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Newsrooms as Sites of Community and Identity: Exploring the Importance of Material Place for Journalistic Work

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has examined the sociomaterial contexts that shape journalistic practice within and beyond the newsroom, considering relationships between humans, and between humans and (non)physical artifacts like desks, computers, or software. While much of that research has focused on the use and role of technology, recent research also suggests an affective dimension of materiality like the sense of stability provided by physical news spaces. The newsroom as a material and lived place and place of power relations can greatly shape journalists' work practices and identity. However, the relevance of the newsroom as a physical place for journalistic practice has so far been taken for granted. This study investigates the role of the newsroom as a physical, material place for journalistic practice and how it contributes to journalists' sense of belonging and identity. Drawing on interviews with 18 Austrian journalists, we find that newsrooms as sociomaterial places facilitate proximity and serendipity which is perceived as relevant for creative and effective work, as well as a visible manifestation of in-group belonging. As such this study contributes to a better understanding of the meaning and relevance of newsrooms as material places for journalistic work.

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Introduction

Over the past 30 years, digital technology has moved much of journalistic work outside the bounds of physical newsrooms, which in recent years also includes remote work from home. While this has long been an established working model for freelance journalists (Cohen 2016; Salamon 2019), processes of economic restructuring and outsourcing in media companies are now affecting journalists in traditional forms of employment as well. As a consequence, news work is increasingly organized and conducted virtually. Research on virtual newsrooms has repeatedly shown that while they function technologically, some aspects of journalistic work do not translate well into the virtual realm (Bunce, Wright, and Scott 2018; Robinson 2011; Saptorini, Zhao, and Jackson 2021). However,

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the Covid-19 pandemic left few alternatives and suddenly forced even hesitant media organizations to embrace remote work.

From a research perspective, the pandemic has presented scholars with an unanticipated opportunity to explore what does and does not work in virtual newsrooms on a larger scale. Since then, many studies have illustrated the impact of the pandemic on journalistic work and journalists' well-being. Some journalists find they are more effective when working from home, away from the noisy open-plan offices (Cherubini, Newman, and Nielsen 2020; Majid 2021). However, working at home appears to also affect their creativity and well-being negatively (García-Avilés 2021; Hoak 2021; Saptorini, Zhao, and Jackson 2021). While media organizations were able to facilitate an environment conducive to producing journalistic content continuously (Hendrickx and Picone 2022; Saptorini, Zhao, and Jackson 2021), they lacked in providing access to support and community (Hoak 2021; Šimunjak 2021). As such, although journalistic work occurs increasingly outside the traditional realms of the material newsroom (Deuze and Witschge 2018), the newsroom as a distinct place seems to play a key role for journalists' perception of belonging to the professional community and their journalistic identity. While "the newsroom" can technically be "defined as every place of work production" (Le Cam 2015, 151), and as a place of cultural meaning (Usher 2015), it is more than just a location.

In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, we ask how this unpredictable shift to remote work—the absence of a newsroom and material artifacts—contributed to or diminished journalists' sense of belonging and work. Based on interviews with 18 journalists in Austria across beats and media types, we show that even though journalists "made it work" from home, the newsroom and material artifacts play a crucial role in allowing journalists to carry out journalistic work they envision as "good journalism", and that the visual cues and interactions within the newsroom as a place reaffirm their journalistic identity. As such, this study contributes to a better understanding of newsrooms as material places and objects as resources for journalists' perception of the quality of their work and belonging to a professional community.

The Sociomateriality of Journalistic Practice and Place: A Theoretical Framework

Place is largely taken for granted in journalism research (Usher 2019, 85). Even though "where" is a key dimension in journalistic reporting, where journalistic practice takes place has continuously been understudied. Place shapes what and how journalists know about new information (Tuchman 1978) and is crucial for journalists' legitimacy and claims to authority (Carlson 2017; Usher 2019). While (local) journalism scholarship has focused more on the role of place for journalism to facilitate a sense of community for audiences (Gutsche Jr. and Hess 2018; Hess 2013), the role of newsrooms as a material place in journalism practice has been explicitly acknowledged only in ethnographic work (Boczkowski 2010; Robinson 2011; Tuchman 1978; Usher 2015; Zaman 2013).

Still, place is a complex concept as it carries both material and cultural meaning. Communication and journalism research have often conflated these dimensions and use different descriptors of spatiality synonymously (Usher 2019, 92). More recently, researchers investigating the spatial settings of journalism have divided these into three conceptual categories: (1) the material, (2) the material setting for relations, and (3) the symbolic

(Bunce, Wright, and Scott 2018; Mari 2021; Robinson 2011; Usher 2019; Zaman 2013). Here, theories on space and place from social geography have been most informative.¹ For instance, Lefebvre (2013) thinks of space as existing in material, represented, and lived form; Harvey (2006) conceptualizes space as fixed and physical (absolute space), as spatiotemporal configurations of objects and people (relative space), and the meanings that develop through these relations and the predispositions that people bring to a place (relational space); and Cresswell (2009) considers place as material location, locale (material setting for social relations), and having an affective sense of place, i.e., the “feelings and emotions a place evokes” (Cresswell 2009, 1).

Likewise, we can conceptualize newsrooms as places with three distinct dimensions (Bunce, Wright, and Scott 2018; Usher 2019, 91; Zaman 2013). First, the newsroom is a real, *material location* with desks, chairs, computers and more. Second, it is a spatiotemporal structured *sociomaterial place*, in which desks, chairs, computers, but also people take up room in relation to each other. This configuration of objects with a specific layout shapes what journalists can do, how much time specific actions might take, and what meaning their actions can have. And lastly, the newsroom is a *symbolic place of meaning and power*, like the “space for newsroom culture, the mindset of employees, and the process of journalism” (Robinson 2011, 1124), and providing journalists with a sense of belonging. Below, we expand on these dimensions further, also in relation to empirical research on newsrooms as places.

Newsrooms as Material and Sociomaterial Places

The newsroom as material place shapes *where* journalistic news is primarily produced; where journalists work, they are more aware of issues arising in spatial proximity (Usher 2019). Historically, newsrooms as material places were located in representative buildings and in close proximity to centers of power, like parliaments, courthouses, and city councils, only recently moving to the outskirts of cities as property prices went up and technology allowed journalists to be informed without being on-site (Le Cam 2015; Tuchman 1978; Usher 2015; Wilke 2003). As such, the material place of newsrooms is also a good indicator for understanding economic constraints on news production and how technology changes it.

The newsroom as sociomaterial place also shapes *how* journalists produce news. Sociomateriality describes the relationships between humans, and between humans and (non-)physical objects like desks, computers, or software. As such, sociomateriality not only refers to what objects *do* but also what they *mean* for people and how they mediate practice (Neff 2015). That is, practices can differ depending on the objects employed and the interactions with these objects (Orlikowski 2007). With regard to the newsroom, the objects in it and journalists’ interactions with them, shape their agency in news production and the relationships they form within the newsroom (Boczkowski 2010).

Historically, the newsroom went hand in hand with the professionalization of journalistic work and developed from a shared open-plan room, in which many editors worked, to a spatially separated organization of news work along specialized beats in single rooms or areas (Wilke 2003). Since the mid-twentieth century, however, open-plan offices were re-introduced to foster teamwork and more efficient coordination of news work (Garcia Avilés and Carvajal 2008; Usher 2019, 113). While the open-plan newsroom increases

collaborative work, it can also be distracting, act as a form of control (Breed 1955), and make some journalists invisible. Even though they have generally become much quieter places with the disappearance of typewriters (Le Cam 2015), open-plan newsrooms are still frequently described as loud with journalists talking on the phone, shouting, and news programs running in the background (Boczkowski 2010; Zaman 2013). Moreover, journalists can also see and assess their colleagues' productivity (Le Cam 2015). *Seeing* colleagues and conversing with them frequently improves work relationships and makes certain aspects of news work, like story construction, seem more relevant to reporters (Robinson 2011). This is also in line with work which highlights that working in proximity to others improves newsroom socialization. For example, Steensen (2018, 10) illustrates how seemingly mundane objects such as having your own desk had a significant impact on young intern journalists' socialization into routines and feeling as "part of the newsroom".

The importance of taken-for-granted objects in newsroom socialization is further illustrated in Boczkowski (2010)'s account of the contrasting news production in two units of an Argentinian media organization. Even though both newsrooms were located in the same building on the same floor, their materiality and how people engaged with objects and each other were extremely different, one crammed and loud, the other spacious and much quieter, also impacting speed of reporting and the occurrence of informal talk. Moran and Usher (2021, 1162) further systemize newsroom objects and distinguish between hard, soft and unexpected objects of journalism; where hard objects are physical, soft objects are primarily digital, and unexpected objects are "defined not by their physicality but by their unanticipated relationship to journalism", for instance paintings, merchandise, and furniture. Likewise, air-conditioning, break rooms, and canteens can be viewed as unexpected objects making work more pleasant (Mari 2021). Access to material objects—both hard and soft—can also indicate changing working conditions in journalism (Le Cam 2015), when for example atypically employed journalists rely primarily on their personal, privately-owned computers for work.

The sociomaterial is, however, not bound to the physical newsroom. Bunce and colleagues (2018) argue that virtual newsrooms are also shaped by objects and journalists' relationship to them and other journalists. For instance, resources like old equipment, a slow internet connection, a busy home, or technology skills, all shape how journalists work in a virtual newsroom. This has been especially highlighted by research on the impact of remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic (Hendrickx and Picone 2022; Hoak 2021; Saptorini, Zhao, and Jackson 2021; Šimunjak 2021). Besides the objects of journalistic work, the material newsroom and the relationships it facilitates play a key role in shaping journalists' perception of belonging to the professional community and their journalistic identity. In fact, Moran and Usher (2021) suggest that newsrooms' materiality can have an affective dimension for journalists.

Newsrooms as Symbolic Place of Meaning, Power and Identity

Lastly, newsrooms as a relational place contribute to journalists' identity and perception of belonging. As humans we build connections and feelings toward the places we live in, and similarly, journalists develop a sense of belonging based on the feelings and emotions they attach to the place, its objects and other journalists within that place

(Cresswell 2009; Usher 2019). As such, the place is imbued with meaning, both on an individual and collective level. The newsroom as a place offers journalists a set of tools and interactions that allow them to form and reinforce positive intergroup distinctiveness based on shared beliefs, which promotes self-esteem and a sense of group belonging. When journalists more than ever before are confronted with the pressures to “fend off” emerging actors they perceive as disruptive to the field and the norms and values that define it (Eldridge 2018), journalists experience the newsroom as a locus where field belonging and identity can be reaffirmed. Digital journalists, for example, distinguish themselves from “others” by claiming their belonging to an established organization (Ferrucci and Vos 2017).

Similarly, research indicates that material newsrooms matter to journalists and their sense of belonging in that “many journalists are deeply attached to the buildings they worked in” (Usher 2019, 113) and take pride in their newsrooms (Mari 2021). When a US-based newspaper moved its newsroom from a prestigious building to offices above a Hard Rock Café, a journalist remarked: “This is not a newsroom” (Clark, 2014; cited in Usher 2015, 1006). As such, the buildings, newsroom, and objects are part of journalistic identity. For example, modern art can contribute to journalists’ perception of belonging to a cultivated workspace, hard objects like a desk can offer a sense of stability, historic objects add to the perception of being part of a newsroom with history and tradition (Moran and Usher 2021).

At the same time, a newsroom is a visible marker of boundary-drawing, as access to it is regimented, and both spatial organization and newsroom culture reflect power dynamics and hierarchization (Le Cam 2015; Usher 2019; Zaman 2013). Access to the place and the objects of journalism can then serve a purpose of distinction from others (Moran and Usher 2021). For instance, journalism students who had experience working in legacy newsrooms rejected the idea of a virtual Pop-Up Newsroom as it did not provide the sociomaterial resources needed to distinguish their work from that of amateurs (Wall 2015). Similarly, television journalists who had to adapt to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic rejected the use of 4G streaming equipment instead of a regular television camera setting, perceiving it as unprofessional even though it is standard in professional YouTube content creation (Saptorini, Zhao, and Jackson 2021).

Newsrooms are therefore also places of shared cultural meaning. In Bourdieusian terms (Bourdieu 1977, 214), having a sense of place relates to the habitus, the practical sense or “social sensitivity” (Wacquant 1992, 20) for indirectly communicated knowledge, rules, and norms within a specific place (Hess 2013; Schultz 2007). Consequently, physically being in a newsroom also contributes to forming a feeling for its specific culture and sense of belonging (Joseph 1998). Moreover, feeling embedded in a community and understanding the shared dispositions contributes to confidence, renders work meaningful, and is necessary to feel in control over one’s work (De Peuter, Cohen, and Saraco 2017). This is also evident from research on atypically employed journalists. For instance, freelancers with weak ties to newsrooms have little opportunity to “get a feel for how editors work and think” which impedes socialization into the specific rules of the game of a newsroom even more (Gollmitzer 2014, 833; cf. Mathisen 2019; Summ 2013).

Thus, even though newsrooms are often described metaphorically as warzones, as messy, loud, and for some marginalized groups as toxic (Antunovic, Grzeslo, and Hoag

2019; Boczkowski 2010; Mari 2021; Reyna 2023; Robinson 2011; Zaman 2013), they can also facilitate community and room for emotional support. Early ethnographic work has already illustrated the role of peer support in news decision making (Breed 1955; Tuchman 1978), and recent studies also highlight the role of colleagues for creativity, professional reassurance and sense of belonging (Hoak 2021; Robinson 2011). In a study on how the pandemic has affected journalists' well-being, Šimunjak (2021, 10) shows that respondents missed the newsroom as a place "for emotional release to, and support from, colleagues, leading to feelings of frustration, anxiety and worry".

Based on the above discussion outlining the dimensions through which the newsroom as a place can be conceptualized and given the lack of knowledge about what particular meaning journalists ascribe to physical workplaces in digital times, we developed the following questions:

RQ 1: How do journalists think about the newsroom as a physical, material place and what role does it play in their everyday work practice?

RQ 2: How does the newsroom contribute to journalists' sense of belonging and professional identity?

Method

To answer these research questions, we draw on interviews from a diverse sample of 18 Austrian journalists who abruptly had to switch to remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Comparatively, the Austrian media system is a relatively typical model found in countries across central and Western Europe (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Hanitzsch et al. 2019). Furthermore, most media companies tend to be concentrated in Austria's capital Vienna, a highly competitive job market for journalists (Grünangerl, Trappel, and Tomaz 2021), making it ideal for identifying a diverse sample. Participants were selected through a purposive sampling approach that aimed to include journalists working across different beats and with varying experience with voluntary remote work. Since previous research has predominantly focused on newspaper newsrooms (Boczkowski 2010; Bunce, Wright, and Scott 2018; Moran and Usher 2021; Robinson 2011; Usher 2015) and largely ignored the materiality of television and radio newsrooms, we sought to include these media types as well.

To recruit participants who met our selection criteria, we employed both convenience and snowball sampling. As an initial step, we used our own contacts with journalists working in different Austrian media outlets. We then asked these contacts to recommend other colleagues who had worked remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic and we contacted them as well. In addition, we reached out to more extreme cases of journalists who had publicly reported on their experiences with remote work—either through their social media accounts or through statements quoted in formats of meta-journalistic discourse about the home office.

To allow for more reflection on their shift to remote work and back to a "new normal", data collection occurred in two waves. The first wave of nine interviews took place in the summer of 2021, the second one of 11 more interviews in the summer of 2022 when most of our respondents had returned to some work in the physical newsroom. In total, 18 journalists agreed to interviews. After 15 interviews we found that responses reiterated similar

perceptions and new insights decreased, suggesting we had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 2017; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). Hence, we ended the sampling at this point.

Out of the 18 journalists in our sample, 10 worked for print media (including local as well as national papers, tabloids as well as broadsheets and weekly magazines), four for television stations (public service as well as private TV), another three for radio stations (all public service radio) and one for a news agency. Four of them worked as freelance journalists. Respondents ranged in age from 28 to 59 with an average age of 38 years, and had journalistic experience ranging from 3.5 to 35 years, with an average of 13 years. Eleven of the interviewees identified as women. An overview of the distribution of gender, media type, age, experience as a journalist, and employment status can be found in Table 1. All journalists were assigned a pseudonym.

The majority of interviews, 16 in total, were conducted by three researchers via Zoom which has proven to be an appropriate tool for data collection in qualitative research (Archibald et al. 2019) and allowed us to record the conversation in high quality. Only two interviews were conducted in person. Interviews lasted about 52 min on average (ranging from 35 to 73 min) yielding a total of more than 16 hours of material for analysis.

This article is part of a larger study and we used a semi-structured question guide addressing a broad spectrum of issues, including respondents' initial feelings about the forced transition to remote work, their views on the home office as compared to the physical newsroom, their strategies for coping with the new situation, the role of place and tools for their professional identity as journalists, and their preferences for future work models in journalism. Example questions included "How did you feel at the very beginning when it became clear that the work now had to be done from home?", "Can you please describe to me what your home office workplace looks like?", "To what extent did you miss working in the newsroom during this time?", "Please imagine that you enter your newsroom, walk through the door and look around. What gives you the

Table 1. Sample.

Name ^a	Gender	Media type	Age	Experience ^b	Employment
Frank	Male	National newspaper	46	19	Full-time
Christian	Male	Regional public broadcast	31	8	Full-time
Julia	Female	Regional newspaper	35	13	Full-time
Sebastian	Male	Regional newspaper	36	11	Full-time
Vanessa	Female	Regional newspaper	28	7	Freelancer
Alexander	Male	National public broadcast (TV)	34	14	Full-time
Sara	Female	National newspaper	28	14	Freelancer
Sven	Male	National commercial broadcast (TV)	32	11	Full-time
Nicole	Female	News agency	36	11	Full-time
Denis	Male	Print media (various)	37	12	Freelancer
Jutta	Female	National public broadcast (Radio)	57	32	Full-time
Michael	Male	National public broadcast (TV)	36	7.5	Full-time
Tim	Male	National newspaper	27	3.5	Full-time
Marie	Female	Weekly magazine	33	9	Freelancer
Thomas	Male	National public broadcast (Radio)	59	20+	Full-time
Jessica	Female	National newspaper	33	13	Full-time
Sabine	Female	National public broadcast (Radio)	57	35	Full-time
Claudia	Female	National newspaper	53	22	Full-time

^aNames are pseudonyms.

^bJournalistic experience in years.

feeling of being a journalist?”, “What would be an ideal future working model for you?”, “What was the first thing you did when you returned to the newsroom?”.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analyzed by the authors, using MAXQDA software. Thematic analysis has proven an appropriate method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun and Clarke 2006). In identifying themes, it can combine deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis (Fram 2013). Accordingly, our analysis was guided primarily by our theoretical interest, using a “top-down” way” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 83). However, we also paid attention to further themes that emerged in the interviews that did not fit into our pre-existing coding frame. More specifically, from theoretical considerations and previous research on remote work in journalism and newsrooms as places of identity and community, we analyzed the interviews with the main analytical categories of (1) the material, (2) the sociomaterial, and (3) the affective dimensions of the newsroom. For the sociomaterial dimension we also paid particular attention to references to the hard, soft, and unexpected objects of journalistic work. Through inductive coding, we identified additional themes, such as the relationship between place and (1) efficient work, (2) well-being, and (3) serendipity. While we touch upon virtual newsrooms, we only discuss their meaning in relation to the physical newsroom when journalists indicated in interviews what they missed but do not intend a comparison of which form of organization works better.

Findings

The Role of the (Socio)Material Newsroom for Effective News Work

Regarding the first research question, how journalists think about the newsroom as a material place and what role it plays in their everyday practice, we found that it is only mentioned in a few cases explicitly. Rather, it is the sociomaterial and relational newsroom, that is, the layout and set-up of the newsroom, that came up more often, as well as specific objects required in journalists’ everyday work. As such, interviewees emphasized aspects of proximity and serendipity, rendering the newsroom a place especially conducive to working efficiently and fulfilling the role of “good journalism”.

Relating to the material newsroom as a place, unsurprisingly, especially radio and television journalists referred to the necessity of specific places, like cutting rooms or a studio. Even though they acknowledged that broadcast production also worked remotely with the newest technology at hand, like mixing consoles and high-quality recording equipment, they were adamant that the quality of news production in a studio is higher and emblematic for their news companies. Here, absolute silence without acoustic noise normally available in newsroom studios is crucial, indicating that also the absence of something can make a place relevant for news work. This is reminiscent of Mari’s (2021) argument that the nonexistence of heat can contribute to a more professional work environment.

Generally, when asked what they need to perform their work as journalists and when describing their everyday work surroundings, most journalists mentioned hard objects and said they only required a laptop, phone and notepad. Some added they needed other office supplies for an ergonomic working environment, like desks, external desktops, in some cases two monitors, printers, office chairs, and lamps. As such, the newsroom as a place also offers predictable order, especially for those who are unable to

set up a proper office at home due to economic or space constraints. This becomes especially apparent in the following quote by Alexander, a television journalist reflecting on what he missed most about working in a newsroom:

At home, everything was all over the place. I mean, I sat here and there [in the apartment]. Then I had slips of paper everywhere when I took notes. Everything was always lying around somewhere.

More specific hard objects are related to specific beats or media types; for instance, broadcast and photojournalists mentioned cameras, recording equipment and mixing consoles. Journalists working breaking news beats said they needed a television and radio running in the background and an external desktop for news agencies and social media streams. Likewise, in the instances when journalists mentioned soft objects, most referred to content management systems (CMS) and only those working with multimedia elements brought up software to record and edit (audio-)visual material.

All of these objects relate to efficient work, and thus the newsroom as a place is also primarily viewed through the lens of efficiency for journalists. Several journalists, across media types but mostly in breaking news, emphasized the aspect of being able to “shout” a problem out to fellow colleagues in the newsroom to receive an immediate response. As such, working in a newsroom together—especially in an open-plan place—allows fast and direct communication, as this quote from Denis, a print journalist indicates, when he reflected what he missed most while working remotely: “being able to just shout over your shoulder and such, that is something I miss obviously”. The spatial proximity also ensures that journalists get help and feedback easier and quicker, which is especially beneficial for young journalists, as said by newspaper journalist Tim who only started out one year before the pandemic began. This highlights once more the importance of physical newsrooms for journalists’ socialization (Steensen 2018). Even journalists who enjoyed the shift to remote work as an opportunity to escape from working in a noisy open-plan office, agreed that proximity and personal contact was indeed beneficial for efficient problem-solving.

Moreover, working together in a sociomaterial place enables journalists to practice and provide “good journalism”. Here, respondents perceived the newsroom as a collaborative place to “brainstorm together”, to “tinker together on something” (Frank), to “sit together at a table and deliberate it” (Christian), to “write a news story together” (Sara). Respondents believed physical proximity enhanced the interactive dynamic in these processes, as television journalist Christian said: “It [journalism] is a creative process (...) which works differently when you sit face to face opposite each other”. The newsroom as place provides room to talk with each other, which is seen as relevant basis to produce good journalism across all beats, as Thomas, a radio journalist elaborated:

The purpose of journalism is to tell good stories. And these develop most of the time when you talk with each other, when you tell each other things, when you learn something from others, which is then perhaps a piece of the puzzle for something that you yourself have already heard.

What is more, the opportunity to gain different perspectives was perceived to be absent in remote work, leading to “tunnel vision” (Julia); working alone meant working in a “self-centered” way (Tim). Instead, working together allowed journalists to get a different

perspective on issues, ideas for possible sources and story angles. Several journalists therefore believed that virtual newsrooms decreased the quality of journalism as exchange and connectivity within the newsroom got lost. As Julia, a newspaper journalist said:

It's supposed to be a joint project, a newspaper like this, and not a project in which everyone cooks their own soup. And I think—well, it worked very well for us with Zoom and everything—but I don't think it's possible in the long run. Because the exchange is missing.

Moreover, proximity facilitates having a sense of the bigger picture and minimizes the likelihood that several journalists within the same newsroom end up working on the same topic separately. Several respondents referred to instances in which similar story ideas were developed by different journalists at the same time during the period of remote work. Compared to a virtual newsroom, they said, the open-plan office just provided more awareness of what stories others are planning. Especially in larger companies, journalists thus need to be aware of what happens in other sub-units, and this is more easily facilitated in the newsroom, argued Jutta, a radio journalist: “We noticed today, just by talking in person, that someone planned a similar program [to us] and that is only possible when you talk with each other. (...) That works better when people get together”.

At the same time—and this reiterates findings from years of newsroom ethnographies (Boczkowski 2010; Zaman 2013)—newsrooms were described as loud. This noisiness and bustle were perceived as counterproductive for many journalists, preventing them from working efficiently. The newsroom as a sociomaterial place “whirs constantly” (Tim), “disrupts nonstop” (Jutta), provides “no silence at all” (Marie), as “some people are loud” (Nicole). Denis went to the heart of the problem:

Journalists do two things an insane amount. It's still a profession that consists to a very large extent of making phone calls. (...) So it consists of making phone calls and it consists of writing. And those are just things that are super hard to do in an open-plan office. That's just the way it is.

Some journalists even reminisced about old times, when newsrooms had telephone booths or dedicated telephone rooms which rarely exist today anymore.

Lastly, journalists also often referred to unexpected objects and places in the interviews, predominantly relating to the serendipity of creative work. Most often, journalists named the newsroom kitchen, coffee or break room as places that facilitate their everyday practice. Others also mentioned the canteen or hallway, places in which journalists across beats could meet by chance and have a “semi-professional, semi-personal chat” (Frank). These small, seemingly meaningless and mundane, interactions were often referred to as providing a new angle to a news story or leading to new ideas, as is illustrated in this quote by Jutta: “I would say, for our profession, it is important to move, to go somewhere, to open a door, see people, talk with people. A colleague says something to me in the hallway and that's it! That was the piece missing in my work”.

The Newsroom as a Place of Belonging and Professional Identity

Regarding our second research question, how a place contributes to a sense of belonging and professional identity, we found that the newsroom offers a visible connection to

journalists' work and their peers, and structures their every day, contributing to their well-being (see also Šimunjak 2021). Some respondents explicitly mentioned the newsroom as a crucial dimension for them to perceive themselves as professional journalists. They referred to the newsroom as "the base, from which you work and where you are and where you are anchored", as Thomas put it. The newsroom provides identification with their work and with the employer, said Sara, who works for a newspaper and Michael, a television journalist. A radio journalist working in a "building laden with history" said that as soon as "I step over the doorsill, I feel I am a journalist. Just by walking in" (Jutta). Sven, a television journalist who works on-site and thus outside the newsroom most of the time, emphasized that the meetings in the physical newsroom are crucial to feel connected and build relationships with colleagues. Likewise, local journalist Vanessa said, she explicitly drove 30 km to the new newsroom which was established during the pandemic because she hoped her everyday work would be less difficult for her:

Because I'd have the journalistic environment again. That is, the editorial office, where people really work on a newspaper and where you also see the newspaper on-site. And where everything is just so—well, the newsroom was already a very professional environment, as it looked. That's why I went back to it, simply so that I could have the newspaper environment again, so that I could feel as if I really worked for a newspaper.

As such, it is not surprising that many respondents thought remote work and virtual newsrooms had changed the social exchange with their colleagues. For instance, some said they "extremely" missed having lunch and coffee with their colleagues. Especially for weak tie relationships, that is, as Sven said, the colleagues "that I wouldn't call on the phone but who I enjoy chatting to", the newsroom provides a necessary common ground and adds to their perception of belongingness to a professional community (cf. Summ 2013).

Moreover, our results reiterate findings from Šimunjak (2021) that the newsroom also provides a place for journalists' emotional management, to vent to colleagues, and maintain their personal well-being at work. Vanessa said it helped her to discuss harassment from audiences and interview partners and the stress she felt with her colleagues in informal chats. Likewise, Tim, a young journalist who had to work remotely when the Russian invasion into Ukraine started in early 2022, said he then realized how important actual social contact is for him as a journalist and for his well-being. Being and working alone while having to process horrible information made him all the more upset:

Mentally, I noticed I felt something that I had not ever before, where I thought, if it continues like that, I will become so unhappy, because you see, for example, all these agency photos that never end up in the news with corpses and blood and dead children and everything. And then, I always talked a lot about it with my colleagues (...) [Since then] talking to colleagues in person has of course helped a lot more than a telephone call.

Lastly, the newsroom provides journalists with a sense of stability and structure. This is most vividly visible in contrast to the lack of physical boundaries between work and leisure time during remote work. When journalists worked from home, they actively had to develop a ritual to disconnect from work, as newspaper journalist Julia said: "you don't have that moment where you leave the office". This reiterates findings on remote and virtual newsrooms where being "at work" easily becomes the default (Cohen 2012; Robinson 2011). However, the structuring quality of the newsroom is also

visible throughout the working day. Some journalists reported that they are more active in the newsroom, they walk around to fetch things and, on the way, have a chat with colleagues. All of that is lost at home where respondents said they sometimes remained in the same spot the entire day. This is most strikingly exemplified by television journalist Alexander:

In the home office, I always lose myself in my work somehow more, I notice. I forget much more about eating and drinking when I'm working at home than when I'm at work. There I get up more often, gossip a bit, and get a coffee.

The role of the newsroom for journalists' professional identity also shines through when we asked them what they first did when they returned to it. Their answers show that to them the newsroom is not only any physical place, but a place filled with meaning and comfort. Tim said he first went to his work area to check whether everything was as he had left it: "I had decorated my place (...) and I first went and checked, is everything still there? Where are my books?" Jutta watered her plants first and cleaned her desk to get situated. Others checked the mail or turned the air-conditioning on. For one journalist, the ability to stay cool was actually the main reason to return to the newsroom (cf. Mari 2021). However, the first activity that was most often mentioned, was to go and get a coffee, a ritual to start the work day.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, our results indicate that newsrooms are more than *just a location* of work for journalists. Instead, newsrooms as places provide journalists with a sense of efficiency and ideals of "good" journalism, offer them both structure and unexpectedness, and function as boundary markers and contribute to their journalistic identity. Thus, while journalism can *technically* be done from any place, the newsroom carries meaning beyond the organizational structure.

Newsrooms as sociomaterial places of collective knowledge production shape journalistic practice in more profound ways than we might expect. First, they are a place for exchange and debate. Be it in editorial meetings or when working together on a news story, we find that journalists in our study believe that discussions are more insightful and effective when they occur face-to-face, reiterating previous research results. What is more, journalists emphasized the serendipitous character of journalistic practice in newsrooms. This is reminiscent of journalists' narrations of the non-routine character of their everyday work. Just like no work day appears to be like the other to journalists (Örnebring and Schmitz Weiss 2021), chance and serendipity are routinized and integrated into journalistic practice by building on constant exchange with others.

These themes point to the relevance of collaborative work in journalistic practice and are linked to aspects of efficiency but also to notions of "good journalism", and ultimately to journalism's role for society (Kunelius 2006). First, spatial proximity is viewed as a requirement for efficient work. Sitting next to colleagues in an open-plan or shared office provides journalists with the perception that they could ask for advice or help any time, which is especially relevant for journalists new to the newsroom (Steensen 2018). This is in contrast to virtual newsrooms, where journalists must write or call someone. As such, for our respondents, the virtual newsroom reduces spontaneity

because they believe their problem might be too trivial to disturb colleagues, or because writing, reading, and answering messages might be perceived as too time-consuming. While this might also be a reflection of the difficulty of an ad hoc implementation of virtual newsrooms (Appelgren 2022), virtual newsrooms might not be conducive to receiving a prompt answer, and waiting for it could be perceived as a nuisance. In a sense, waiting is in stark contrast to the shared belief that journalism must be fast-paced and always a step ahead (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999; Rosenberg and Feldman 2008). Here, future research should investigate the different *perceptions of time* depending on the place of work.

Secondly, the material newsroom contributes to perceptions of what “good journalism” is, as it offers room for debate and serendipitous knowledge exchange, preventing tunnel vision and ideally contributing to more diverse reporting. Journalists emphasize the necessity of outside perspectives to evaluate their work and ultimately do “good journalism”, even though they look for this outside perspective in their professional community. This is reminiscent of one dimension of journalism and citizen expectations of what journalism ought to do: provide objective and verified information, and new and diverse perspectives on issues (Gil de Zúñiga and Hinsley 2013; Karlsson and Clerwall 2019; Kuneilius 2006). Here, the absence of spatial proximity introduces a shift which might also affect journalistic epistemic practice: whereas in physical newsrooms journalists sit together, debate, and maybe even work creatively together by using whiteboards or editing audio or video material, in virtual newsrooms they tend to work alone, maybe connect with colleagues over online chat or in telephone conferences. Similar to how the introduction of computers shifted journalistic epistemology from a craft to screenwork (De Maeyer and Le Cam 2015), the move to virtual newsrooms might introduce a shift from journalism as collaborative to individual practice. Moreover, as Robinson (2011) proposed in her study on virtual and physical newsrooms, *seeing* colleagues contributes to awareness. As such, while this could include a form of social control (Breed 1955), the material newsroom also facilitates awareness of what is going on within the newsroom, which topics are covered, how and by whom. Taken together, these findings illustrate the communicative and collaborative character of journalistic practice and that journalism is the work of many—and that this can be done best by working together in a material place.

At the same time, our findings support research suggesting an affective dimension of newsrooms as places, contributing to journalists’ identity and sense of belonging but also shaping their mental well-being. Most profoundly, newsrooms establish journalists’ shared perception of their societal role: the loud and stressful breaking news desk gives journalists the sense that they are doing highly relevant and timely work (Zaman 2013), the quiet studio-cabin means they provide quality audio-journalism, distinct from podcast recordings done at home (Saptorini, Zhao, and Jackson 2021). As such, the presence or absence of noise contributes to journalists’ specific identity. Consequently, we could argue these shared beliefs about what it means to be a journalist are present in their expectations of a newsroom as a sociomaterial place. Moreover, newsrooms are a visible, tangible reminder to journalists that they belong to a professional community, especially for those whose status is uncertain like journalists on short-rolling contracts. Here, our study reiterates arguments by Usher (2019) and Mari (2021) that journalists take pride in the newsrooms and buildings they work in, especially when they are history-laden like a public broadcast radio news building might be.

Likewise, seeing others engage in similar work, sitting in an office that represents the shared vision of news work as bustling, can provide journalists with a sense of stability in uncertain times and acts as a boundary marker to those who do not belong in the newsroom (Eldridge 2018). Moreover, while newsroom shouting can be seen as disruptive to work, such acts of seeking and exchanging advice with fellow colleagues in the midst of journalistic work can also serve as a way to discursively reinforce commonly accepted norms and practices within a defined place, among peers who share the same mindset (Breed 1955). In a sense, the newsroom as a physical place seems to also be important for reinforcing how journalists construct their roles, both on cognitive and normative levels in terms of what they think they should or want to do, as well as in how they articulate their roles and potentially go on to enact those roles in the journalism they produce (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Mellado et al. 2020). Future research should take this into account.

Lastly, journalistic work can be emotionally difficult, and journalists might not always have people outside of work to turn to and discuss challenging situations with. Here, the newsroom as a relational place facilitates relationships to colleagues which allow them to unwind and release some of the emotional stress (Šimunjak, 2021). However, our interviews also indicate that many of these relationships are weak and place-bound, and thus journalists do not necessarily turn to them in remote working settings. Taken together, these findings highlight the value of newsrooms as places reinforcing journalists' sense of belonging to a professional community, especially in times of crisis, and might be a cautious reminder to newsroom management to retain the newsroom as a physical place. This is further strengthened by our findings confirming existing assumptions that remote work delineates journalists' working time and contributes to workaholism due to an internalization of job uncertainty and organizational control (Cohen 2012; Reyna 2023; Robinson 2011).

While research also indicates that many journalists prefer a more flexible model with remote days (Cherubini, Newman, and Nielsen 2020), the material newsroom still serves a purpose both for journalistic practice and journalists' professional identity. Two years after the Covid-19 pandemic had started, many of our respondents still worked from home to some extent. While many saw this hybrid model as "having the best of two worlds", others worried that their employers might slowly move to smaller newsrooms with flexible desks to lower costs. Concluding, we could provide ample reasons to acknowledge the newsroom and the resources that it provides to journalists more explicitly in research on journalistic practice (Örnebring et al. 2018). Considering the newsroom as a material, sociomaterial and affective place will also help to uncover issues of inequality and unequal access in news production as well as to what extent journalists have a sense for the specific newsroom and journalistic culture (Gollmitzer 2014; Summ 2013).

We acknowledge that our approach to interview journalists about their views of newsroom and remote work is limited insofar as semi-structured interviews are discursive representations of journalists' perceptions of their experiences and processes of meaning-making. While ethnographic work could ideally complement our interviews, it was not feasible due to the context of the pandemic. Moreover, interviews relating to past events are always complicated by longer delay periods; however, we believe that interviewing journalists one year and two years after the pandemic started strengthens our

findings. As we are primarily interested in journalists' assessment of what the newsroom means to them as a material, sociomaterial, and affective place, the two waves of interviews provide contrast and insight into longer-lasting perceptions. As such, we can assume that the themes that we found were not only shaped by the uncertainty and unexpectedness of the first year of the pandemic. Lastly, interviews can be compromised by social desirability, which in our case might mean that journalists were more or less critical of the shift to remote work depending on what effects they expected from our study.

Note

1. We deliberately use only the term "place" to refer to newsrooms, as the term "space" can encapsulate many meanings and is a broader concept in social geography studies, communication studies, and journalism studies (cf. Usher 2019, 92; Harvey 2006, 270). In contrast, "place" is "definable and knowable" as it refers to "the environment where we live our lives and from which we draw meaning and identity" (Usher 2019, 90).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics

Data collection for this project was approved by the IRB of the Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Austria. Furthermore, we have received written informed consent by all our respondents prior to the interviews.

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