

CULTIVATING CRITICISMS:
HOW JOURNALISM STUDENTS CRITIQUE THE NEWS

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family and the brilliant friends (aka the Neff Nook Crew) I made through this program. To Mom and Dad, thank you for your unwavering support in everything I have chosen to do so far, especially moving all the way to Mid-Missouri! I wouldn't be here without you, and I appreciate you both immensely. I want to shout out my grandma, Annie, for sparking much of my intellectual curiosity about the world. A few Mizzou friends deserve recognition for assisting me during this process and listening to me speak at length about my ideas. Valerie, thank you for leading discussion and patiently listening to me as I actively processed all this. Brandon, thank you for leading discussion and sitting with me while I wrote in the library late at night. Jana Rose, you saw this idea grow from day one, and I am grateful you always matched my enthusiasm about the topic. I am eternally grateful for the rest of the Neff Nook Crew (Teghan & Cao) as well. I love everyone mentioned here, and I hope each of you read this in its entirety ☺. Thanks, y'all.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	vi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Rationale	2
Purpose of Study	5
Preview of Thesis Organization	6
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	8
Press Criticism	8
Theoretical Underpinnings.....	8
Press Criticism’s Process	10
Press Criticism’s Contents	10
Quality Criticism.....	11
News Literacy	13
News Literacy and Journalism Education.....	16
News Literacy and Press Criticism	18
Research Questions	20
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD	21
Procedures.....	21
Sampling	23
Coding for Criticism	24
Summary	27

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	29
RQs 1 and 2: The Quality of Criticisms.....	30
Content	31
Philosophical Approaches to Reporting and Newsgathering.....	34
Press Structure	37
The Relationship Between Journalism and Democracy	39
Power	42
RQ3: Analyzing Criticism	42
Useful Criticism: The Valid and the Invalid.....	43
Criticism’s Purpose and Value.....	45
RQ4: Ambassadors for Journalism	46
Defending Personal Choice and Institutional Importance	47
Defending Against Bad Critique.....	48
Summary	50
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	52
Summary of Major Findings	52
Theoretical Implications	53
Practical Implications.....	56
Limitations	57
Directions for Future Research	58
Conclusion	58
REFERENCES	60
APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL	67

APPENDIX B: ELICITATION PROTOCOL (UNUSED).....69

ABSTRACT

Scholars note the importance of press criticism to the journalism-democracy framework, yet press criticism is underdeveloped as an academic pursuit. This study seeks to develop the study of press criticism by examining press criticism using focus groups as a simulated public sphere. Using Wyatt's (2007) normative theory of press criticism, the design allowed for press criticisms to occur in a deliberative setting. The method and theory offer a neat fit, because the theory proposes a discursive model for the press and press criticism. Journalism students were used due to their dual role as students and not-yet-deeply-institutionalized practitioners. Students critiqued the press with specificity, accuracy, and thoughtfulness. The research calls scholarship on press criticism more directly back to Wyatt's (2007) normative theory and encourages more research on press criticism using the deliberative method.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A key assumption at the core of journalism practice and education is that *journalism matters* (Schudson, 2018, 2020). More specifically, that journalism matters to democracy. In *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*, Schudson (2008) wrote that where democracies exist, or may be ready to come about, “journalism can provide a number of different services to help establish or sustain representative government.” (p. 12). In their seminal work, *The Elements of Journalism*, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) state that the concepts of journalism and democracy are difficult to separate. Furthermore, esteemed scholar James Carey may have made the largest leap, famously saying journalism is another name for democracy (Carey, 2000). Schudson (2008) does not go that far, stating journalism is in service of democracy. Despite consensus on the relationship and its importance, there is no single way to conceptualize it.

The nuance of the relationship is perhaps best exemplified in the debates between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. The exchanges, starting in the early 1920s, made such an impression that scholars continue to reference and rehash their arguments to this day (Allan, 2010). Lippmann believed the full health of a democratic society rested on the shoulders of reporters whose job is to present the news. Yet he claimed the endeavor to be doomed, believing citizens were too busy to actively participate in news, and society too complex for journalists to portray it accurately. Lippmann instead advocated for an “intelligence system,” which would be a body of experts devoted to portraying an accurate picture of society to lawmakers (Allan, 2010). While agreeing that reporters conveying an accurate depiction of the world was a tough task, Dewey (1922) saw the refinement and use of news reporting as the best solution to growing an intelligent

society. Both saw the importance of journalism while coming to different conclusions on its role in the future of democracy.

The debates highlight two key actors in the journalism-democracy framework: *producers* and *consumers* of news. In other words, journalists and their publics. Akin to the social contract theory used by philosophers to articulate the relationship between the citizen and the state, journalism has its own social contract (Sjøvaag, 2010). This is a two-way relationship rooted in reciprocity. In other words, as journalism has obligations to the public, the public has obligations to journalism and to democracy. What are these obligations? Wyatt (2010) enumerates six specific citizen obligations: (1) Develop media literacy skills; (2) Consume the news; (3) Diversify news sources; (4) Respond to the news; (5) Protect media autonomy; and (6) Empower participation for all. These recommendations provide a framework for how citizens should interact with journalism. Ultimately, the second through fifth recommendations are underpinned by the first: the need to develop media literacy skills. This is because the fulfillment of each obligation would, ideally, cultivate media literacy. Furthermore, that fulfillment would also *exemplify* news literacy through the practice of each obligation. The purpose of this study is to specifically investigate one of Wyatt's (2010) public obligations: respond to the news. It does so through the dual lens of journalism students, who are not yet deeply-institutionalized practitioners.

Rationale

Press criticism is a way of responding to news. Criticism can highlight journalism's triumphs, such as analyzing the impacts of a specific journalistic investigation. However, accusations of bias against mainstream news organizations are

common, perhaps none more salient in recent years than the onset of the “fake news” term weaponized by former President Donald Trump (Carlson et al., 2021). Such claims – regardless of accuracy – are examples of press criticism. Unfortunately, the press is often confronted with unhelpful and uninformed critique, which is effectively a form of “news illiteracy” (Wyatt, 2010, p. 290). News *literacy* is defined as “knowledge of the personal and social processes by which news is produced, distributed, and consumed, and skills that allow users some control over these processes.” (Tully, 2022, p. 1593). It deals with how to consume news and do so responsibly. News literacy is an emergent sub-field of the umbrella discipline of media literacy (Ashley, 2019). The overarching goal of media literacy initiatives is to cultivate the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of formats (Ashley, 2019). For press criticism to be done well, it warrants a level of news literacy. Press criticism offers an opportunity to cut through parts of news literacy education that may overly romanticize journalism’s role in democracy through its critical reflections on the realities of journalism practice. These two concepts are, therefore, fundamentally connected.

Criticism more generally is a common feature of society, from literary and cultural criticism to criticism of elected officials and those in power (such criticism often coming from the press itself). However, press criticism as an academic pursuit was not formally theorized until the early 2000s with a normative theory of press criticism (Wyatt, 2007). The theory advocates for a discursive model of press criticism that holds the press to values that encourage participation in democracy. The theory was ultimately a response to an earlier claim from James Carey (1974) that press criticism, as a systematic pursuit, was underdeveloped. The lack of a normative theory for press

criticism from Carey to Wyatt was not for a lack of recognition of its importance, however. Criticism and democracy are insolubly connected (Carey, 1974), and for an institution as democratically important as journalism, criticism of its practice cannot be separated from its democratic mission. Systematic press criticism is a check on an institution that otherwise operates as a proverbial “black box,” and such a process is even an alternative to state censorship as the mode of reform. This critical analysis is, perhaps, the only alternative to information censorship (Carey, 1974). Put simply, if criticism acts as a check on the press, there may be no need for other forms of monitoring, of which state sanctions could be one. The digital age provides new possibilities and new challenges for press criticism. For one, it makes criticism more accessible and allows it to reach across global boundaries (Wyatt, 2018). However, the flood of information in our media ecosystems make it difficult to locate insightful criticism, and press criticism itself may struggle to keep up with the swift changes in contemporary journalism brought by digital tools (Wyatt, 2018).

While the roles and responsibilities of journalism and journalists have been deeply studied, citizens’ obligations as part of this wider social contract have, to date, been underexplored. This study shows what responding to the news looks like in a deliberative setting, and is relevant to academics, practitioners, and audiences because journalism and democracy need good criticism. Criticism, ultimately, is one avenue to reform and better the practice. Despite the abundance of criticism in journalism discourse and Wyatt’s landmark normative theory, press criticism is still not abundant in journalism studies (Wyatt, 2018), and the landmark normative theory (Wyatt, 2007) hasn’t been explicitly employed in journalism studies either, though it is often referenced.

Purpose of Study

What remains true, from Carey to Wyatt, is that criticism is a social process. Criticism is a form of communication that happens both interpersonally (e.g., in family living rooms, in the meetings of civic organizations) and in public spheres (e.g., on Twitter or Facebook). The discursive model of press criticism actually places deliberation in a public sphere as the first level of systematic criticism (Wyatt, 2007). In other words, deliberation is the first step in press criticism as an organized process. Academic inquiry of criticism should account for that fact, and focus groups offer a unique window into a simulation of that process. News literacy concepts are expressed and employed in social contexts such as news consumption or critical conversations, yet most news literacy studies have focused on quantitative measurements (see, e.g., Maksl, 2015, 2017; Vraga, 2016). Due to the nature of press criticism and the application of news literacy being social processes, a qualitative approach is needed.

Journalism students are a population which should be well equipped to critique the press. Using these students as a sample adds implications for the study and practice of journalism education. Press criticisms by students also operate as a reflection of their coursework, displaying how students with a journalism education think about the news in practice. Furthermore, the study offers an opportunity to see press criticism in good practice, which can build on normative notions of criticism by showing what it looks like when practiced well. Therefore, the purpose of this focus group study is to examine what journalistic constructs journalism students use to critique the news, assess the ways those criticisms reflect specificity and accuracy, and also explain students' critical analyses of press criticisms.

Preview of Thesis Organization

This thesis is organized as follows. The second chapter provides a literature review that details a summary of Wyatt's (2007) normative theory and provides the theoretical basis for this study. It also compiles academic literature on press criticism's contents to show common themes which will inform the coding of data. Further sections of the chapter will map the emergence of news literacy in journalism studies, showing its origins and evolution. There will also be a discussion of the connection between news literacy and journalism education. The section will aid in the justification for journalism students as the sample. Lastly, the chapter directly connects press criticism and news literacy as concepts, ending with a rationale for where this study fits in that realm.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological choices, procedures, sample, elicitation methods, and coding for the study. Here, the use of focus groups will be directly connected to the normative theory of press criticism, showing how the use of such a method fits that model. The procedure details how many focus groups will be used, with how many participants, and the way participants will be recruited. The sample is purposeful and homogenous regarding education, and further explanation on the usefulness of studying senior journalism students is provided. The elicitation methods section proposes a rationale for using stimuli and includes a procedure for how stimuli will be selected. Finally, a plan for coding data is explained through an assessment of normative ideals for press criticism detailed in academic literature.

Chapter Four details findings from the focus groups. It begins with an assessment of student criticisms, analyzing the quality of participant responses using a coding criterion established in Chapter Three. Further findings focused on how participants

analyzed press criticism as a concept. Here, participants identified valid and invalid critiques, and explained press criticism's purpose and value. Further findings showed these participants were willing to be ambassadors for journalism based on the quality of critique. Furthermore, those defenses were grounded in their belief in journalism as an institution. The chapter ends with a summary of the findings when analyzed as a body of work.

The thesis ends with Chapter Five. The chapter puts this research into its broader theoretical context by pointing future scholarship on press criticism to Wyatt's (2007) normative theory. Furthermore, the connections between press criticism and news literacy are also explicated in this chapter. Practical implications for journalism education, news literacy education, and journalism practice are also noted. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the significance of the study for press criticism research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with a summary of the theoretical framework. The normative theory of press criticism is grounded in deliberative democratic theory, which warrants a vision for the press that promotes discourse instead of information. There is further discussion on what academic literature designates as quality press criticism. After the landscape of criticism is covered, a section on news literacy maps the subfield's development. Furthermore, the connection between news literacy and journalism education is explored. The chapter ends with a formal connection between press criticism and news literacy, showing how this study fits into that niche.

Press Criticism

Though press criticism was not formally theorized until the late 2000s, remnants of a normative tradition existed before it. An early conception of press criticism's ideal form by Carey (1974) conceptualized it as a criticism of language. Others argued that journalism schools should be key agents in press criticism, urging the academy and its students to come into direct contact with America's newsrooms (Dennis et al., 1990). This was an explicit call for journalism's academic arm to have a role in whatever press criticism's systematic process may be. A more recent work, based on a contemporary journalistic case, employed Carey's essay as a rubric (Lerner, 2021). While referenced, Wyatt's (2007) discursive theory was not directly *used*. The discursive model was the first, and remains the only, holistic claim on *what press criticism's process should be*.

Theoretical Underpinnings

First, a theory of press criticism must be grounded in a theory of the press. In other words, "the destination for criticism, as defined by its theory, is determined by the

normative ideals of the press on which the theory is based” (Wyatt, 2007, p. 66). But a press theory must be grounded in a theory of democracy from which the press will function in and for. Productive criticism can only occur based on a vision for which functions and standards the press ought to fulfill. Wyatt (2007) draws on deliberative democratic theory as the basis for her theory of criticism.

Second, the core of deliberative democracy is for individuals to work out their problems together. To achieve this, they must engage in discourse which is defined as “a process aimed at intersubjectively achieved agreement among participants in conversation” (Wyatt, 2007, p. 85). The destination of this process is communicative action. Communicative action is a process of social interaction aimed at mutual understanding (Wyatt, 2007). The methods for communicative action could be discourse, argumentation and even criticism. This is where Wyatt grounds her press theory – in a democratic vision centered on community, social participation, and productive dialogue. In other words, democracy is not an outcome but a process – something to be *done*. The press and press criticism are crucial avenues for prompting, fostering, and contributing to the action of democracy. Based on this vision of democracy, the telos – or purpose – of the press is to aid the citizenry in achieving communicative action (Wyatt, 2007). It places responsibilities on journalism and the public to engage each other, and it makes the focus of the press one of discourse instead of information dissemination. The goal of a discursive press is not simply to inform the public but to encourage participation in democracy through its work. The quality of the press is determined by its ability to start conversations and contribute to them in a meaningful manner. A discursive press sees journalism not as an occupation, but as a social practice (Wyatt, 2007). Therefore, the

goal of criticism is to help the press achieve its normative value of fostering the methods for communicative action.

Press Criticism's Process

This normative framework details a process for criticism, consisting of three related levels. The first level is that of opinion formation, where members of the public deliberate on the strengths and weaknesses of the press. It is also where the opinions of the people are voiced to formal critics, or spokespeople, who are those with a critical distance from the press, yet have institutional knowledge of its functions (Wyatt, 2007). In other words, these formal critics cannot simply be the journalists themselves, because they lack a critical distance from the current journalism industry. A contemporary example could be press critic Jay Rosen, who is a journalism scholar at New York University. Second-level criticism is where the press is addressed, often from within the press itself as a venue. This is also the level where the press can respond to criticism. The final level is the press-to-press level, where members of the institution discern good criticism from bad and deliberate on solutions. Since this is the level where current practitioners formulate reforms, it follows that journalists' self-critiques would also take place on this level.

Press Criticism's Contents

The contents of criticism can be divided into five domains (Wyatt, 2007). These domains are news content, philosophical approaches to newsgathering and reporting, press structure, the power of the press, and the relationship between the press and democracy. These domains may often intersect, and criticism should occur in each domain. However, the relationship between the press and democracy is the foundational

domain. It is the source from which the press flows from, and the importance of this relationship was established early in this paper. Indeed, the Dewey-Lippmann exchange is an exemplar of criticism in this domain. Wyatt (2007) says the importance of this relationship is not discussed often enough, but it is the issue which critics must begin with. News content refers to the substance of what makes publication: the stories journalists tell. Criticism in this domain could target the language used in an article or the types of sources used. Philosophical approaches are the normative standards of journalism, and the ways in which it goes about producing its content. For example, this domain may entail newsgathering techniques or journalistic norms such as objectivity. The structure of the press refers to the economic forces that make it run. Here, one may make a distinction between non-profit news organizations and traditional newspapers. Power, while abstract and hard to fully understand, refers to the sheer influence of the press (Wyatt, 2007). This domain is intrinsically linked with journalism's impact, or in other words, the scale of its outcomes. These domains provide topical guideposts for where the content of criticisms might land.

Quality Criticism

Studying press criticism is not only about its importance to journalism and democracy. There is simply no use if its study does not also concern normative assertions about its specific contents. In the discursive model of press criticism, the five domains can help focus the contents of criticism and help identify what ideal criticisms might look like. Based on this framework, good criticism could target news content, philosophical approaches, press structure, press power and the relationship between journalism and democracy. There are similar notions of what criticism may entail in other areas of the

literature. For example, criticisms can target news organizations as businesses, the fact news organizations are error-prone and may have political agendas, or that news organizations often present news reporting as empirical evidence (Frank, 2022). More granular arguments of what criticisms in these domains should contain are the presence of factual detail, unemotional language, and an articulation of the value of the contents in the press (Carey, 1974). In the spirit of press criticism as the criticism of language, it ought to be “an assessment of the adequacy of the methods men use to observe the world, the language they use to describe the world, and the kind of world such language and methods imply is in existence” (Carey, 1974, p. 244). Implicit in such a claim is that press criticisms will be specific and accurate: they must deal directly with the world of journalism and reflect factual understandings of it.

Still, the press should be receptive to criticism of its work if the fruits of press criticism are to be borne. Based on a sample of Kenyan and South African journalists, Cheruiyot (2018) identified five types of online press criticism: offensive, unreasonable, unfounded, instructive, and analytical. The offensive criticisms were uncivil, defamatory, and targeted the journalists themselves. The unreasonable criticisms had elements of insult or mockery, but still dealt with journalistic constructs. The unfounded criticisms were not as derogatory, but these criticisms showed news illiteracy and were not based on good premises about news work. The final two – instructive and analytical criticisms – were the ones that journalists were most receptive to. These criticisms dealt specifically with journalism practice and specific issues related to coverage (Cheruiyot, 2018). The limitation here is journalists may not perceive all valid criticisms as valid due to their stake in the work. In other words, journalists’ defenses of their product could make them

less receptive to valid criticisms. If journalists are stubborn to good criticism, it weakens press criticism's ability to reform and better the trade.

Based on historic notions of what criticism ought to entail (and what criticisms are unhelpful to journalists), some commonalities start to become manifest. Foremost, good criticisms will be specific. They will engage journalistic constructs and news work directly and will deal with factual details about journalism. They will also be unemotional. The unemotional criticisms center the object of criticism instead of an individual's subjective feelings or reactions to the work. These attributes allow analyses of criticism independent of an assessment on the criticism's claims. For example, you can analyze a statement such as "CNN has a liberal bias because of its frequent use of Democratic sources" based on its specificity, engagement with journalistic constructs, and its unemotional tone without assessing whether CNN actually has a liberal bias or not.

News Literacy

There has been a surge of interest in the academy and among the public about the importance of news literacy. Many see it as a solution to the ills of misinformation and disinformation. There is broad consensus about its importance and studies examining the effects of news literacy show that news literacy interventions work (Ashley, 2019). Broadly, studies have found individuals with high levels of news literacy show positive outcomes related to knowledge of, engagement with, and judgement of news and news content. Despite this consensus, news literacy has been poorly theorized and conceptualized until recently, with discrepancies as fundamental as how to define news (Vraga et al., 2020). This study will operate on Vraga et al.'s (2020) broad definition of

news as “any accurate information that facilitates decision-making on both personal and social issues, thus enabling people to more effectively engage with society” (p. 3).

Scholars have broken news literacy down into a basic framework, using what is known as the “five c’s” (Tully et al., 2022; Vraga et al., 2020). These are *context* (the social, legal, and economic environment news is produced), *creation* (the processes journalists and other actors use to conceive, report, and create news), *content* (the characteristics of a news story that distinguish it from other types of media), *circulation* (the process by which news is distributed to potential audiences), and *consumption* (personal factors that contribute to news exposure, attention and evaluation, and recognition of the effects of such consumption). These criteria are the grounds for operationalizing the study of news literacy, providing fertile ground to dive into its existence and application in journalism education and audiences.

However, many scholars were studying the effects of news literacy education before this groundwork was laid. They developed ways to measure news literacy, and often linked it with other concepts and phenomena such as interpretations of bias or the hostile media effect. One of the earliest studies measuring news literacy used a cognitive model of media literacy (Potter, 2004). The model suggests media literate individuals think deeply about their media experiences, are in control of their consumption, and understand media content and effects (Maksl et al., 2015). One study adapted the model to focus specifically on news literacy; it found that news literate teens were “defined by their intrinsic motivations toward news consumption, greater skepticism about the news content they receive, and greater knowledge about current events” (Maksl et al., 2015, p.

37). Scholars made a measurement for news literacy to assess news literacy curriculums that focused on news knowledge and consumption.

One of the first news literacy curricula in U.S. higher education is Stony Brook University's undergraduate news literacy course. Many early news literacy studies focused on measuring the effects of its pioneering curriculum. Stony Brook's News Literacy Center describes its curriculum as helping students develop critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of information across various mediums (Center for News Literacy, 2018). Maksl et al. (2017) argue that Stony Brook's curriculum aligns with the previously established model of news media literacy because it focuses on identifying the credibility of news, with practices that include distinguishing between news and opinion journalism, identifying bias, and understanding the connection between news and "pro-social civic outcomes" (p. 235). Using the adapted model for news literacy, Stony Brook's curriculum increased news literacy for students who took the class and made students more literate in general (Maksl et al., 2017). It should be noted these studies were conducted before Tully et al.'s (2022) formal definition and conceptualization of news literacy, and the measurement studies based on the adapted news literacy model used only quantitative methods. However, news literacy is something to be applied in a social setting, as part of a social process. Its usefulness to society is not just in its presence, but through its application. Therefore, qualitative methods may be more useful in examining news literacy and evaluating individuals' understandings and responses to news content more deeply.

More recent scholarship has advocated for a move beyond news literacy knowledge to News Literacy Behaviors (NLBs), which are the uses and applications of

news literacy knowledge. NLBs are defined as “the behaviors that occur when people engage with news content in a critical and mindful manner” (Vraga et al., 2020, p. 8). Just because an individual has knowledge of news literacy concepts does not mean they will use them in practice. The concept of NLBs seeks to address that problem. The concept is based on Ajzen’s (1985) theory of planned behavior which suggests that three factors lead to actions: 1) Attitudes toward the behavior; 2) Social norms regarding the behavior; and 3) Perceived behavioral control over performing the behavior. Vraga et al. (2020) adapted the theory to make it apply to news behaviors and integrate news literacy into the model to predict NLBs. These behaviors include news exposure, verification, and identifying misinformation (Vraga et al., 2020).

Some studies have moved beyond basic news literacy knowledge, even if they didn’t use the specific NLB framework. For example, Swart’s (2023) study participated in this move, focusing on how individuals employed news literacy in their everyday lives. The study used in-depth interviews with 36 people aged 16 to 22 to examine strategies for accessing, analyzing, and engaging with news, particularly in the social media context. It emphasizes news literacy as more than an individual enterprise, but a social act performed in specific contexts. A focus group could be a venue for such acts to manifest due to an element of community intrinsic to the method.

News Literacy and Journalism Education

Beyond the initial Stony Brook case study, there are few studies that focus on the contents of news literacy in journalism education. Still, media literacy and news literacy appear to be common topics in journalism and mass communication schools. For example, in introductory college media courses, media literacy is a prominent topic

(Ashley, 2015). Still, Ashley's study focused on general mass communication courses and media literacy opposed to introductory journalism courses and news literacy. Another recent study looked at the frequency of news literacy concepts in journalism programs in the United Kingdom, finding that news literacy concepts were frequently present in the programs even though they were not packaged as "news literacy" (Morris & Yoeman, 2021). In fact, many of the instructors interviewed by Morris and Yoeman were resistant to news literacy as a single course, viewing news literacy as baked into the whole of journalism education. One respondent used news literacy as a module name and a learning outcome. The primary limitation of Morris and Yoeman's study is that it focused only on the United Kingdom; a similar study focused on U.S. journalism programs would be helpful. News literacy should be a desired outcome of journalism education because the journalism-democracy framework requires a news literate public. Similarly, journalists themselves should be news literate so they can practice their craft at a high level. This heightens the need for news literacy education in journalism and even the public in general.

Furthermore, news literacy literature also points to how its concepts can extend beyond journalism education. Morris and Yoeman's (2021) study from the United Kingdom also found that journalism professors do not do much to promote or teach news literacy outside of their classroom settings. The authors call on journalism scholars to make a better effort in participating in those types of interventions. Such a call is warranted based on research that shows short-term, out-of-classroom interventions increased perceived media literacy for all audiences (Vraga & Tully, 2016). However, the extent to which undergraduate students were influenced by short-term news literacy

messages was conditioned by the amount of existing news literacy education they already had (Vraga & Tully, 2016). Students with previous media-related education were more receptive and influenced by news literacy messages outside of the classroom. While interventions outside the classroom setting worked, the literature still shows the importance of having news literacy as a part of an individuals' formal education.

News Literacy and Press Criticism

Grounding criticism in theory is crucial for analyzing criticism uniformly and adequately. The theoretical foundation is crucial for this study because to understand criticisms as expressions of news literacy, one must be able to identify good and bad critiques, as well as helpful and unhelpful critiques. The discursive model provides a framework for a standard. Still, scholars have looked at the world of news literacy and criticism already without this normative framework. Some studies looked at critiques specifically and others looked at interpretations of news and norms. While not explicitly labeled criticisms, they are still reflections of how people think about news. For example, personal bias is a strong indicator of identifying bias in a news story (Tully et al., 2020). Through in-depth interviews, the study found that individuals' political beliefs heavily influenced them identifying bias in a story. It also found that news readers relied heavily on source identification when interpreting news. For example, liberal news readers might identify a Fox News article as biased based on the source, even if the article was neutral. Inversely, conservative viewers would identify a neutral *New York Times* article as liberal (Tully et al., 2020). This is an observance of the hostile media effect, which states that individuals will perceive neutral news as biased if it counters their existing opinions (Vallone et al., 1985). Accusations of bias, even if informal, are criticisms at their

essence. In fact, claims of bias about news media may be the most salient and popular criticism in today's media ecosystem (Barthel & Mitchell; Brenan & Stubbs, 2020). As observed by the hostile media effect, the quality and validity of these claims can be questionable. The hostile media effect itself is a news literacy issue, illustrating a type of news illiteracy which could be cured by news literacy interventions. Kaun's (2014) study looked specifically at criticisms from young Estonians. The findings suggested that the ideal of the "informed citizen" still exists, and the college students demonstrated valid criticisms. Based on the literature of criticism and news literacy, the current study can be a useful addition by its exploration of these concepts in a setting which resembles a public sphere. Furthermore, previous studies' use of non-journalism students creates an opportunity to qualitatively investigate the criticisms posed by journalism students specifically, and how this reflects their news literacy. These students are in a unique position to use their critical analyses in an educational role.

President Trump's attacks on news media prompted much study in the academy focusing on how journalists and organizations defend their work (Carlson et al., 2021; Neo, 2022). In response to unwarranted "fake news" accusations, defenses that simply denied the accusations increased belief in the initial work of journalism (Neo, 2022). Furthermore, the same study found defenses that centered the damage of the "fake news" term also increased belief. Here, journalistic defenses had educational effects. Journalism students are unique in that they are not yet deeply institutionalized practitioners, and they can play a role of journalism advocate as students. Opportunities for defending journalism could manifest from Thanksgiving dinner tables to social settings with non-journalism students. This sample can expand the study's implications through looking at

journalistic defenses and education through the lens of students' critical analyses. Finally, the use of journalism students, or those with news literacy education, has been reserved to quantitative studies. My use of focus groups and journalism students will provide a unique contribution to literature on criticism and news literacy.

Research Questions

Following from the framework explained above, and in order to make a unique contribution to literature on press criticism and news literacy, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: What journalistic constructs manifest in upperclassmen journalism students' press criticisms?

RQ2: In what ways do their criticisms reflect accuracy and specificity?

RQ3: In what ways do students critically analyze press criticisms?

RQ4: How do they use these analyses to defend journalism as an institution?

These specific questions were designed to yield press criticisms and critical reflections on the concept. The research method, explicated in the following chapter, explains *how* these questions would be answered.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

This research used qualitative methods in the form of focus groups to study criticism as a social process. This chapter begins with an explanation of the procedures, which includes a detailed justification for the choice of focus groups. The sample and recruitment method will follow. Elicitation methods were offered as an “if needed” way of guiding focus group discussion in the event the conversation moved too far off topic or is too abstract. These elicitation methods were, ultimately, not needed. Finally, there is an explanation for how the data was coded.

Procedures

Focus groups are useful in simulating a public sphere, which is defined as a place of discussion on matters important to the public (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). A press that promotes discourse would inevitably contribute to the public sphere, and the public sphere is one place that deliberation would take place. The focus group is also equipped to simulate the process of opinion formation, with groups of people co-constructing meaning together (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Opinion formation is the object of the first level of criticism (Wyatt, 2007). Ultimately, the method provided a neat fit for studying criticism under this normative framework, creating a sort of simulation for opinion formation within the public sphere. To aid in this simulation, I used a set of questions (see Appendix A) designed to foster discussion about journalism. Conversation was directed by co-facilitators, who were fellow students in the journalism school’s M.A. program. One co-facilitator led three of the four groups, and one other led the fourth. The colleagues asked most discussion questions, enabling me to observe the focus group setting while also asking follow-up questions as needed. The colleagues were briefed on

the study's theoretical background, implications, and interview guide before focus groups are conducted. The second co-facilitator shadowed one focus group before they led theirs to gain experience with how the initial co-facilitator led the group. Specific works of journalism were prepared as elicitation materials in case conversation needed to be more focused (see Appendix B), but these were ultimately not needed since the participants filled the entire time with rich discussion.

Ultimately, I completed four focus groups with a total sample of 12 participants. There were three participants in the first group, four in the second group, two in the third group, and three in the fourth group. Every focus group lasted around one hour. All were recorded for audio and video using Zoom. For recruitment, capstone and upper-level classes were identified to target junior and senior journalism students. Participants signed up for focus groups through a Google Form distributed to them by their professors in the Missouri School of Journalism. Two of the seniors were also in the accelerated master's program.

Throughout, I was looking for conceptual saturation, which is when no new information is being drawn from the responses (Guest et al., 2006). One study used focus groups to understand opinions of extreme speech on social media, and four focus groups were conducted (Johnson, 2018). One study on celebrity health also conducted four focus groups (Hinnant & Hendrickson, 2014). Though the sample size was below the proposed range due to a lack of sign-ups, the smaller focus group sizes allowed every participant to speak in depth. Furthermore, there was saturation in the quality of discussion in each group, where all participants were able to critique the press at a similar level of depth and

specificity. Based on that quality of discussion, the proposed elicitation methods were not used.

Sampling

Focus group participants were junior, senior, and accelerated master's students pursuing degrees in journalism. This sample was purposeful and homogenous regarding education, which allowed for focused discussion and help facilitate topical exchange (Yin, 1994). Since news literacy is knowledge of news production, distribution, and consumption, with skills allowing users control over these processes, it was expected those with a journalism education to be news literate. Furthermore, most journalism students in their last semester of study are just months away from being full-time professionals. The reciprocal journalism-citizen relationship needs practitioners who can identify good, valid criticism. It also needs citizens equipped to propose such criticisms. Students are uniquely positioned to show both sides of the coin due to not being deeply institutionalized practitioners while still doing journalism in their coursework. Theoretical coursework provides practice in critical thinking about journalism. These students at the end of their programs have taken enough theoretical classes to be equipped for speaking deeply and critically about the news. Furthermore, using the sample of students allowed for investigation of how they use their critical analyses to be ambassadors of journalism. Since criticism entails both positive and negative constructive feedback (Frank, 2022), it warranted asking how journalism students use those analyses to practice news literacy education, and also advocate for journalism outside of both the academy and institution of journalism itself.

Students came from the Missouri School of Journalism, the place where focus groups were conducted, because that was my location during the completion of this thesis. This makes this both a purposive and convenience sample. Undergraduate capstone courses were identified through a list provided by a committee member. Other upper-level courses were identified through a plan of study sheet on the Missouri School of Journalism's website. Pizza was advertised in the recruitment letter as incentive to participate, and the food was offered at the site of the focus group to help foster comfortable conversation. Money from the Duffy Fund covered the expenses of food, drink, and supplies such as plates and napkins.

Coding for Criticism

To code for RQ1, Wyatt's domains were applied as a framework to sort students' responses. Those domains are: (1) News content; (2) Philosophical approaches to news gathering and news reporting; (3) Press structure; (4) Press power; and (5) The relationship between the press and democracy. Tracing student criticisms to the domains shows how their expressions align with journalistic constructs. In other words, it shows that criticisms are on topic. If press criticisms could not be matched to the domains, this was treated as an indication that such expressions do not specifically deal with journalism, and therefore those criticisms would be deemed poor quality. Interview questions were not intended to prompt specific responses in each domain, but instead fostered conversation related to journalism. Focus group responses emerged organically, and the criticisms were then applied to Wyatt's domains.

RQ1 starts with a broad understanding of student criticisms and is designed to show how they criticize the press. Wyatt's (2007) domains are topical, but RQ2 will more

intricately deal with the substance of the criticisms. This warrants a more intricate coding criterion. Given there are existing indications of what quality criticism can entail, coding the strength of criticisms will largely rely on those constructs. Primarily, I searched for specificity and accuracy. For example, a common occurrence is the use of the unhelpful phrase “the media,” which is overly broad (Farhi, 2016). If students were talking about journalism as an institution, they could be specific about what elements of the institution they are critiquing (e.g., the news media in general, national political newspapers, or specific organizations). The accuracy component connects quality criticism to news literacy specifically. Good criticisms must deal in factual accuracy, so not to reflect the “news illiteracy” which often plagues responses to the news (Wyatt, 2010). RQ3 analyzed the ways students’ normative ideals for criticism match those in this coding criterion. RQ4 dealt with the personal experiences of students, so a grounded theory approach was used to create themes from repeated data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Ultimately, these criteria point back to the vision of criticism as helping journalism foster participation in democracy. Specific and accurate criticisms provide journalism with responses that are actionable. When the public articulates actionable criticisms, and the press follows with response or reform, it’s not only the fostering of participation but an act of participation itself.

Press criticisms, particularly those that are accurate and specific, will inevitably engage with journalistic norms. Identifying these norms allowed me to draft discussion questions relevant to the study’s theoretical framework and readily identify the norms in the data. Given that this study looked at people’s criticisms, interpretations, and understandings of news, I reasoned that conversations around journalistic norms were

bound to manifest. These norms usually manifested organically. Some commonly discussed standards for judging journalism are bias, objectivity, and transparency. Transparency is a journalistic standard set forth in the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics and often mentioned within Kovach and Rosenstiel's ten elements. Objectivity has often been described as journalism's gold standard. In Wyatt's (2007) theory of press criticism, objectivity is recognized as the root of news gathering and news reporting. Bias may be one of the most saturated terms in news commentary and criticism. Given the importance of norms to criticism, detailing these descriptions now will aid in analysis of the criticisms present in the data.

Fundamentally, perceptions of bias can be understood as news sources promoting one political side or party over the other in their coverage. Around 75% of Americans think news sources favor one political position over the other (Barthel & Mitchell, 2017). Transparency in journalism can be defined as openness about journalists' routines, practices, and decision-making throughout the newsgathering process (Bhuiyan et al., 2021). The concept is often ritualized as a disclosure of information, earning the term disclosure transparency (Karlsson, 2010). Objectivity is a highly debated, contentious, and misunderstood journalistic norm. It refers more to a process than the idea that journalists themselves are free of opinions and values. It is a guide to separate facts from values, creates fairness in reporting on political controversies and guides reporting without commenting, slanting, or shaping its formation (Schudson, 2001).

There is a less common, more emergent norm that would be useful in analyzing journalistic content and promoting a discursive democracy. The norm is helpfulness. Thomas (2019) is the first to connect the concept with journalism, but helpfulness as a

general concept has been extensively studied on its own. Notably, helpfulness has been used as a measure of message quality in online communities in a study of product reviews on Amazon (Otterbacher, 2009). Helpful reviews were those that were deemed to be believable, topically relevant, from credible reviewers, easy to read, and objective. Similarly, Agnihotri and Bhattacharya (2016) studied the qualitative factors of helpfulness in online reviews, finding that users often deemed extreme content less credible, unless it is from a credible reviewer. This connects well with quality criticism striking an unemotional tone.

The online review literature helps understand some characteristics of helpfulness. Thomas (2019) drew on virtue ethics and paternalism to define helpful conduct as creating opportunities that would otherwise be foreclosed. Therefore, journalism is helpful when it expands and improves people's opportunities (Thomas, 2019). This could mean an opportunity via gaining new knowledge or developing new abilities. Other examples could include acquired cultural capital or opportunities for political mobilization (Thomas, 2019). As a normative anchor, helpfulness fits particularly well in a discursive democracy. It initiates an action, or an invitation for actions, to citizens. It encourages citizen participation in democratic society. These characteristics justified it as a guide in selecting examples and analyzing students' criticisms.

Summary

The use of focus groups is one of this study's most crucial elements. The methodological choices are relatively unique to scholarship on press criticism and news literacy, and without the use of focus groups the deliberative element of press criticism would be missing in this study. The total sample is small, but data gleaned from these

groups were rich. The following chapter shows, through exemplary discourses from the focus groups, the answers to this study's research questions.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine what journalistic constructs journalism students use to critique the news, assess the ways those criticisms reflect specificity and accuracy, and explain students' critical analyses of press criticisms. In doing so, the study aimed to analyze the quality of student press criticisms and investigate their ability to reflect on press criticism as a concept. The use of focus groups allowed criticisms to occur in a deliberative setting that resembles a public sphere and the type of interpersonal social settings press criticisms manifest. This study also connects press criticism and news literacy through the analysis of quality press criticisms, in which the criticisms can be interpreted as expressions of news literacy.

Students consistently critiqued the press with a reasonable amount of specificity and accuracy across all focus groups. The conversations lasted for over an hour in each group, and anticipated elicitation methods were not needed to spur conversation. Students often added new insights from their peers' critiques and reflections, even on specific issues they agreed with. The addition of new insights showed how press criticism, understood as a social process, can increase the quality of critique through *conversation*. Students also showed a particularly impressive ability to move beyond negative critique and offer proposed solutions for the press that countered their negative assertions. The press criticisms most heavily centered on the content, and the philosophical approaches to newsgathering and reporting domains. Press structure, power, and the relationship between the press and democracy domains were less common but still manifested in various critiques. This finding is consistent with Wyatt's (2007) assertion that press criticism should occur in each domain. However, even in the three less prominent

domains students showed an understanding of journalistic constructs within them. Such understandings came through in reflections about journalism as an institution, and not necessarily in press critiques levied at the current industry's practice. In other words, students often made normative claims about journalism's role in democracy through general discussion that did not focus on a specific journalistic work or outlet. This elucidates a more nuanced finding that the depth of news literacy may not reach the point of manifesting in a press critique. This finding has implications for how the connection between news literacy and press criticism are taught in news literacy education.

The findings presented here are organized by research question. RQ1 asked which journalistic constructs manifest in student press criticisms. RQ2 asked about how those criticisms reflected specificity and accuracy. These findings will be presented together because it is intuitive to show specificity and accuracy within the critiques located in a specific domain. RQ3 and RQ4 shift the focus towards student reflections on press criticism as a concept. Findings for these RQs will be presented independently because they focus on unique elements of student reflections on press criticism.

RQs 1 & 2: The Quality of Criticisms

A consistency across focus groups was students' ability to make organizational-level and institutional-level critiques of the press. They showed nuance in being able to identify positive and negative attributes of their most-consumed political news organization's work. Students also could deliberate on industry-wide strengths or weaknesses, showing their ability to speak with specificity and accuracy about a broader element of the press.

Content

Many criticisms by students focused on the content of news, particularly so when students were critiquing specific outlets. Content is perhaps the most granular and least abstract of the domains, so it follows that these critiques would occur from the organizational level, which is a more granular and less abstract element of the press. Here is an example of students critiquing in a content-centered way by focusing on the content from specific organizations. Participant 6 spoke about *The Daily* podcast by *The New York Times* and its coverage of the war in Ukraine. Also here, critiques of content connect back to the philosophical approaches to reporting and newsgathering domain.

Participant 6: “I still listen to it every morning, and I have for years. So, I know that they have been covering Ukraine and talking to people on the ground in Ukraine, putting more effort into having reporters be there, and connecting with people more than they have in other places where there have been national crises or other wars. And I started noticing it last year, and I was like ‘they’re doing Ukraine again,’ for like the third time this week. And I’m like that’s important, we need that, but it just felt so unbalanced to me.”

Participant 4: “It’s kind of similar to my thing, it’s like proof of what [The Daily] aren’t covering. [...] I mean, Ukraine, it’s Euro-centric.”

Participant 5: “Something for the AP (Associated Press) with the coverage of Ukraine is, not that it’s problematic, but it hasn’t always been the most essential aspect of the war. It’s been like the death count, the death toll has been updated for the day. And I think more comprehensive reporting can be a way to, I don’t know, to switch up the hierarchy of stories and also keep it a relevant conversation instead of just ‘hey people are still dying.’”

In this discourse, the students sustained critique on a specific topic: the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, the responses built on each other and added a new element to the critique with each response. Another layer of depth is added by students recognizing, within their critiques, that philosophical approaches to reporting impact the product. The “more comprehensive reporting” critique from Participant 5 shows an understanding that

changing the scope of the reporting process would lead to different types of stories being published. The collection of critiques within the exchange show accuracy and specificity through identifying current news events, specific journalistic practices, and news framing.

Another focus group also critiqued *The New York Times*, but on a separate topic. This is another example of how philosophical approaches and content often tie together in critique, and the exchange further shows how elements of critique are added through discourse.

Participant 3: “They [*The New York Times*] had a story about what is the cost of trans kids transitioning at school but not at home. And they were basically centering that parents deserve to know if their kids are transitioning instead of looking at ‘why do trans kids feel safer at school than coming out to their parents.’ I think they were kind of centering the wrong voices in that content and were approaching it with a very straight, cis-gender lens.”

Participant 3 added that they understood that transgender reporters cannot cover every story related to transgender issues but maintained that *The Times*’ story was not treated with the nuance it deserved. Participant 2 agreed with this critique, and Participant 1 built on it:

Participant 1: “Actually I didn’t read that article because I stopped reading *Times* stuff on transgender folks after, this was a couple months ago, they did a story about minors transitioning back to the gender they were assigned at birth. And they featured like two or three families in there, and I can’t remember but it was like one or two that had done that. That has a statistical presence of like .2% or something insanely low. Yet they made it sound like it happens about half the time, and they didn’t go out of the way to cite the easily accessible stats on it. [...] I still read *The Times* because they do a lot, but on that topic, no, they lost their credibility with me.”

This discourse began with relatively vague critiques that questioned the “editorial decision making” at *The New York Times*. However, the quality of critique increased as

students talked more about specific issues they found in the publication's coverage. There was notable specificity in identifying particular story elements.

One common institutional-level critique was that political news in the U.S. made participants feel hopeless; many said they had to distance from political news due to its consistently hyper-negative nature. Many students also noted this critique derives from the lack of solutions or empowerment in political news content. They noted that content which feels actionable and points to their ability to do something about the issue would make them less hopeless. In this critique, students asserted that the political press actually hurts consumption and participation more than empowering it. Furthermore, this development shows how content can be critiqued with specificity, but beyond the organizational level.

Participant 12: "I think it's just always dropping all this negative stuff at you, but not giving you solutions on how we as people can change it. ... And I feel like that makes people not motivated to change things or feel like they can change things."

Participant 12 finished this response by leveling with their own critique, stating that they understand it's also the job of the press to monitor elected officials and legislation, so that people who are already engaged have the means to participate. Participant 10 echoed a similar sentiment.

Participant 10: "The lack of solutions, definitely. I mean for me personally, it just makes me very hopeless when I read it, because I'm like 'oh, everybody sucks. Our voting system sucks so it doesn't even matter.' [...] But also, that's their [the press's] job to point out why it doesn't work."

Participant 10's critique delves into emotion towards news, which in some normative press criticism literature has been frowned upon. However, there is a constructive element to this criticism, despite a lack of specificity on how and why it produces this

hopelessness, by opening the door to questions of what journalism is ultimately for. If participation is a crucial element to deliberative democracy, the fact that political news content is debilitating to some viewers is a valid critique in itself. Furthermore, it is different in nature to the types of emotional critiques that are duly criticized. Emotional criticisms that amount to ideological crusades and personal attacks are distinctly different than emotional critiques that articulate how news content makes a consumer *feel*. In a different focus group, Participant 8 also said they don't enjoy political news. They made a critique of the political press that it's too focused on Capitol Hill and is filled with insider language. They mentioned they are often lost reading political news. This led Participant 8 to articulate the type of political news they see as helpful.

Participant 8: "I like political stories that focus solely on the people that are actually affected by the legislation. When it's outside the Capitol, it's much more interesting."

Participant 9 built on this critique by referencing a recent piece of local political news they read. The story detailed how proposed legislation would allow wrongfully convicted and incarcerated individuals to sue the state for greater damages. This participant noted how the entire first half of the story was devoted to the experiences of formerly incarcerated people after they leave jail. This specific discourse shows how, through conversation, critiques can be made more specific and tangible.

Philosophical Approaches to Reporting and Newsgathering

The previous section shows how the philosophical approaches domain can be intrinsically connected to the content domain, because philosophical approaches are a sociological force shaping news content. Here, examples will focus in on these philosophical approaches more pointedly. In Focus Group Two, institutional-level

critique was made specific through references to a specific journalistic work, which took a critique initially in the domain of philosophical approaches into the content domain as well. Participant 6 begins the exchange with a philosophical critique related to international news:

Participant 6: “I find myself constantly questioning stories about international politics, because I think there is a lot more room for bias, misinterpretation, translation, and so many issues. And a lack of cultural relativity, which I think is just present in a lot of journalists minds without them realizing it.”

Here, Participant 6 demonstrates a healthy skepticism towards U.S.-produced international news based on specific reporting factors that may rise out of domestic journalists covering international issues. This participant went on to use the coverage of the Chinese spy balloon as an example:

Participant 6: “I think when I was reading stuff about that, I was like I am not getting information that is helpful, and I’m sure other people aren’t either. They [the press] aren’t explaining what this is, and if it’s a real threat to our national security or not, and if we’re really going to war with China in the imminent future.”

Participant 7 made a structural critique before a key response from Participant 5, which develops the critique by providing a philosophical insight on a different topic. The response is shown here:

Participant 5: “Another major issue is just lack of follow through. Like, I think even from a state government perspective, we do a really good job of reporting on legislation as it's happening. And then when it's proposed, when it's passed into law, I think there's always work to be done on the follow through, that how to get back to people in the day-to-day. I've definitely, you know, not done my best job at that I wish I like had in the past for sure.”

Participant 4 ended this discourse by agreeing with this critique, adding that much coverage is “events-oriented instead of issue-oriented.” This added another element to the philosophical approaches critique. Participant 5’s critique fit in the philosophical

approaches domain because it highlighted a rationale behind producing a specific type of content. The participant also showed duality in thinking about this issue as a consumer and producer of news. They see this issue in the coverage they consume, but also as an area for improvement in their own reporting.

The following discourse shows an inverse of how critiques most commonly manifested. Usually, a critique would warrant a solution and subsequent vision *for* journalism. Participant 1 starts here with an idea of what helpful journalism in political coverage would look like, and that articulation walks into a more specific critique of philosophical approaches in the current political press.

Participant 1: “I am a big fan of political reporting that puts heat on specific politicians to get them as a yes or no on things.”

Participant 1 then detailed their own reporting experience practicing this approach, where they nailed down a U.S. Senator to get an on-the-record position related to red flag laws. From there, this participant offered a critique of one of the political press’s philosophical approaches.

Co-facilitator 1: “So on that note, are you saying political journalism should resemble more helpful journalism? How does that look for you?”

Participant 1: “I guess it depends if you look at politics as entertainment or if it’s actually impacting you. [...] So there’s that [entertainment] component of it, but then there are people whose identities are being thrown around on the Missouri Senate floor everyday as if it’s something that shouldn’t be talked about in schools. [...] So I feel like political journalism can very much can be a service, but it also can very easily just feed into more tabloid news of, ‘here’s the hot-button topic this week, guess what, it’s people.’”

Participant 2 offered their view of the impact concept next, by explaining another type of political reporting that would be helpful.

Participant 2: “What social services are going on that can help people? Because your state legislator or your representative are in charge of voting for SNAP,

they're in charge of voting for different programs for your city, county, whatever.”

After Participant 2 finished their reflection, Participant 3 rounded out the discourse by relating back to Participant 1:

Participant 3: “I was thinking the same thing that [Participant 1] said, I think political journalism has to be viewed as service journalism. I think we think about service journalism and solutions journalism as this little niche part of journalism, that you have to go down this very specific path to have journalism as oriented towards the public good.”

Within this discourse, critiques in the philosophical approaches domain also reach the domain dealing with the relationship between the press and democracy. This was a relatively rare occurrence in the focus groups, where criticisms actually reached that fundamental domain. It was more often the case that articulations of journalism's role in democracy came out in normative statements about journalism separate from critiques. Here, they were connected. The specificity in this discourse lies in its identification of particular journalistic practices, such as framing politics as entertainment, using social services reporting to highlight impact, and critiquing the position of solutions journalism within the contemporary press context.

Press Structure

This domain yielded the next most critiques after the content and philosophical approaches domains. The encouraging finding in this domain is that multiple students showed an ability to critique the economic and social structures that so often constrict journalism practice. In other words, it shows students' ability to think systemically about the forces impinging on journalism practice. Here is an example of a student discussing the diverse nature of NPR's funding model and noting it as a strength:

Co-facilitator 1: “Why would you say *NPR* is your chosen media outlet?”

Participant 8: “I think *NPR* is also funded by a lot of different people, including the government and private donors. Like no one has 50% or plus of *NPR*, and most newspapers are owned by Gannett.”

Participant 9 added a comedic comment that *NPR* was also not funded by Jeff Bezos, who owns *The Washington Post*. Participant 8 described, with great specificity, *NPR*'s funding model. This critique is an example of how a good reflection could still be deepened with greater explanation of why that funding model is positive. The notion is more implied than fully articulated. Such an example provides the opportunity to highlight one weakness across groups: that critiques don't always connect how their reflections correspond to what journalism is for. When we think about how press criticism is ultimately taught, we should note that criticisms ought be cast in light of journalism's normative aims. That practice would bring more criticisms into the relationship domain.

Another key element of student press criticisms was the ability to identify the causes of the criticisms they articulate. The ability to explain the roots of problems within journalism makes criticisms more specific and actionable. In Focus Group One, students connected understandings of press structure with poor outcomes in journalistic practice.

Participant 1: “I think a large degree is that journalism exists within this capitalist framework, right? Because it's set up in a way to you know, I think it's sort of set up in a way to draw clicks, views too. All the ways that journalism makes money, it's designed to do that. And that has very little correlation with community service stuff, because there is not a lot of money in covering the City Council, right?”

Participant 2: “I think also another big thing about fixing political journalism or journalism in general is having diverse journalists. At the end of the day when you think historically, back through who is in charge, who is in front of that camera, who is reading that newspaper article, you need to have more diverse people and diverse sources.”

This is a different type of structural critique that deals with the socio-demographic elements of news organizations opposed to the economic models that fund them.

Participant 3 rounds out the discourse by revisiting the economic element.

Participant 3: “I agree that I think a lot of it comes down to money. A lot of the newsrooms that I really follow are non-profit newsrooms. I really like *The 19th*’s coverage of gender, and policy, and politics, and they’re not motivated by profit. And you can access all of their stories whenever you like.”

While these criticisms offer specificity regarding economic and socio-demographic constraints on journalism, there is still an element of “why” or “how” missing from some of these critiques beyond the fact they were provided as causes to poor journalistic practice. For example, Participant 2 could have expounded with an explanation of how a diversified newsroom could better influence coverage. Participant 3 could have provided a philosophical statement about why greater access to news content is normatively good. Still, the criticisms are specific enough to be actionable because they identify real, tangible issues confronting journalism.

The Relationship Between Journalism and Democracy

Though Wyatt (2007) identifies the relationship between journalism and democracy as a foundational domain for press criticism, critiques were not as common in this area. This domain manifested most readily when students were probed about norms such as helpfulness, and journalism’s ability to encourage participation in democracy. Here, the discussion questions seemed to prompt connections between journalism and its relationship to democracy. This warrants interrogation of the focus group method. Co-facilitators know the theoretical frameworks of the study, and discussion questions were based on that framework, which highlights participation in democracy as a key import of journalism (Wyatt, 2007). This is relevant to how criticism is taught because it shows that

thoughtful critics also need to know how to ask focused questions to move discourse forward. It is also another example of why casting criticism in light of journalism's normative aims is so important. Constructive questions that move deliberation forward can be grounded in normative ideals, such as journalism encouraging participation. This was the function of the discussion questions in the focus group. Here is an example of a discourse it produced:

Co-facilitator 1: "Let's say yeah, journalism equips me to go vote, but does it encourage me?"

Participant 4: "My instinct is to say no ... Because it's just information. I don't know, because an opinion makes me want to go vote not like the facts, I suppose. The announcement 'hey there's a balloon over America' or something like that. Okay, that doesn't motivate me to go vote. But somebody saying 'people are dying and nothing is being done about it' that is a motivator to go vote."

Participant 7: "It is a motivator for me and a lot of people just because it's so accessible, and because of technology. [...] They'll want to do something about what they're passionate about, and they have access to learn about those things I guess is what I'm trying to say."

Participant 6: "I sort of feel like people get stuck in information overload, where they get paralyzed by having too much. And they don't really know what to do with it or how to sort through it, or how to make normative judgements on it, like the [news] literacy thing I was talking about earlier."

Participant 6 then invited others to disagree with them, because they started disagreeing with themselves, they said.

Participant 4: "Well, but I think that some of the people who say there's too much crap out there, 'ah I'm not even going to vote screw it' are the same people that, even if there wasn't too much crap out there, they also wouldn't vote. And they're kind of using it as an excuse, but it's not like their real excuse."

Here, Participant 4 seemed to note that even if information overload exists, it is not an impairment to participating via the vote. Participant 6 responded:

Participant 6: "I don't know, I feel like even reasonable people feel that way. I feel like I, myself, feel that way sometimes like I'm being bombarded by

information constantly. And I don't think it's necessarily a media or journalism issue, it's just a 'this day and age' kind of thing. I think a lot of what journalism is having to face right now, especially political journalism, I don't know if it's really caused by journalism, but it has to respond and adapt to new technologies, information and new ways that people are relating to each other and relating to their government."

This discourse shows how students relate journalism to a democratic practice such as voting. They also disagree with each other, which shows the value of discourse in expanding the scope of critique. If this critique was presented to a newsroom, they would have multiple elements of the issue to consider. There is also another example in Participant 6's final response that shows how critique in one domain can bleed into another. While connecting journalism practice to its democratic import, the participant also notes how journalism is constantly responding to outer-institution forces.

Here is another example of critiques in this domain after students were asked a participation question:

Co-Facilitator 3: "Do you feel like the information in political news coverage in the U.S. equips you to participate in our democracy?"

Participant 12: "It's really for people who are willing to take action. It's not like telling people, because we have to do that whole being what do we call it? Objective. You can't tell people that there's a problem here and we need to fix it. You have to hope people will realize it's a problem and be willing to go out and fix it."

Co-Facilitator 3: "Do you feel like if the information being provided in the news coverage is perceived as being non-objective that that damages participation?"

Participant 12: "Um, I don't know. I feel like people need an extra push in realizing something is wrong. Even from freshman year I've always felt like being objective would hurt us in the long run, because it just doesn't make sense to me you have to be unbiased when some things are right or wrong."

This exchange between the co-facilitator and Participant 12 shows how a philosophical approach manifests as an influence in the relationship between journalism and democracy

domain. It is another multi-domain critique that consists of a helpful level of specificity through its articulation of norms.

Power

Discourse in this domain was least common. This tracks with the claim that the power domain is the most abstract and hardest to conceptualize (Wyatt, 2010). The way this most often manifested was through statements about journalism's impact on people. A key example came from a response by Participant 1, which was referenced earlier in the philosophical approaches section, which explained one frame for political news is impact. Impact-focused journalism was identified as a service in that response and shows how the power of the press can be articulated through the relationship between journalism's output and its audience. Another criticism in this domain was made through identifying an organization's power over what information is put and prioritized in the news. Here's a critique from a participant whose favorite organization is NPR. This was a response asking what participants don't like about their favorite outlet.

Participant 4: "NPR does a pretty good job in the broader culture of directing the conversation to what they think is important. If NPR is covering COVID still, then other outlets are covering COVID still. So I feel like they have to be more conscious of what they are covering because their top-five things aren't going to be everyone else's top-five things."

Together, these critiques show two distinct ways of critiquing within the power domain.

One is through impact on people, and the other is through impact on the broader institution of journalism itself.

RQ3: Analyzing Criticism

This section shows how students reflected on press criticism as its own concept. It's organized based on two key themes in the data: useful criticisms and press criticism's

value. The findings show critical analyses from students that weren't specific critiques directed at journalism as an institution. Here, the section begins with findings on useful criticisms and moves to the sub-section on press criticism's value.

Useful Criticism: The Valid and the Invalid

One component of student reflections on criticism were identifying its useful attributes and showing an ability to recognize valid and invalid critiques. This was most commonly manifested in describing specific criticisms they have experienced, either personally or of other work, and noting which were useful and valid. Bias was identified in each focus group as one of the most common critiques of journalism. The co-facilitator asked why participants thought that was the case. This discourse followed:

Participant 8: "I guess because some things [the audience] see just don't agree with their views. And that some journalism truly is biased."

Here, the distinction between valid and invalid criticism is made. Participant 8 went on to say that journalism's espousal of objectivity as non-bias created a false expectation amongst the public, because objectivity is ultimately an impossibility. Participant 9 agreed with the reflection then built with another example of a valid critique, that perceptions of bias may be valid based on the lack of diversity within newsrooms.

Participant 9: "We're supposed to be reflective of our society, but our profession does not attract everyone from our society. I feel like that plays into it all. You want to hear from someone like you, and we can't do that."

This discourse is important to start with because it shows these students, who are already practitioners, can think critically about the institution they are within. For press criticism to achieve its aim of redress and reform, it requires practitioners willing to field good criticism. Students across focus groups identified valid criticisms, and this discourse is a specific example of that.

In the following reflection, one participant made a distinction between useful and not useful negative criticism. This response illuminates more detail on attributes of unhelpful and invalid criticisms, which across focus groups were associated with personal attack and ideological crusade.

Participant 5: “I actually have received negative feedback that is helpful, like, ‘hey the nuances of your story are slightly off, here’s how you can adjust it to better reflect the situation.’ And I also received extremely hateful feedback that was personal. I think the two are not mutually exclusive, but they are typically very separate situations. They’re not coming from the same people.”

Examples of personal and hateful feedback included ideological epithets such as “you woman lib” and “you’re a socialist working for the Chinese government.” Here’s a discourse from a different focus group that centered *how* criticism was delivered to identify its usefulness.

Participant 10: “I think if the criticism is willing to be delivered in a respectful way, and that it’s also really specific in terms of, not the content necessarily, but ‘you could have done it this way, you could have delivered it in a more informed way,’ or something like that.”

Participant 11: “I think of criticism as useful if I think it’s exposing a real harm, or a stigma that the work could be perpetuating.”

Here is another example of recognizing a valid critique based on a normative assessment of the journalistic product it may be critiquing. If the work is perpetuating a stigma or causing harm, which would be bad journalistic practice, then it is easy to identify a criticism is valid when it targets that. Participant 12 rounded out this discourse by relating back to Participant 10.

Participant 12: “I think I agree with [Participant 10] that it’s delivered in a respectful manner, and it’s not attacking. That’s how all criticism is, but you’re more able to listen to it if it’s actually reasonable and not just based on emotions. And also if multiple people agree from different spectrums. People who are left or right, middle, if people all agree that something was done wrong.”

This exchange again highlights the importance of discourse to deepening reflection.

Participant 12 agreed with prior response on respectfulness but added an element of depth by introducing the concept of consensus.

Criticism's Purpose and Value

When participants were asked to provide personal experiences receiving feedback of their work, positive examples were shared almost exclusively. Although negative responses were less prominent, a common thread manifested in the value of critique. Students consistently said feedback showed them they weren't "speaking into the void." Press criticism had value in showing these practitioners that people were consuming their work, and therefore part of criticism's purpose is to show that the work has tangible reach. Another value students identified was criticism's ability to show how a non-journalist perceived the work. Some participants noted that criticism could impinge on the story-making process in positive and negative ways. Here is an example of students identifying positive value in criticism:

Co-Facilitator 1: "What do you guys feel the purpose of people telling you what you did good or bad in your journalism coverage is?"

Participant 4: "Motivation to keep doing it. Because a lot of times I feel like I spend hours on something and be like 'did anybody read this?' Then getting one comment I'm like 'oh thank god, somebody read it.'"

Participant 5: "I think it's nice, in the realm of journalism and being exposed to journalists most of my days, and getting most of my feedback from journalists, it is just nice seeing how my work affects real people, and if it does. And how it's being interpreted with a blind eye, and from someone who is not a part of the collaborative process it gets enlightening sometimes and humbling at other times."

Participant 5 finished this response by stating that feedback can be used to reframe future work and "re-approach the writing process." This is a positive example of how criticism

can influence the production process. It also shows the potential for criticism to achieve one of its normative aims: reform. Participant 6 rounded out this discourse agreeing with prior reflections but specifically notes even negative criticism can have value in showing the work means something.

Participant 6: “I agree. It can be both enlightening and humbling. It does feel like shouting into the void doing this work sometimes. So it does feel nice, even in a negative way, I’ll be like ‘okay, someone read it.’”

However, not all value was positive. Negative criticisms often had negative emotional impacts on participants. Participant 6 expressed how negative criticism can have a negative emotional impact by describing feedback that *falsely* targeted the factual integrity of a story. The feedback made them feel panicked the entire day, and they cried multiple times. In another focus group, a participant explained how feedback can impinge on the reporting process in a way they perceive as negative.

Participant 1: “I think it’s [criticism] actually counterproductive. I think just specific to my case, once you see it you can’t unsee it, the response, whether it’s good or bad. Subconsciously, or I think consciously to a large degree, but for sure subconsciously, I write with that in mind.”

Here, the perceived negative impact of the response is normatively questionable. Since criticism is supposed to be a means of redress and reform, it *should* factor into how a journalist does their work. The importance lies in knowing what to take and what to leave.

RQ4: Ambassadors for Journalism

Every participant across every focus group expressed a willingness to defend journalism as an institution. These defenses were broken down into students defending their choice to practice journalism and defending journalism against “bad” critique. Participants readily recognize valid critique. Therefore, the students often defend

journalism in their personal lives when they are faced with critiques that show news illiteracy instead. Furthermore, institutional defenses within their personal lives dealt with their decisions to be in journalism in the first place. These defenses were rooted in fundamental convictions about journalism's societal and democratic importance.

Defending Personal Choice and Institutional Importance

Responses within this theme related institutional defenses, rooted in conviction of journalism's societal value, to participants' individual decisions to enter journalism. Notably, those three elements were often intrinsically related. The following discourse shows consensus on students defending their personal choice. After Participant 6 introduced the concept, it resonated with the other participants.

Participant 6: "Usually I'm not having to defend bad journalists or biased journalists, I have to defend my choice to do journalism, because it's a dying field."

Participant 4: "Yeah, I think one of my major criticisms around the dinner table is journalism's importance to society. I feel like my family definitely would be more proud of me for being a doctor than a journalist."

Participant 5: "Yeah, the holidays are a complicated thing. I would agree that typically I'm put on the defensive of my choices and more on the value of what I do, and the format especially, as a print journalist."

Participant 4: "Yeah, mine is like the defense of journalism as a whole, like journalism's place in society. I think that sometimes in the j-school, definitely we hit in J1100 we are the watchdogs of society. Like, we are actually so important. [...] And if I'm being honest, I do think we are that important. I think it needs to evolve to fit that landscape better."

Here, the student reflects on how their convictions about journalism's importance were connected to their education. J1100 is an introductory journalism class that connects the vocation to its democratic role and importance.

Participants' willingness to defend journalism's institutional importance was also connected not just to their choice to enter journalism, but also with their conviction to improve the institution via their personal position within it. The following discourse illuminates this concept:

Participant 1: "I'm real quick to make fun of a self-righteous journalist, like I hate them they are annoying. But attack journalism right in front of me and all of a sudden I become one. ... You do get naturally defensive because it's an institution we believe in that other people don't. And we see a vision for it."

Participant 3: "I like what you said about how we see a vision for it. There's so many parts of what the current journalism industry looks like that I don't love, like everyone getting laid off every 72 hours. But I believe in the future of it. I believe what our generation can make it, and I have hope for what it can become in the future. I think that's what keeps me going with it."

The exchange shows more nuance amongst participants in how their criticisms of journalism relate to their position within the institution and their philosophical defenses of it. The final note by Participant 3 shows how institutional belief, combined with their upcoming generation of journalists, actually pushes them forward in light of the industry's bleak current conditions. Participant 1 finished this discourse by showing how self-critique of journalism informs their institutional defenses of it:

Participant 1: "What's the cliché? You can't really have an opinion unless you can argue the other side too, right? I don't think you can really say you believe in an institution unless you're willing to critique it as well."

Defending Against Bad Critique

Given participants' willingness to acknowledge valid critique, they said defenses would often manifest against critiques which showed a lack of understanding of journalism's process or were generally not based in fact. Here's an exchange from Focus Group Four that shows how participant defenses act as news literacy education against news illiterate criticism:

Participant 10: “When it comes to the technical parts of the job that people may not understand, then I might feel the need to defend in terms of ‘oh I can see why they might have made this decision, or why they may have felt rushed to do this, XYZ.”

Participant 11 made an off-topic comment after this reflection, and the researcher probed the participant on if they feel an obligation to defend against wrong critique. They followed with a similar reflection of acting as a news literacy educator.

Participant 11: “I think in real life, maybe someone in my family criticizes something in a certain way. And I go ‘oh yeah, see what I think they did here is this, and I think they should have done this. I don’t know I can’t think of a concrete example right now.”

A different exchange from Focus Group Three showed a different dimension of this concept. Here, the participants explained how they may direct people with unhelpful critiques towards more helpful news consumption practices:

Participant 8: “For instance, you know, Fox versus CNN, to people who criticize that I say well that’s why you should really focus on your local journalism, honestly, away from your national journalism, because those are the people, in local journalism, who are the ones in your community. And they’ll have a better idea of how big things are impacting you.”

Participant 9 followed with an explanation for their willingness to defend journalism. After their response, they were probed about how they respond to criticisms that are invalid.

Participant 9: “That [Fox versus CNN] example is really good, but what I have more encountered is people read a lot of opinion. People like to think because of an opinion, for example *The New York Times* gets labeled as a super liberal newspaper, which they have columns from both sides, not that I read them. [...] Basically I’ll tell people ‘stop reading opinion, read the news.’ Form your own ideas around like the facts of what’s happening. Also, I’ll just tell people [to] get off Twitter.”

Participant 9 directed people away from opinion journalism because of a news illiteracy which many conflate opinion pieces with news journalism. There may be a normative

problem with this direction, however, because directing people away from opinion journalism may devalue its valid democratic function. Opinion journalism plays a key role in journalism's public forum function (Schudson, 2008). A better direction would be to help distinguish what constitutes good opinion journalism.

Though participants consistently identified bad critique, they used their ambassador role for defense and education. Baked into this position is an ethos that the onus is on journalism, and more specifically news organizations, to act as news literacy educators. This is a welcomed ethos, which was made explicit by Participant 3. They also describe how taking this responsibility can be a key element of repairing harms caused by journalism practice.

Participant 3: "I think that's a big part of news literacy is I think news literacy has to come from newsrooms, or like non-profit adjacent journalism organizations. It's our responsibility. Saying the problem is news literacy isn't saying 'okay, you the audience members, fix it,' and [instead] saying we need to now put in the extra work to rebuild relationships with our communities, in addition to changing our reporting practices, changing our editorial decision making, and doing a some of the course correcting on this side and doing some of the repairing on this side.

Summary

The findings displayed in this chapter are positive indications of how journalism education can cultivate critical consumers and producers of journalism. The discourses within show reasonable, fact-based criticisms that could be actionable for the institution and news organizations. Based on the quality of these criticisms, an aptitude for news literacy is also demonstrated by participants. Furthermore, the fact students showed an ability to think deeply about press criticism is another positive indication. The ability to identify valid and invalid critiques is needed from practitioners and consumers alike,

because quality critiques should fill and anchor discourse about journalism. The following chapter explicates these positive notions.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Normative literature on press criticism asserts its insolubility within the journalism-democracy framework. Still, its exploration in journalism studies has not reached a level of prominence that matches its importance. Wyatt's (2007) landmark work mapped a necessary framework for how to conceptualize press criticism as a systematic pursuit, but the work also gave a model for how to study press criticism. This study builds on that foundation by examining press criticism through its presence in conversation. The method emphasizes the deliberative nature of how criticisms do manifest and also *should* manifest. Beyond expanding on Wyatt's (2007) existing work, this research adds a body of data to normative notions of press criticism's contents. It shows an element of press criticism, deliberation, which can increase the quality of critique. Despite the small sample size, these findings are relevant to press criticism scholarship, as well as journalism education, and journalism practice.

Summary of Major Findings

While participants critiqued with good depth and specificity, they also showed an ability to think critically about press criticism as a concept. The criticisms identified current examples, trends and overarching problems within the journalism industry. Furthermore, the participants often moved beyond those criticisms to offer solutions for journalism practice. In doing so, they offered a vision for journalism's future. That vision gave them hope for the industry's future and bolstered many of their institutional defenses of journalism. Not only did they exhibit a willingness to be ambassadors for journalism, but their defenses involved critical analyses as well. These students were willing to acknowledge valid critiques because they have critiques of their own, but this

didn't inhibit their inclination to educate about journalism against bad critique. The finding shows that such students are actually good ambassadors for journalism because of their willingness and ability to cultivate critical analyses of their own.

To some degree, the findings were anticipated because upperclassman journalism students at the University of Missouri take a robust theoretical core curriculum which includes classes in Principles of Journalism in Democracy, Cross-Cultural Journalism, and Communication Law. These students also have much practical experience through their coursework. This dual role manifested when participants reflected on the news as both practitioners *and* consumers of journalism. Although the study does not specifically analyze if any particular curriculum cultivates the ability to critique, the findings offer a positive reflection on the value of journalism education for these students.

Theoretical Implications

This research should call scholarship on press criticism more directly back to Wyatt's (2007) normative theory. The theory has been under-utilized in research and should be more than just a reference or touchstone within the sub-field. It offers a model to be implemented and expanded. For one, it asserts a needed vision of the press that centers discourse and encourages participation. Through that vision, it offers a model for criticism that is also discursive. The normative claims within are insightful on their own but understanding criticism as a social process simply understands how it already exists. Press criticisms occur in living rooms around television sets, at dinner tables, and coffee shops. By using this theory, scholars can study criticism at its heart. After all, Wyatt's (2007) book is named *Critical Conversations* for this very reason. This study makes a step in that direction by simulating the first level of criticism using focus groups as a

simulated public sphere. It is a notable addition to press criticism scholarship that should serve as a springboard for more robust studies under the same theoretical framework. Furthermore, it could be a model for how Wyatt's (2007) theory can be done to present criticisms to specific organizations. Researchers can conduct series of focus groups with readers of outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, for example, and present the findings as criticisms to the organizations. Such practices would increase the rigor and breadth of criticism and exemplify the model within the theory. Lastly, the findings provide more nuance into normative claims that press criticisms should not use emotional language (Carey, 1974). Responses from these participants show that emotionality is not necessarily a negative attribute of press criticism because how the news makes consumers feel is an important impact. Rather, it is personal attack and criticisms that center ideology or identity that present problematic responses. Future assessments of press criticism should account for this nuance.

Furthermore, journalism students have been overlooked in qualitative investigation of news responses. News literacy studies have primarily used quantitative measurements (see, e.g., Maksl, 2015, 2017; Vraga, 2016). Studies that use qualitative methods have often steered away from students with a journalism education (Kaun, 2014; Craft et al., 2016). Given that it is reasonable to expect journalism students to respond to the news well, using non-journalism students for a sample is an understandable methodological choice. However, the population should not be overlooked because their ability to think critically about journalism is an accountability check on their journalism education. This study contributes to journalism studies through the deliberative method and theory, but also by engaging journalism students in this type of qualitative study.

The final theoretical implication is this study's effort to explicitly link news literacy and press criticism. It should be noted that when scholars examine press criticism, they are inherently examining expressions of news literacy. Quality critiques hinge on fundamental understandings of news context, content, creation, circulation, and consumption. These are the "five c's" of news literacy (Tully et al., 2022). There are implicit connections between some of these elements of news literacy and Wyatt's (2007) domains. One is explicit: content. Furthermore, context and creation deal with sociological factors that can influence news production, and those elements coincide well with the philosophical approaches domain. Context also matches the press structure domain, where the economic structures journalism relies on are centered. It is not clear how the "five c's" might deal with the power of the press, and an element of news literacy which explicitly targets what journalism is for, or in other words the relationship between the press and democracy domain, would also be helpful. Well-formed opinions of journalism's ultimate purpose are crucial to news literacy and press criticism because reflections on journalism should be framed with that vision in mind. For example, one could dismiss the value of opinion journalism if they view the purpose of the press as a stenographic communicator of facts. But this view would directly contradict a normative vision that sees the purpose of the press as creating discourse. Without making a value judgement on any specific vision, you can assess the quality of news literacy or press criticism by how an individual articulates the *why* and *how* of those visions. Those elements of expression are critical in understanding how someone thinks about journalism. Therefore, there could be an adjustment to the five c's that makes this element more explicit. Wyatt's (2007) relationship domain offers a helpful suggestion.

Still, *either* of these guideposts offer useful coding criteria for analyzing press criticisms. Studies that analyze press criticism outside of this theoretical framework even *should* use the five c's, because they cover the foundations of quality criticism.

Practical Implications

The biggest practical implication resides with journalism education and news literacy education. Although the sample consists of already motivated upperclassmen, there is a knowledge base that is reasonably traceable to a journalism education. However, there needs to be deeper interrogation of what the connections are between journalism education and the ability to critique well. This also warrants an examination of if and how press criticism is even taught within undergraduate curriculums. If there is an absence of explicit instruction on the topic in any given curriculum, this points to a deficiency in that instruction. Either way, deeper dives into existing curriculum and its connection to students' ability to critique would be valuable in developing coherent press criticism curriculum. This study is relevant to news literacy education because of its explicit connection of news literacy and press criticism. News literacy education should involve a press criticism element, due to the intrinsic nature of these concepts. Consumers and practitioners alike need to be able to express news knowledge in a way that is specific, accurate, and actionable to practitioners.

Lastly, there are indications of an emerging generation of journalists' visions for the press. Perhaps a larger sample is needed to claim these normative visions are characteristic of this generation, but current journalism practice would be wise to listen to the institutional critiques levied here. Much of their normative assertions are welcome, such as the highlighted need for a norm like helpfulness as an anchor. If political news

makes motivated, engaged journalism students feel hopeless and disaffected with news, journalists ought to consider how they deal with the negative contents that (rightly) often manifest within the press. Participants often noted that journalism is helpful when they feel they can do something with the information within or the content points towards solutions. These claims match well with helpfulness as creating opportunities (Thomas, 2019).

Limitations

The greatest limitation of this study is the small sample size. Implications for the contents of student criticisms is softened due to that fact. Furthermore, these are highly educated and highly motivated participants. Even within the School of Journalism, responses to the recruitment sign-up form were small, so the students that made it to focus groups likely came with strong existing opinions about U.S. journalism. The fact that they likely had existing reflections is a positive development, but the participants in this study should not be interpreted as the median student. Therefore, the median journalism student was likely not well represented in the study. Still, the participants are those with “local knowledge” relevant to journalism and journalism education (Thomas, 2011, p. 514). The participants are model examples for doing press criticism based on that local knowledge inherent to their highly engaged position. This study maintains that press criticism and news literacy need some qualitative investigation because expressions of these concepts often manifest as dialogue and through social processes. Though this study cannot and does not measure and test the effectiveness of any particular course or curriculum that could be identified as cultivating good criticism and news literacy, this is certainly something that future researchers can expand upon.

Directions for Future Research

The limitations provide many avenues for future work. This study can serve as a touchstone due to its connection of news literacy and criticism using Wyatt's (2007) framework, which hasn't been employed much in research. Using senior journalism students, which will likely have good criticisms, allows future work under this framework to interrogate which elements of curriculum develop good criticisms. A direct follow-up to the current research would be to add an in-depth interview component after focus groups. Furthermore, there is also a use in searching for the abundance of press criticism education within the journalism education, much in the ways scholars have done for media and news literacy (Ashley, 2015). Future studies can take this framework and explore other contexts. For example, one could ask how parents of journalism students critique the news. Another study could look at strategic communication students, or those at mass communications schools without a strong journalism focus. Future studies do need to explore measuring news literacy and criticism together, either qualitatively or quantitatively. For example, one could interview or survey students at the beginning of an introductory journalism course and after to see if there is any growth in quality of criticism or news literacy. Ultimately, the current study can make a significant contribution to journalism studies while also being a springboard for future work.

Conclusion

Press criticism's importance in the journalism-democracy framework is consistent and prominent throughout academic literature. James Carey noted its central role in prompting reform and accountability to journalism, because state regulation of journalism is neither a viable nor desirable option (Carey, 1974). *Critical Conversations* created a

path and prompt for operationalizing press criticism (Wyatt, 2007). Somehow, the study of press criticism has not matched the importance assigned to it by the chorus of scholars. It represents an oversight by the field of journalism studies, and what's the point of journalism studies if not to bring the practice of these crucial concepts towards their highest normative ideals? Ideally, the current study can push the field one step further in that direction through direct examination of press criticism in practice.

The findings should also promote optimism for journalism studies and the journalism field at large. The research successfully applied the discursive model for press criticism to an academic study, creating many opportunities for further investigation on this topic. Furthermore, the contents of this thesis give an encouraging look into an emerging generation of journalists. In their dual roles as students and not-yet-deeply-institutionalized practitioners, they showed a keen ability to think critically about journalism. Their ambitions and visions for journalism's future show there are future practitioners and scholars prepared to confront and solve journalism's many challenges. These students deserve a note of praise, and I hope the journalism studies field will take note of these findings.

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

RQ1 & RQ2

1. What's a news outlet you regularly consume for political news? Why?
2. What does that outlet do well in their political coverage?
3. What are some problems with that outlet's political coverage?
4. Think about political news coverage in the U.S. more generally, what are its shortcomings and successes?
5. Do you feel like the information in political news coverage in the U.S. equips you to participate in our democracy?
6. Does political journalism in the U.S. encourage participation in democracy? How or how not?
7. When you think of "helpful journalism," what does that look like?
8. How do you see helpfulness reflected in political journalism in the U.S.?

RQ3

1. When was a time you encountered someone responding to your own work or someone else's? It can be either positive or negative.
2. What do you think the most common criticisms of journalism are?
 - a. Have you ever heard this criticism directly?
3. How does that feedback or those criticisms make you feel?
4. Was it useful feedback or criticism?
5. How did you determine if it was useful criticism?
6. What is the purpose of the audience providing feedback on journalism?

RQ4

1. Think back to those stories of encountering feedback on the work of journalists and the common criticisms you see of journalism, how did you respond?
2. Why did you respond? Or why not?
3. Do you feel an obligation to defend journalism?
4. How does that manifest in your lives?
5. Provide an example.

APPENDIX B: ELICITATION PROTOCOL (UNUSED)

RQ1 & RQ2

1. Would you consider this article an exemplar of good journalism? Why or why not?
2. What attributes of this article show good journalism practice?

RQ4

1. Would you use an article such as this to defend good journalism to a friend or family member? Why or why not?
2. What would you say if you used this article to defend journalism to a friend or family member?