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Article

# The Struggle for News Value in the Digital Era

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**Abstract:** News has long been a contested concept but in the digital era it has become increasingly fractured and multidimensional. This discursive article explores some of the ways in which the news has been disrupted by technological and economic tensions and argues that the social value of news is worth articulating and, where necessary, struggling for. News values have never been universal or unproblematic, and the tension between commercial and social ways of valuing news is intensified today. News values are not fixed and must be open to critique as to how they are meeting citizens' needs. Societally useful news may be at risk of being marginalized as news organizations struggle to survive, but it is not inevitable that disruption and digitization should undermine journalistic ethics and the social value of news. In arguing that scholars ought to approach news more holistically, to defend it as well as critique it, the article attempts to synthesize what typically appears as discrete approaches to studying news. The article concludes that, if the social value of news is not to suffer further diminution, there is a need to view news through a lens of struggle; a struggle in which journalists, audiences, scholars and, indeed, *all* citizens have a part to play.

**Keywords:** AI; algorithmic journalism; alternative journalism; audiences; ethics; multidimensionality of news; news values; shareability; social value of news; unionization

## 1. Introduction

This article explores the multidimensional nature of news today and examines the prospects for forms of news of most social value to citizens. Within the context of the “turmoil” and “permanent flux” experienced by news providers internationally (Newman 2023, p. 3; Deuze 2019), this article makes the case that the concept of news *value* to citizens—that is, the social or civic usefulness of news—is something worth not merely dissecting in principle but defending in practice. The approach is primarily discursive, drawing on insights from empirical studies reported within the literature as well as more theoretical and conceptual scholarship.

The six sections comprise a series of interlocking and thematic reviews of the pertinent literature that, together, can help us evaluate how news in the digital era is—or is not—valued. The aim of this disquisition is to point towards a more holistic way of studying and valuing news, one that synthesizes a range of critical perspectives that have emerged from critiques of news production, reception, circulation, content and ethics but which tend to be considered as entirely discrete areas of inquiry. Following this **Introduction** is a brief statement of the article’s **theoretical framework**, followed by a section identifying some of the ways in which the concept of **news values** has been applied by journalists and others, identified by scholars and influenced by new technologies. After that is a section that identifies evidence of major **tensions** around news, both within and beyond formal news industries. A substantial **discussion** section follows, in which key themes that emerge from an examination of evidence from the recent literature are explored discursively before being viewed specifically through a struggle lens; that is, a perspective that the social value of news is something requiring, and deserving of, a struggle to preserve and enhance it at the same time as insisting that such news must be open to critique. The **Conclusion** summarizes and synthesizes the main findings of this article within the context of its theoretical framework,



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articulating the need for such a struggle while pointing towards implications for journalists, scholars and citizens alike.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework within which this article considers the place/s of news in the digital era is the liberal theory of journalism's role within democracy, whereby a "free press" of sorts undertakes a "fourth estate" duty as society's "watchdog". This is what Lewis (2006, p. 316) calls "the democratic promise of news", providing citizens with current information in the form of news "that makes it possible for us to take part in governing ourselves", as Kovach and Rosenstiel (2003, p. 11) put it. Which is not to say that concepts such as press freedom, fourth estate, democracy or, indeed, news are either unproblematic or uncontested (Bromley and Slavtcheva-Petkova 2019; Harcup 2020; Josephi 2012; Zelizer 2017). Far from it. The point is that a theoretical understanding of news as something that ought to play some role in informing us *as citizens* can help us *as scholars* in exploring its strengths and weaknesses in practice. With this in mind, a useful set of normative benchmarks for measuring the societal utility of news are what Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) refer to as the "democratic expectations" of news, whereby—whatever else it may do—the news is expected to inform us about our social and political environments, identify major issues confronting society, provide platforms for civic dialogue, hold the powerful to account and encourage active citizenship. Citizenship in this sense is conceived more as an activity than a status (Lister 2003; Harcup 2013). Thus, an active citizen is "somebody who *acts* as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking" (Mouffe 1992, p. 4, emphasis in original), and democracy is "something that is done *by* us rather than something that is done *to* us" (Fenton 2016, p. 178, my emphasis). News outputs that contribute to this can therefore be said to have some social value.

As news remains one of society's key channels of communication, questions about the extent to which news facilitates democratic expectations and active citizenship are pertinent as all around us the news channels we have come to know are undergoing repeated and rapid change—and challenge. Answers to these questions are likely to differ from country to country, continent to continent, from the global North to the global South, yet even within differing contexts, normative concepts such as the role of the press as society's watchdog can prove "most useful as heuristic tools providing a basic outline of practical societal expectations rather than as abstract prescriptions for journalism's role" (Bromley and Slavtcheva-Petkova 2019, p. 89). Whatever media and governmental systems exist in any location, the population can be said to have a human right to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers", as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts (UN 1948). In this context, "what gets reported and equally what remains under-covered or uncovered have crucial implications both for the quotidian working of societies as well as democratic functioning itself" (Chadha and Steiner 2022, p. 27).

Informed by the above, the social value of news is understood for the purposes of this article as akin to what Jackie Harrison refers to as a "civil ideal"; one that, while acting as a watchdog on the most powerful on behalf of the least powerful, also enables citizens to "think in a more informed and critical way about things, and acts as an aid to conducting a 'civilised conversation'" (Harrison 2019, p. 34). A rudimentary typology of the content of such news might be that it has at least one of the following characteristics: social surveillance on behalf of citizens; monitoring of power; recording of community action and self-activity; and the challenging of assumptions and stereotypes; all leavened with doses of surprise, novelty, entertainment and humour (Harcup 2020, p. 140). Thinking of news *value* in this way might cut across some existing simplistic binary conceptions of news as being either quality or popular, hard or soft, impartial or opinionated and so on; such a challenge might be no bad thing.

### 3. What News? News Values at Work

“What news?”, is a question repeatedly asked in Ben Jonson’s ([1626] 1988) satire *The Staple of News*, dating from the earliest days of a fledgling news industry in seventeenth century England. It is said to have been one of the most frequently asked questions of the day, and it remains the case that “it is in the structure of the question ‘what news?’ that anything responding to it becomes, in exchange, news” (Raymond 2005, p. 88). It also remains the case that, from at least Jonson’s time onwards, circulation of news has been synonymous in some minds, if not necessarily with formal theories of democracy, then at least with some inchoate sense of citizenship. Journalism has even been claimed to be just another word for democracy, but for Beate Josephi (2012, p. 486) such a perspective smacks of Western arrogance because “journalism offering accurate and verified information that rests on independent news judgement also happens in places that are deemed non-democratic.” Wherever and whenever they are made, journalists’ news judgements are informed by what have come to be known as news values, and these will be discussed in this section.

Answers to the question “what news?” may include everything from personal gossip exchanged on a one-to-one basis up to national or international information produced, packaged and distributed on an industrial scale as the output of a news industry. The circulation of news along this continuum has undergone significant disruption since the emergence of digital and mobile technologies in recent decades, yet there remains an element of truth in the assertion that anything said in response to the question “what news?” is, by definition, news. There is, of course, more to it than that, and generations of scholars—from Galtung and Ruge (1965) onwards—have offered systematic analyses of the production of journalistic news. That is, information that has (to some extent) been researched, sourced, verified, contextualized, edited, packaged, told—and often sold—in the form of news stories (or headlines, at least), produced and circulated by a variety of organizations of varying size and ethos, adhering to relevant ethical codes and norms, that together comprise what may be described as a news industry, or industries<sup>1</sup>.

Such industries still exist, retaining many familiar traits but operating in changed conditions not entirely of their own making, with extant tensions between the commercial and social value of news exacerbated by prevailing economic and technological winds (Karidi 2018). All media have been “significantly disrupted” by the rapidity of technological developments (Trattner et al. 2022, p. 591), with news journalism facing “transformative challenges” (Medeiros and Badr 2022, p. 1342), including the disruption of long-established revenue streams such as advertising and circulation income, the rapid growth online of mega-platforms distributing material via their own algorithms at the expense of more traditional forms of publishing (also known as platformization), experiments with the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and, more recently, with generative AI to aid or even replace human news workers.

These challenges are not experienced uniformly in every country, both between and within the global North and South (Newman et al. 2022, 2023). The responses of different news providers may also vary (Newman 2023), but in general it seems undeniable that news industries today operate in an immeasurably more pressurized and volatile environment than was the case when, for example, Galtung and Ruge (1965) produced their landmark study of how four Norwegian newspapers covered foreign news six decades ago. Comparing their much-cited taxonomy of common news factors with more recent studies such as that by Harcup and O’Neill (2017), there are some similarities but also notable differences. Quite apart from the prevalence today of factors such as celebrity, entertainment and audio-visuals, none of which seemed to come within the purview of Galtung and Ruge in the 1960s, there is the recent addition of a new factor labelled “shareability”, defined as news “thought likely to generate sharing and comments via Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media” (Harcup and O’Neill 2017, p. 1482). This rise of shareability—also known as “shareworthiness” (Trilling et al. 2017, p. 39)—impacts not only the ways news circulates but also *what* becomes selected as worth reporting in the first place, as well as *how*

such news is reported by an industry desperately seeking eyeballs. Its significance is likely to have increased since the Harcup and O'Neill study, which was conducted before the attentions of news providers turned towards feeding the “addictive algorithm” of TikTok (Newman 2022a, p. 3).

For many journalists today, the collapse of established business models—combined with the way employers often use new technologies more to produce quantity than enhance quality—has significantly increased the precarity of work (Cohen 2019; Chadha and Steiner 2022). Those on the editorial side of media businesses are now subjected to the speeding-up, automation, downsizing and outsourcing already experienced by production and administrative workers within the same industries (Nerone 2022). As Dugmore (2022) has pointed out, journalists working in Africa and elsewhere in the global South have long endured the “parlous working conditions” now being imposed on increasing numbers in the North. Casualization and short-term contracts lead not just to lower living standards but also to an “intensified subjective sense of existential insecurity” among journalists (Chadha and Steiner 2022)<sup>2</sup>. Existential insecurity is not an ideal mindset from which to embark on reporting the news or considering the ethical implications thereof, although it may remind us that the bulk of journalists have more in common with the everyday experiences of their audiences than may be supposed by those who retain an image of journalism as an entirely elite profession. Journalism is a form of labor and journalists are workers who, in common with counterparts in other industries, can find the quality as well as quantity of their output impacted by working conditions. That means, as Caitlin Petre (2021, p. 5) notes, that the employment status and working conditions of journalists may influence what news is produced. However, as neither journalists nor the news organizations they work for are homogenous, such impacts will not be uniform. Also, people employed (however precariously) as journalists are far from being the only producers of news today, with countless users of social media also circulating news of one sort or another. This means that news has become more multi-dimensional than in previous eras; that is, it takes many different forms, comes from many different sources and circulates in many different directions simultaneously. Compared to the stability of earlier periods, today's journalism appears more like “chaos” (Deuze and Witschge 2018, p. 166).

However, what counts as news has never been a simple calibration of which issues are of most objective importance to the world's population; if it were, then the existential threat posed to humanity by the climate emergency would surely lead every news bulletin every day (Harcup 2020, p. 128). News is a contested concept and disagreement over the relative newsworthiness of events or issues is nothing new. What is new is the extent to which news is “no longer tied to journalism” in ways it once was, as Steensen and Westlund (2021, p. 7) argue, meaning journalists' news stories now tend to arrive in social media feeds alongside other content, “more often than not deprived of edited contexts and fixed genres and formats”. For most of the news industry's existence it was comparatively simple to spot the difference between its output and the informal circulation of chat, entertainment and updates from family or friends. The digital era and the growth of algorithmic journalism have blurred such boundaries, and even the most carefully crafted TV news package is now more likely to be viewed on a tiny phone amid the work of myriad tiktokers, instagrammers and youtubers than it is to be watched on a television screen in the professionally curated context of a news bulletin's linear running order. Those who do not purposely choose to follow or consume news—including the growing number of people actively seeking to *avoid* exposure to news (Newman et al. 2022, p. 10)—are still likely to find it buzzing around them, giving rise to descriptions such as news becoming more liquid or ambient; less appointment viewing or long reads, more an alert or fleeting glance before scrolling on. News is now produced, circulated and engaged with—or not—at the same time as many traditional boundaries are being eroded. Communication has not just speeded up but is multi-directional, multi-platform and multi-modal, all of which influence not only what news circulates but also how it is told and who is telling it to whom.



The news industry once largely depended on a limited and relatively stable range of commercial revenue streams: namely, advertising and/or the charging of a cover price, whether collected by subscription or more casual purchases, for example from newspaper vendors. Many of these revenue streams have been disrupted in the digital era, with advertising increasingly shifting to giant online platforms such as Google and Meta at the same time as audiences have turned away from traditional print and broadcast outlets towards an online world in which most do not expect to pay for content (Newman et al. 2022). The power relations inherent in this so-called platformization—whereby news organizations young and old are forced to tailor content strategies to fit in with “the selection principles of infrastructural platforms” (van Dijck et al. 2018, p. 66)—is demonstrated whenever the news industry scurries to respond to the tweak of a platform’s algorithm for fear of its output being rendered less visible to potential audiences online. However, platformization has been found to have affected news industries to different extents in different countries and sectors, and should be expected to continue evolving (Nielsen and Fletcher 2023).

In any event, although platforms increasingly appear to have the upper hand over journalism, news organizations have also developed some strategies for monetizing online news beyond embracing the power of the platforms to circulate their content (Poell et al. 2022). In addition to seeking to attract advertisers by garnering clicks, commercial news organizations’ responses have included pushing online subscriptions; erecting metered paywalls around their websites; introducing paid membership schemes providing access to events and/or extra material; licensing content to third parties; publishing sponsored content; accepting native advertising; launching new newsletters, podcasts and apps; and appealing for donations from the most loyal members of their audiences. In the short term, such efforts have been combined with extracting whatever revenue remains from dwindling so-called “legacy” or “heritage” assets such as print titles, while they last, as well as the relentless cost-cutting of staff, premises, pagination and anything else that can be reduced. There has been an increase in the proportion of people paying for digital news in a few affluent countries, but recent growth has levelled off in most places, with younger subscribers proving particularly hard to attract (Newman et al. 2022, pp. 10–11). Future revenue streams are uncertain, to say the least.

Running parallel to the commercial news industry are non-profit news organizations subsidized either by recourse to public funds (such as the BBC licence fee in the UK) or by the free labor and voluntary contributions of enthusiasts (as with many examples of alternative media). Such media may not share the panic of commercial counterparts about advertising income or subscriber numbers, but they are not immune from digital disruption in that they too find themselves competing for attention and loyalty with the asymmetric power of established and emergent platforms (Poell et al. 2022, p. 14). Alternative forms of non-commercial media have often adopted the new technology of the day and have come in many shapes, sizes, styles and formats (Atton 2015; Atton and Hamilton 2008; Forde 2011; Harcup 2013; Ihlebæk et al. 2022; Rauch 2021; Rodriguez 2001; Waisbord 2022; Waltz 2005), only some of which have taken journalism in general, and news in particular, as their primary focus<sup>3</sup>. They might tend towards the small and ephemeral, but non-commercial forms of digital journalism add to the multidimensionality of news today. As Ihlebæk et al. (2022, pp. 1271–77) point out, alternative news media are deserving of attention precisely because they contribute to the diversity of news provision, whether in the ways they operate, the content they produce or both. The production of alternative news can be seen as an implicit—and sometimes explicit—critique of dominant news values, conducted not in theory but in practice (Harcup 2013, p. 163). As one study of alternative news outlets in Turkey and Greece found, their news stories can “subvert the predominant discourse in the mainstream media” (Ozgul and Veneti 2022, p. 1316). Such critiques of news conducted in practice are by no means restricted to alternative media in the global North. As Medeiros and Badr (2022, p. 1358) conclude, after studying alternative forms of journalism in parts of the global South: “By deliberately speaking from the periphery, engaged journalists navigate radical criticism of legacy media.”

Alternative news media do not have to engage in explicitly “oppositional reporting” (Harcup 2014) to be offering something different when it comes to news values. For example, again in the South, a recent study of online news by Summer Harlow (2022, pp. 1335–38) found a trend towards “hybrid. . . independent, online-native news sites throughout Latin America [that] does not fit neatly into alternative or mainstream categorizations”. Unlike some earlier forms of alternative media, these hybrid news outlets do not necessarily see themselves as part of activist social movements. However, by maintaining their independence and by including representation of more diverse voices, with producers often being indistinguishable from their audiences, they contribute not just to the multidimensionality of news in practice but also to our understanding of news in theory. Similarly, even on the smallest of scales, varieties of independent local and hyperlocal community news can be found online, distributed via social media or on blogging platforms such as WordPress. Content ranges from the serious coverage of local power structures to everyday reporting of lost pets and suchlike, and may be produced variously by journalists’ collectives, self-proclaimed “citizen journalists” or individuals who do not even think of themselves as doing journalism—yet all of whom in their own ways may breathe fresh life into local news ecologies damaged by the decline in traditional news providers (Harte et al. 2019). If news values were never the sole preserve of the biggest news industry brands, they are even less so today.

#### 4. What’s New? Tensions and Technologies

Digital technology may have made possible the disruption of the news industry and the various responses to such disruption outlined above, but technologies do not exist in a vacuum. Nor are they neutral (Fenton 2016, p. 162). Rather, as Salamon (2022a, p. 15) points out, strategies adopted by news organizations in any given time and place are “shaped by the historically developed and developing relations among the capitalist-owner, management, unions, and the state, and their location within a particular institutional, political-economic, and social-historical context”. In other words, there are tensions between different social actors with stakes in the news industry. Thus, we find tensions between news providers and platforms, platforms and regulators, platforms and advertisers, news organizations and regulators and between those running different sectors within the news industry, for example when publishers of local commercial news sites in the UK attack the BBC for undermining them by providing local news online for free. There can also be tensions *within* news organizations, for example between editorial and commercial departments, editors and proprietors, workers and management, and local bureaux and national or international headquarters. There may be tensions among journalists themselves about the relative newsworthiness of stories and non-stories. Finally, there can be tensions between journalists and audiences over coverage—or otherwise—of different issues. Multidimensional tensions such as these play out daily, all with the potential to impact the news to which citizens have access.

Although some news has circulated independently of the news industry for as long as there has been a news industry, the digital era has taken this to previously unimaginable levels. From stringers to reporters to editors to proprietors, all are aware that news output now competes for attention in a crowded, noisy and unforgiving online environment in which everything can be counted and measured, from page views on a story to the number of seconds a video typically runs before audiences click elsewhere. News decisions are now informed by an understanding not just of how members of the audience might respond but also of “expected algorithmic behaviour” (Kristensen and Bro 2023, p. 13). Analytics identifying the apparent relative popularity of certain topics or takes are now part of the air that journalists breathe, “embedded in journalistic routines” (Tandoc et al. 2021, p. 88). Technology has become embedded in *audience* routines too, with smartphones now the dominant medium by which most people around the world first access news each day, and audiences are also increasingly eschewing news apps and websites in favor of accessing news, if at all, via “side” entrances such as social media and search platforms. However, audience habits are not uniform across countries or age groups (Newman et al. 2022, 2023).

Audiences' likely emotional reactions to content are now embedded within the news selection process, not just by journalists anticipating the impact of stories but also by what Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2019, p. 165) calls the "algorithmic manipulation of our emotions", especially on social media where the items most likely to be shared are those generating the strongest emotions (Harcup and O'Neill 2017, p. 1481). Members of the audience have some agency in all this, of course, but their agency is not unconstrained, meaning that "audiences act both against and within said systems in the dialectical relationship between power, power structures and agency", as Hendrickx (2022, p. 6) puts it.

Today's journalists are similarly constrained, and everything they do is done in the knowledge that the reach and shareability of whatever they produce is subject to constant measurement by employers<sup>4</sup>. Such an understanding may influence choices made by individuals and small teams of journalists as well as being fed into programs, algorithms and AI systems. Such knowledge can inform the operations of entire news organizations, including priorities for investment, deployment of resources and utilization of technologies to interact with news audiences. As a result, tensions can arise from the temptation for media organizations to utilise technology to churn out more and more of what consumers appear to want, faster and faster, while employing fewer skilled reporters and allowing less room for journalistic agency and ethics. The analytics dashboard constantly showing editorial staff a range of metrics such as the most-clicked stories needs to be understood as "a tool of labor discipline that profoundly shapes the working conditions and power relationships within contemporary newsrooms", argues Petre (2021, p. 43). However, while most newswriters may face such deskilling and digital surveillance, others may gain skills and even find they have more rather than less autonomy, potentially resulting in polarization *within* a workforce and not just between workers and their bosses (Salamon 2022b, p. 4).

As the journalism industry further digitizes, "conflict and struggle around the conditions of those who produce journalism intensifies", observes Cohen (2019, p. 572). An illustration of this is the way that, since around 2015, tensions within digital newsrooms—particularly in the US—have led to a dramatic increase in unionization that has seen journalists engage in a collective effort to improve wages and working conditions; or, at least, to resist their diminution (Cohen 2019; Salamon 2022b). This new wave of trade unionism among digital-first journalists, many of them relatively young, appears to have been motivated primarily by concerns over employment and economic issues, including the ways in which AI has been introduced (Sato 2023). However, an upsurge in unionization at this time perhaps has a wider and deeper resonance, as Cohen and de Peuter (2020, pp. xii–xv) argue, because collective organizing may have the potential to foster an environment in which digital journalism can become more democratic in ethos, more "accessible, inclusive, and kinder". If so, maybe journalists working in unionized newsrooms will also feel more empowered to contribute to discussions beyond those concerning working conditions, including wider debates about ethics, citizenship and the social value of the news.

## 5. What Nuance? A Discussion

That there remains a commercial value to news is evidenced by continuing efforts to monetize it via old and new revenue streams alike. But how is the more *social* value of news faring amid the disruptions and tensions outlined above? News widely shared on social media must have a social value of sorts, in that it is both an exchange of information and a form of sociable interaction<sup>5</sup>. Not all information is equal, though, and beyond its sharing by people in a spirit of sociability, is today's news really living up to claims that it holds the powerful to account and equips us to be self-governing and active citizens (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2003; Harcup 2013)? To what extent is the news today fulfilling its "democratic promise" (Lewis 2006) or offering citizens sufficient social surveillance, monitoring of power, recording of community action and challenging of stereotypes (Harcup 2020)? Not well enough, judging by the most pressing example. The World Health Organization declares climate change to be the biggest threat facing humanity today, yet "publishers say it is hard to engage audience interest—and this in turn makes it difficult to make the case for



further investment” in covering the story (Newman 2022b, p. 29). Nevertheless, there is some evidence that more news publishers are—belatedly—now investing in some more serious coverage of the climate crisis, whether or not audiences are demanding it (Newman 2023, pp. 19–20). And some audiences *do* demand it, just as in pre-digital days some readers (and advertisers) eschewed popular tabloid newspapers in favor of the more sober columns of heavyweight broadsheets. It is worth recalling that most of the “quality” printed press was just as commercial as the “pops” (popular titles); they just served different markets. Similarly, whereas many online news providers today have adopted an economic model requiring them to compete for clicks, some promote their wares to a smaller but arguably more discerning subscriber base seeking “quality” content. All such decisions have potential to influence the news produced, but if citizen-focused news is restricted to outlets serving more affluent audiences then citizenship itself will likely suffer.

The social value of the news will be at risk if news providers regard audiences “as consumers and nothing else”, argues Harrison (2019, p. 66). Similarly, Lewis (2006, p. 303) says we need “to ask hard questions about the social utility of news”. His own answers to such questions include urging journalists “to reconceive news by focusing on what it is useful for people to know”, for example by translating major political–economic issues into “human interest” stories that demonstrate their impact on ordinary people and covering community activities in ways in which “citizenship is foregrounded” (Lewis 2006, pp. 312–15). Lest such a project be regarded as too po-faced, the case has been made for such citizen-focused news values to find room for “the warp and weft of people’s lives”, including the fact that “despite all our problems, life can also at times be fun” (Harcup 2020, p. 142). News reporting along such lines will be endangered, along with *all* news worthy of the name, if the financial and technological disruption of the news industry results in further reductions in editorial resources, with fewer reporters being employed and less time or space for ethical deliberation. However, the news terrain has long proved to be more uneven than that, with the best-resourced media organizations sometimes producing the least news of social value while, conversely, more citizen-focused news is reported by small independent outlets often operating on a shoestring. Resources alone are never enough when values are at stake.

To an extent, the news we get is the product of the tension between a primarily commercial ethos and a primarily civic one. If we value news mostly for its potential to be monetized—its reach, clickability and shareability—then we run the risk of allowing socially important but less shared news about issues such as climate change, foreign affairs, inequality or poverty to slip further and further down “the public agenda” (Trilling et al. 2017, p. 55). That is why, even while acknowledging the power of platforms and that monetizing news is essential for the industry’s survival, it is crucial to retain some concept of the social value of news for people as *citizens*.

Digital technology influences editorial considerations by enabling informed predictions of popularity and shareability to be factored into decision making about story selection, presentation, circulation and promotion. Journalistic decisions about the newsworthiness of potential items are informed by what people search for online as well as what is being most frequently shared on social media, plus real-time monitoring of how an outlet’s own news output is performing, with potential news items thought likely to generate online clicks, shares, likes, comments, replies and other forms of engagement being valued most highly. AI and audience data are thus used to inform decision making within digital news outlets in ways that would have been unthinkable when journalists relied on gut instinct or on picking up whatever people were talking about in bars, at water coolers or wherever else they gathered in real life. This has consequences when it comes to what gets reported, how and how often.

In the digital era, not even the least commercially minded journalist working for the least business-oriented outlet can escape the impact of new technologies on the news industry. Digital technology with the potential to be used to produce and distribute societally significant news as a public service has often been deployed merely to produce and dis-

tribute cheap and socially insignificant news as a marketable commodity. In this age of platformization, news organizations themselves are no longer in control of how all their own output is circulated. For example, [Karlsson et al. \(2022, pp. 200–1\)](#) found that by taking note of metadata *about* content in addition to the content itself, Facebook’s algorithms tend to push news in ways that do not correspond either with how news organizations prioritize stories or the order in which audiences rank them, thereby reinforcing the argument that the commercial logic of major platforms should not be conflated with either the news values of journalists or the information needs of citizens.

Yet, while digital technologies may have amplified many of “the deeper, persistent, and structural problems confronting journalism”, technology is not “the whole picture” ([Callison and Young 2020, p. 200](#)). Whatever new technological kit may be involved, and notwithstanding the growing influence of AI, it is *people* who remain at the heart of news, whether they are considered as consumers or citizens. Even automated elements of news production necessarily reflect the input of people, because “human influence is woven into the process of defining, rating, and sampling the data to train the algorithm”, as [Diakopoulos \(2019a, p. 20\)](#) puts it. Far from being neutral, the algorithms that are now such a powerful influence on the ways in which news is circulated by news providers themselves and, even more importantly, by the major social platforms, “embody social values and business models” ([Klinger and Svensson 2018, p. 4658](#)). The result is that, notwithstanding evidence that algorithmic selection and sharing might conceivably broaden some users’ news diets due to “automated serendipity” ([Arguedas et al. 2022, p. 18](#)), for the most part users are likely to be fed more and more of the same. This means issues and voices that, historically, have tended to be marginalized within dominant discourse are likely to remain largely absent from the news if AI systems reflect—or amplify—human biases that have been programmed into them ([Helberger et al. 2020](#)).

Such ethical concerns are among the reasons why the output of alternative news media is worth taking note of, even when circulation remains relatively small. Journalism that takes an alternative approach to issues of representation, for example, can produce bottom-up news told from the perspective of those most directly involved. Similarly, what has come to be known as “solutions journalism” can go beyond highlighting social problems to recording what active citizens are doing to address such issues. Not only is such output part of the multidimensionality of news, but it shows that another news is possible; that is, news informed by a more explicit sense of social responsibility. Even within the most mainstream of newsrooms there may be some journalists arguing for the importance of such news, whether or not it is the most attractive to audiences, advertisers or proprietors.

Tensions between differing sets of values play out at different points along the continuum of news providers, with differing outcomes in different countries, different sectors of the media and even within the same news organization at different times. Taking such tensions into consideration, what hope is there for recognition of the social value of news, and of citizens’ information *needs*, in an industry in which AI and algorithms are lauded for providing what an audience *wants*? Nicholas [Diakopoulos \(2019b, p. 1183\)](#), for one, is hopeful, arguing that “if we shift our perspective to consider how technologies could be designed, we can envisage journalism as a field that has its values implemented in the technology, rather than a field simply subjected to the values implemented in technologies by others,” before adding: “If algorithms and automation are to be optimized for journalistic purposes they must be fed the appropriate metrics.” What those appropriate metrics might be will clearly be up for debate, but insights into the social value of news from [Harcup \(2020\)](#), [Harrison \(2019\)](#), [Lewis \(2006\)](#) and others could be used to inform such discussions.

The tension between the values embedded in journalistic practice and the “risks” of deploying generative AI “necessitates inclusive, value-sensitive design processes for the use and evaluation of generative AI in the newsroom, conducted in partnership with journalists, editors and other participants,” argue [Nishal and Diakopoulos \(2023\)](#). Similarly, [van Dijck et al. \(2018, p. 72\)](#) write of the need for collaboration between platforms, policymakers and news providers to maintain standards of journalistic accuracy and independence. The

chances of persuading beleaguered commercial news organizations—not to mention the owners of Meta, Google, TikTok and other major platforms—to play nicely and inscribe social values and active citizenship into the ways they operate may be thought slim in the current climate, but that does not mean the issue is not worth putting on the agenda<sup>6</sup>.

This article seeks to move beyond current understandings of the news, and of challenges facing journalism in the digital era, towards what might be thought of as a rather more holistic way of examining the news today. “We must insist upon an integrated, contextual analysis that places the technological alongside and in relation to its social, economic, cultural and political histories,” as Natalie Fenton (2016, p. 179) puts it. The argument here is that to better understand news, we must consider that produced both within and outwith professional and commercial news organizations; we must critique news values at the same time as acknowledging the economic and technological disruptions of journalism; and we must not overlook the continuing importance in all this of human agency and ethics. Whereas studies of newsworthiness have tended to focus on published content, studies of journalists’ routines have tended to focus on the issue of autonomy, studies of ethics have tended to focus on codes and regulation, and studies of technology have tended to fixate on what Posetti (2018) calls the latest “shiny things”, the suggestion here is to—sometimes—consider the sum of the parts *as a whole*. To this end, as well as asking, “What news?”, we might also ask, “What nuance?”.

From the development of the internet to the rapid growth of AI, technological developments in the digital era have been accompanied by “unresolved challenges and societal risks”, argue Trattner et al. (2022, p. 591). Disruptions such as the impact of automation and audience analytics on journalistic practices and ethics require “profound reassessment of the role of journalistic values”, according to Bastian et al. (2021, p. 836). They are not talking about news values specifically, but as news is the “heartbeat” of journalism (Harcup 2020, p. 1) it is surely the most logical starting point. Any such reassessment based on the social value of news might lead us to conclude that issues of journalistic autonomy need to be part of the discussion.

Given that studies of news organizations find “tension between choosing what was deemed journalistically relevant versus popular with the audience” (Blanchett 2021, p. 9), does being an ethical journalist in the digital era also entail asserting autonomy from the audience, just as editorial departments once prided themselves on being on the other side of a firewall from the advertising department? It may well do, to an extent, notwithstanding the “turn to audiences” by both journalism practitioners and researchers (Costera Meijer 2020; Swart et al. 2022; Temmerman and Mast 2021). However, just as journalists are far from uniform in their approaches to news values, so are audiences (Wilkinson et al. 2021), and there is some evidence that encouraging audience input and participation can nudge journalists into reflecting more deeply on news choices and to embrace more solutions journalism, for example (Boesman et al. 2021). Certainly, journalists and scholars alike ought to guard against any axiomatic assumption that popular equals worthless, and to keep in mind that, as far as the economics of the news industry are concerned, it remains to a large extent the actions of “news users” that will determine which news outlets survive (Costera Meijer 2020, p. 400).

Studies have found that even some journalists working in those digital newsrooms—whether physical or virtual—where they are bombarded with information about analytics and metrics can still retain a degree of autonomy when deciding what to cover (Kenza and Van Aelst 2020). Audience data “are not simply numbers,” observes Nicole Blanchett (2021, p. 14), “they are participatory mechanisms that represent human behaviour”. Data always need to be unpicked. How many of the news stories being shared have actually been clicked on and read by the sharer, for example, or is their decision just based on a headline or picture? How much of a video is watched, even by somebody who signals they like it? And what of those members of the audience who may absorb news headlines without ever clicking, sharing or liking, never mind commenting? Is there a danger of such people being overlooked, by journalism scholars as much as by those employed within the news

industry? These are just some of the questions that might benefit from the development of a more nuanced and holistic approach to news that recognizes there are not just tensions at work; there might also be active and conscious struggles going on.

This article is not concerned primarily with labor struggles over the working conditions of journalists—significant though they may be—but with a wider struggle over the *value* of the news produced. This affects citizens not employed in the industry as much as those who are. How such tensions play out in an era of AI and algorithms is already a key part of the research agenda for many scholars of digital journalism (among them, [Diakopoulos 2019a, 2019b](#); [Klinger and Svensson 2018](#); [Møller 2022](#); [Petre 2021](#); [Sehat 2022](#); [Simon 2022](#)), but there is always more to be done when it comes to exploring journalistic agency in the digital era. For example, as [Diakopoulos \(2019a\)](#) argues, one way in which news organizations could assert editorial independence from corporate interests is by developing specifically journalistic algorithms that consider ethical and public interest issues such as diversity, transparency and accuracy alongside commercial considerations. “The future of algorithmic media must be human-centred,” he writes (p. 240), which would mean being more open about how news organizations are using algorithms as well as embedding what he terms “prosocial values” within them (p. 251). Similarly, [Møller \(2022\)](#) calls for greater algorithmic transparency and increased interaction between journalists and coders to mediate tensions around automated news recommendations and how they may serve society as well as individual consumers.

Can such a human-centered approach ever be achieved without a struggle, and who is to decide what the social value of news might be? After all, are authoritarian regimes around the world not attempting to justify the suppression and censorship of independent media with reference to the need for social cohesion? This is why identifying and recording expressions of journalistic agency will be particularly important in exploring not just how to be independent from the state power of the Communist Party of China or the market power of News Corp, but also how in countless small ways journalists and others in civil society can create spaces in which independent news of social value is reported and circulated. Many members of the audience will want to have their say too, whether or not they have been formally invited to participate in the process of news making and the discussion of news values.

Conceiving of news as entailing struggle necessarily requires scholars to dig beneath the surface of news outputs to explore whatever values might underpin production and circulation. This moves beyond acknowledging tensions within the news industry, in a rather passive sense, to asserting the need for active struggle for the *value* of news. The word “struggle” is used here both to signify progressing with difficulty *and* fighting to overcome obstacles; it may entail not just contention but everything up to outright confrontation. The type of news deserving of such a struggle is that with a democratic, civic or citizen-focused orientation, such as has been identified by [Gurevitch and Blumler \(1990\)](#), [Lewis \(2006\)](#) and [Harrison \(2019\)](#) and which is laid out in the theoretical framework above<sup>7</sup>. A struggle for the social value of news is not new but it takes on different forms in a period of intensified, speeded-up, semi-automated, networked and multi-directional digital communication, when neither the economic nor the societal value of news is secure. Within this context, this article argues for an explicit recognition of the need for conscious struggle if the value of news is to be preserved and enhanced.

However, news values are not fixed, and what is understood as the social value of news must necessarily be further studied and contested. For example, as [Parks \(2021, p. 823\)](#) argues in his examination of why “joy” ought to be thought of as an explicitly *positive* news value: “If the news values we have steer us toward negativity, fear, and hopelessness, we can go ahead and pick some new ones.” Given the social value of news, this “we” and “us” ought to be taken as not referring just to scholars and journalists; it also includes audiences, also known as fellow citizens. Struggles might take different forms not only in different places along the news industry continuum but also in different parts of the world, where the conditions under which journalists work can differ markedly ([Josephi 2012](#); [Hanitzsch](#)



2019). In parts of the global South, for example, there have long been moves “to assert different, less ethnocentric, less Western news values” (Bromley and Slavtcheva-Petkova 2019, p. 96). Journalists and other concerned citizens in many countries in the global South have challenged the news values prevalent in the North as representing a form of imperialist hegemony that ought not to be imported uncritically (Douglas and Phillips 2023, pp. 246–57). Such challenges to dominant forms of journalism from voices in the South can “call into question key assumptions about journalism that we have long taken for granted”, argues Hanitzsch (2019, p. 216). Welcome news for those of us who believe that news needs to be dissected, not just defended; and defended, not just dissected.

## 6. Conclusions

News has long been a contested concept but, as we have seen, in the digital era news is also increasingly multidimensional in nature and subject to multiple tensions that influence its capacity to serve citizens with information that meets democratic expectations. This article has traced some of the ways in which the reporting and circulation of the news, in the journalistic sense of the term, are affected by technological and economic disruptions. Tensions have been identified and, while recognizing that news values have never been universal or unproblematic, the argument is made that the tension between a primarily commercial and a primarily social way of valuing news is experienced in intensified ways today. The result is that news of most social value to citizens is at increased risk of being diminished and/or marginalized as news organizations frantically seek ways of surviving in a transformed communications ecosystem. It is not inevitable that digital technology, including AI, should undermine the social value of the news, any more than the impacts and repercussions of earlier technological developments were inevitable. However, if society is to continue to be served with news of social value, it seems that people within the news industry will need to be prepared to engage in struggle to defend it. At the same time, other citizens must do what we can to support it, including paying good money for news if we can afford it. Journalism studies scholars can best contribute not just by continuing to explore the myriad ways in which news circulates in the digital era, but also by turning our attention to the ongoing struggle for news *value*, in the global South as much as the North. As Josephi (2012) has pointed out, spaces for socially useful journalism can exist under non-democratic regimes, just as they can be compromised in more democratic societies, so it would be a mistake to expect identical challenges and solutions to apply everywhere.

There is not just *one* news in the digital era any more than there was in analogue days. Writing within the context of news organizations’ increasing experimentation with TikTok, Newman (2022a, p. 31) argues that “more journalism in the future will be consumed in new formats, using new technology, and within contexts that may seem unthinkable today”. Yet “in many ways the future is now”, as Pavlik (2023, p. 9) points out, in an article described as “coauthored” with a generative AI bot via ChatGPT. Digital technology offers fresh possibilities for news reporting and distribution, as well as fresh problems, but it is the *journalism* that remains most important. “Technology does not become, replace or stand for journalism,” as Barbie Zelizer (2019, p. 344) argues. It is human activity that creates technologies; it is human decision making that decides how such technologies are deployed and regulated; it will be human agency that embraces, adapts or resists the ways that digital technology is used in news; and it is humans as citizens who must struggle for news with a social value, if such news is to survive.

The networked communication capabilities of the digital era open up greater possibilities for collaboration between journalists and other active citizens in what Blassnig and Esser (2022, p. 53) term an “audience logic [which] addresses individual users in a more co-creative community relationship”. This is one way in which alternative and independent not-for-profit media might help citizens shift news reporting more in a civic direction in the digital era, but the potential is there for journalists in *any* news organization, operating in all sorts of societies, to engage a little more reflectively and reflexively. With this in mind, the concept of struggling for the social value of news might be of particular



interest to scholars examining the ways in which the combined digital and street activism of movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and the climate emergency have on occasions subverted the established agenda-setting processes of society and, in the process, have managed temporarily to influence the news agenda even of mainstream news. At a time when journalism around the world faces a range of disruptions, it is an opportune moment to explore not just what alternative media have to say but also what “engaged” journalism from both within and beyond mainstream newsrooms can tell us about “the spectrum of practices that are both critical of and stem from legacy journalism” (Medeiros and Badr 2022, p. 1358).

The stakes are high, not least because humanity is facing the existential threat of a climate emergency. Yet news still has the potential to connect citizens “to stories that represent the fullness of our relations to land, water, humans, and non-human relatives,” insist Callison and Young (2020, p. 214), adding: “Whether, when, and how journalism plays that role remains worthy of ongoing care.” I would go further. It is the contention of this article that we need to go beyond taking *care*; we need to engage in active *struggle* for the social value of news. Such a struggle will play out in different ways—individual and collective—in different places. Not all struggles will be acknowledged as such, and some may be abandoned as attention or energies are exhausted or simply move elsewhere. But struggles there must undoubtedly be, if what Lewis (2006, p. 303) refers to as the “social utility” of news is to be protected and nurtured. That is, if we are to receive sufficient news that comes somewhere near to matching the typology of socially useful political, economic, social and cultural surveillance on behalf of citizens (Harcup 2020); news with a “a notion of citizenship inscribed within its structure”, as Lewis (2006, p. 315) puts it.

This article has traced some of the tensions and disruptions associated with the production and circulation of news in the third decade of the twenty-first century and argued for a more holistic and contextualized approach to studying the news, bringing together what are often seen as separate areas of study. It highlights the argument that news has a social value to citizens and advocates viewing news through a struggle lens. This article has also identified some news values worth struggling for. It is to be hoped that an understanding of this concept of the social value of news could be used by journalists, scholars, regulators and regular citizens to inform debates about the future of news. It can perhaps help temper over-optimism about the latest technological wizardry and over-pessimism about the end of days for quality news; it might also feed into ways in which the journalists of tomorrow are trained, encouraging the asking of some fundamental questions, not the least of which is: “What’s the point of this story?” (Harcup 2021, p. 87). There is much scope for further research. Fruitful lines of inquiry are likely to include testing the robustness of any theoretical definition of the social value of news when confronted with the vagaries of real life; gathering input from journalists, audiences and news avoiders alike into how they define social value; and exploring the usefulness of alternative approaches to news such as activist journalism, collaborative journalism, peace journalism, solutions journalism and slow journalism.

Finally, even though it remains the case that news might be anything said in reply to the age-old query, “What news?”, the vast scholarly literature on news values indicates the reality is messier than that. Answers to the question, “What news?” have become more multidimensional in the digital era, but although AI and algorithms have taken over some of the functions previously carried out by people working in the news industry, news of the most social value is still likely to be both human-focused and human-produced. Just as human activity must solve the existential threat posed to life on Earth by the climate emergency so, equally, human journalists around the world have the social responsibility of reporting on this threat—along with potential solutions—in ways that inform and engage citizens without causing them to switch off. News devoid of any sense of social value—any sense of humanity and ethics—is unlikely to be equipped for that particular struggle. But it is a struggle worth embracing, as is the struggle for the value of news itself.

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## Notes

- 1 This article is primarily concerned with news in this journalistic sense and does not cover so-called “fake news”, propaganda or public relations output.
- 2 Precarity here is primarily economic, but further existential uncertainty may be experienced by journalists facing online trolling and/or those working in situations where retribution or violence from state or non-state actors is a constant threat.
- 3 The forms of alternative media considered here are primarily those with a commitment to some form of news reporting rather than propagandistic commentary. There are many examples of the latter, on the political right as well as the left, but they are beyond the scope of this article.
- 4 Some employers openly determine journalists’ pay or employment status on metrics such as page views, but even those without an explicit policy might use such data for informal staff evaluations.
- 5 Apart, that is, from any “news” items that are both generated *and* consumed by AI bots alone.
- 6 For one thing, some news providers themselves are developing their own technologies, and it would be a missed opportunity if their programs and algorithms merely aped existing platforms. For another thing, flagging up the issue of the social value of news can inform societal debate about values and citizenship, which might be seen as a public good in itself. Beyond news, there are concerns around wider forms of content circulating on social media platforms, but these are not the focus here.
- 7 Other forms of journalism exist but they are beyond the scope of this article.

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