you will not be identified by name in any report or publication unless you have given your specific permission for this. This research data will be kept for up to three years after the original findings of the research are published.

### **Who is organising / funding this research?**

The University of Leeds is organising this research. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) of England and The University of Leeds fund this research.

### **Contact for further information**

Thank you for taking the time to read through this information. If you have any questions or would like any further information you can contact me using either the email or telephone number you have been provided.

**Thank you for taking time to read this sheet and for considering taking part in the study**

<b>Consent Form for Research Project: “Making News at Digital Natives”</b>	Add your initials next to the statement if you agree
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 28/04/16 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the data gathering stage of the research, without providing any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. If I do wish to withdraw my data I will contact Paul Stringer either by email or telephone.	
I give permission for the researcher (Paul Stringer) and his project supervisors to have access to my responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research data unless I have specified that this be allowed. I accept the risk that I am potentially identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research, based on my name and/or job title. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential.	
I agree for the data collected from me to be stored and used in relevant future research in an anonymised form, up to three years after the original findings of the study are published.	
I understand that other genuine researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	
I understand that other genuine researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of researcher	

Signature	
Date	

## Appendix E: Interviewee List

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
A	Reporter	1:00:10	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
B	Reporter	54:53	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
C	Reporter	1:04:32	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
D	Editor	18:09	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
E	Editor	31:11	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
F	Editor	34:02	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
G	Reporter	1:05:15	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
H	Reporter	46:28	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
I	Reporter	1:28:32	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
J	Reporter	36:59	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
K	Editor	57:53	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
L	Editor	1:38:32	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
M	Reporter	44:45	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
N	Reporter	38:53	<b>BuzzFeed</b>
O	Reporter	1:13:24	<b>BuzzFeed / Freelance</b>
A	Reporter	47:05	<b>VICE</b>
B	Reporter	1:04:22	<b>VICE</b>
C	Reporter	38:39	<b>VICE</b>
D	Reporter	41:53	<b>VICE</b>
E	Editor	1:41:39	<b>VICE</b>
F	Editor	1:22:24	<b>VICE</b>
G	Reporter	47:53	<b>VICE / Freelance</b>
H	Reporter	Typed	<b>VICE EU</b>
J	Editor	70:51	<b>VICE</b>

## Appendix F: Coding Scheme

Variable	Sub-category	Description
<b>Basic Article information</b>		
News outlet	1- BuzzFeed UK 2- BuzzFeed US 3- Vice UK 4- Vice US 5- Guardian UK 6- Guardian US 7- BBC UK 8- BBC US	Indicate which website the article was published on.
Headline		Please write the headline of the article.
Date		Please write the date of publication of the article.
Author gender	1- Male 2- Female 3- Can't tell	Where possible, indicate the author's gender. If this is not possible, use the code labelled 'can't tell'.
Author ethnicity	1- White 2- Asian or Indian 3- Black 4- Hispanic 5- Can't tell	Where possible, indicate the author's ethnicity. If this is not possible, use the code labelled 'can't tell'.
Word Count		Record the word count of the article (excluding any text that appears outside the <i>main body text</i> of the article)
URL		Record the website URL of the article
<b>Advanced article information</b>		
Topic	1- Government and politics 2- Social issues, rights, and protests 3- Crime and terrorism 4- Science, education, and technology 5- Health 6- Business and economy	Code the main topic of the article from the adjacent list. If you are unsure, please use the code 'other/can't tell'.



	<p>7- Entertainment (including celebrity news and gossip)</p> <p>8- Lifestyle (trends, fashion and travel)</p> <p>9- Accidents and disasters</p> <p>10- Energy and environment</p> <p>11- Other / can't tell</p>	
Format	<p>1- Report</p> <p>2- Feature or investigation</p> <p>3- Interview</p> <p>4- Comment or opinion</p> <p>5- Review</p> <p>6- Listicle</p> <p>7- Quiz</p> <p>8- Game</p> <p>9- Aggregated / curated content</p> <p>10- Live blog</p> <p>11- Other / can't tell</p>	Code the article according to its format. If you are unsure, please use the code 'other/can't tell'.
Storytelling style	<p>1- Mainly descriptive</p> <p>2- Mainly interpretive</p> <p>3- Ambiguous /can't tell</p>	Code the article either as <i>mainly descriptive</i> or <i>mainly interpretive</i> . If you encounter stories where neither variable seems to fit, please code these as 'ambiguous/can't tell'.
Main source name		Indicate the name (if a human source) of the main source of the article. If it is a non-human source like a leaked document, then write down N/A.
Main source organisation		If the source is affiliated with a particular institution or organisation, please record its name. Otherwise, put N/A.
Main source age	<p>1- 0-10</p> <p>2- 11-20</p> <p>3- 21-30</p> <p>4- 31-40</p> <p>5- 41-50</p> <p>6- 51-60</p> <p>7- 61-70</p> <p>8- 70+</p> <p>9- Can't tell</p> <p>10-Not applicable</p>	Indicate the age of the source (note: you may have to manually search for their age on the internet if this is not made obvious in the story). If this is not possible, use the code labelled 'can't tell'. If you cannot identify a main source for the news story, then use the label 'not applicable'.
Main Source gender	1- Male	Indicate the gender of the source (note: you may have to manually

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2- Female</li> <li>3- Can't tell</li> <li>4- Not applicable</li> </ul>	<p>search for their age on the internet if this is not made obvious in the story). If this is not possible, use the code labelled 'can't tell'. If you cannot identify a main source for the news story, then use the label 'not applicable'.</p>
Main Source ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1- White</li> <li>2- Asian or Indian</li> <li>3- Black</li> <li>4- Hispanic</li> <li>5- Can't tell</li> <li>6- Not applicable</li> </ul>	<p>Indicate the ethnicity of the source (note: you may have to manually search for their age on the internet if this is not made obvious in the story). If this is not possible, use the code labelled 'can't tell'. If you cannot identify a main source for the news story, then use the label 'not applicable'.</p>
Main source type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1- Government officials, politicians, or legal professionals</li> <li>2- Police, law enforcement, or military</li> <li>3- Business people and organisations</li> <li>4- Civil society members and organisations (NGOs, trade unions, charities, etc.)</li> <li>5- Own media (where the news organization references their own content)</li> <li>6- Traditional media</li> <li>7- Other media</li> <li>8- Celebrities and other famous people (artists, musicians, etc.)</li> <li>9- News agencies/wires</li> <li>10- Analysts or experts (including academics)</li> <li>11- Ordinary citizens</li> <li>12- Other/can't tell</li> <li>13- Not applicable</li> </ul>	<p>Indicate the type of source. If this is difficult to determine, please use the label 'other / can't tell'. If you cannot identify a main source for the news story, then use the label 'not applicable'.</p>
Main Source exclusivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1- Exclusive</li> <li>2- Indirect / second-hand</li> <li>3- Ambiguous/can't tell</li> </ul>	<p>Indicate if the main source is being quoted exclusively by the journalist in question, or have his/her/its quotes have been obtained indirectly, or second-hand from another source. You</p>

	4- Not applicable	may have to use the internet and Google the text from individual quotes to accurately determine whether they are exclusive or indirect/second-hand. If this is too difficult to determine, please use the label 'ambiguous / can't tell'. If you cannot identify a main source for the news story, then use the label 'not applicable'.
Main Source social media	1- Yes 2- No 3- Can't tell 4- Not applicable	Indicate if the main source being quoted from social media (e.g. <i>Twitter</i> , <i>Instagram</i> , <i>YouTube</i> , <i>Facebook</i> , <i>Linkedin</i> ). Use the code 'can't tell' when this is not clear. If you cannot identify a main source for the news story, then use the label 'not applicable'.
Source 1 name		Indicate the name (if a human source) of the first quoted source of the article. If it is a non-human source like a leaked document, then write down N/A.
Source 1 organisation		If the source is affiliated with a particular institution or organisation, please record its name. Otherwise, put N/A.
Source 1 age	1- 0-10 2- 11-20 3- 21-30 4- 31-40 5- 41-50 6- 51-60 7- 61-70 8- 70+ 9- Can't tell 10- Not applicable	Indicate the age of the source. If the source is not a person (e.g. a document), then please use the code: 'not applicable'. If it is not possible to identify the age of the source, then use the code: 'can't tell'.
Source 1 gender	1- Male 2- Female 3- Can't tell	Indicate the gender of the source. If the source is not a person (e.g. a document), then please use the code: 'not applicable'. If it is not possible to identify the gender of the source, then use the code: 'can't tell'.
Source 1 ethnicity	1- White 2- Asian or Indian 3- Black 4- Hispanic 5- Can't tell	Indicate the ethnicity of the source. If the source is not a person (e.g. a document), then please use the code: 'not applicable'. If it is not possible to identify the ethnicity of the source, then use the code: 'can't tell'.
Source 1 type	1- Government officials, politicians, or legal professionals	Indicate the type of source. If this is difficult to determine, please use the label 'other / can't tell'.

	<p>2- Police or military</p> <p>3- Business people and organisations</p> <p>4- Civil society members and organisations (Campaigners, NGOs, Charities, etc.)</p> <p>5- Own media (where the news organization references their own content)</p> <p>6- Traditional media</p> <p>7- Other media</p> <p>8- Celebrities / famous people</p> <p>9- News agencies/wires</p> <p>10- Analysts or experts (including academics)</p> <p>11- Ordinary citizens</p> <p>12- Other /can't tell</p>	
Source 1 exclusivity	<p>1- Exclusive</p> <p>2- Indirect / second-hand</p> <p>3- Ambiguous / can't tell</p>	<p>Indicate if the source is being quoted exclusively by the journalist in question, or have his/her/its quotes have been obtained indirectly, or second-hand from another source. You may have to use the internet and Google the text from individual quotes to accurately determine whether they are exclusive or indirect/second-hand. If this is too difficult to determine, please use the label 'ambiguous / can't tell'.</p>
Source 1 social media	<p>1- Yes</p> <p>2- No</p> <p>3- Can't tell</p>	<p>Indicate if the source being quoted from social media (e.g. <i>Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn</i>). Use the code 'can't tell' when this is not clear.</p>
Source 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, etc.		<p><b>NOTE:</b> Please repeat the above coding procedure for every quoted source that appears in the news article.</p>
Total number of sources		<p>Write down the total number of quoted sources that were used in the news article.</p>
Total number of social media sources		<p>Write down the total number of sources from social media that were used in the news article.</p>

<b>Objectivity and Emotionality</b>		
Headline Language	1- Straight / factual 2- Emotional 3- Ambiguous / can't tell	Indicate if the article uses a straight/factual headline or an emotional headline. If you cannot determine the headline, please use the code 'ambiguous/can't tell'.
Storytelling Lead	1- Inverted pyramid 2- Narrative / anecdotal lead 3- Other / can't tell	Indicate if the lead paragraph of the story uses an inverted pyramid structure or a narrative / anecdotal lead. If you cannot determine the lead paragraph, please use the code 'other/can't tell'.
Personalized storytelling	1- Yes 2- No 3- Ambiguous / can't tell	Indicate if the news article uses personalized storytelling. If you are unsure, use the code 'ambiguous/can't tell'.
<b>Disclosure Transparency</b>		
Time stamps	1- Date of publication only 2- Time of publication only 3- Date and time of publication 4- No timestamp	Indicate the level of information provided about the date and/or time of publication of the news article.
Authorial information	1- Author's name 2- Author's name and contact details (email and / or social media links) 3- No author information	Please indicate how much information is provided about the author of the news article.
Number of hyperlinks		Indicate the total number of hyperlinks used in the news article.
Number of internal hyperlinks		Indicate the total number of internal hyperlinks used in the news article.
Number of external hyperlinks		Indicate the total number of external hyperlinks used in the news article.
<b>Participatory Transparency</b>		
<b>Participation index (stories can contain zero, or 1 or more of the following values)</b>	1- Sharing 2- Commenting 3- Poll 4- Quiz 5- Submit your own content	Indicate how many of the following features are contained within the news article:  1) Sharing: <i>readers are encouraged to share the news item (via social media or email)</i> 2) Commenting: <i>readers are invited to comment on the news item</i> 3) Poll: <i>readers are invited to submit</i>

	<p>6- Reader contribution published in text</p> <p>7- Reader news (news item presented as wholly being written by a reader)</p>	<p><i>an answer to a poll</i></p> <p>4) Quiz: <i>readers are invited to answer questions in a quiz</i></p> <p>5) Submit your own content: <i>readers are encouraged to send in their own content, including reports, images, and videos, to contribute to a news story</i></p> <p>6) Reader contribution is published: <i>where readers have been previously asked to send in their own content, these contributions now explicitly form part of the news story. NOTE: this is different to journalists simply using ordinary people as sources, such as tweets compiled from Twitter, or comments taken from Facebook.</i></p> <p>7) Reader news: <i>news item is presented as being wholly written by a reader</i></p>

## Appendix G: Codebook

### Codebook: Making News at Digital Natives

Analysing News Content Produced by *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, *The Guardian* and *BBC*

#### 1. Overview

##### 1.1 Introduction

This quantitative content analysis is part a larger project examining news production at digital-native news organizations.

The codebook provides instructions for how to code online news articles published by *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, *The Guardian* and *BBC*. Each article will be coded according to a set of predefined variables, which are described in more detail below. An accompanying coding sheet is also provided for coders to input the results of the analysis. If the coder has any questions or encounters any issues during the coding process, they should consult the lead researcher of the project (Paul Stringer) who will aim to answer any queries or questions.

##### 1.2. Sample

The sample comes from news articles collected from the UK and US websites of the four aforementioned news organizations:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news> (UK site)

<http://www.bbc.com/news> (US site)

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/news> (UK site)

<https://www.buzzfeed.com/news/?country=en-us> (US site)

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk> (UK site)

[https://www.theguardian.com/us?INTCMP=CE\\_US](https://www.theguardian.com/us?INTCMP=CE_US) (US site)

[https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/news](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/news) (UK site)

[http://www.vice.com/en\\_us/news](http://www.vice.com/en_us/news) (US site)

To help narrow down the sample, the top 10 most prominent articles that featured on the pages of each of these websites were collected at the same time each day, over two different week-long periods. The number of total articles gathered was 800. To help preserve the news content in the form it was captured, each article was downloaded using *NCapture* (part of the *NVivo* software package) and also using a third-party web browser application called 'Full Page Screenshot Capture', which saved articles in the PDF file format.

##### 1.3. Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this research project was defined as a single news article.

## 2. Coding Procedure and Variables

What follows is a detailed guide for coding online news articles from *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, *The Guardian* and *BBC*. While some variables should be relatively self-explanatory, other variables are supplanted with a description to help provide more clarity. If anything remains unclear please speak to Paul Stringer, the project lead.

### 2.1. Basic Article Information

To begin the procedure, you will code basic information about the news article using the following variables.

#### *Variable 1: News Outlet*

-On what website was the article published?

- |                  |                  |
|------------------|------------------|
| 1- BuzzFeed (UK) | 5- Guardian (UK) |
| 2- BuzzFeed (US) | 6- Guardian (US) |
| 3- VICE (UK)     | 7- BBC (UK)      |
| 4- VICE (US)     | 8- BBC (US)      |

#### *Variable 2: Headline*

-What is the headline of the news article? Please write this down in full.

#### *Variable 3: Date*

-What date was the news article published? Please write this down in a consistent format.

#### *Variable 4: Author Gender*

-What is the gender of the author(s) who has/have published the news article? If there is more than one author, please indicate their gender(s) too. In any instance where you cannot tell the gender of the author, please code this as "can't tell".

- 1- Male      2- Female      3- Can't tell

#### *Variable 5: Author Ethnicity*

-What is the ethnicity of the author(s) who has/have published the news article? If there is more than one author, please indicate their ethnicity too. In any instance where you cannot tell the ethnicity of the author, please code this as "can't tell".

- 1- White      2- Asian or Indian      3- Black      4- Hispanic      5- Can't Tell

#### *Variable 6: Word Count*

-What is the total word count of the article? Please count the body text only; not headlines, sub-headlines, captions, or embedded content from social media (e.g. Tweets and Facebook posts).

#### *Variable 7: URL*

-Please note the URL address of the article.



## 2.2. Advanced Article Information

Having coded some basic information, you will move on to coding some more specific information about the news article using the following variables.

### *Variable 8: Topic of News story*

-Please record the main topic of the news story. If you are unsure of the main topic, or you feel that the article gives equal weight to multiple topics, then use the code “other / can’t tell”.

- 1- Government and Politics
- 2- Social Issues, rights, and protests
- 3- Crime and terrorism
- 4- Science, education, and technology
- 5- Health
- 6- Business and economy
- 7- Entertainment (including celebrity news and gossip)
- 8- Lifestyle (trends, fashion, and travel)
- 9- Accidents and disasters
- 10- Energy, nature, and environment (including weather)
- 11- Other / Can’t Tell

### *Variable 9: Format of News Story*

-Please record the format of the news story. If you are unsure of the format, please use the category “other / can’t tell”.

- |   |                            |               |                    |
|---|----------------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| 1- Report                                     | 2- Feature / investigation | 3- Interview  | 4- Comment/Opinion |
| 5- Review                                     | 6- Listicle                | 7-Quiz        | 8- Game            |
| 9- Aggregated / curated content<br>can’t tell |                            | 10- Live blog | 11- Other /        |

Note: sometimes news formats such as reports or features might *contain* quizzes or games, but these should still be coded as reports or features.

### *Variable 10: Storytelling Style*

-This variable is interested in whether the main body text of the news story is primarily descriptive or interpretive. Stories that are *mainly descriptive* are primarily concerned with describing *what* has happened in a rather straight-forward and uncomplicated style. On the other hand, stories that are *mainly interpretive* will typically involve the writer trying to analyse, evaluate or explain a situation while also describing it. On some occasions, it might be difficult to determine whether a story is mainly descriptive or mainly interpretive. When this occurs, the value “other / can’t tell” can be used.

## 2.3. Sources

The coding procedure for sources is more complex. For this reason, an explanation of what constitutes a news ‘source’ is provided, before the coding procedure for sources is described in more detail.

### 2.3.1. Introduction

In the broadest sense, a source is an individual, organization, or document, that provides a journalist with information for a news story. Traditionally, journalists have gravitated towards ‘elite’ sources like lawmakers, politicians, and business leaders, when constructing news stories. Sources are often represented in quoted speech in news stories, for example:

R.C. Hammond, a senior State Department official, said such a dialogue would be out of the question as long as North Korea continues its pattern of “test launches, over flights,” and “threats of detonations over the Pacific.”

However, on other occasions, a source’s presence in a news story may be less obvious. For example, in the passage below, two sources (Tim Selaty and ‘Business Filings’) are mentioned but neither are attributed speech in quotations:

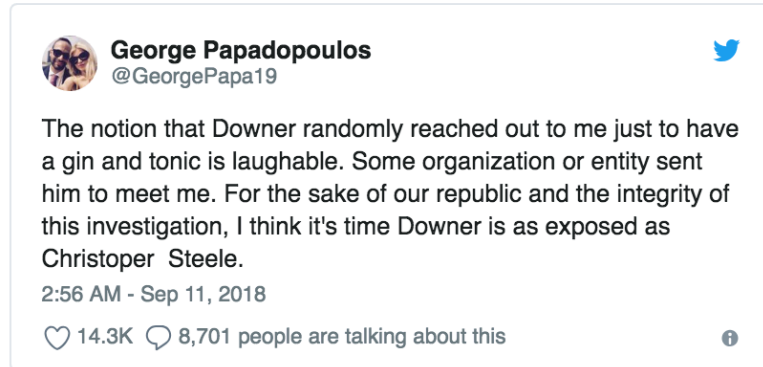
A donate button was only added recently to the Citizens for Trump website to help offset out-of-pocket expenses, Selaty said. The button links to a PayPal page for Patriotic Strategies, which, according to business filings in Texas, incorporated as an LLC last March, listing Earl and James Lee Brown as officers. Selaty said he would be surprised if the group has raised

In rare cases, quoted speech might also be used in a news story that is un-attributable to a particular source:

The constitutional monarch had been treated by doctors for “[water on the brain](#)” and [a chest infection in August 2015](#). On Sunday, the palace

For the purposes of clarity, this project defines a source as a provider of *attributed* textual information (e.g. the president *said*, it was *reported*, the officer *believed*), that appears in *quotation* marks in a news story (any attributed text that is *not* quoted should *not* be recorded). The only exception to this is textual content from social media, for example, Facebook posts and tweets, which can often appear embedded in news stories. For example:

Papadopoulos, who was earlier this month sentenced to 14 days in [prison for lying to the FBI](#), has turned his attention to publicly bashing Downer. He has posted nine tweets about Downer in 12 days, accusing the former high commissioner of spying and secretly recording their conversation.



Papadopoulos said in another tweet: "I think it's time Downer is as exposed as Christopher Steele," referring to the former British intelligence officer behind the Trump dossier. He has also tweeted at the heads of the US Senate Intelligence Committee that he's willing to testify about Downer.

Providing the embedded social media content contains a textual element, it can be counted as a source. The source should be noted as the social media account from which the content was posted.

### 2.3.2. Main Source Variables

Who or what is the *main source* of the news story. This could be an individual, an organization, or a document such as a press release, a report, or a statement. While often the case, the main source of the story is not necessarily the source that is quoted *the most* in a news article. In very rare instances, you might even encounter an article that includes no quotes from a main source. In this regard, it is helpful to read the article headline and news story in its entirety, to understand the full context of the story before making a judgement about the main source.

*Variable 11:* Main source name (if a person)

-What is the name of the source? Note: if the main source is a document or organization then write N/A.

*Variable 12:* Main source organization

-If the source is an individual working for a particular organization, then please write down the name of the organization. Sometimes stories will also be based on an organizational document such as a press release or statement. If this is the case please also record the name of the organization that has published the document.

*Variable 13:* Main source age (if a person)

-Please record the age of the source. Often, this will not be obvious and so you might have to use the internet (e.g. Googling a person's name) to help determine the age of a source. If the main source is not a person (e.g. a document), then please use the code: "not applicable". If it is not possible to identify the age of the main source, then use the code: "can't tell".

- |                     |          |               |
|---------------------|----------|---------------|
| 1- 0-10 (years-old) | 4- 31-40 | 7- 61-70      |
| 2- 11-20            | 5- 41-50 | 8- 71+        |
| 3- 21-30            | 6- 51-60 | 9- Can't tell |
| 10-Not applicable   |          |               |

*Variable 14: Main source gender (if a person)*

-Please record the gender of the source. If the main source is not a person (e.g. a document), then please use the code: "not applicable". If it is not possible to identify the gender of the main source, then use the code: "can't tell".

- |           |                   |
|-----------|-------------------|
| 1- Male   | 3- Can't tell     |
| 2- Female | 4- Not applicable |

*Variable 15: Main source ethnicity (if a person)*

-Please record the ethnicity of the source. Often, this will not be obvious and so you might have to use the internet (e.g. Googling a person's name) to help determine the ethnicity of a source. If the main source is not a person (e.g. a document), then please use the code: "not applicable". If it is not possible to identify the ethnicity of the main source, then use the code: "can't tell".

- |                    |             |                   |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| 1- White           | 3- Black    | 5- Can't tell     |
| 2- Asian or Indian | 4- Hispanic | 6- Not applicable |

*Variable 16: Main source type*

-Please record the *type* of main source. If this is difficult to determine, please use the label "other / can't tell". If you cannot identify a main source for the news story, then use the label "not applicable".

- 1-Government officials, politicians, or legal professionals
- 2-Police, law enforcement, or military
- 3-Business people and organisations (note: this includes spokespeople who act in their capacity as representatives of businesses. This does not include ordinary people working for businesses unless they are claiming to speak on behalf of their organisation)
- 4-Civil society members and organisations (these are individuals or organisations that are distinct from government and business, for example: charities, trade unions, co-operatives, and foundations)
- 5-Own media (if the main source is from the organisation publishing the story)
- 6-Traditional media (traditional media refers to established media organisations, often which started out making news in other mediums such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television)
- 7-Other media (other media refers to newer media organisations that produce news and other content for a predominantly online audience, for example: *BuzzFeed, Slate, Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, Vox, The Intercept*)

- 8-Celebrities and other famous people (artists, musicians, etc.)
- 9-News agencies and wires (e.g. *Reuters*, *Associated Press*, *Agence France-Presse*, *Bloomberg*)
- 10-Analysts or experts (including academics)
- 11-Ordinary citizens (“ordinary” people refers to individuals not affiliated to any particular organisation or institution. This can include eyewitnesses, protestors and activists, individual workers, and volunteers)
- 12-Other / can’t tell
- 13-Not applicable

*Variable 17: Main source exclusivity*

-Please code whether the main source is exclusive or has been obtained indirect / second-hand by the journalist. This can sometimes be difficult to determine and might require you to Google quotes from a source to see where they appear and how they are attributed in other contexts. Sometimes, news organizations will make it clear when they have obtained exclusive information. Either because the story will be labelled as an ‘exclusive’, or quotes will use words like “Speaking to the *Guardian*, Dr Rogers said...”, or “Miss Smith told *BuzzFeed News* that she...” Most often, however, you are likely to find that information from a source has been received indirectly or second-hand by the journalist – from scheduled events like press briefings or via reports from other media, to give two examples. If, after conducting your own research, you are still unsure whether a source is exclusive or indirect / second-hand, please use the code “ambiguous / can’t tell”. If you cannot identify a main source for the news story, then use the label “not applicable”.

- 1-Exclusive    2-Indirect / Second-hand    3-Ambiguous / can’t tell    4-Not applicable

*Variable 18: Main source social media*

-Is the main source from social media? Sometimes this can take the form of embedded social media content, other times, a journalist may reference a quote came directly from social media (e.g. the President *tweeted*). If you are unsure, please use the label “can’t tell”. If you cannot identify a main source for the news story, then use the label “not applicable”.

- 1-Yes            2-No            3-Can’t tell            4-Not applicable

**2.3.3. Story Source(s) Variables**

You should record all sources used by the journalist in the news story, that is, any individual, organization or document that is quoted by the journalist using speech marks, or embedded text from social media. This procedure is largely the same as the process for coding the main source of the news article.

*Variable 19: Source name (if a person)*

-What is the name of the source? Note: if the source is a document or organization then write N/A.

*Variable 20: Source organization*

-If the source is an individual working for a particular organization, then please write down the name of the organization. Sometimes stories will also be based on an organizational document such as a press release or statement. If this is the case please also record the name of the organization that has published the document.

*Variable 21: Source age (if a person)*

-Please record the age of the source. Often, this will not be obvious and so you might have to use the internet (e.g. Googling a person's name) to help determine the age of a source. If the source is not a person (e.g. a document), then please use the code: "not applicable". If it is not possible to identify the age of the source, then use the code: "can't tell".

1- 0-10 (years-old)	4- 31-40	7- 61-70
2- 11-20	5- 41-50	8- 71+
3- 21-30	6- 51-60	9- Can't tell
10- Not applicable		

*Variable 22: Source gender (if a person)*

-Please record the gender of the source. If the source is not a person (e.g. a document), then please use the code: "not applicable". If it is not possible to identify the gender of the source, then use the code: "can't tell".

1- Male	3- Can't tell
2- Female	4- Not applicable

*Variable 23: Source ethnicity (if a person)*

-Please record the ethnicity of the source. Often, this will not be obvious and so you might have to use the internet (e.g. Googling a person's name) to help determine the ethnicity of a source. If the source is not a person (e.g. a document), then please use the code: "not applicable". If it is not possible to identify the ethnicity of the source, then use the code: "can't tell".

1- White	3- Black	5- Can't tell
2- Asian or Indian	4- Hispanic	6- Not applicable

*Variable 24: Source type*

-Please record the *type* of source. If this is difficult to determine, please use the label "other / can't tell".

- 1-Government officials, politicians, or legal professionals
- 2-Police, law enforcement, or military
- 3-Business people and organisations (note: this includes spokespeople who act in their capacity as representatives of businesses. This does not include ordinary people working for businesses unless they are claiming to speak on behalf of their organisation)
- 4-Civil society members and organisations (these are individuals or organisations that are distinct from government and business, for example: charities, trade unions, co-operatives, and foundations)

- 5-Own media (if the source is from the organisation publishing the story)
- 6-Traditional media (traditional media refers to established media organisations, often which started out making news in other mediums such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television)
- 7-Other media (other media refers to newer media organisations that produce news and other content for a predominantly online audience, for example: *BuzzFeed, Slate, Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, Vox, The Intercept*)
- 8-Celebrities and other famous people (artists, musicians, etc.)
- 9-News agencies and wires (e.g. *Reuters, Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, Bloomberg*)
- 10-Analysts or experts (including academics)
- 11-Ordinary citizens (“ordinary” people refers to individuals not affiliated to any particular organisation or institution. This can include eyewitnesses, protestors and activists, individual workers, and volunteers)
- 12-Other / can’t tell

*Variable 25: Source exclusivity*

-Please code whether the source is exclusive or has been obtained indirect / second-hand by the journalist. This can sometimes be difficult to determine and might require you to Google quotes from a source to see where they appear and how they are attributed in other contexts. Sometimes, news organizations will make it clear when they have obtained exclusive information. Either because the story will be labelled as an ‘exclusive’, or quotes will use words like “Speaking to the *Guardian*, Dr Rogers said...”, or “Miss Smith told *BuzzFeed News* that she...” Most often, however, you are likely to find that information from a source has been received indirectly or second-hand by the journalist – from scheduled events like press briefings or via reports from other media, to give two examples. If, after conducting your own research, you are still unsure whether a source is exclusive or indirect / second-hand, please use the code “ambiguous / can’t tell”.

- 1-Exclusive    2-Indirect / Second-hand    3-Ambiguous / can’t tell

*Variable 26: Source social media*

-Is the source from social media? Sometimes this can take the form of embedded social media content, other times, a journalist may reference a quote that came directly from social media (e.g. the President *tweeted*). If you are unsure, please use the label “can’t tell”.

- 1- Yes            2- No            3-Can’t tell

*Please repeat this coding procedure for every quoted source or embedded piece of text-based social media content that appears within the body text of an article.*

*Variable 27: Number of sources*

Please record the total number of quoted sources that are used in the news article.

*Variable 28: Number of social sources*

Please record the total number of sources from social media that are used in the news article.

## **2.4. Objectivity and emotionality**

-Three variables have been developed to analyse whether news articles are more 'objective' or 'emotional' in character.

*Variable 29: Headline Language*

-This variable is designed to assess whether the news article uses emotional or straight language in its headline. Emotional language is defined as language that includes one or more of the following features:

*Forward referencing:* headlines that use forward referencing use words that imply the article must be read in full in order to gain comprehension of a particular subject. They often build in a *promise* designed to create curiosity in the reader, and typically contain words like 'how', 'why', and 'this' that suggest the article will explain to the reader a particular topic or issue. Examples include: "This is how much plastic humans have made" (*BuzzFeed*); "People on Twitter are freaking out about *this* life-changing corn hack" (*BuzzFeed*); "Here's how legal experts say the Grenfell inquiry can avoid becoming a whitewash" (*BuzzFeed*); "Why the mentally ill keep getting shot by the cops" (*Vice*); "What Wells Fargo knew" (*Vice*); "These women feel excluded from the strike" (*Vice*); "The second presidential debate, decoded" (*Vice*)

*Personalization:* headlines that address the reader directly, typically using the word 'you', or variations of this. For example: "Jeff Sessions just made it easier for the cops to take *your* stuff" (*VICE*); "Flights are going to cost *you* more because of climate change" (*VICE*); "Google wants *you* to spend a lot more time in its app" (*BuzzFeed*)

*Special punctuation and expressives:* headlines that contain special punctuation like question marks and exclamation marks. For example: "Is microdosing the future of marijuana?" (*Vice*). Or headlines that employ word games, alliteration, idioms, proverbs, slang / swear words and popular expressions. For example: "Money talks" (*BuzzFeed*), "Science of the Lambs" (*BuzzFeed*); "The latest 'Keeping up with the Kardashians' Trailer is intense as fuck" (*BuzzFeed*); "So, you've decided to give a shit about climate change" (*VICE*).

Conversely, headlines that use straight language typically use language that reflects the content of the news article without trying to induce curiosity in the reader. They are often characterised by the use of straight, matter-of-fact language. For example: "UK and EU at odds on Brexit bill" (*BBC*); "Grandparents should leave homes and savings to millennials, says MP" (*VICE*); "Thailand's King dies at age 88" (*BuzzFeed*); "Baby killed and child injured in Colchester dog attack" (*BuzzFeed*).



Following this guidance, headlines should be categorized as either 'straight' or 'emotional'. In instances where it is difficult to tell, please use the code 'can't tell'.

1- Straight 2- Emotional 3-Can't tell

*Variable 30: Storytelling Lead*

-The lead paragraph of the news article is defined as the first paragraph of text that forms the main body of the article (not the headline or sub-headline). This variable aims to determine whether the lead paragraph uses the traditional 'inverted pyramid' style of news reporting, or the story begins with a 'narrative' or 'anecdotal' lead. The inverted pyramid style aims to convey the most important information in the first paragraph (the who, what, why, and when), and is typically written in a straight, matter-of-fact style. The narrative or anecdotal lead is more concerned with telling an emotionally engaging story, and often begins with an anecdote or story to draw the reader in.

Please code articles according to whether they adopt an 'inverted pyramid' lead or an 'anecdotal/narrative' lead. In instances where it is difficult to determine the style of the lead paragraph, please use the code 'can't tell'.

1- Inverted pyramid 2- Anecdotal/narrative 3- Ambiguous/other/can't tell

*Variable 31: Personalized Storytelling*

-This variable is interested in whether news articles use personalized storytelling to engage the reader in the story. Personalized storytelling is "a narrative form which draws on the personal experience of a particular individual caught up in a story to dramatize a broader social issue" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013: 135). Sometimes, journalists will explain an event or issue from the perspective of an individual to add greater emotional depth to the story. This is a particularly popular trope in stories about war, accidents, and disasters, and in long-form articles like features and investigations. Please indicate if the article in question uses personalized storytelling with 'yes' or 'no'. If you are unsure if an article is using personalized storytelling, please use the code 'ambiguous/can't tell'.

1- Yes 2- No 3- Ambiguous/can't tell

## **2.5. Disclosure transparency**

- This set of variables have been developed to see how 'open' the journalist is being with readers about the origin and province of their news story.

*Variable 32: Time Stamps*

-Please record how much information is present about the time and/or date an article was published.

1-Date of publication only  
2- Time of publication only

3-Date and time of publication  
4-No time stamp

*Variable 33: Authorial Information*

-Please record how much information an article contains about its the author(s)?

- 1- Author's name only      2- Author's name and contact information (including links to the author's social media accounts)  
3-No authorial information

For articles that contain multiple authors, *all* authors must have their names and contact information displayed for you to use code two: 'author's name and contact information'. Otherwise, please select from the other two codes, as appropriate.

## 2.6. Hyperlinks

The coding procedure for hyperlinks is slightly more complex. For this reason, an explanation of what constitutes a hyperlink is provided, before the coding procedure for hyperlinks is described in more detail.

### 2.6.1. Introduction

A hyperlink is a word, image, or phrase that a user can click on to go to travel to a new document or web page. Hyperlinks are now recognised as an "established feature of online news" (Dimitrova and Neznanski 2006: 256) and are typically used to provide the reader with more information or context about a particular event. Often, hyperlinks will appear embedded in text, for example:

Starbucks baristas on Sunday became eligible for six weeks of 100% paid [maternity leave](#), but that's still far less than the 18 weeks corporate employees get, prompting some shareholders to ask if the policy could be discriminatory.

The hyperlink above leads to an article on the website of Starbucks. Alternatively, hyperlinks are sometimes separated from the main body text of a news story:

It comes after Mr Johnson set out his Brexit "red lines" at the weekend.

- [\*\*Conference live: Rolling text and video updates\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Kuenssberg: Fears of a downward spiral\*\*](#)
- [\*\*'Uncomfortable truths' in PM's race audit\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Live: MEPs debate state of Brexit talks\*\*](#)

Mrs May has been shown the foreign secretary's speech and is understood to be happy with it, the BBC's assistant political editor Norman Smith.

These hyperlinks appear in-line with the body text of the news story and link to other news stories published on the BBC's main website. Finally, hyperlinks can appear *outside* the main body text of a news story, in, for example, side-panels, below the main article, or elsewhere on the website:

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the BBC News website with categories like Home, UK, World, Business, Politics, Tech, Science, Health, Family & Education, Entertainment & Arts, and More. The main article title is "Theresa May: I don't want a cabinet of 'yes men'", published 26 minutes ago. Below the title is a video player showing Theresa May in a studio. To the right, there are several widgets: a "LIVE Conservative conference 2017" widget with a "Conservative fears of a downward spiral" sub-headline; a "Top Stories" widget listing "Police hunt for Las Vegas killer's motive", "US musician Tom Petty dies aged 66", and the current article; and a "Features" widget.

In the example above, links to other news stories can be found in the 'top stories' widget to the side of the article, and also above the article, in a series of links that take the user to other areas of the BBC news website (e.g. 'World', 'Business', 'Science', 'Health').

"There is no simple idea that is going to change all of these. It will take action in a number of areas."

[View comments](#)

#### Related Topics

[Boris Johnson](#) [Theresa May](#)

#### Share this story About sharing



The snippet shows a photo of a group of people, with the headline "A strange encounter with St Vincent" and a sub-headline "Is Mumbai India's most unliveable city?".

#### Most Read

Links also commonly feature below the final paragraph of the news article, pointing the user to 'related topics' or encouraging them to 'share'.

In the interest of clarity, this study defines hyperlinks as links that appear either *embedded* in the main body text of a news article, or *in-line* with the body text of a news article (not, for example, in separate widgets or sidebars). Hyperlinks that appear either *before* or *after* the first and final paragraph of a news story should also not be recorded.

### 2.6.2. Hyperlinks Variables

*Variable 34: Number of Hyperlinks*

-Please record how many hyperlinks appear in the news article.

*Variable 35: Number of internal hyperlinks*

-Please record how many internal hyperlinks are used in each article. An internal link is a link that points the reader *inwards* to an internal source of information on the same website (e.g. A hyperlink in a *BuzzFeed* article that takes the reader to another *BuzzFeed* news article).

*Variable 36: Number of external hyperlinks*

-Please record how many external hyperlinks are used in each article. An external link is a link that points the reader *outwards* to an external source of information, on another website.

### 2.7. Participatory transparency

- One variable has been developed to explore the extent to which readers are invited to participate in news articles.

*Variable 37: Participation Features*

-Please indicate how many of the following features are contained within the news article. Note: you may select more than one feature.

1-*Sharing*: tools are provided for readers to share the news item (for example, via social media or email)

2-*Commenting*: readers are invited to comment on the news item

3-*Poll*: readers are invited to submit an answer to a poll in the news item

4-*Quiz*: readers are invited to answer questions in a quiz in the news item

5-*Submit your own content*: readers are encouraged to send in their own content, including reports, images, and videos, to contribute directly to a news story

6-*Reader contribution published*: where readers have been previously asked to send in their own content, these contributions now explicitly form part of the news story. Note: this is different to journalists simply using ordinary people as sources, such as tweets compiled from Twitter, or comments taken from Facebook.

7-*Reader news*: news item is presented as being wholly written by a reader, rather than a journalist.

## **2.8. Conclusion**

Thank you for your assistance. If you require any further clarification on any of the variables detailed above, then please contact the lead researcher (Paul Stringer) of the project.

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