

# MEDIÁLNÍ STUDIA

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# MEDIA STUDIES

JOURNAL FOR CRITICAL MEDIA INQUIRY

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# CONTENTS

## STUDIES

Nico Carpentier & Vaia Doudaki

**“If You Don't Nurture the Nature Inside of You, You Will Eventually Die”:  
A Discourse-Theoretical Analysis of the Discursive Assemblage  
of Ecocentrism and Its Ethics in the Swedish Television Series Jordskott ..... 6**

František Géla & Veronika Macková

**The Other or Visually Almost the Same?  
A Comparison of the Visual Coverage of Athletes with and without a Disability .....27**

Isabella Lamanna, Rosa Scardigno & Francesca D'Errico

**The Language of Racist Virality: A Content Analysis of Italian Racial Hoaxes .....51**

Kirstin Pellizzaro & Madeleine Liseblad

**Journalism Across Platforms:  
A Content Analysis of the Washington Post's Early Framing of Ukraine War Stories .....75**

Dejan Jontes, Breda Luthar & Maruša Pušnik

**Multiplicity of Media Choices and Privatised Mobility in Quarantine .....97**

Raheemat Adeniran

**Exploring Audience Engagement Strategies of Data  
Journalism Practices in Nigerian Online News Media ..... 113**

# “IF YOU DON'T NURTURE THE NATURE INSIDE OF YOU, YOU WILL EVENTUALLY DIE”: A DISCOURSE-THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DISCURSIVE ASSEMBLAGE OF ECOCENTRISM AND ITS ETHICS IN THE SWEDISH TELEVISION SERIES JORDSKOTT

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## ABSTRACT

*The article analyses the discursive construction of human-nature relationships in the first series of the Swedish television fiction series *Jordskott*, with its narrative about the supernatural. Driven by Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, the article investigates how the series intervenes in environmental debates through an active defence of the discursive assemblage of ecocentrism, using the discursive strategy of ethicisation to strengthen the claims for this assemblage and its constitutive discourses. By using the method of discourse-theoretical analysis, the article's analysis scrutinizes *Jordskott*'s three main actor groups—nature, humans and humanoids—to show the articulation of ecocentrism, entanglementism, posthumanism, indigenism and (anti-)romanticism, and how an ethical repertoire is used to strengthen the position of this ecocentric discursive assemblage, in its struggle with anthropocentrism.*

Keywords: discourse theory ▪ human-nature relationships ▪ ecocentrism ▪ anthropocentrism ▪ television fiction ▪ supernatural

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As is the case with many realms of cultural production, television fiction also has taken more of an interest in ecological thematics, for instance, in the Scandinavian countries (Bruhn, 2018). These television fiction series are quite diverse, but still—arguably—key interventions in the discursive-material struggles over the environment, and in particular, in the struggles between anthropocentric and ecocentric

discursive assemblages. Often siding with the ecocentric discursive assemblage, a diversity of discursive strategies is used to counter the hegemony of anthropocentrism and to promote a more counter-hegemonic ecocentrism.

In this article we want to unravel how a particular television series, the Swedish *Jordskott*, activates different discourses that are part of the ecocentric discursive assemblage, and how the particular discursive strategy of ethicisation is used to strengthen the claims for this assemblage and its constitutive discourses, privileging—to use Estok’s (2018) words—biophilia over ecophobia. Driven by Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) discourse theory, and later extensions (Carpentier, 2017), we also want to show how networks of discourses—or discursive assemblages, as we will call them—allow for discourses to become aligned and strengthen each other; in this particular case, we want to show how in *Jordskott* ecocentrism becomes articulated with entanglementism, posthumanism, indigenism and (anti-)romanticism, and how then an ethical repertoire is used to strengthen the position of this ecocentric discursive assemblage, in its struggle with anthropocentrism.

The Swedish television series *Jordskott*, with its supernatural narrative, offers a highly creative and original location for our discourse-theoretical analysis, as the supernatural, for instance, allows the allocation of agency to the forest, the introduction of a range of other-humans, and the deconstruction of dualist human/non-human models. Before turning to our analysis of *Jordskott*, structured by its three main actor groups (nature/forest, humans and other-humans), we will first briefly introduce the relevant parts of Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) discourse theory and its extensions, including the role of discursive assemblages and the ethical. In a second theoretical part, we will provide a more in-depth theoretical discussion on the ecocentric discursive assemblage and its four components.

## 2. DISCOURSES, THE ETHICAL AND DISCURSIVE ASSEMBLAGES

Discourse, as a concept, has been used (and defined) in a variety of ways in the field of discourse studies. In this article, we will use Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) discourse theory, approaching it as frameworks of intelligibility, which implies a macro-textual and macro-contextual definition of discourse (Carpentier, 2017). Defined by Laclau (1988) as “a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed” (p. 254), the meaning of discourse—in discourse theory—is closely related to the meaning of concepts such as representation and ideology, thus avoiding the equation of language with discourse. In a discourse-theoretical approach, language becomes seen as one of the materializations (and communication vehicles) of discourse, which implies a clear conceptual distinction between language and discourse. Also the way discourses are constituted in discourse theory is specific: They are constructed through the combination of different elements, a practice which is called articulation, defined as “[...] any practice establishing a relation among elements

such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 105).

This definition of articulation already indicates that, in discourse theory, discourses are only partially fixated. Driven by a non-essentialist ontology, discourses are seen as structurally contingent, with their fixations the outcome of political struggles. Even the most radical stabilizations—hegemonies—are susceptible to change, as Mouffe (2005) formulated it:

“Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, i.e. practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install other forms of hegemony” (p. 18).

Discourses are also all-pervasive, and the opportunities for discourse analyses are thus endless. In this article, we aim to study a series of discourses articulated with ecocentrism, which we will discuss later, using literature external to discourse theory. But we also want to analyse how the ethical becomes activated in these discourses, which has been addressed in discourse theory, which is, in turn, a reason to discuss this here first. More specifically, in some of his writings from the early 2000s, Laclau (2000; 2002) introduced a key distinction between “the ethical” and “normative orders”, which will prove helpful for our analysis, connecting the discursive-theoretical logic with the societal field of ethics. For Laclau, the ethical is an empty signifier, or a signifier whose meaning is emptied so that it can be filled by particular meanings (Laclau, 1996, p. 39). This also implies that the ethical becomes the site of discursive struggle, waged between different normative orders—as Laclau calls them—that aim to occupy the seat of the ethical, and fill this signifier with the particularity of their meanings. As Laclau (2000, p.81) pointed out: “There is an ethical investment in particular normative orders, but no normative order which is, in and for itself, ethical.”

A second particularity of this article is that we do not want to focus on one specific discourse, but on clusters or networks of interconnected discourses, that, as individual discourses still have their autonomy (with their particular signifiers and nodal points), but that are still affiliated to each other. To label these clusters of affiliated discourses, we will use the notion of the ‘discursive assemblage’. Assemblage, as a Deleuzian concept, refers to “a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns - different natures” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007, p. 69). Even though this definition suggests an exclusive focus on discursive elements (‘terms’) being articulated into a fluid whole, the example that Deleuze and Parnet (2007, pp. 69-70) immediately add—the assemblage of the “MAN-HORSE-STIRRUP” as “a new assemblage of war” and a significant innovation in military technology for cavalry—demonstrates that the assemblage has both discursive / representational / signifi-catory elements and material elements that become articulated as a whole. As one of us has also extensively argued (Carpentier, 2017), assemblages do include discourses and materials, where discourses remain indispensable for giving meaning



to the material in these assemblages, and where materials are equally indispensable to provide the condensations of these meanings. This also implies that there is no necessary hierarchy between the discursive and the material, and that one does not automatically dominate the other.

Within this framework, we want to deploy the concept of the ‘discursive assemblage’, a notion that has been used in a variety of ways in discourse studies and beyond (e.g., Kinney, 2016; Kuus, 2007), but rarely in discourse-theoretical work. We want to bring this concept into the discursive-theoretical context of this article to refer to the discursive components of an assemblage, and to open up the possibility of the presence of several (affiliated) discourses in one assemblage. The reasons for this expansion are two-fold. The first reason is practical: This article reports on a discourse-theoretical analysis of a television series, which has its own signifying practices, mediating the material and communicating a series of discourses. Even though this television series has its own materiality, we will be focussing on its discursive component. The second reason is more theoretical: Our analysis also demonstrated the need to theoretically capture a situation where several discourses co-exist and become articulated into a larger whole, supporting and strengthening each other, while they each still have their own signifiers and nodal points, and simultaneously function in autonomous ways, as independent discourses. For instance, anthropocentrism and capitalism can be considered as parts of an anthropocentric assemblage, where these components are articulated and reinforce each other, while capitalism is still a discourse in its own right. As simply labelling capitalism a signifier that constitutes anthropocentrism would not do justice to the importance and sophistication of capitalism, we prefer to use the concept of discursive assemblage to capture this kind of discursive mega-formation — to paraphrase Foucault’s (1972) concept.

### **3. DISCURSIVE ASSEMBLAGES ON NATURE AND THEIR ETHICAL CLAIMS**

When analysing the discursive constructions of the environment, nature and human-nature relations, it is difficult not to start with the discourses of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, and their struggle. Arguably, anthropocentrism, the discourse that positions humans at the centre of the planet, still takes a hegemonic position, despite the contestations of the ecocentric discourse. As Scholte and his co-authors (2020) wrote: “Indeed, the hegemony of anthropocentrism is so strong – perhaps still more powerful than that of the state or capitalism – that most people are not even aware of this world-order structure and can imagine no alternative mode of ecology” (p. 10). Ecocentrism is a counter-hegemonic discourse, that rejects the idea that humans are superior and positioned at the top of a planetary hierarchy (Lysaker, 2023; Woodhouse, 2018). Instead, this discourse articulates the entanglement of biotic and abiotic actors (Devall and Sessions, 1985), acknowledging their

agencies and rejecting the dependency of nature on humans. Instead of hierarchy, ecocentrism promotes “heterarchy” (Corbett, 2006, p. 27). Moreover, ecocentrism argues for the inherent value of nature irrespective of the instrumental, economic, aesthetic or other value humans attribute to the elements of the natural environment (Devall and Sessions, 1985, p. 69).

Ecocentrism is not a discourse that functions in isolation, but in contrast, it is a discourse that is part of a discursive assemblage. Although this assemblage includes many discourses (i.e., Dryzek, 1997), we here want to focus on four: entanglementism, posthumanism, indigenism and (anti-) romanticism. The first discourse is entanglementism, which captures the multitude of interactions and cross-fertilizations between humans and nature, which are articulated as interdependent and permanently co-determining each other. It is a discourse of pluralism that opposes the anthropocentric dualism between nature and humans (Soper, 1995), and that rejects the conflationism that ignores diversity within social categories.<sup>1</sup> In order to signify this “inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed” (Malone and Ovenden, 2017, p. 1), Haraway (2003, p. 12) introduced the concept of natureculture.

There are many variations of entanglementism possible, but one variation is particularly important in our context, and that is the ‘balance of nature’ concept. It is a widely critiqued notion—Kricher (2009) calls it a myth—that suggests that “nature is an essentially static, orderly system being integral to the economy of nature” (Jelinski, 2005, p. 272, emphasis removed). But when taken as a metaphor of entanglement, acknowledging contingency and non-determinism (and removing the myth of an ultimate equilibrium that will always be restored), the balance concept can also be understood to refer to the ideas of interrelationship and connectivity, in quite similar ways as the ecosystem concept.

The second discourse that is part of the discursive assemblage of ecocentrism is posthumanism, which articulates the changes for the human identity, brought about by entanglementism. While transhumanism is “the extreme expression of human enhancement” (Santos, 2021, p. 378), (philosophical) posthumanism is a discourse “that is critical of traditional humanism and associated theories about the superiority of humanity” (Kopnina, 2019, pp. 1-2).

A third discourse that is part of the discursive assemblage of ecocentrism is indigenism, which is a discourse that articulates the specificity of Indigenous groups, for instance, in relation to indigenous environmental knowledge, which underscores its subjectivity, situatedness and openness to contestations (Dove, 2006; Duvall, 2020). The indigenous identity itself is constructed with nature as its nodal point (Duile, 2017), with the relationship between indigenous people and nature articulated in terms of equality (Salmón, 2000), respect for all life-forms and the land (Turner, Ignace, and Ignace 2000) and harmonious coexistence with them (Salmón, 2000),

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<sup>1</sup> The use of conflationism is inspired by Archer’s (1995) use of the concept in/about social theory.

thus resisting instrumentalism and extractivism. Indigenism also encompasses a variety of political demands of Indigenous groups, and, in terms of the environment, refers to the entitlement of these groups to full control of land and water on the territory that they consider theirs (Castree, 2004), which conflicts with capitalist and statist discourses, that, in various degrees, deny them these rights.

Finally, both romanticism and anti-romanticism are also part of this discursive assemblage. Romanticism privileges the aesthetic dimension of nature, articulating (the value of) nature through its beauty, as captured through the human senses. This discourse offers an important counter-weight to the industrialized society, and positions nature as the location where humans can find peace and discover their ‘true’ selves, which continues to provide a relevant ground for ecocentrism. Anti-romanticism is a discourse that rejects the reduction of nature to its aesthetic dimension. There is, for instance, a call not to (only) focus on the “pretty or sublime pictures of nature” (Morton, 2009, p. 160), but to concentrate on the “things that glisten, schlup, and decay” (Morton, 2009, p. 159), that is, “to hold the slimy in view” (Morton, 2009, p. 159). Also nature’s role in human salvation is questioned, “refusing claims that there is some original human nature suppressed by the artificial, from which it must be retrieved” (Clark, 2011, p. 66). As Harrison (1992) wrote: “nature also teaches us that it cannot assume responsibility for human existence” (p. 227). This implies that through anti-romanticism, nature becomes articulated as multidimensional, again moving away from nature/culture and human/nonhuman dichotomies.

The discursive assemblage of ecocentrism can thus be seen as a network of intersecting discourses, which—together—have the ambition of challenging and eventually dislocating the hegemony of the anthropocentric discursive assemblage. As argued earlier, in more general terms, this also implies the activation of normative orders, in an attempt to claim the empty signifier of the ‘environmental ethical.’ As Mouffe (2005) summarized it—in fairly radical terms—this hegemonizing strategy consists of “securing one’s goodness, through the condemnation of the evil in others” (p. 74), which can also be applied to the ecocentric discursive assemblage. This is not to argue that this discursive assemblage is formulated exclusively in ethical terms. Instead, the articulation of the discursive assemblage of ecocentrism in ethical terms is one of the strategies to (attempt to) counter anthropocentrism’s hegemony.

#### 4. ANALYSING JORDSKOTT: CONTENT AND METHOD

In our analysis of Jordskott we show that the series favours the ecocentric discursive assemblage, also through the activation of an ethical repertoire (or a particular normative order). The television series Jordskott—which literally translates as “earth

shot”<sup>2</sup>—has been described as an example of “eco-critical fiction” (Souch, 2020, p. 108), a “layering [...] of two particular generic strands – namely Nordic Noir and the so-called telefantasy” (Souch, 2020, p. 110), aligned with the “eco-Gothic” area (Souch, 2020, p. 117) and an “ecofantastic crime thriller” (Mäntymäki, 2017, p. 89). Produced by ITV, the first 10-episode season of the *Jordskott* series was broadcast in February 2015<sup>3</sup> on the Swedish public broadcaster SVT. Its second season, with 8 episodes, started in October 2017.<sup>4</sup> According to the Nordic Fantasy blog, the first season of *Jordskott* was sold to 55 countries.<sup>5</sup>

The *Jordskott* series starts with Eva Thörnblad, a police detective from the Swedish capital of Stockholm, returning to the (fictional) Swedish town of Silverhöjd, her hometown, after her father’s death. Years before, her daughter Josefine had disappeared there, and now another child (Anton Leander) has disappeared, which is another reason for her return to Silverhöjd. Later, six more children will disappear. Together with the local police department (in particular Tom Aronsson) and the national criminal police (with Göran Wass, who secretly works for an organisation called *Envoyés de la Nature* (‘Envoys of Nature’, EN)), she tries to solve these abductions and a series of related murders (including that of her father). They discover how these abductions and murders are connected with a conflict over the North Woods, between the Thörnblad Mineral & Cellulosa company and an other-human people living underground. In saving the forest and rescuing the children, they are assisted by several other humanoid creatures, and by the extra-human capacities given to them by the *Jordskott*, a parasite that will even save the lives of Eva and Göran.

As this summary shows, *Jordskott* uses the discourse of supernaturalism, representing the supernatural as natural. Using the telefantasy genre, which features television narratives that are “united by their representation of the otherworldly and unreal” (Johnson, 2015, p. 57), *Jordskott* taps into a fantasy world, also to reflect about the social and natural worlds, for instance, by allowing for discourses to be played out in a less direct (accusatory) way. This is a point that writer Sheree Renée Thomas (quoted in Souch, 2020) makes:

“There is power in fantasy, especially in stories that urge us to face the impossible or find ways to survive [...]. The best stories take us inside of storytelling so seamlessly, that when we emerge, the impossible is easier to imagine. This fiction creates a space in our minds to consider other perspectives and adopt new solutions” (p. 111).

2 It is the Swedish term for a natural phenomenon, where a large piece of frozen soil is lifted and moved, leaving a hole in the ground.

3 <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vastmanland/hela-familjen-debuterar-i-svt-premiar>

4 <https://www.svt.se/kultur/film/premiar-for-jordskott-sasong-tva>

5 <https://nordicfantasy.wordpress.com/2017/10/18/jordskott-2-preview/>. It is likely that this is an overstatement, though.

Methodologically, our analysis uses a discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA) (Carpentier, 2017). DTA is a method that combines the basic mechanisms and procedures of qualitative textual analysis<sup>6</sup> —using coding strategies as explained in Saldaña (2013)—with sensitizing concepts that originate from discourse theory (e.g., the notion of discourse itself). As sensitizing concepts on environmental discourses were also needed to support the analysis, the existing literature (e.g., Dryzek, 1997) was re-read from a discourse-theoretical perspective, providing a range of additional sensitizing concepts (some of which would be eventually included in our analysis of the discursive assemblage of ecocentrism).

In our analysis, we focussed on the first (2015) season, as this was the richest in its representations of the discursive assemblage of ecocentrism (and its normative order). In practice, our analysis combined a textual analysis with an audio-visual analysis, given Jordskott's strong reliance on visual aspects, coding both the audio-visual material and the transcripts. The content of season two served as contextual background for our analysis of the first season, and our analysis was further enriched by an interview with one of the writers of series 1, which took place on Zoom on 22 September 2022. This interview consisted of four parts, with (1) introductory questions on Jordskott itself (and its production and genre), (2) the identities of the actor (sub)groups in Jordskott, (3) the links in Jordskott to ecocentrism and other discourses (without naming them in the questions), and (4) the links in Jordskott with the ethical.

Through the confrontation of these empirical data with the sensitizing concepts—using what Glynos and Howarth (2007) call a retroductive approach—the analytical categories and theoretical framework were developed. This approach allows for the organization of iterations between theory and analysis, with sensitizing concepts making the researcher sensitive to particular processes or phenomena (Blumer, 1969, p. 7), without silencing the data either. Practically speaking, all material was first subjected to an initial coding, and then through axial coding (see Saldaña, 2013) the main categories of the analysis were identified. One cluster of main categories that originated from the analysis were the three main actor groups—the forest, the human and the other-human—which were eventually used to structure this article's narrative. A second cluster of main categories were the four components of the discursive assemblage of ecocentrism and their links to the actor groups. These four discourses were not pre-given, but identified through the analysis, aided by the discursive assemblage of ecocentrism as sensitizing concept. Finally, the coding then focussed on the role of the ethical in connection to the actor groups and four discourses. After the coding process, the first results were presented to colleagues on several occasions, as part of a peer debriefing strategy to ensure the quality of the interpretations (in conjuncture with the strategies of theoretical embedding and procedural transparency). Also, the results were triangulated with similar analyses of

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<sup>6</sup> These were enriched with visual analysis methods (e.g., Rose, 2016).

Swedish audiovisual material (e.g., Carpentier et al., 2021; Doudaki & Carpentier, 2024; Filimonov & Carpentier, 2022) further enhancing the trustworthiness of the analysis.

## 5. THE JORDSKOTT TRIANGLE: THE FOREST, THE HUMAN AND THE OTHER-HUMAN

As mentioned before, the main structure of our analysis is based on the three main actor groups in *Jordskott*: nature (in particular the forest), humans and other-humans, whose representation we will discuss in the following three parts. At the same time, it is important to emphasize two elements of this representation already here. First, in *Jordskott*, these three actor groups, including the forest, are all attributed with agency. Partially through the invocation of the supernatural, these three actor groups are represented as active, as capable of ‘making things happen’. Second, as Souch (2020, p. 107-108) also wrote—and as we will argue during our analysis—*Jordskott* is very much about the entanglement of these categories, and the structure of our analysis should not be read as an artificial separation of these actor groups.

### 5.1. The Construction of Nature in *Jordskott*

The construction of nature in *Jordskott* is very much centred on the forest, where “Western civilization literally cleared its space”, as Harrison (1992, p. ix) wrote. In a considerable number of shots we can see the forest of Silverhøjd. It is portrayed in a variety of ways, ranging from beautiful, over mysterious to threatening, which strengthens its position as non-human actor.

*Jordskott* also represents nature through an entanglementist discourse, in a variation that approximates the balance-of-nature argument, which brings in a particular normative order, articulating these disruptions as ethically undesirable as well. The storyline about the nix—a humanoid water creature—particularly illustrates the prominence of the balance-of-nature argument, as summarized by one of the series’ writers: “if you kill nature, you will also die” (interview writer, 22 September 2022). In episode 3, a nix is killed. The nix’s death causes the water quality to degrade, which is communicated through shots of dead/dying animals and trees, scientist measuring water pollution levels and trucks distributing clean drinking water, but through the media coverage of these changes as well. In episode 8, for instance, we briefly see a television news interview with an environmental activist, who says: “Just look around. It’s the middle of summer and trees are dying.”

Ylva, a mixture of a witch, a “wise old crone” (interview writer, 22 September 2022) and a troll, who has a raven, Vordur, as her familiar—and one of *Jordskott*’s main characters—had already discovered the disruption, by tasting the water (E4,

50:05<sup>7</sup>), and decided to go to Rissajaure, a lake in the very north of Sweden (in the Norrbotten County, relatively close to the city of Kiruna), which is considered to be the clearest and purest lake in the country. There, Ylva catches a tiny nix, and brings him back to her bathtub at home, where she raises him, always wearing ear protection, to prevent his screams from doing damage. In episode 8, she talks to the almost adult nix in the bathtub, again indicating how necessary he is for the restoration of the balance: “You just need to get a little bigger. The leaves are yellowing, the water is toxic, and nature is dying. If we don't get you out there soon maybe it'll never recover” (E8, 20:31). Eventually, Ylva releases the nix back into the water in the Silverhöjd forest (E9, 45:30) and immediately (in the next shot) we can see how the buds grow back on a tree.

The balance-entanglementist discourse is also represented through the human-nature relations, where the “underground people”—of which Muns is said to be the sole survivor—become articulated with nature, through their indigeneity. The disruption of the forest, caused by the Thörnblad M&C company, which aims to mine for silver in the North Woods, plays out at several levels. First, the eagerness of the company to use explosives to find the silver materially destabilizes parts of the forest, despite warnings from the geologist Börje Dahlqvist that “One explosive in the wrong place could make everything collapse” (E7, 9:15). He is subsequently bribed to change his report. One of the explosions (E7, 42:26) effectively causes a sinkhole, swallowing part of the forest and injuring several of the workers.

The second level where we see the negative consequences of the disruption of the balance is when the children of Silverhöjd start to disappear. The original abduction of Eva Thörnblad's daughter, Josefine, years before the series' actual narrative starts, was, as it turns out during the series, an attempt to force Eva Thörnblad's father, Johan, to stop the exploitation of the North Woods. Similarly, Anton Leander and Emma Eriksson—both children of Thörnblad M & C board members—and later 5 children from the local hospital, are abducted to force the new Thörnblad M & C CEO, Gustaf Borén, to halt the plans to continue the exploitation of the North Woods. Here we see that the disruption of nature's balance, also disrupts human-nature relationships, and the human world as such. Again, these disruptions become articulated as ethical undesirable, in their own right, and through the consequences they have.

A third level is the political disruption caused by the violation of the treaty signed by one of Eva Thörnblad's ancestors, Adolf Fredrik Thörnblad, with the underground people. As Ylva formulates it, when explaining the nature of the document to Eva in Episode 7: “It's an agreement between Thörnblad and the forest” (E7, 25:22), articulating the underground people as part of the forest. Ylva also describes its genocidal violation:

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7 When referring to a particular part of *Jordskott*, the ‘E’ refers to the number of the episode, and the 3 or 4 digits that follow, refer to the time.

“Ylva: There lives a people who are almost like us. 350 years ago, Adolf Fredrik Thörnblad signed an agreement with them. Peace was ensured with his promise to keep the North Woods untouched. Your father had made an enemy of the forest. But your father Johan wanted to restore the Thörnblad name to greatness. He became obsessed with the rumours of all the riches. I tried to warn him, but he refused to listen to a crazy old lady.

Eva: So he started clearing the North Woods?

Ylva: He did something much worse. In 1978, Thörnblad Cellulosa used a lethal toxin on the North Woods. I was expecting the worst. But nothing could prepare me for what I saw. The toxin killed all living things. Vegetation, animals ... and those underground” (E7, 26:06).

Ylva also argues that this violation of the treaty is the motivation for the actions of Muns, the last of the underground people (still to live underground): “He’s not out for revenge. Justice to Muns would mean reinstating the agreement your father broke” (E7, 29:50). Here, the balance-entanglementist discourse is used to argue that this political disruption, resulting in the genocide on the underground people, was not only deeply unethical in itself. The consequences also affected those who disturbed the balance, at the societal level, with in total 8 children from Silverhöjd being abducted (which is highly unsettling for all its inhabitants), but at the personal level as well, as one of the abducted children is Josefine, Johan Thörnblad’s granddaughter.

A second cluster of key discourses in Jordskott’s representation of nature is the combination of romanticism and anti-romanticism, which again intersects with the complex articulation of nature’s ethical nature (enabled by positioning the forest as actor). The more romantic side of Jordskott represents the forest as a location of beauty and mystery. As Brühn (2018) writes: Jordskott has a “nostalgic representation of a lost nature” (p. 71). But in the case of Jordskott, the forest also becomes represented as a life-giver, with regenerative capacities, and thus as intrinsically benevolent. Both Josefine and detective Göran Wass use this capacity, by slipping their fingers in the soil, causing their hands to grow roots, and to feed or to revive them. Göran uses this life-saving strategy after he has been shot by Harry Storm—a mercenary hired by Thörnblad M & C—who is trying to exterminate all underground people and the other humanoid creatures. Even more radically, Josefine, who is seriously ill, is brought by her mother to a forest clearing. Also Josefine slips her fingers into the soil, with her mother lying next to her. The next morning, when Eva wakes up, Josefine has transformed into a plant, continuing her life in a different form. When Eva caresses the plant, tiny branches return her affection. Again, the forest is seen to demonstrate its capacity to protect and give life.

Finally, also the Jordskott parasite allows to represent nature as benevolent and generative. During episode 7, Göran revives Eva—who has been deadly shot—by



placing the Jordskott in her mouth. Once she regains consciousness, he explains her that “Maybe half a dozen” (E7, 44:06) people carry the Jordskott parasite, and that Eva and her parasite are now inseparable: “Killing one thing will kill the other” (E7, 43:57). Göran also explains that—apart from saving her life—the Jordskott “heightens your senses” (E7, 44:23), which will turn out to be helpful for their detective work. Thanks to the Jordskott, Eva and Göran (who also carries the parasite) are, for instance, able to “see” past events; a technique they use at several crime scenes.

At the same time, nature is represented through an anti-romantic discourse, demonstrating its deadly force and malevolence. Nature is not exclusively good, but evil and destructive as well. A very modest illustration—an early warning, one could say—occurs in the first episode, when Eva gets hurt by hogweed (E1, 46:22), and develops a rash. More importantly, the Jordskott parasite can turn against its host. First, as Göran explains to Eva: “You need to learn to control it. Or things can go very wrong. [...] How wrong? Your senses could break down. You'll go crazy for real” (E8, 11:12). Moreover, carriers of the Jordskott parasite need to feed it with a special black liquid,<sup>8</sup> because, as again Göran explains, “If the parasite starts feeding on you, it's bad. [...] The parasite takes over. And you stop being human” (E7, 43:46). During the last episodes of season one, we can also see that consuming too much of the black liquid has equally problematic effects. Not only is this another example of the balance discourse, but of the destructive and malevolent nature of nature as well.

The earlier-discussed examples of the disruptions of nature are equally important examples of nature's malevolence, although this malevolence is mostly responsive, and articulated as (proportional) self-defence. In that sense, Mäntymäki's (2017) rather harsh comment that Jordskott is “Featuring a naïve ‘nature strikes back’ narrative” (p. 90) might need to be tempered by pointing to the proportionality of the response, but still, nature can lash out hard. In Jordskott, it is Harry, the mercenary, who bears the full weight of nature's destructive capacity. An overdose of Jordskott first turns him into a monster, hardly capable of walking, and his attempts to kill Ylva and Göran end in Harry being dragged into the water and killed by the nix.

## 5.2. The Construction of the Human in Jordskott

In Jordskott, humans are predominantly articulated through the discourses of capitalism and instrumentalism, and through a lack of (post)humanism. This representation also results in humans being mapped on the ethical scale of malevolence and benevolence, in a similar way as the forest, but here malevolence dominates. ”

This critical perspective on humanity's ethics is represented in Jordskott in three ways. First, humans are seen to have an instrumentalist relation with nature, as a means to satisfy a capitalist drive. Johan Thörnblad and Gustaf Borén, the late and

<sup>8</sup> Later, in series 2, it will turn out that the secret ingredient of the black liquid is the blood of the underground people.

current CEOs of Thörnblad M & C, are both represented as ruthless in exploiting the natural resources, and as willing to go at any length in order to secure the growth of the company, and secure the related profits. Gerda Gunnarsson (Johan Thörnblad's former secretary, lover, mother of his child Nicklas and Johan's murderer), dying of cancer, is equally ruthless in instrumentalizing and exploiting the forest.<sup>9</sup> As Souch (2020) writes in her analysis of *Jordskott*, the instrumentalization of the forest is also visible in how the forest is represented:

“Especially indicative are the successions of takes allowing the panoramic views to be followed by the medium and close-up shots of the thick formations of bushes and trees and, shortly after, by the images of cut tree trunks and barren sandy spots covered with dead, mouldy branches” (p. 117).

The second representation of human malevolence occurs through the absence of humanism, resulting in the omnipresence of intra-human violence. Not surprisingly for a crime series, we see an abundance of (almost) deadly violence. The series starts with Eva returning to Silverhöjd, because of the death of her father (Johan), who, as it turns out later, has been assassinated by his former lover and secretary, Gerda. Eva is deadly wounded by—as it also turns out later—her half-brother Nicklas, and can only be saved by administering her *Jordskott*. Göran is shot by Harry—the mercenary—and is only saved because he has the parasite, and the forest can thus heal him. Even Eva abducts one of the Silverhöjd children, Emma, using her as bait to get her daughter Josephine back. Eva, as one of the series' writers explains, commits “the ultimate fail of putting another child in risk to save her own” (interview writer, 22 September 2022). The plan backfires, resulting on Muns getting hold of Emma as well.

But the violence against the underground people and other humanoids is even more rampant, which we can see as the absence of posthumanism. One key actor here is Harry, who, as mentioned before, aims to kill all underground people—including those who are hiding amongst humans—and other humanoids. On Harry's website, according to Göran, it is mentioned that “his wife and children were murdered by non-humans” (E9, 4:14), but he is also paid by the Board of Thörnblad M & C. Harry kills the first nix, and then tracks down the underground people who lived undercover in the human world—the brothers Jeppe, Ebbe and Sture Bergman—of which only the latter can escape. We already mentioned how Harry meets his end: Eventually shot by Göran, Harry overdoses on *Jordskott* and is killed by the (second) nix. The second actor is Johan Thörnblad, who exterminated (almost) all underground people by releasing a lethal toxin in the forest. On one of his videos, that Eva watches after his death, Johan recounts the genocide of the underground people:

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<sup>9</sup> In a cathartic moment at the very end of season one, Gerda intervenes to stop the explosions, gives up on the silver, and inadvertently preserves the lives of the children, who are, at that very moment, trying to make their way out of the cave (accompanied by Tom and Ida).

“In 1978, I sprayed the forest with a toxic agent. An illegal defoliant, and it went horribly wrong. We didn't know it, but an unknown people lived in the North Woods. Adults and children ... lay dead everywhere. I panicked. Burn them. Please, get rid of them” (E8, 52:39).

The *Jordskott* series does not articulate humans as exclusively malevolent. Here, we can see a diversity of ethical positions as well, with four actor groups being articulated as more benevolent. Three of them are aligned with protecting the forest and/or the underground people, thus being connected to the ecocentric discursive assemblage. First, there are the environmental activists, who, for instance, occupy part of the forest in an attempt to stop the mining in Silverhöjd. Importantly, they are joined by two board members of Thörnblad M & C, Thomas Leander and Jeanette Eriksson. Eventually, Thomas and Jeanette will sell their company shares to Eva Thörnblad, so that she can obtain a controlling share in the company and stop the mining attempts. The second actor are the Swedish police, who are seen to do their utmost best to find the missing children and resolve the murders that have plagued the town. It is eventually detective Tom Aronsson who, with the help of his daughter Ida, rescues all missing children. The third actor is the mysterious organisation EN—which has even infiltrated the Swedish police, with Göran working for EN—whose aim is to protect the underground people and other humanoid creatures, mostly by maintaining the secrecy about their existence. And finally, there is Ylva, half witch and half troll. She turns out to be a key person in protecting the forest, the underground people—Ylva saved Muns as a baby, after the genocide—and the Swedish police officers.

Still, many of these actors are not represented as unambiguously benevolent. Eva, a Swedish police officer, abducts one of the children herself, in a failed attempt to lure Muns out of his hiding. Göran, working for EN, regularly makes evidence disappear, to maintain the EN policy of secrecy. But it is mostly EN, with its apparent altruistic motives, that turns out to be a deeply malevolent organisation,<sup>10</sup> for instance, murdering Olof Gran, a retired Silverhöjd police officer who has been studying the underground people, and spoke out too much during a televised police press conference. As EN representative Gabriel Moreaux dryly tells Göran about Olof's assassination: “The end justifies the means” (E5, 56:20).

### 5.3. The Construction of the Other-human in *Jordskott*

*Jordskott* features a variety of humanoids. As mentioned, one significant actor is the underground people, who become articulated with the forest, where they live. This implies the activation of an indigenist discourse, signifying the proximity of the underground people with their habitat, their respect and stewardship of nature, but

<sup>10</sup> One of the main storylines during season two is how EN is holding underground people captive, to harvest their blood for the production of the black liquid.

the indigenous epistemologies that intersect with nature as well. For instance, when Muns abducts the five children from the hospital, they quietly follow him to a tunnel, leading into the caves. Göran later explains to Eva how this was done: “There are certain decoctions that make people ... docile. It's risky. The measurements need to be precise. Or the damage could be permanent” (E9, 8:04). Simultaneously, the *Jordskott* series goes at great length to emphasize the sophisticated and encultured nature of the underground people, for instance, by showing the burial chamber of the underground people (as Ylva explains to Eva, when they are about to enter this room: “The place we're going means a great deal to him. It's holy” (E8, 36:07). Another example is the written language of the underground people, which only few humans can decode. When Muns leaves a note to Eva at the end of episode 5, with the writing clearly visible, Olof Gran has to translate it for her (in episode 6).

Again, an ethical repertoire is used to represent the underground people and indigeneity. They are seen as generous and benevolent. Only during series 2, it becomes clear that they have been donating their blood as the secret ingredient for the black liquid, that allows the people with the *Jordskott* parasite to survive. A few survivors of the genocide (try to) live peacefully in the human society (until Harry kills most of them), not seeking revenge or even justice. In the case of Muns, it is made even clearer—by Ylva in a conversation with Eva, as mentioned earlier—that “He's not out for revenge. Justice to Muns would mean reinstating the agreement your father broke” (E7, 29:50). Still, also in this case, the underground people (and in particular Muns) are not unequivocally benevolent, as he first abducted Josefine Thörnblad, and later six more children, although in *Jordskott* this is represented as legitimate and proportional resistance against the forest's destruction. For instance, when Eva goes into the cave to negotiate with Muns—through the mediation of Ylva—the latter sums up Muns's position:

“Ylva: First he wants to make sure your word is good. If they leave the forest be, he'll let the children go.

Eva: How can I trust that?

Ylva: He means what he says” (E8, 39:52).

The second example of how the ethical position of the humanoids is represented relates to Esmeralda, a young huldra (a female forest spirit, who has psychic powers). Still learning to control her powers, Esmeralda causes quite some havoc when she feels threatened. Her skills force people to harm themselves: Eddie, a 17-year-old who tries to violate her, cuts his own throat; Tom, when interrogating Esmeralda, stabs himself in the next with a pen; and Harry fatally injures his dog Kuba, and is then almost brought to shooting himself. After going through a similar experience, Göran manages to make Esmeralda stop the psychic assault on him, explaining that

“You have a power and an ability you can't comprehend” (E8, 46:13) and “You're not alone. There are others like you” (E8, 46:37). Göran then brings Esmeralda to Klara, a more experienced huldra, allowing her to learn to better control her psychic powers. Esmeralda, and the forest spirits in general, are again positioned as benevolent, and, in this case, the harm they do is unintentional. For instance, when Göran explains Tom how he ended up with a pen in his neck, he says: “It's how huldras defend themselves. But it was never her intention to hurt you or anyone else” (E9, 46:55). Later, Esmeralda's benevolence is emphasized further, when she risks her own well-being to trace Harry, and thus saves Ylva's life.

Apart from indigeneity and ethics, hybridity is used to articulate the other-humans, and the relations between humans and other-humans as well. This is the main argument that Mäntymäki (2018) makes in her article about *Jordskott*, grounded in Braidotti's (2013) work. *Jordskott* thus also represents a posthumanist discourse, again connecting it with ethics. We can return to Braidotti's (2013) book *The Posthuman* for a formulation of this posthumanist ethics: “A posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism” (pp. 49-50). The *Jordskott* series defends this normative order in a variety of ways. Not only are we presented with human diversity—for instance, through the conflict between industrial capitalism and environmental activism—but this diversity is further increased through the encounters with nature (Figure 1). After Tom's unpleasant encounter with Esmeralda (a huldra), he has gained some psychic skills. Göran explains this to Tom as follows: “What she did to you leaves traces. Nothing serious, but ... it could open doors to senses you didn't know existed” (E9, 47:22). Obviously, the introduction of *Jordskott* into a human body—the merger of human and parasite—affects humans as well, providing them with additional skills. These alterations, which render them posthuman, further increases human diversity.

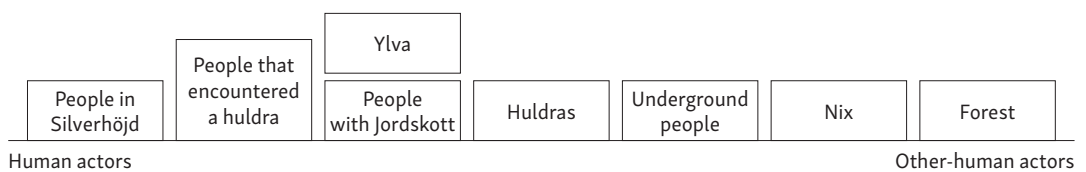


Figure 1: Diversity and hybridity in *Jordskott*

Hybridity also relates to the humanoid actors (Figure 1). Huldras can hardly be distinguished from humans. The same goes for the underground people who went undercover in human society. Their only mark is a scar, where their small tail used to be, cut-off and preserved in a box, as a reminder of their alterity. Apart from this feature, they are indistinguishable from humans. Even when Muns is different, as

he chooses to return to traditional life underground, his (post)humanity becomes strongly emphasized as well.

Jordskott thus represents the entanglement of humans and other-humans, extending the category of the human, also introducing a posthumanist ethics that welcomes this diversity, countering anthropocentric-dualist discourses by rejecting the construction of hierarchies between human and non-humans and showing their entanglement, diversity and hybridity. This becomes even clearer when Josefine—in order to save her life, which is threatened by the loss of control over her Jordskott parasite—transforms into a plant, a strategy that is not represented as a problematic descent into otherness, but as a continuation of life, albeit in a different form. Moreover, Jordskott's representation of the other-human as ethically equal to humans, and in some cases even as ethically superior—only causing harm out of ignorance or self-defence—even more fundamentally reverses the hierarchy between humans and other-humans.

One important exception is Harry Storm, who rejects any posthumanist ethics, with its entanglement, diversity and hybridity. He consistently labels the other-humans as “not human”, for instance, when he explains to Thörnblad M & C CEO Gustaf (who hired him) that the other-humans are “vermin” (E4, 41:31): “Many of them look like us, but they're not like us. They're animals, monsters” (E4, 41:37). Harry is the main representative of the anthropocentric-dualist and conflationist discourses, dichotomizing ‘humans’ and ‘non-humans’ and conflating all other-human diversity into one (side of the) dichotomy. But the Jordskott series does not side with him, as he is represented as a merciless serial killer who meets his end in a most gruesome way. In this fashion, Jordskott as a series aligns itself with the posthumanist position as well.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Jordskott, with its 10 episodes in the first season, is a complex television narrative, that requires a careful analysis to show the deeply structural intervention it entails. It contains a harsh critique on the capitalist instrumentalization of nature, and its genocidal consequences for an indigenous people. Humans are not necessarily represented as kind and careful caretakers of the forest, even if, at the end, the conflict is resolved by the death of some and re-positioning of the others who were blocking the resolution of this conflict.

Importantly, nature is attributed with agency, and it is seen to use this agency in not always the kindest ways. It is not an actor to mess with, but the Jordskott series still shows the benevolence of nature, and the proportional (or accidental) use of malevolence by nature-affiliated actors. Through the invocation of a balance-entanglementist discourse, we see that humans are the drivers of malevolence, but that nature is perfectly capable of defending itself. In other words, “if you don't nurture the nature inside of you, you will eventually die” (writer interview, 22 September

2022). Moreover, we also see a posthumanist ethics, that refuses the construction of a dualist hierarchy between humans and non-humans. Instead, we see that Jordskott approvingly represents an egalitarian ethics that acknowledges internal and external diversity.

Without getting too much lodged in Jordskott's narrative, its importance lies exactly in the activation of this ethical repertoire—an ecocentric normative order—as its main discursive strategy to strengthen an ecocentric discursive assemblage. As an intervention, the Jordskott narrative gently nudges its viewers towards an ecocentrist position, defending its ethical nature, to be preferred over cruel anthropocentrism. Moreover, Jordskott also allows us to argue that ecocentrism does not stand on its own, but that it is part of a discursive assemblage, where a series of affiliated discourses become activated, to enrich and strengthen the ecocentrist position.

Finally, this brings us to the use of the supernatural fiction (or telefantasy), as a framework to facilitate the activation of this ecocentrist discursive assemblage, in an almost harmless way, without direct strong reality claims. Bruhn (2018) argued that the addition of the “mythologizing or supernatural aspect to the plot” allows avoiding “an ecocritical understanding of modernisation and the nonecological understanding of nature” (p. 71, emphasis removed). We hope that our analysis shows the inverse, namely that—what Ang (1989, p. 45) labelled, when writing about television soaps—the ‘emotional realism’ of Jordskott allows it to make a persuasive and creative intervention in strengthening ecocentrism.

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# THE OTHER OR VISUALLY ALMOST THE SAME? A COMPARISON OF THE VISUAL COVERAGE OF ATHLETES WITH AND WITHOUT A DISABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

*The study introduces and discusses the differences between the visual presentation of successful Czech athletes who attended the 2016 Rio and the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics and Paralympics. The research focused on the representation of athletes on the official Facebook pages of the Czech Olympic Team and the Czech Paralympic Team. The aim was to compare the portrayal of athletes with and without a disability and to find out if there are any differences from the previous studies which focused on so-called "traditional" print media. We examined both common (i.e., a subgenre of sports photography) and specific (i.e., visibility of a disability) aspects of the images. We focused on social media as an important source of information about Paralympic sports. The most widely read print and online media did not report on Paralympic sport consistently. Paralympic topics appear mostly only in the case of scandals or extraordinary stories. Thus, social media serve as an instant source of current information, as well as the primary source of Paralympic sports news. We have found out that there is a difference in the approach of portrayal of athletes with and without a disability. While athletes with a disability were mostly shown in active poses during their sports performance, the Olympic athletes were depicted primarily in emotional situations. We also discussed various aspects of (in)visibility of a disability on examples of specific pictures.*

Keywords: photography ▪ Olympic Games ▪ Paralympic Games ▪ athletes with a disability – sport

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Photography has become a natural part of contemporary media since its invention in the 19th century and the development of printing techniques at the end of the 19th century (Tausk, 1988). However, photography is only one element of what we call visual communication. A significant part of individuals' experience with visual

materials relates not specifically to photography but to a diverse array of visual materials, including medical records, satellite pictures, or CCTV images (Mirzoeff, 1999). This could illustrate the importance of visual communication in everyday life. In general, visual images create and shape the social reality (Mirzoeff, 1999; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009; Mitchell 2015). Nowadays, visually based content in any form (photos, videos, graphics, etc.) is the essence of the constantly growing communication via social media.

Visuals in sports consist of various materials such as photo finish camera records or educational materials which, on one side, serve as a tool in sports, and videos and photographs functioning as media or promotional elements on the other side. We will focus on images employed in media – specifically on photography. Photography is a necessary element within the sports clubs' and organizations' websites and social media pages. Due to the importance of visual communication in people's social reality, we focused on the photographically based images of Czech athletes with a disability on the most popular social network Facebook (Tankovska, 2021). For that purpose, we compared the differences between the portrayal of the Czech Olympic and Paralympic athletes.

The visual representation of athletes with a disability in the Czech context has not yet been thoroughly researched and described. In this article, we followed up on the research carried out by DePauw (1997) and the studies by Pappous (2008) and Pappous et al. (2011), which dealt with the development of Paralympic photographic coverage from Sydney 2000 to Beijing 2008 Paralympic Games. While Pappous et al. (2011) focused on printed media and the evolution of the number of photographs (considering the difference in the depiction of men and women), we decided to focus on social media as a contemporary way of communication. Additionally, we examined other variables beyond the number of photographs in a given Paralympic cycle.

Examining two Olympic and Paralympic Games (2016 Rio and 2018 PyeongChang), we were interested in how the Czech Olympic and Paralympic Committee presented the athletes on their official Facebook pages. We are aware that we analyze the production of dominant sports organization. However, there is no other relevant local source – the Czech media did not have any photographers present at the selected Paralympic Games. Thus, the only available pictures were produced by the Czech Paralympic Committee. For this reason, we focused on the official websites of these two Czech sports institutions. This study aims to analyze the differences between the portrayal of able-bodied athletes and athletes with a disability in pictures from the world's top sports events on the social media pages of the Czech Olympic and Paralympic teams.

## 2. PHOTOGRAPHY AND REPRESENTATION

Tracing back to the essence of photography, there might be a certain general feeling that photography is a trustworthy, direct imprint of reality. However, Barthes (1981)

remarked on the myth of the photographic truth against this idea. In this concept, Barthes combined the idea of the camera's objectivity and the photographer's subjectivity. The photographer chooses the frame and the moment which adjusts the positivistic perception of a camera as

a tool for the precise registration of reality. The credibility of photography was questioned even before the possibilities of digital image manipulation became easier and more advanced in the 1990s (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Historically, the power of photography was exploited, for example by different totalitarian regimes (Flusser, 2013). There are several cases when photography became a propagandistic tool, but on the other hand, photography has also served as a kind of proof that holds strong emotional meaning. A well-known example is an iconic picture by the AP photographer Nick Ut from the Vietnam war. In this picture, he captured a girl running from the napalm-attacked village in South Vietnam. The impact of the shocking image was strong and led to a change of the general public's view of the Vietnam conflict (Wallenius & Nilsson, 2019). Another example of an image with a strong emotional impact is the picture of a dead Syrian boy by photographer Nilüfer Demir. This image became a symbol of the suffering of the refugees in 2015 (Mattus, 2020). There are also examples from the field of sports photography – Děkanovský (2008) recalls sports images which became symbols in Czech culture. For example, images of Kateřina Neumannová's finish in 2006 Torino Olympic Games serve as a visualization of the races' happy end.

Hall (1997) considers photography as a representational system that uses images as a language for communication. Especially, when representing a difference, like in our case of athletes with a disability, it affects the reader's feelings, emotions, and attitudes. Furthermore, Sturken and Cartwright (2009, p. 23) have postulated that visuals in everyday life are one aspect of social learning, which serves to build ideologies. Hall (1997, p. 39) considers them to be “general beliefs, conceptual frameworks and value systems of society”. In this context, photography has been used for this purpose, even though it is unintentional.

An image can have several meanings depending on the manner of reading, especially, when we talk about the connotative meaning. Barthes (1957) labeled this phenomenon “myths”. According to Barthes (1981), photography may also hold strong emotional meaning. In his book *Camera Lucida* (Ibid.), he developed the concept of *studium* and *punctum*. *Studium* is the first phase of the picture reading process. It holds cultural, linguistic, and political denotation. During *studium*, the reader should figure out the author's intention. On the other hand, *punctum* is the affective denotation that stimulates emotions and depends solely on the reader. One picture can have different effects on different readers. Every picture has its connotation, but Hall (1997, p. 231) suggested that similar representational practices and figures repeat in the case of difference or otherness which he illustrated by examples of race, ethnicity, color, gender, or sexuality in sports photographs.

The research on representation in sports photography conducted over the past

25 years follows Hall's work (1997) on difference and otherness. Relating to the purposes of our study the most important is the work by Pappous (2008) and Pappous et al. (2011), which show predominant shifts in the portrayal of athletes with a disability. Pappous (2008) focused on the image of athletes with a disability in European newspapers during the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens. According to his research, athletes with a disability were mostly portrayed in passive poses, their impairments were not visible, and pictures showing emotions were published more often than pictures showing sports action (Pappous, 2008). Pappous continued with research on the portrayal of athletes with a disability from the 2000 Sydney to 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games. The findings suggested a shift towards depicting athletes with a disability in a more subdued manner (Pappous et al., 2011). The growth of the Paralympic sport is the topic of Buysse's and Borscherding's (2010) study, which examined representations of Paralympic athletes in print media worldwide. They pointed out that the newspaper coverage did not match the growth of Paralympic sport, but rather marginalized Paralympic sport, and media outlets tend to stereotype athletes with a disability. Visual representation in sports in general is the central theme of other studies. Female sport and its representation in photos in daily newspapers in Florida during the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games was the subject of the work of Hardin et al. (2002). In this case, the researchers found out that the ratio of men's and women's pictures published in the selected newspapers corresponded to the ratio of participants. Predominantly, the published photos showed women in a neutral way which meant that the newspaper coverage was moving away from stereotypes. Wolter (2015) conducted a qualitative study on the representation of female athletes in ESPNW's feature article photographs. The author revealed an unprecedented difference between the representation of women and minorities in the mainstream media compared to the specialized website, ESPNW.

## 2.1. Sports Photography

Sports photography is a natural part of contemporary media - whether in the so-called traditional print or online forms. Generally, the focus is on sports, although various approaches take place. Andrews (2005) noted that a sports photographer is not able to compete against another visual medium - television - which broadcasts sports events live and has more opportunities to cover different angles and aspects of the game. A sports photographer's task is to capture the greatest moments of a single match, a championship, or the spirit of sports. On the other hand, during major sporting events, the biggest photo news wires (Reuters, Getty, AP, AFP) also offer images from remote cameras placed in unusual places such as on the roof, behind the goal, etc. (Perez, 2010; Easton, 2016). Kobr  (2008) considers sports photography as one of the most challenging photographic disciplines. The photographer must be able to combine three traits in their pictures - technical skills and visual and journalistic qualities. Technically, sports photography is a highly demanding genre. Major

photographic equipment producers (Canon, Nikon) release the high-end professional cameras and lenses before the Olympic Games (Artaius, 2019; Sarkar, 2019). This expensive, high-end equipment, including long and fast telephoto lenses, allows photographers to capture essential details (Horton, 2001). This work often takes place under physically demanding conditions (Andrews, 2005). On the other hand, sports photography struggles with limited visual components, especially the usage of gestures and compositional devices, for example, an athlete separated via a small depth of field from the background (Hagaman, 1993).

The type of content in a picture, however, allows us to define several sub-genres of sports photography. A sports action picture is an image where the essential aspect is the action. One of the pioneers of documentary photography, French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, introduced the concept of the *decisive moment* – a fraction of a second when the most important characteristic moment happens (Cartier-Bresson, 1951). The quality of a picture is measured by the appropriate timing of the peak action. Another approach is to capture the emotions or gestures of an individual athlete or team. In sports photography, common gestures are, for instance, up or down positions of the head as well as more people responding to each other (Hagaman, 1993). On the other hand, *feature sports photography* does not target the peak action but rather background action (Hoy, 1986; Kobre, 2008; Parrish, 2002) or it can artistically visualize the sports action using various photographic techniques. We can include backstage photos, fans, coaches, or moments that are not directly connected to the game in this category. One of the most common genres within media is a *portrait* with a wide range of approaches, including a spontaneous reportage portrait or a stylized studio portrait (Hoy, 1986). However, according to Parrish (2002) and Hoy (1986), the photographer should go beyond a simple reproduction of face. They note that, due to the limited space, single pictures are the most common image materials in daily newspapers. Picture series, which consist of more interconnected pictures (one game, one event, etc.), have their place mainly on media websites, sports club websites, social media, or in specialized print magazines. Both, single pictures and picture series are parts of international photographic competitions such as World Press Photo, NPPA Best of Photojournalism, and local counterparts such as Czech Press Photo or Hungarian Press Photo.

While sport is a natural part of contemporary print and online Czech media, photographs of Paralympic sports are not a subject of much attention. The media ignore the Czech Paralympic athletes even when they become successful (Němcová Tejkalová, 2012). Some athletes with a disability gain attention when there is an especially compelling personal story. An example of this represents the Czech para ice-hockey player and boxer Zdeněk Šafránek who was the subject of Michael Hanke's photo essay which received the second prize in the Sports Series category at World Press Photo 2019 (Vocelka, 2019), or the most successful Czech Paralympic cyclist Jiří Ježek who became a celebrity (Macková & Trunečka, 2015).

## 2.2. Disabled Body

The Ancient ideal of perfection was represented by the so-called *kalokagathia*, consisting of two words, *kalos* and *agathos*, meaning beautiful and good (Eco, 2004). Although these two terms are positive, physical exercise or physical fitness were often developed during wars and thus influenced the structure of physical fitness training (Šíp, 2008). The concept of *kalokagathia* also appeared in the Czech territory (Ludvíkovský, 1923). Miroslav Tyrš was a promoter of the harmony of body and soul and participated in the establishment of the gymnastics organization *Sokol*. Moreover, *kalokagathia* has been an important element of the modern Olympic idea since the 19th century (Zamarovský, 2003) and continues to be until today. The ideal athletic body is represented as a strong, sporty, able-bodied male figure, not a body with a disability (DePauw, 1997; Apelmo, 2017). Athletes with and without a disability have separate competitions. The sport of people with a disability has not been in the awareness of fans for a long time. The disabled body was perceived as the opposite of the "hegemonic ideal of the athletic body" (Promis et al., 2001; Berger, 2008). The sport of athletes without a disability was a space for building masculinity. People with a disability were considered vulnerable, weak, and incomplete (Berger, 2008). However, the bodies of athletes with a disability are compared to the bodies of non-disabled athletes (Vanlandewijck & Thompson, 2011). "Historically, individuals with disabilities were excluded from sport given their 'inability' to meet the socially constructed ideals of physicality, masculinity, and sexuality," noted DePauw (1997, p. 421). She also adds that those "who were initially somewhat 'included' were those who seemed the closest to the ideals, usually the White male with lower spinal cord injuries who competed in wheelchairs" (Ibid., p. 421).

Hargreaves (2000) argued that disabled bodies are in opposition to the ideal of perfect corpus. However, DePauw (1997) noted that some individuals with disability insist on considering their bodies to be normal and perfect. However, it has not always been that way. "Key to the importance of the body in sport is the argument that the natural inequality of one's body (e.g., male vs. female body, able body vs. disabled body) provides the basis for social inequality and, therefore, marginal status in sport," explained (DePauw, 1997, p. 420). Those who were initially omitted (e.g., women, individuals with disabilities) were "excluded from sport due, in part, to the 'nature of the body' argument" (Ibid., 1997, p. 420).

Women can show in competitions for disabled athletes that they are not only "the weak and disabled", but they can prove that they are able to achieve very high-quality sports performances.

Elite performers transform the stereotypes of disabled women as weak, inactive victims into incredible, dynamic sports performers, blurring the able-bodied/disabled body divide. The female stars of disabled sport signal an identity which is a challenge to ableist ideology, a reinvention of the possible. (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 199)

Purdue & Howe (2012) suggested the exclusion of individuals with severe



disabilities from the Paralympic Games because some sports do not contribute to the perception of athletes with a disability as representatives of elite sports. Nevertheless, there is also a contra opinion supporting the inclusion of Paralympic athletes among Olympians. Athletes with a disability would compete at the Olympic Games (Purdue & Howe, 2012). Several Paralympic athletes have already participated in the Olympic Games. Among the most famous are, for example, Oscar Pistorius (South African runner) and Natalia Partyka (Polish table tennis player).

### 3. THE PARALYMPIC SPORT AND MEDIA

The history of Paralympic sports began in 1944 when Sir Ludwig Guttmann established a rehabilitation center for spinal cord injuries in Stoke Mandeville, England (Brittain, 2016). Before 1944, para sports were only performed as part of therapy for people with a disability. Stays in rehabilitation institutions helped patients to become more independent and to take better care of themselves (International Paralympic Committee, n.d. a). Four years later, as explained by Brittain, athletes with a disability could participate in the first games in Stoke Mandeville. Even in the Czech Republic, the sport for people with a disability started relatively recently. Physiotherapist Vojmír Srdečný founded the first sports games in Kladruby in 1948. These games were organized four months before the Stoke Mandeville Games and were attended by athletes in four classification groups (Němcová Tejkalová, 2012). Nowadays, the Paralympic Games are one of the world's mega sports events (International Paralympic Committee, 2020). They have helped change attitudes toward the people with a disability. Athletes with various disabilities – visual impairments, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities (e.g., paraplegia, quadriplegia, muscular dystrophy, spina bifida), impaired range of movement, limb deficiency, leg length difference, hypertonia, etc. (International Paralympic Committee, n.d. c). – can compete in the Paralympic Games in a wide range of disciplines. However, people with a disability still face stereotypes (Charlton, 1998) and the mega sports events for athletes with a disability also have a social overlap. “The Paralympic Games are the pinnacle of the career of Paralympic athletes and motivate others to participate or engage in Paralympic events.” (International Paralympic Committee, 2020) Sport can thus be an element that dispels stereotypes (DePauw & Gavron, 1995), but athletes with a disability still evoke emotions such as pity or fear. On the other hand, some viewers and readers admire them and see them as superhumans (Macková, 2020; Thomas & Smith, 2009). The superhuman model challenges the notion of disability and highlights the courage and perseverance of athletes leading to success (McGillivray et al., 2019).

The media and social media also advertise and provide information about people with a disability. With some exceptions, the Paralympic Games are often the only opportunity for athletes with a disability to be a part of world news (Brittain, 2016). “The IPC has invested heavily in social media as a means of spreading its message and providing wide-ranging access to information about the Paralympic Movement

and Games. This includes the use of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google...” (Brittain, 2016, p. 108)

According to Lippmann (2004), stereotypes influence public opinion and people use their biases to interpret different messages. Stereotypes in relation to people with a disability have been addressed in several academic papers (Rubin & Strauss Watson, 1987; Haller, 1995; Berger, 2008 or Němcová Tejkalová, 2012). The majority of people in society are non-disabled and thus the disability is considered and perceived as something different from the rest of the population (Tejkalová, 2008). Over the past few decades, attitudes towards people with disabilities have changed, but negative stereotypes remains. In media, they often appear, for example, as victims (dependent on others for help), heroes (able to succeed), representatives of evil (given negative roles), etc. (Block, 2007). However, the media can play a positive role in this process by presenting people with a disability in the same way as the mainstream society is represented (Kama, 2004). Interest in the sport of athletes with a disability has gradually evolved, with an increase observed after the Paralympic Games in Beijing in 2008 and then in London in 2012. 2.7 million people visited the venue during the London Paralympic Games. It was estimated that in the United Kingdom alone, more than 11 million spectators watched the opening ceremony. The Paralympic tickets were sold out, the biggest event for athletes with a disability was watched by 3,8 billion TV viewers (International Paralympic Committee, 2012). As Daniel Jackson mentioned, British TV Channel 4 made live broadcasts during the 2012 London Paralympic Games. They taught television viewers to watch athletes with a disability, gave them the vocabulary of sport and disability, and educated the audience about special rules and classifications (Macková, 2017). Companies have changed the perception of athletes with a disability and began to present them as full-fledged athletes (as well as Olympians). During the London 2012 Paralympic Games, athletes with a disability began to appear in the advertising campaigns of major brands and thus came to the attention of television viewers (Jackson-Brown, 2020).

Hodges et al. (2015) described how the audience perceived the Paralympic Games in London in 2012. They found that television viewers' perceptions of athletes with a disability changed during this mega sports event. At first, they were afraid of the unknown (they do not encounter athletes with a disability often) and then their feelings turned to amazement (they admired their sports performances). The Paralympic Games in London were epoch-making, but they have already been surpassed. The number of hours broadcast from the Paralympic Games and the number of television viewers watching athletes with a disability is increasing worldwide. The 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio became the most viewed in history and broke the audience record. From the Paralympic Games in 2004 to 2016, the number of TV viewers has increased by 127% (International Paralympic Committee, 2017). The number of countries that broadcast the top event for athletes with a disability has also increased. While only 25 countries had purchased broadcasting rights in the 2004 Athens Paralympic Games, the number of broadcasters grew to 154 countries in the 2016 Rio

de Janeiro Paralympic Games (International Paralympic Committee, 2020). However, this increased TV broadcasting interest is not reflected in print media. There, the Paralympic Games remain without considerable media coverage. Němcová Tejkalová (2012) hypothesized that the amount of media coverage of the athletes with a disability would develop, but this claim was not confirmed in her research.

The media play an important role in the perception of athletes with a disability (Ellis & Goggin, 2015). This does not apply to traditional media only (e.g., newspaper, radio, TV), but also to new and social media. The International Paralympic Committee works with the media, as well as with athletes with a disability and their representative associations. Social media help popularize athletes and allow them to stay in touch and interact with their fans (Nicholson et al., 2015; Real, 2006). Social media thus allow athletes with a disability to influence media content (Ellis & Goggin, 2015) and to share the topics they want to present, such as sports and competition results. Social media help build athletes' personal brands as well (Walsh et al., 2013). Facebook and Twitter directly connect people with organizations through public or semi-public profiles (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Fuchs, 2017). Social media were used as a standard communication tool during the Paralympic Games in London. The increase in Twitter followers and Facebook likes was enormous. The International Paralympic Committee confirmed increase of around 30% on Twitter and 130% on Facebook (Gassewitz, 2020). Paralympic athletes used Twitter to promote their sport during the London 2012 Paralympic Games and in many cases replaced journalists, as they were the direct source of information from this mega event (Pate et al., 2014).

Athletes with a disability are not presented in the Czech media very often. The amount of reporting does not reflect the significance of the success of athletes with a disability (Tejkalová, 2008), which is the reason why the Czech Paralympic Committee presents itself via social media. On the other hand, this means an almost unlimited access policy for photographers. In the interview, the sports photographer Jan Povýšil explained: "Media coverage at the Paralympic events is not as extensive as at events for athletes without a disability, which means that the photographer is also able to capture photos from places where it is not usually allowed. Fewer photographers at sporting events for athletes with a disability also contribute to better photos, as they can choose better places to take their pictures." (Povýšil, personal interview, August 19, 2018)

The International Paralympic Committee tries to highlight the performance of athletes with a disability during the Paralympic Games in an attempt to draw attention away from their disabilities and focus on their sports performance (International Paralympic Committee, 2017). For example, this situation was achieved with para ice hockey, which the Czech audience understand as a full-fledged sport. The Czech TV rating of para ice hockey is close to the most popular sports for athletes without a disability such as ice hockey, football, or tennis (Macková, 2020). On the other hand, para ice hockey is an exception in the Czech environment. According to research conducted by Macková (2020), television viewers perceive other

para-sports only as a therapeutic element and thus para sport symbolically returns to the very beginning to Stoke Mandeville, where the sport was part of rehabilitation (Brittain, 2016). Purdue and Howe (2012) argue that we should talk about the disabled every day during the mega sporting events, because people should not distance themselves from others with a disability.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

There are researchers who focus on images of athletes with a disability, yet dealing with pictures published in print media (e.g., Hardin et al., 2001; Pappous, 2008; Buysse & Borscherding, 2010; Pappous et al., 2011; Beacom et al., 2016; Rees et al., 2017), therefore we focused on images published on social media. While these studies were based on media in Western countries (United Kingdom, USA, Germany, etc.), our aim was to analyze the situation in the Czech Republic as a Central European country (sometimes ranked among Eastern European countries). The main question of the research was: How do the photographs on Facebook pages of the world's top events for able-bodied athletes and athletes with a disability vary? In addition to the main research question, we had two related questions that guided this study: Which was the dominant subgenre of sports photography among the pictures of athletes with and without a disability? What are the practices of (not) showing the athletes' impairments in the pictures taken from the Paralympic Games?

For the comparison of the pictures of athletes with and without a disability, we performed a content analysis of the images that were published on the Facebook pages of the national committees: Czech Olympic Team<sup>1</sup> and Czech Paralympic Team<sup>2</sup>. The examined images consisted of any photographically based visuals (photography, photography with graphics, etc.). In April 2022, the Facebook page of the Czech Olympic Team had over 400,000 followers and the Czech Paralympic Team over 16,000 followers.

We examined the pictures that were published by both committees during the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro (5th August – 21st August 2016), the 2016 Summer Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro (7th September – 18th September 2016), 2018 Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang (9th February – 25th February 2018) and the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Paralympic Games (9th March – 18th March 2018).

Our sample consisted of 209 pictures (see Table 1) of Czech athletes with and without a disability who won medals in the 2016 Rio Olympic and Paralympic Games and the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games. In Rio in 2016, the Czech Olympic team gained 10 medals including one gold, two silver and seven bronze (International Olympic Committee, n.d.). The Czech Paralympic team won seven medals – one gold, two silver and four bronze (International Paralympic Committee, n.d. b). In the

1 Český olympijský tým – <https://www.facebook.com/olympijskytym/>

2 Český paralympijský tým – <https://www.facebook.com/paralympicsCZ/>

2018 PyeongChang Olympic Games, the Czech team won seven medals, including two gold, two silver and three bronze (International Olympic Committee, n.d.). However, the Czech Paralympic team did not gain any medal in the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Paralympic Games; therefore, we focused on the most successful Czech athletes with a disability (International Paralympic Committee, n.d. b). All the images included in the sample were posted on the timeline of the Facebook pages of the Czech Olympic Team and the Czech Paralympic Team. We focused on regular posts, not on Facebook Stories which were introduced in 2017 (Newton, 2017).

Table 1. Image sources.

	n	%
Rio 2016 Olympics	68	33 %
Rio 2016 Paralympics	28	13 %
PyeongChang 2018 Olympics	81	39 %
PyeongChang 2018 Paralympics	32	15 %
Total	209	100 %

Source: Authors of the article

We collected the data in two phases – the first part consisted of pictures from the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Rio 2016 that were downloaded in June 2017. The second part consisted of pictures from the winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in PyeongChang 2018 and was collected in June 2018. Within these pictures, we focused on elements that would differ when comparing the sport of athletes with and without a disability a) the size of the shot, b) the subgenre of the sports photography and c) the visibility of the disability in case of athletes with a disability.

Two coders proceeded to code a total of 209 images during two phases (Rio 2016 events and PyeongChang 2018). Before the coding of each phase, coders tested the coding of 10% (21 random pictures in total) sample data with the total percentage of agreement 0.96 (Neuendorf, 2002).

We also carried out semi-structured interviews with photographers of athletes with a disability. The aim of these additional interviews was to discover if there were any changes in the way how the photographers approached their subjects when dealing with athletes with or without a disability in general. Both examined Facebook pages have not indicated the authorship of published pictures so we could not precisely connect specific pictures with a specific photographer. Therefore, we selected three sports photographers – Jan Malý (an official photographer of the Czech Paralympic Committee at the 2016 Rio Summer Paralympic Games and the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Paralympic Games), Martin Malý (a sports photographer who also focuses on athletes with a disability) and Jan Povýšil (a Paralympic athlete and a sports photographer). All three photographers participated in the media outputs for the Czech Paralympic Committee. Due to the interviewees' heavy workload,

we conducted the interviews via e-mail. We asked 15 questions regarding photographing Czech athletes with a disability. The discussion included the specifics of portraying athletes with and without a disability, the selection of particular photos, the expectations of contractor. In a follow-up e-mail, we asked additional questions to gain more detailed answers.

#### **4.1. SIZE OF THE SHOT**

The size of the shot (also the size of the frame) is one of the basic properties of a single shot and it is the key aspect of the photographic composition of an image. The particular size of the shot can be achieved through the technical settings of a camera, the editing process (specific lens, crop factor, postproduction cropping), and the position of the photographer. The size of the shot fulfils the photographer's intention. Via its properties, it exactly defines what and how will be portrayed. The size of the shot is defined through the relative size of objects that are included in the picture and is based on the properties of various shots as defined in the motion picture theory (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012; Rose, 2016). There is not a convention in the used size of a shot in the sports photography genres, but sports photographers have tendencies to use a tighter crop (Hagaman, 1993).

For this research, we chose a simplified classification due to the usage of various shots in motion pictures (film, TV) and specifically in journalism photography (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012). For example, so-called extreme long shot is widely used in motion pictures as well as the extreme close-up, which is also widely used in macro photography of nature, but it is rarely used in photojournalism (Kobré, 2008). In addition, Bordwell & Thompson (2012) emphasize that the boundaries between various sizes of shots are not clearly defined and are rather a matter of the intention of an individual shot.

The long shot (LS) shows the entire body. Its main function is to contextualize the object in the environment. The size of the figure within the frame can vary, but the whole figure is visible. Medium shot (MS) refers to the size of the shot where the body of the main object is cropped (usually from the waist up). This type of shot mainly shows the action and identifies particular people. Close-up (CU) shows only a fragment of the situation or figure (usually face, hands, legs, etc.). It identifies specific visible properties of the object. When a part of the body is captured, the close-up usually emphasizes emotions (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012).

#### **4.2. Type of the picture**

Type of the picture means the subgenre of sports photography. Each picture was classified into one category. In case a picture met the criteria for more than one category, we chose the most fitting category. Action sports picture shows an athlete during a competition. Usually, the athlete uses sports equipment and shows the typical

movement in particular sports art. A picture showing emotions or gestures mainly focuses on positive or negative emotions in reaction to the athletes' own performance, other athletes' performances or to the final results of the competition. We are aware that every picture can carry an emotional message. Thus, we listed the pictures where the main theme contained emotions or gestures into this category. The feature picture focuses on moments excluding the athlete's sports performance. Typical examples of this category are "behind the scenes" moments or moments with fans. Portraits are pictures that focus on people. Portraits should focus not only on the physical look of the portrayed individual but also on his or her personality. There are various subcategories of portrait depending on various aspects (level of stylization, location, etc.) (Horton, 2001; Kobre, 2008). In addition to the subgenres mentioned above, we added an additional category, miscellaneous, which addresses other phenomena appearing in the social media profiles of the Czech Olympic Team – picture montages and 360-degree pictures. The Czech Olympic Team's Facebook page published these kinds of pictures because of their sponsorship by a 360-degree camera production company.

### **4.3. Visibility of the disability**

The last category deals with the visibility of the disability in the picture. If one or more of the athletes have a visible disability in the picture, the value is visible. Otherwise, we considered the disability as not visible. We considered the visibility of a particular disability through the presence of a particular compensatory aid, the visibility of a deformed or missing body part. Visibility of the disability is a category that can be partly determined by the size of the frame. Pappous (2008) noticed that with the shift towards "more near" shots (close-ups), the disabilities are not often visible. We explain the limitations of this category in the results.

## **5. FINDINGS**

### **5.1. Sports Photography Subgenres**

Table 2 shows the number of pictures within various photographic subgenres. We can see that most pictures both from the Olympic and Paralympic Games can be ranked in three subgenres – sports action picture, picture showing emotions, and feature photo. We classified only a few images as a portrait or miscellaneous.

Table 2. Photo genres across the pictures from the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

	Rio 2016 Olympics		Rio 2016 Paralympics		PyeongChang 2018 Olympics		Pyeong-Chang 2018 Paralympics		Total	% Grand Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Action</b>	9	13%	15	54%	19	23%	23	72%	66	32%
<b>Emotions and gestures</b>	36	53%	11	39%	40	49%	1	3%	88	42%
<b>Feature</b>	19	28%	1	4%	14	17%	8	25%	42	20%
<b>Portrait</b>	1	1%	1	4%	7	9%	0	0%	9	4%
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	3	4%	0	0%	1	1%	0	0%	4	2%
<b>Total</b>	68	100%	28	100%	81	100%	32	100%	209	100%

Source: Authors of the article

The biggest difference was identified among the usage of action sports pictures and photos that show emotions. While most of the photos from the Summer and Winter Olympic Games was listed in the category emotions (51 % in total), the pictures from the Paralympic Games mostly focused on the sports so that the ratio of the sports action pictures (63 % in total) to the Paralympic Games compared to other genres is higher. Stereotypes about athletes with a disability persist in media (Němcová Tejkalová, 2012).

The Czech Olympic Team pages did not publish very often feature sports action pictures during either the 2016 Rio games (13 %) or the 2018 PyeongChang games (23 %). On the Paralympic Team page, there were 15 of 28 pictures (54 %) during the 2016 Rio games and 23 of 32 (72 %) during the 2018 PyeongChang games. During the 2016 Rio Olympics, 53 % photos showed emotions and 49 % during the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics. During the 2016 Rio, there were 39 %, and during the 2018 PyeongChang Paralympics, only 1 of 32 pictures (3 %).

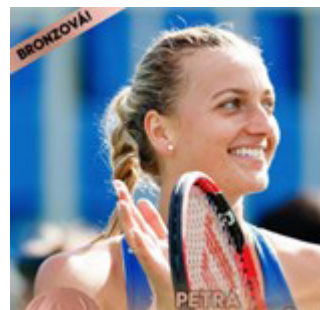
Emotions are mostly seen on the Facebook page of the Czech Olympic Team as it is assumed that sports fans had already seen the sports achievements of medalists (i.e., on TV). It is different in case of Paralympic sports. Athletes with a disability do not get in front pages of media so often, so it is also important to show the sport discipline. Paralympic sports photographer Martin Malý claims it as well. “The most important thing is to capture sports performance, rather than the emotions and efforts behind it.” (personal interview, August 8, 2018). Jan Povýšil adds: “It depends on the client and on the target group. However, if it is possible, I do not suppress anything.” (personal interview, August 19, 2018). As a result, the Czech Paralympic Committee shows more sports action in photos than emotions or gestures.

Among other genres, only feature photos had noticeable representation, especially on the pages of the Czech Olympic Team – 28 % during the 2016 games in Rio and 17 % from the PyeongChang games in 2018.

Both committees used photos as a part of graphics – especially in moments when



an athlete won a medal. The Olympic Committee’s page also used photos in posts that presented the daily program.



Pictures 1-3: Petra Kvitová. Source: Facebook / Czech Olympic Team

Pictures 1-3 show the usual image content on the Facebook page of the Czech Olympic Team during the Olympic Games. Via examples of pictures of Petra Kvitová, a tennis player and the bronze medalist from the 2016 games in Rio, various photos showing emotions are visible. As Hagaman (1993) notes, there are several gestures, which act as elementary visual components. Usage of fists and clapping is one of the widely used visual elements.

## 5.2. The Visibility of Disability and Size of a Shot

The visibility of disability (see Table 3) among the photos of the Paralympic Games was one of the key aspects that we examined. The visibility of a disability and the size of a shot usually related. However, there were different results from the 2016 games in Rio and the 2018 games in PyeongChang.

Table 3. Visibility of a disability in pictures from Paralympic Games

	Rio 2016 Paralympics		PyeongChang 2018 Paralympics	
	n	%	n	%
Disability – visible	9	32%	19	59%
Disability – not visible	19	68%	13	41%
Total	28	100%	32	100%

Source: Authors of the article

During the games in Rio in 2016, a disability was visible in 9 of 28 pictures. In the pictures from the PyeongChang games in 2018 a disability was shown in 19 of 32 pictures. One explanation for this would be to take into consideration the different characteristics of the disciplines – e.g., para ice hockey (the disability is always visible via sledge except in cases of an extreme close-up). Para ice hockey is a popular sport among audiences in the Czech Republic. This sports discipline was ranked by TV viewers as

a full-fledged sport (Macková, 2020), which is proven by the TV viewership of the Paralympic ice hockey tournament in 2018 or the high number of Facebook likes related to the images of para ice hockey players, that have received over one thousand Facebook likes compared to the pictures of the most successful skier Patrik Hetmer. Hetmer’s Facebook likes do not reach such numbers. His most successful photo from PyeongChang in 2018 received 384 likes (Český paralympijský tým, n.d.).

Table 4. Visibility of a disability across size of shot

	Long shot		Midsize shot		Closeup	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Disability – visible	5	31%	23	56%	0	0%
Disability – not visible	11	69%	18	44%	3	100%
Total	16	100%	41	100%	3	100%

Source: Authors of the article

In the cases of pictures of athletes with a disability, the size of the shot and visibility of the disabilities are aspects that are worth looking further. Table 4 shows how many pictures among the images from the Paralympic Games (both Rio 2016 and Pyeongchang 2018) were of which size and if a disability was visible. The results show how the size of the shot can influence the visibility of a disability. In long shots, the disability was mostly not visible. This is a match with Pappous’ (2008) results. He found out that there was progress in portrayal of athletes with a disability. In 2008 more “near shots” appeared which meant “preventing possibility of distinguishing any visual markers of disability” (Pappous, 2008: 350). Among the midsize shots, a slight majority of the shots show a disability. In none of the close-ups a disability was visible. However, the results of the close-ups are limited due to the small absolute number of shots. Also, various aspects of the disability must be considered – the presence of compensation or its severity.



Picture 4: Eva Berná.  
Source: Facebook / Czech Paralympic Team



Picture 5: Běla Třebínová.  
Source: Facebook / Czech Paralympic Team

In Picture 4, we can see an example of Eva Berná (Datinská) who competes in the shot-put and discus throw. Her disability is not visible on her body regardless of the scope of the photograph. There is no difference if we compare it to the pictures from field disciplines at the Olympic Games (her body construction corresponds with the body construction of discus throwers or shot-putters). In this case, the visibility depends on the type of disability. Eva Berná (Datinská) has cerebral palsy (which is not visible at first sight). On the other hand, Picture 5 shows wheelchair user Běla Třebínová, the silver and the bronze medalist from the games in Rio in 2016. We cannot see the disability on her body in the picture, but she does not have a "perfect and skillful body" (Apelmo, 2017) composition such as would be expected in a top-level swimmer. "The bodies of impaired athletes have continually been judged in relation to an able-bodied 'norm', and the standards of play and performance are compared with those of mainstream competitions." (Vanlandewijck & Thompson, 2011).



Pictures 6-7: Arnošt Petrářek. Source: Facebook / Czech Paralympic Team

At first glance, we encounter the same case in the portrayal of Paralympic gold medalist Arnošt Petrářek during the competition. Despite his severe physical impairment, it is not visible in the sports action picture from the race (Picture 6). Picture 7 shows Petrářek on the podium at the medal ceremony. In this picture, his impairment is clearly visible. Another similar example is wheelchair table tennis player Jiří Suchánek (Picture 8). While Petrářek's disability is hidden by the water, Suchánek's wheelchair is usually not visible behind the table. As Pappous (Brittain, 2016) described in the book, *The Paralympic Games Explained*, the disability is hidden in the photos from the Paralympic Games and this was noticeable in the sample of our research and also confirmed by one of the photographers. "It is not that I, as a photographer, want to deliberately hide something, but there are moments when the disability is not visible." (Povýšil, personal interview, August 19, 2018).



Picture 8: Jiří Suchánek. Source: Facebook / Czech Paralympic Team

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of our research showed that there were notable differences between the presentation of athletes with and without a disability on social media. The pictures on the Czech Paralympic Team page focused more on the sport when compared with the page of the Czech Olympic Team. The athletes thus were mostly shown during their sports performance. The official Facebook page of the Czech Olympic Team primarily focused on emotions or gestures. For the images of athletes with a disability, the responsibility of a creator and an editor of communication channel is crucial as they control the visibility of the disability (Pappous, 2008).

Furthermore, according to Maas and Hasbrook (2001), Pappous (2008) and Pappous et al. (2011), the disability in the examined pictures is either not visible or there are no photos with disabled athletes. As was shown in our research, the selected framing of the picture hid even a severe disability. This might lead to the denial of an athlete's identity and the suppression of the differences between the athletes with and without a disability. However, the selection of framing was not intentional by the creators. Jan Malý, a photographer of the Paralympic events, expressed his approach: "Definitely, I do not try to alter the athlete's disability. The most important thing is to capture the action, emotions, and effort of the athlete. Our (photographer's) task is

to document the (Paralympic) event just as any other. The only difference is in the specifics of each discipline.” (Jan Malý, e-mail interview, 2018).

The social status (the prestige or the acceptance of an individual in society) could be determined by the disability (DePauw & Gavron, 1995). “I am just like everyone else” (Apelmo, 2017) can serve as a motto of athletes with a disability. The success of Paralympic athletes works as a stimulus to other people with a disability and encourages them to be involved. However, there remains the question if the visual hiding of disability and the possible identity suppression is the most desirable way to reach this objective.

Hopefully, our research will lead to further investigation in this field. There are several potential areas that could be explored, especially, a comparison of these results with results coming from the highly developed countries in terms of the Paralympic movement.

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# THE LANGUAGE OF RACIST VIRALITY: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ITALIAN RACIAL HOAXES

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## ABSTRACT

*Social media allow democratization and immediate access to information. Despite this, a significant disadvantage of these platforms is the dissemination of fake news. Fake news is usually presented in the form of text; therefore, it is relevant to investigate it with linguistic, content-based analysis, to better understand how and why users decide to share the content regardless of its trustworthiness. To this date, few studies have a qualitative approach and most linguistic analyses of fake news often use machine learning or deep learning techniques. To overcome this shortcoming and improve fake news recognition, this research aims at analysing 50 racial hoaxes selected from debunking websites in Italy (Bufale.net, Butac.it), with a quanti-qualitative approach. Hoaxes' titles were collected, classified, organized, and analysed using psycholinguistic methodologies. The study aims to identify the language features that make racial hoaxes engaging and explore their variation across different types of threats. The main results of the study pointed out how racial hoaxes are characterised by the widespread use of provocative emotional content; moreover, more negatively polarised words, more vulgar expressions and in general, a more aggressive connotated language were found in criminality threat hoaxes compared to the others.*

Keywords: fake news ▪ racial hoaxes ▪ content analysis ▪ linguistic analysis ▪ misinformation ▪ virality

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Even if covering rather any domain of social life, the wide world of fake news originated in the political sphere. However, recent events such as the “infodemic” (Radu, 2020), highlight the wider extent of the phenomenon and therefore, the necessity of taking into consideration other types of hoaxes. A specific type of fake news that is becoming a popular discursive strategy to mask racism and unleash waves of fake

news and outraged comments on social media is racial hoaxes, meant as a kind of disinformation involving persons or groups based on their ethnicity, nationality, or religion (Papapicco et. al, 2022).

In Europe and Italy, any information on immigrants, refugees, or minorities is likely to cause a series of reactions which, consequently, create an enormous spread of news on social networks (Cerase & Santoro, 2018). In Italy, the UNAR (National agency against racism and discrimination) confirms there is a link between racism and the Internet: 29,2 % of verified cases of discrimination filed by UNAR in 2019, were considered “virtual” as the reports concerned acts of discrimination that were performed on social media. Moreover, considering the perpetrators of the discriminations, in 34,7 % of cases, the author is unknown, or not possible to identify but, in 12,4 % of cases, it is classified as a “Twitter user” (UNAR, 2019).

Being for some aspects a transnational phenomenon (Froio & Ganesh, 2019), the far-right movements have intensified their efforts to create a common opposition against the weakening of nation-states resulting from globalization and European integration, also supported by the Internet, acting as a facilitator for the construction of cross-border collective identities and interpretative frames (Caiani et al., 2012). As a matter of fact, among the transnational issues spread through Twitter, topics concerning anti-immigration and Islamophobia were found (Froio & Ganesh, 2019). Far-right movements can be accompanied by populism (Ernst et al., 2017) and conspiracy theories, such as the ‘Great Replacement’<sup>1</sup> (Ekman, 2022), both arousing affect, such as insecurity and fear, in online communication related to immigrants.

Considering the abovementioned data, we felt the urge to focus on racial hoaxes specifically, both because of the lack of research considering this type of fake news and the repercussions these hoaxes have in Italy. The existing literature, while growing, focuses primarily on recipients’ characteristics (Lyons et al., 2021; Staender et al., 2021), social and political repercussions (Cerase & Santoro, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2021), and on the possible strategies to counter misinformation (Abonizio et al., 2020; Basol et al., 2021; Epstein et al., 2021; Pennycook et al., 2021). However, fake news is primarily text, thus it is crucial to approach it considering its linguistic and content characteristics. Most of the literature on the subject has a quantitative approach and uses automated tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms or natural language processing<sup>2</sup> to investigate fake news’ features (Choudhary & Arora, 2021; Horne & Adali, 2017; Kasseropoulos & Tjortjis, 2021; Paschen, 2019) neglecting the peculiar contents, linguistic, and argumentative aspects. Considering this scarcity,

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1 Usually accounted among the conspiracy theories, the ‘Great Replacement’ claims that ethnically homogeneous populations in European nations are being “replaced” by people of non-European origin.

2 Natural language processing (NLP) is an interdisciplinary perspective, mainly matching the research efforts of computer science and linguistics, primarily aimed to improve the ability of digital tools to support and manipulate human language as well as to make computers capable of “understanding” some features of texts, including the contextual nuances of the language within them. As a consequence, NLP can be applied to the wide world on online misinformation.

this study aims to investigate the linguistic and content characteristics of fake news qualitatively. In this research, content analysis was used as a systematic coding and categorisation approach to determine, patterns of words used, their frequency, their relationships, and structures of communication (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Given the theoretical background which will be outlined, the overall aim of this work is to deepen how the linguistic features that make fake news engaging, vary across the different types of threats. To explore which linguistic features make racial hoaxes engaging, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Which are the main linguistic and content features in a corpus of recent racial hoaxes (RH)?

RQ2: Moreover, considering the threats associated to RH, which are their most frequent linguistic and content features?

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Peculiarities of Racial Hoaxes

Racial hoaxes are defined as communicative acts created to propagate distorted information in the form of a threat to our health and safety, in which the protagonist is a person, or a group of people described based on his/her/their ethnicity, nationality or religion (Cerase & Santoro, 2018; D'Errico et al., 2022). They can remain latent for a long time and emerge periodically by widely spreading negative stereotypes; moreover, they foster a discourse of exclusion on refugees and other minorities (Calvert et al., 2018). As an example, while it is widely acknowledged that general anti-Semitism was a precondition for the violent hostility toward Jews throughout Europe as exploded in the Holocaust, the origins of this feeling are less debated. Since a millennium, in the early medieval period, the interaction of social, economic, and religious factors shifted the Jews' images from misguided adherents of an outdated religion to a global dangerous and inhuman threat, leading to gradual Jewish dehumanization (Tuckwood, 2010). More specifically, toxification, that is to conceive the victim group as toxic to the furtherance of human civilization is identified as a warning sign, as it can stimulate two critical emotions, that is fear and survival instinct. Consequently, victims can be portrayed as poisonous deformations or as infectious contagions, accompanied by medical rhetoric, metaphors, and discourse encompassing pathology, diseases, viruses, and so on (Neilsen, 2015). Leaping forward, in the late context of global health crises and uncertainty, increased risk perception has negatively affected attitudes toward members of out-groups and foreign immigrants leading to new waves of xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes (Esses & Hamilton, 2021).

In general, the false information targeting immigrants and refugees does not only result as shocking, but provides stereotypical, biased, and prejudicial falsehoods (Patel, 2018). Indeed, from a psycho-linguistic perspective, racial hoaxes often convey stereotypes and prejudices through the manipulation of language (Papappicco et

al., 2022). D'Errico, Papapicco and Taulè (2022) pointed out for instance how racial hoaxes often contain typical linguistic forms of stereotypes and prejudices aimed at dehumanizing and attributing various types of threats to their protagonists. In this sense, racial hoaxes can be a tool to affect anti-immigrant attitudes.

## 2.2. A Focus on Disinformation

The term “fake news” was born in the United States in the nineteenth century to describe a story fabricated with the intent to harm a person or an institution, usually in the political sphere (Editors of Merriam-Webster, 2017); however, the spread of this expression, took place following the 2016 American election, won against all odds by Donald Trump (Riva, 2018). The advisor to the presidency herself, Kellyanne Conway, introduced the term “alternative facts” (which could be defined as the politically correct version of “lie”) during an interview a few days after the inauguration ceremony of the president. The expression “post-truth” was introduced in the Oxford Dictionary of the English language of 2016, and it denotes circumstances in which objective facts are less influential than emotional perception and personal beliefs. In the same year, this formula was selected as the word of the year, given its use in many public speeches and presentations. “Post order” was introduced by the Munich Security Report in 2017, to alert individuals to the presence of half-truths, interpretations, conspiracy theories or rumours (Buluc, 2018). In the political scenario, the post-truth era appears as paradoxical: the core issues of democracies are no more related to the neglect of facts; rather, disputes over what counts as “true”, “real”, “false” and “fake” are at stake in political public discourses. These contents accompany the efforts to obtain political dominance by supporting the construction of in-group as the bearer of truth and out-group as enemies (of truth). In other words, the “concept” of fake news has become part of political struggles to hegemonise social reality (Farkas & Schou, 2019).

More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a digital outbreak of disinformation often referred to as “infodemic”: false cures and inadequate prevention methods have also gone viral, causing more confusion, and risking more people's lives (Radu, 2020). In this sensitive domain, individual perspectives focused on “alternative lifestyle” of subcultural groups in cyberspace and criminological interpretations of social learning behaviours were conjointly applied to explain some features of science denial and medical misinformation (Lavorgna & Myles, 2022).

To understand how it is possible that the mere dissemination of manipulated news can cause such striking results, it is necessary to consider the social environment in which these processes are enabled. The immediate access to the Internet and the habitual use of mobile phones have drastically changed the way information is disseminated. Before the disclosure of the WWW, the only way to get information was through press professionals which meant that news, to have public resonance, had to be reported by journalists via official sources. Social networks instead,

provide a way for misinformation to reach a mass audience (Tandoc, 2020) without journalistic verification (Müller & Denner, 2019). To date, social media, blogs, and social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are some of the primary information resources for individuals (McClain, 2017). The positive consequence is the democratization and immediate consumption of information. The negative one is that in these social environments users can be easily manipulated, due to a lack of control and disintermediation between facts and users. Hence, considering the outcomes of information exposure on these platforms, it is of utmost importance for scholars to focus on the subject in order to find a solution to counteract the effect of fake news.

### 2.3. The Virality of Fake News: Linguistic and stylistic features

Baptista and Gradim (2020) present five main characteristics that make fake news viral: emotional content, heuristic persuasion, imitation of the journalistic format, clickbait, and images. In this paper the focus is on the content of such texts, thus we will not consider the influence of images (for a complete overview see Dan et al., 2021).<sup>3</sup>

If we look at these characteristics, their manipulation aims at leading users to read and or share fake news with two objectives: to generate advertising revenue and / or obtain ideological gain (Lazer et al., 2018). However, each of these features concurs differently to the achievement of the same purpose. Namely, imitation of the journalistic format consists in using false legitimacy and manipulating credibility (Baptista & Gradim, 2020): multiple studies indeed state that fake news contains at least one veracity element (Müller & Denner, 2019; Scardigno & Mininni, 2019) which complicates the distinction between true and fabricated facts and credibility assessment. Moreover, considering that true news often features an individual's full name, preceded with the name of their position (or the name of the institution) followed by a statement (Marquardt, 2019), we could argue that some fake news might be formulated using this structure, indeed, to resemble journalistic writing and thus, to result as more credible. Heuristic persuasion is defined as the use of pretentious, simple, persuasive, and informal language (Baptista & Gradim, 2020; Ali & Zain-ul-Abdin, 2021): specifically fake news' titles contain simpler words in length and technicality, they are composed of more capitalized words, significantly more proper nouns, and verb phrases (Horne & Adali, 2017). This implies that fake news requires less effort and attention: the interpretation of the reader may be less logical and based only on the titles' packed content and exaggeration (Horne & Adali, 2017). Moreover, the emotional response also explains why this type of information is processed heuristically rather than systematically (Meinert et al., 2018).

Emotional content is defined as the use of language that evokes strong feelings

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3 Even if the dissemination and manipulation of images can have a sensitive impact on racial hoaxes (Bharali & Goswami, 2018), visual fake news has a specific configuration, related to its specific features, such as analogical quality, indexicality, and propositional syntax (D'Errico et al., 2022). In addition, in the selected corpus several hoaxes were not accompanied by images. As a consequence, only texts were included in our analysis.

either positive or negative, the report of bizarre, impressive, or shocking events and crimes and exaggerated and dramatic stories (Baptista & Gradim, 2020; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019; Scardigno et al., 2024). Literature on the subject points out that the emotional response (specifically anger, see Chuai & Zhao, 2020; Fan et al., 2014; Müller & Denner, 2019; Wardle, 2017) provoked in readers by manipulated news is the key factor for its spread. In fact, emotional arousal does not only drive recipients to process information heuristically, but content that encourages strong feelings is also more likely to be shared (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Chuai & Zhao, 2020; Harber & Cohen, 2005; Valenzuela et al., 2017). On this matter, Basol, Roozenbeek and van der Linden (2020) included the use of emotional content in the most commonly used misinformation strategies: in this study the authors draw on an inoculation metaphor, where pre-emptively exposing people with the strategies used in the production of fake news helps confer cognitive immunity when exposed to real misinformation; they designed an online game in which players take on the role of a fake news producer and learn to master six common misinformation techniques used in the production of misinformation: use of emotional content, polarisation, spreading conspiracy theories, trolling people online and impersonating fake accounts. With this study the authors provided evidence that people's ability to spot and resist misinformation improves after gameplay, irrespective of education, age, political ideology, and cognitive style (Basol et al., 2020). The emotional response is also obtained through the narration of particularly alarming events: clickbait consists of titles manipulated to attract and arouse curiosity, especially with the use of sensationalism (Baptista & Gradim, 2020).<sup>4</sup>

Fake news topics comprise crimes, sexual crimes, fraudulent acts, and political inventions. These topics are not country related (Baptista & Gradim, 2020); nevertheless, in an analysis of the fact-checkers in the USA, United Kingdom, Germany and Austria, Humprecht (2019) found that online disinformation in English-speaking countries tends to target political actors, whereas, in German-speaking countries, the main focus is immigrants, holding them responsible for current political, economic or social situations. As previously stated, immigration seems to be a pivotal topic in Italy too, thus the choice of investigating this subject.

To date, there are only a few studies considering racial hoaxes specifically (Bourgade et al., 2023; D'Errico et al., 2023; D'Errico et al., 2022; Papapicco et al., 2022). For this research, we considered a relevant study on how racial hoaxes develop within media hypes and the comparison of their dynamics (Cerase & Santoro, 2018). Here, hoaxes were classified according to their topic: "health threat", "economic threat" and "criminal threat". In the study, the authors presented three case studies each of

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4 As for this last point, it should be specified that even if fake news is considered a blending genre, combining elements of traditional news with features that are exogenous to normative professional journalism (such as misinformation, sensationalism, clickbait, and bias) (Mourão & Robertson, 2019), a sensational approach to news construction penetrated the history of news (Brown et al., 2018), not being automatically and at all identifiable with fake contents.



them belonging to one of the above-mentioned topics. The analysis found that risk and security were often used as trigger factors to foment media hype. In other cases, the risk was used as a threat posed against natives' welfare (Cerase & Santoro, 2018). For our study, media hype was not investigated; instead, the focus here was on detecting the possible differences in language use among the different types of threats to investigate which linguistic features make racial hoaxes engaging. Therefore, the classification of the different types of racial hoaxes was maintained. Investigating how a threat is conveyed linguistically in these types of hoaxes seems important to understand how and why this factor may foment media hype.

### 3. METHOD

This is an exploratory research aimed at developing a possible method of linguistic analysis of racial hoaxes. Fifty racial hoaxes were collected from debunking websites from 2018 to March 2020. In addition, an automatic procedure enabled us to collect their corresponding comments on Twitter over the same period.

A content analysis was performed. Finding its roots in Lasswell's classic communication process (1948), this method offers a realist perspective since it works through a systematic coding and categorization approach for exploring and interpreting textual data (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020). We adopted an unobtrusive pathway to outline patterns of words, frequency, relationships, and structures of communication in a less subjective way than other analytical procedures, such as discourse analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

The categorization was based on multiple criteria extracted from previous research on the subject (Cerase & Santoro, 2018; D'Errico et al., 2022; D'Errico et al., 2023; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019; Scardigno & Mininni, 2019; Scardigno et al., 2023). From these works, three crucial categories, which respectively focus on linguistic, argumentative manoeuvres, and content aspects, were obtained corresponding to: "thick lexicon", "misinformation strategies", and "threat type". For each of the elements of these categories, we used the pre-existing definitions already given by the authors. In such a manner, we obtained the categories and rules for the translation of the text into code. As reported by Scardigno and Mininni (2019), the category "thick lexicon" is composed of the following criteria: "polarised words" which are described as terms recalling extreme positive or negative scenarios; "connoted words" which evoke cultural frames (such as 'fascist'); "generalising words" an expression used to broaden the domain; "common sense words and expressions" which comprise idioms, figures of speech, common sayings, etc. From these definitions, a higher frequency of "polarised words" was considered an indicator of the presence of either emotional content or clickbait (or both), and a more frequent presence of either "connoted words", "generalising words" or "common sense words and expressions" as an indicator of the formulation of the title to stimulate a heuristic persuasion.

As for the argumentative side, we focused on the theorization of Roozenbeek and van der Linden (2019), presenting six common “misinformation strategies”, whose definitions are summarized in Tab. 1.

*Table 1: Common misinformation strategies in line with theorization proposed by Roozenbeek and van der Linden (2019). (This source was created by authors).*

Type of misinformation strategy	Definition
Impersonation	Deception in the form of impersonating online accounts
Provocative emotional content	Creation of content that deliberately plays into basic emotions to frame an issue in a specific way
Group polarisation	Artificial amplification of already existing tensions between different groups in society
Conspiracy theories	Creation or strengthening alternative explanations which assume that events are controlled by a small, secret elite group of people
Discrediting opponents	Shifting the attention away from accusations by discrediting the source of the criticism
Trolling	Deliberate incitation of a reaction from an audience by using bait or a combination of the abovementioned strategies

Furthermore, to better assess the features of these hoaxes’ titles, in-group and out-group elements were categorised as well as the presence of the veracity element. Lastly, the category “threat type” was obtained by Cerase and Santoro (2018), in which the authors analyse a case study and displayed three types of threat present in racial hoaxes: “public health” hoaxes in which immigrants are portrayed as a threat and a risk for public health; in hoaxes presenting an “economic” threat, immigrants are considered as an economic threat (for immigration costs) and as undeserving recipients of the country’s economic prosperity; in “criminality” threat hoaxes, immigrants are represented as criminals and thus considered a criminal threat.

To answer RQ1, fifty hoaxes’ titles were randomly selected from the Italian fact-checking websites *Bufale.net* (<https://www.bufale.net>) and *Butac.it*<sup>5</sup> (<https://www.butac.it>) following purposive sampling strategies, whose aim is to make sure that specific kinds of cases that could be included are part of the final sample (Campbell et al., 2020). The hoaxes’ titles were picked based on their content: only racial hoaxes were selected for this corpus (freely available on the project *Sterheotypes website*<sup>6</sup>). The selection was obtained by inserting in the search bar of

5 *Bufale.net* and *Butac.it* are two accredited Italian realities fighting against disinformation and specialized in fake news detection and fact-checking. Their work starts with readers’ alerts through social media (WhatsApp, email, Facebook, and Instagram) or emails. These warnings are forwarded to staff members, who analyze each case by comparing contents with official sources, institutional websites, and security forces. After these checks, news is rewritten, and “fake” contents are explained. Internet users consider these services particularly useful since they can help discern reliable and authentic information, thus avoiding increasing misinformation.

6 <https://www.irrit.fr/sterheotypes/home/objectives/>

the websites, the following keywords: “racism”, “immigrants” and “Salvini” (former Italian Minister for Internal Affairs, renowned for his criticism towards the immigrant’s reception policy carried out by the centre-left governments, see Cervi et al., 2020). Out of fifty racial hoaxes, thirty-eight had a textual format (usually articles published on websites), seven were images reporting a sentence, four were social media posts and one was a politician’s statement.

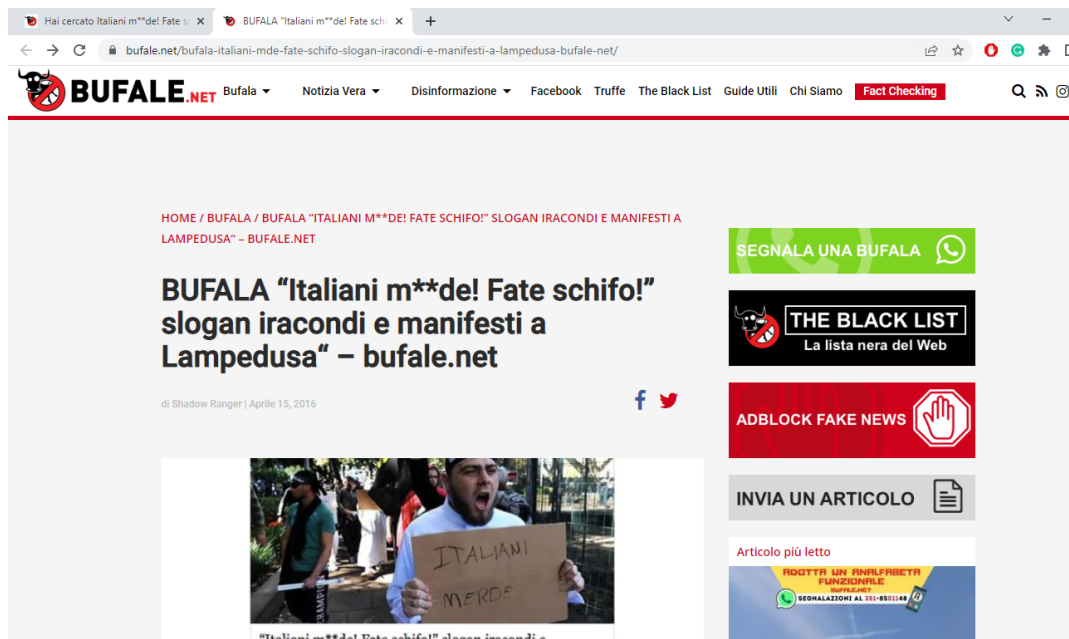


Figure 1. Example of racial hoax taken from Bufale.net

To make the analysis more accurate, two researchers performed the analysis separately on the same titles data set and with the same criteria, reaching a good inter-coder agreement (K Cohen=0.68) and then compared the results. Each element of each criterion was detectable in each hoax’s title: before the analysis, it was assumed the possibility to find more than one “thick lexicon” word or “disinformation strategy” or “threat type” in just one title. The titles were selected from fact-checking websites both to ensure their mendacity and to verify the presence of veracity elements. Moreover, considering the analytical nature of this study, it seemed appropriate to select authentic fake news, in order to produce a more realistic analysis of the factors influencing racial hoaxes spread. As Pennycook and colleagues argue (2021), creating fake news headlines results in the impossibility of knowing whether that sort of content would actually spread on social media, even though there might be good theoretical reasons to believe it would; moreover, many false headlines found on the internet are rarely shared, whereas the headlines analysed from fact-checking websites are those that already spread sufficiently widely and thus, do inevitably have the characteristics that facilitate content’s spread.

To answer RQ2, threat type was employed to categorise the titles based on the conveyed threat, and “thick lexicon” was used to investigate the language variation among the different types of hoaxes detected with the “threat type” category. Specifically, a random egalitarian selection of seven titles was performed among three groups of threat type. The translation from Italian to English was carried out by the author. The analysis was carried on two levels: on a structural level, we distinguished between positive action/concept and negative action/concept, between the presence or absence of in-group and out-group identifiers, and we analysed how the subject of the sentence is related to his/her action. The purpose of this distinction was to understand whether, on a syntactic level, there are differences in how racial hoaxes’ protagonists and their actions are presented to the reader. The second level of analysis focused on the variation of thick lexicon use among the three types of threat, to investigate linguistic variation and thus produce an answer for RQ2.

Table 2: Methodological design. (This source was created by authors).

Phase 1: racial hoaxes collection	Phase 2: corpus classification	Phase 3: linguistic qualitative analysis
Fifty racial hoaxes were collected from debunking websites	Hoaxes were classified using existing literature. Thick lexicon, disinformation strategies, and threat type criteria and their elements were used: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Thick lexicon: polarised words, generalising words, common sense words and expressions, connoted words</li> <li>▪ Misinformation strategies: impersonation, provocative emotional content, group polarisation, conspiracy theories, discrediting opponent and trolling</li> <li>▪ Threat type: public health, economic and criminality</li> </ul>	Random egalitarian selection of seven hoaxes’ titles to perform the analysis of the linguistic variation among threat type: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ positive/negative action or concept</li> <li>▪ presence/absence of in-group or out-group identifiers</li> </ul>

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following tables report the results of the classification. The percentage frequencies illustrated in the tables were calculated by dividing the absolute frequencies of each criterion for the total amount of frequencies of the “threat type” category and multiplying for 100. The (N) in the tables stands for the total amount of occurrences of the category and can be used to calculate the occurrence of each criterion in the corpus. Data were processed this way to better read the incidence of each criterion on the overall distribution and on the other criteria.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of the “threat type” category. (This source was created by authors.)

Type of threat	Percentage frequency	Examples
Criminality	39 %	Sicily: Islamic extremist kills his girlfriend’s dog for sniffing the Koran.
Realistic conflict	25 %	Prenestina, the nursery will be shut down: it will become an immigrant housing centre.
National identity	23 %	The prayer of the Alpine troops was censored so as not to offend immigrants.
Economic	11 %	Boldrini: “Immigrants have no money and it is not fair”.
Public health	2 %	91 % of immigrants who land in Italy are affected by Onan’s disease.
Tot (N)	100 % (61)	

Table 4: Frequency distribution of the “misinformation strategies” category. (This source was created by authors.)

Misinformation strategies	Percentage frequencies	Examples
Provocative emotional content	37 %	Venice, veiled women spit at the crucifix.
Trolling	27 %	Saviano: “Honestly, I prefer to save refugees and my clandestine brothers than to help some whining and spoiled Italian earthquake victim”.
Group polarization	20 %	Free dentist to immigrants: slap in the face to poor Italians.
Impersonation	10 %	Italy. The first illegal immigrant mayor elected: “This is how I will change Italian politics”.
Conspiracy theories	5 %	This is madness: in Agrigento free buses to immigrants to avoid violence and aggression.
Discrediting opponents	1 %	Ventimiglia collapses, policemen accuse: “Gone Salvini, Macron sends us back 100 immigrants per day”.
Tot (N)	100 % (136)	

Table 5: Frequency distribution of the “thick lexicon” category. (This source was created by authors.)

Thick lexicon	Percentage frequencies	Examples
Polarised words	34 %	“violent”, “illegal”, “save”
Generalising words	33 %	“immigrants”, “refugees”, “north African”
Connoted words	23 %	“Alpine”, “veiled women”, “earthquake victims”
Common sense words	10 %	“This is madness”, “lands the card”
Tot (N)	100 % (113)	

Regarding RQ1, the results of the analysis are in line with pre-existing data on the pivotal role of emotional content in making fake news viral: the selected corpus presents frequently elements and structures that provoke strong emotional responses. Specifically, the presence of such content was verified with the use of the “disinformation strategy” and the “thick lexicon” categories: the most frequent disinformation strategy used is that of “provocative emotional content” with an incidence of 37 % in the corpus, confirming the frequent use of structures and strategies that provoke emotional reactions in recipients (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Berger & Milkman, 2011; Guo et al., 2019; Peters et al., 2009; Sivek, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018); the most frequent element of the “thick lexicon” category are “polarised words” confirming the use of inflammatory (Guo et al., 2019) and dividing language in this type of content. Lastly, in thirty-six out of fifty titles there was at least one element of veracity, confirming the usual presence of at least one fact in this type of content (Müller & Denner, 2019); this indicates that, although the presence of emotional content seems the most important feature, our racial hoaxes’ corpus is also characterised by the consistent presence of emotional and veracity elements.

The second most frequent disinformation strategy is “trolling”, indicating both the use of “clickbait” and a combination of more than two of the disinformation strategies in just one title. Lastly, the second most frequent “thick lexicon” criterion is “generalising word” indicating the use of a simpler (Baptista & Gradim, 2020) and less technical language (Horne & Adali, 2017) in order to be easily understood, thus inducing a heuristic processing.

Considering RQ2, the analysis has demonstrated the need to include new types of threats to better detect the characteristics of the corpus: “national identity” defines a threat to a symbol of the Italian national identity (for example a cultural symbol such as a member of the Italian Alpine troops); “realistic conflict” threat is specific to those titles in which two social groups contend for the same good, thus causing conflict. Furthermore, subtypes of the criminality threat were added: “c. for aggression”, “for theft”, “for murder”, “for insurrection”, “for illegal acts” and “sexual”.

To consider the titles’ virality, we retrieved through automatic procedure their corresponding comments on Twitter over a period that goes from 2018 to March 2020 . The total amount corresponds to 21714 comments. Six titles received considerably more replies if compared to the others (see Tab. 6):

Table 6: Type of threat and number of comments concerning the most replied titles. (This source was created by authors.)

RH number	Type of threat	Number of comments
1	criminality and national identity	546
2	national identity	912
3	criminality	968
4	realistic conflict	1816
5	criminality	3080
6	criminality and national identity	3804

The recurrent presence of the criminality threat in the most replied titles in the analysed corpus, further suggests a connection between shocking events and crimes and emotional activation and highlights the pivotal role of emotional content in making fake news viral. A linguistic analysis was performed on twenty-one titles selected from a total of fifty hoaxes’ titles. Seven were selected for each of economic (ETH), realistic conflict (RCTH) and criminality threats (CTH).

Table 7: Percentages of in-group, out-group, positive and negative actions/concepts observed in the selected corpus. (This source was created by authors).

Type of threat	Ingroup %	Outgroup %	Positive action/concept %	Negative action/concept %
Economic	20	33	29	26
Realistic conflict	20	40	42	27
Criminality	60	27	29	57
Tot	100 (10)	100 (27)	100 (14)	100 (23)

For what concerns positive/negative actions/concepts, results show that in CTH, negative actions/concepts are more frequent; moreover, whereas in RCTH and ETH negativity is expressed equally with both actions and concepts, in CTH it is mostly expressed through negative actions (Jiang & Erez, 2018).

Specifically:

- In ETH, there are two negative concepts expressed by actions (e.g. “puts him in the hospital”) and four negative concepts expressed in other terms (e.g. “without money”, “it is not fair”).
- In RCTH, two negative subjects are conveyed by actions (e.g. “nursery school closed”) and two negative concepts expressed by adjectives (“fascist” and “six nuns become pregnant”).
- In CTH, there are nine negative elements expressed by actions (e.g. “I killed many people”, “you suck”, “arrested”, “rapes”, and “destroys him”) and four negative concepts expressed by nouns and adjectives (e.g. “weapons depot” and “harassments”).

Considering positive actions/concepts, no notable differences were found. For what

concerns the presence of in-group or out-group terms in CTH, four in-group occurrences were found compared to the two found in the other two hoaxes. RCTH was the one with the highest occurrence of out-group terms (eleven occurrences in seven sentences), followed by ETH (nine occurrences in seven sentences), and lastly CTH (seven occurrences in seven sentences).

Regarding the words designating the in-group, two were found in RCTH and two more in ETH. Interestingly, we can observe that in three out of four cases, terms are correlated to Italian culture and nation (“earthquake victims”, “Italy” and “monastery”). Concerning CTH, there are seven occurrences of in-group terms, most of which conveying a strong emotional meaning, such as “father”, “girl”, and “daughter”.

Concerning the out-group, many terms referring to this category were found in RCTH. Specifically, most of times the common members of the out-group (for example “immigrants”, “refugees” etc.) are followed by other members that might be considered as part of another out-group: namely, Macron, Renzi, “Zuckerberg” and Boldrini. The strategy of using prominent political or world-renown people or institutions is used twice also in ETH (“Boldrini” and “UE”) and none in CTH. This strategy may be seen as an attempt to imitate the journalistic format given the use in true news of an individual’s full name (or the name of the institution) followed by a statement (Marquardt, 2019).

Lastly, considering how subjects and their actions are presented:

- In ETH, in four sentences out of seven, the out-group members are the objects of a positive action/concept (e.g. “can withdraw up to 37 euros”, “thanks to 500 euros bonus”).
- In RCTH, the out-group causes three unpleasant situations (numbers 8, 9 and 13 of Appendix A) and in three other cases exploits a resource (10, 11, 12). When an in-group member is presented, he is the victim of a situation caused by the out-group (“Italy” in number 8 and “monastery” or “nuns” in number 13).
- In CTH, the out-group causes the negative situation and is a perpetrator of aggressive actions. The in-group is either the victim of these aggressive actions, or acts in defence of the aggression committed by the outgroup. These data concur to strengthen the perceptions of immigrants as a criminal threat and the related negative affect (Baranauskas & Stowell, 2022)

For the lexical investigation of the linguistic analysis and considering polarised terms, we observed a clear difference between the groups.



Table 8: Percentages of thick lexicon in the selected corpus. (This source was created by authors).

Thick lexicon	ETH %	RCTH %	CTH %
Polarised	38	35	54
Generalising	38	40	25
Connotated	12	25	17
Common words	12	0	4
Tot (N)	100 (16)	100 (20)	100 (24)

For CTH 54 % of the “thick lexicon” occurrences were “polarised words” compared to 35 % of RCTH and 38 % of ETH. Moreover, in CTH “polarised words” all have negative value and all convey a negative action or an aggressive scenario; in ETH, most of the words have negative value; in RCTH, all the words have positive value if considered separately (as in “free”, “deserves” or “pregnant”), but their negative value is conveyed by the context (as in “Six nuns become pregnant”). Generalising words are almost equally distributed in all three groups, confirming the extensive use of less technical words (Horne & Adali, 2017). However, it is possible to point out that “connoted words evoking cultural frames” are mostly concentrated in RCTH; we can assume that these words are used strategically to reinforce hostility between the groups and confirm pre-existing attitudes to stimulate heuristic persuasion. “Common sense words and expressions” have few occurrences. In CTH, it is a vulgar expression (“cuts his balls”), whereas the two observed in ETH are a pun or wordplay and an idiom (“travesty of justice”).

The RCTH and the ETH have multiple similarities: here, negative actions or concepts are more frequently conveyed by concepts than by actions; the presence of the out-group seems to be very important and is often modulated by the presence of members, often renowned people or institutions; in-group is mostly depicted as related to Italian culture. Concerning the relationship between subject and action, in these hoaxes, the out-group enjoys actions carried out by members of the in-group. They also have privileges, use resources, and ultimately cause unpleasant situations. As for the lexical part, “polarised words” assume a negative value when related to the context; “connoted words evoking a cultural frame” are linked to politics, economy, culture, and religion; finally, the “words of common use” are rather expressions, popular idioms, and figures of speech. The language used in these two groups of titles is more neutral than in the CTH, but because of this, RCTH and ETH can be more difficult to identify. A recent study (Hameleers et al., 2023) suggests that it is the seemingly harmless contents that pose the largest threats: the authors state that decontextualized information can disarm important defence mechanisms among recipients because, by staying close to the truth, it is hard to assess their credibility. Moreover, this type of fake news is often impossible to identify because of it being composed of verifiable facts, in a misleading way (Ibid). CTH, on the other hand, are characterized by the presence of frequent negative concepts and actions,

usually expressed by actions. Ingroup members are usually portrayed as the victims of aggression by the members of the out-group; these last ones are designated as perpetrators of aggressive actions (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019). Finally, these hoaxes are characterized by the presence of extreme language, conveyed by polarised words stating again aggressive actions or negative scenarios (Maneri, 2016).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This study aimed to investigate the linguistic features that make racial hoaxes engaging and their variation among different threats. Firstly, data point out the widespread use of emotional content (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Berger, Milkman, 2011; Guo et al., 2019; Peters et al., 2009; Sivek, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018), especially through the highest presence of “provocative emotional content” for the “disinformation strategy” category and “polarised words” for the “thick lexicon” category.

Second, the variation of the linguistic features among threats is conveyed by two main “strategies”: on the one hand, provocative emotional content is used to incite negative emotions such as outrage or indignation. This is the case of CTH, in which the language used is extreme, vulgar, and violent (D’Errico et al., 2012; Poggi et al., 2013); the in-group is often designated with emotionally connoted words (such as “father” or “daughter”), whereas the out-group is depicted as the perpetrator of violence. These features concur to construct negative frames in the same way as far-right movements (Froio & Ganesh, 2019), populism (Ernst et al., 2017), and conspiracy theories (Ekman, 2022), all engaging emotional arousal and a threatening climate.

On the other hand, a combination of different strategies is adopted to cause conflict and to induce the reader to feel like a victim of injustice. This is the case of ETH and RCTH in which language is less extreme and resembles journalistic writing; the in-group is designated as victims of unfair treatment whereas the out-group is portrayed as beneficiaries of privileges. The similarity between these types of titles and journalistic writing might increase the difficulty of discernment between hoaxes and true news (Hameleers et al., 2023), thus offering new insights for a critical research field about what is really “at stake” when fake news is under investigation. As made explicit especially in the political domain, the real challenge concerns not only what defines “truthfulness” or “falsehood”, rather identifying “fake news” as a discursive signifier that is part of political struggles (Farkas & Schou, 2019). Even if substantially confirming the types of threats proposed by Cerase & Santoro (2018), additional ones were found, including “national identity”, “realistic conflict” and subtypes of the criminality threat. However, these specific pathways are in line with the Italian political scenario: as Italy is a focal point for maritime arrivals due to its geographical position, some populist parties, such as Lega, capitalised on the fears and the threats related to immigration, thus becoming a political entrepreneur of xenophobia (Avanza, 2010) and pointing to set as an “emergency populism” (Cervi et

al., 2020). As for this domain, an international comparison could be enlightening to emphasize contextual and specific types of threat in line with the rhetoric and argumentations proposed by local far-right and populist movements.

Overall, results emphasize the importance of considering a qualitative, linguistic approach in favour of detecting which kind of lexicon and structures elicit which type of emotional responses. Further investigating linguistic dynamics among different types of hoaxes and the relation between language and emotions would enable researchers to better understand this phenomenon as well as to refine the methods used to distinguish between truthful and fabricated content.

Lastly, even though this study highlights the use of different strategies to make racial hoaxes engaging, most titles present a combination of “misinformation strategies” (which also explains the high occurrence of the criterion “trolling”), “thick lexicon” words, and may even convey multiple threats. As a consequence, the importance of making use of a systematic coding activity, typical of content analysis, can be outlined to match results from thematic issues (the type of threat and the misinformation strategy), linguistic and stylistic cues (the several declinations of thick lexicon) and more objective index (e.g., the number of comments).

This study presents some limitations. First off, the limited extension of the analysed corpus: we classified a total of fifty titles. However, this research is exploratory and aims at developing a possible method of linguistic analysis of racial hoaxes; therefore, we decided to focus on a small cluster of titles and detect the linguistic indicators. Future research should validate the method through the analysis of a broader cluster of racial hoaxes, thus offering data for a wider generalisability.

Secondly, regarding the methodology, both analyses are inherently reductive since only some parts of the titles were observed. Further research on the linguistic features of fake news might be useful to uncover the linguistic mechanisms underlying this type of content, by also monitoring the potential users' reaction.

Future research could compare the linguistic elements of racial hoaxes and real news, considering the engagement that these types of content generate (D'Errico et al. 2022); moreover, considering the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the perception of travellers and immigrants, an interesting analysis could focus on the different type of perceived threat: supposedly, pandemic period racial hoaxes might focus more on the health threat, portraying immigrants as disease and viruses carriers.

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<https://www.irit.fr/sterheotypes>

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# JOURNALISM ACROSS PLATFORMS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF *THE WASHINGTON POST*'S EARLY FRAMING OF UKRAINE WAR STORIES

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## ABSTRACT

*News organizations utilize multiple social media platforms to garner the attention of various audiences. Every platform has different users, characteristics, and expectations. This exploratory study conducted a framing analysis of The Washington Post's initial content related to the Russia-Ukraine war on their Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Findings reveal frames on the conflict and how frames differ depending on the platform. Researchers discuss information implications for consumers depending on the platform they favor.*

Keywords: framing ▪ qualitative research ▪ social media ▪ news ▪ war

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For the second time in the 21st century, the world witnessed Russia invade one of its European neighbors. The first time was the war in Georgia in the summer of 2008, and the second was the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The war in Ukraine began brewing when pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich was ousted in 2014. Russia subsequently seized the southern region of Crimea, began deploying big numbers of troops to the Ukrainian border, and scrapped a peace deal (Kirby, 2022) before the invasion. Today, more than two years later, the war continues. Media outlets around the world have covered the war, including the almost 150-year-old United States legacy media outlet *The Washington Post*.

This research study focuses on *The Washington Post*'s coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The media outlet was selected for several reasons. The U.S. is one of the Group of Eight (G8) countries; it is considered to hold significant economic, political, military, and cultural influence on a global scale. *The Washington Post* is the premier media outlet in the U.S. capital, the political hotbed Washington D.C. The outlet is considered "agenda-setting...in the U.S." (Fleischer, 2023, p. 460), it is a well-respected journalistic publication globally, and it is in many ways at the forefront when it comes to social media use. Rudolph (2019) points out it is one of "the top five of the

newspapers read internationally, and the most commonly used by communication, political science, and policy studies scholars” (p. 314). It has bureaus in 26 locations around the world (*The Washington Post* announces newsroom..., 2020). Because of its status, *The Washington Post* is regularly used to research conflict outside of the U.S. For example, Fleischer (2023) and Ke (2008) used it to conduct framing studies to examine coverage of the Kosovo War and NATO’s involvement.

Being a legacy media outlet today - media business that dominated before the digital information age - takes a lot of navigation, searching for the audience. The internet and social media platforms have opened up channels for media outlets to connect with audiences in expanded ways, allowing for real-time two-way interaction. Gone are the days when print media could offer only a physical hard copy product and be successful. *The Washington Post* has flourished in this digital media age by offering news coverage on multiple platforms. They have focused on acquiring a young, digitally savvy audience via channels such as TikTok (Meek, 2021) and have thereby stayed relevant.

Because most media outlets today are active on several platforms, and because journalism aims to inform the public, it is of uttermost importance to examine and understand how a publication frames the same story on its different platforms. This research study sought to understand how *The Washington Post* covered the invasion of Ukraine across its social media channels Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Data was collected a week before the invasion and a week into the invasion, a time period when the framing of coverage can have a strong initial effect on an audience’s understanding of war and can quickly influence opinions. Through the lens of framing, an inductive content analysis finds unique differences in storytelling and message content across platforms, bringing concerns that how consumers understand the Russia-Ukraine conflict depends on which platform they favor.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. The Russia-Ukraine conflict

When Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, it was described as the “most aggressive move yet to redraw the boundaries of the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War” (Hookway & Trofimov, 2022, para. 1) in the late 1980s. Some argue Putin had been slowly re-erecting that Cold War curtain and media outlets compared Russia’s military equipment rolling into Ukraine to the Soviet Union’s 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia (Moore, 2022).

Ukraine was a part of the former Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991. Putin “regards the Ukraine and Russia as inseparable” (Miranda, 2002, para. 12). He justified the invasion by saying they were defending Russian-speakers in Ukraine, especially those in the self-declared republics that left Ukrainian control in 2014 - Donetsk and Luhansk. The invasion may also be fueled by Ukraine’s interest in

joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), something Putin has seen as a hostile act against the Soviet Union (Miranda, 2022). Countries around the world called for various sanctions against Russia, including trade sanctions, athletic events being moved, and no-fly zones being established.

Putin and Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, have been pitted against one another and compared for leadership styles. Zelensky, described as a "comedian who had no experience of politics when elected" (Mulvey, 2022, para. 1), has now become a household name and a "symbol of resistance and unity" (Adler, 2022, para. 1). He has successfully navigated social media with his openness and selfie-type videos and is seen in stark contrast to Putin. Putin instead has used awkward official photos and long pre-recorded speeches where he rambles (Adler, 2022).

The Russia-Ukraine war has been dubbed the "TikTok War." As Dang and Culliford (2022) point out, the social media platform is very influential with Gen Z. TikTok's algorithm provides trending content regardless of who a person happens to follow, which means topics can easily go viral. Chayka (2022) described how a TikTok video showing missiles falling over Kyiv had over nine million likes. The video followed TikTok norms that Chayka (2022) described as "choppy, decontextualized, with catchy pop music in the background" (para. 2). Chayka (2022) explained how TikTok content has "permeated the collective consciousness, providing some of the earliest and most direct glimpses of the Russian invasion" (para. 2).

Dang and Culliford (2022) say TikTok has a central role, even becoming "so influential in this conflict that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky appealed to 'TikTokers' as a group that could help end the war, in a speech directed at Russian citizens" (para. 6). But it is not only Zelensky that understands the importance of the TikTok audience. So does the Biden administration. In March 2022, 30 TikTok stars were invited to a Zoom meeting with U.S. National Security Council staffers and the White House press secretary. Topics included information about the war, American strategic goals and partnerships, how the U.S. would act if Russia used nuclear weapons, and distributing aid to Ukraine (Lorenz, 2022).

Because of *The Washington Post's* reputation as a leading legacy media outlet on the TikTok platform, it was ideal for a research study on the Russia-Ukraine war. *The Washington Post* has covered the conflict from a wide variety of angles on its various social media platforms. It is also the premier media outlet in the capital of the United States, a country that is viewed as highly influential globally, on many levels. *The Washington Post* is commonly used by global communication, political science, and policy studies scholars and has been used in many studies to examine global conflicts.

## 2.2. The Washington Post

*The Washington Post* has a long history, dating back to December 6, 1877. It began as a Democratic daily newspaper, started by then 38-year-old Stilson Hutchins (Roberts, 1989). Hutchins launched the newspaper "because he knew...that a Washington

newspaper could command the daily attention of power in all branches of the national government” (Roberts, 1989, p. 5). In the 1880s, Hutchins gave up the Democratic slant and started describing *The Washington Post* as independent (Stabile et al., 2010).

Events that cemented the newspaper on the international media map include publishing the Pentagon Papers and breaking the Watergate scandal that brought down President Richard Nixon. Today the newspaper has a wide circulation. It has gone from a local newspaper to a global media company and is now one of the “most respected and influential news outlets” (Stabile et al., 2010, p. 577) in the United States.

By using news and digital platforms, legacy media still play a crucial information role today, especially when it comes to political events (Langer & Gruber, 2021). *The Washington Post* - as a legacy media company - has diversified and expanded its platforms, including the recent innovative use of TikTok as an information tool. In fact, according to Axios Media Trends, *The Washington Post* has the second largest following (1 million) on TikTok for U.S. legacy news outlets, next to CBS News (2 million) (Fischer, 2022). However, *The Washington Post* is thought to have a more engaged following due to its “wonderfully weird, witty, and topical” (Gallucci, 2021, para. 2) content that mixes pop culture with hard news. Dave Jorgenson, known as “*The Washington Post* TikTok guy,” created the legacy paper’s account in May 2019. Jorgenson developed a “self-deprecating,” “dad joke” approach on the platform that won over followers. The TikTok account has gained enough prestige at *The Washington Post* and online that it is now run by a team of three - Jorgenson and two others (Gallucci, 2021; Joseph Ferguson joins..., 2024).

### 2.3. Social media

A newspaper like *The Washington Post* has its regular print edition, but also a website and numerous social media channels. The outreach on different channels is because a media outlet needs to reach audiences, and the demographics on different platforms tend to be slightly different. In other words, *The Washington Post* needs to diversify its channels so that it can reach a larger audience, both in size and demographics.

According to Matsa and Liedke (2022), in 2022 basically one-third of American social media consumers received their news on Facebook (31 percent). This was followed by YouTube with 25 percent, X/Twitter<sup>1</sup> with 14 percent, Instagram with 13 percent, TikTok with 10 percent, and Reddit with 8 percent. LinkedIn and other platforms have less of an audience (Matsa & Liedke, 2022). A year later, Matsa (2023) found that while news consumption on most social media platforms have stayed the same, TikTok is the exception. In three years, the share of U.S. adults getting regular news on TikTok has gone from 3 percent in 2020 to 14 percent in 2023. On a global scale, user information tends to be similar. Newman (2023) found that while

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<sup>1</sup> Twitter was rebranded as X in summer 2023.

Facebook is one of the most used social platforms, TikTok is growing rapidly, in particular in Asia-Pacific, Africa, and Latin America. About half of the top, global publishers are now creating content on the TikTok platform (Newman, 2022).

Diving deeper into the statistics, it is clear that the Facebook audience is older, with 30–49-year-olds as the largest regular social media news user audience. Also, Facebook has the largest share of 50–64-year-olds and 65+ than the other popular platforms. TikTok and Instagram have their largest news audiences in the 18–29 range (Matsa & Liedke, 2022). According to Newman (2023), TikTok reaches as much as 44 percent in the 18–24 range globally. Of those, 20 percent tune in to TikTok for news content. Barnhart (2022) noted that almost 40 percent of Generation Z say they are influenced by items they see on TikTok, and it is currently the fastest-growing social media platform. Essentially, platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok are generally for people under 30. However, the bulk of people with real spending power tend to be on Facebook, YouTube, and X/Twitter. These statistics highlight the need for media outlets to be diverse in their social media outreach.

Because the audience is diverse on various social media platforms, this study seeks to look deeper at *The Washington Post's* Ukraine social media coverage. Instead of examining several media outlets, this study examines how one media outlet frames messages across platforms. This approach was selected because of the importance of the information function of journalism. The authors want to examine how one topic is framed by one media outlet across its platforms to understand similarities and differences in that framing. Of utmost concern is if the framing on the different platforms is creating potential information gaps for audiences.

*The Washington Post's* coverage was examined on three social media platforms - Instagram, TikTok and Facebook. Facebook is, despite its various controversies, the social media platform with the largest number of followers. Established in 2004, Facebook currently has an estimated 2.91 billion users, while Instagram has 2 billion users. TikTok, the 2016 newcomer on the social media scene, only has 1 billion users. However, as Barnhart (2022) points out, TikTok's growth is unprecedented with users spending 89 minutes/day on the platform. This is to compare to Facebook and Instagram, that users spend roughly 30 minutes/day on.

Not only does a different general audience exist on each platform, but each platform has different characteristics and audience expectations. For example, Facebook and X/Twitter posts often consist of text and a generated image from a web link. However, both platforms can also host video. Instagram was created to be the visual platform, with its feeds filled with beautiful photos. It is thought of as a haven for artists or makers to display their talents. The platform also hosts videos through reels or stories. TikTok, a reinvention of the short-form video, has developed a reputation for entertainment value. Videos are a compilation of pop music, memes, filters, and dance challenges, etc., mainly focused on pop culture trends. While all platforms can host text, photos, and videos - they do not look or feel the same based on each platform's technical capabilities and the reputation of content it has developed.

Therefore, the same information from news outlets may read, sound, or generally feel different depending on the platform hosting the content.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Framing theory provided the structure for the analysis of *The Washington Post* stories. It was selected because media coverage contains powerful frames that can influence opinions (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019; McLeod & Detenber, 1999). Tuchman (1978) described news as a window to the world, “and through the news frame, Americans learn of themselves and others...” (p. 1) while Lecheler and de Vreese (2019) explained that news frames stress certain aspects of reality.

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) found that factors that are internal to journalism determine how journalists and news organizations frame certain issues. News frames are like a road map (Goffman, 1974), creating a structure that elements are built on (Capella & Jamieson, 1997). Gamson and Modigliani (1987) describe framing as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them” (p. 143). Entman (1993) explained that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendations” (p. 52). Essentially, as de Vreese (2005) stated, “a frame is an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic” (p. 53).

Scheufele (1999) distinguished media frames from individual frames. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) explained a media frame as a “set of interpretive packages that give meaning to an issue” (p. 3), while Kinder and Sanders (1990) explained that individual frames are “internal structures of the mind that help individuals to order and give meaning to the dizzying parade of events” (p. 74). Scholars examining media frames have found two categories: generic and issue specific. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) describe generic frames as being broad and structural themes. They are generally limited to items such as conflict and human interest. Issue specific frames vary depending on the content and the context being examined (de Vreese, 2005). General frames that journalists tend to use include the conflict frame that portrays adversarial dynamics, the human-interest frame that emotionalizes events, the morality frame that highlights morality issues, the responsibility frame that connects events with consequences or solutions, and the economic impact frame that highlights financial impact (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Studies on framing in the news tend to draw on working or operational definitions of frames that are designed for a specific study. That means there is not a consensus on how to identify news frames (de Vreese, 2005). Some scholars have taken a deductive approach where frames are defined prior to the examination. However, many studies are inductive, meaning that they do not analyze news articles with frames that are defined prior to the study. Instead, they use frames that emerge



from the examination of the material. Furthermore, many scholars support using an inductive approach, in particular when studying events. For example, using an inductive approach, van Dooremalen and Uitemark (2021) focused on the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the coverage in American, French and Dutch national newspapers, and Iannarino et al. (2015) analyzed coverage in U.S. evening news of the 2011 Japan nuclear crisis.

For this study, the inductive approach was best because of the fluid situation, the cross-platform examinations that were needed, and because the researchers wanted to study both visual and textual frames in messages. The inductive approach allowed the researchers to identify the frames that emerged from the data. It was important to the researchers to allow the data to speak for itself versus trying to fit the data into predetermined frames.

Framing theory has been used to examine messages on many platforms and it has been used to examine media and war. Furthermore, many scholars have used framing theory to examine *The Washington Post's* coverage of war and conflict. For example, both Fleischer (2023) and Ke (2008) used framing theory to analyze *The Washington Post's* coverage of the Kosovo War and NATO's involvement. They used *The Washington Post* because of its status as a premier global media outlet. Fleischer (2023) found that *The Washington Post* essentially manufactured consent in support of NATO's involvement, and Ke (2008) concluded the publication had missed important information in the war and did not report several incidents in a timely enough manner. Other studies aimed at *The Washington Post* and framing include Auerbach and Bloch-Elkon (2005) studying the Bosnian crisis, Gruley and Duvall (2012) looking at the Darfur conflict, Porpora et al. (2010) reviewing the Iraq war and prisoners at Abu Ghraib, Rudolph (2019) examining human rights in North Korea, and Sotiraki (2023) studying the Russia-Ukraine war.

Research examining war using framing theory includes Alitavoli (2020), who examined Syrian war articles on an alternative news website and a mainstream news site and found differences in the consistency of the themes used, with the alternative news site being more consistent. Mhanna and Rodan (2019) used framing theory to examine newspaper articles published by mainstream Australian media outlets about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza. They found that a conflict frame was dominant in both newspapers. Guzman (2016) examined U.S. news media frames in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and found that frames between CNN and Fox News fluctuated, but overall, the frames reflected U.S. ideology that democracy is better than authoritarian rule. Carpenter (2007) analyzed frames in newspapers during and after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. She found that while the frames and inclusion of international, national, and local sources differed, the inclusion of military sources was basically balanced across newspapers. Keith et al. (2009) examined print, broadcast, and online visuals of the Iraqi invasion and found distinct differences in the images that were published across media platforms. Schwalbe et al.

(2018) explain that “studying framing across media platforms matches how media producers are presenting content” (p. 235).

Publishers tend to present the same stories differently, depending on the platform, and studies have shown that a relationship between news framing and media formats and platforms exists. This exploratory study is innovative as it focuses on one media outlet's - *The Washington Post* - framing of news stories about one significant event across multiple platforms. Because of its unique blend as not only an American legacy media outlet but also a cutting-edge, innovative outlet - for example, because of its ingenious use of new platforms such as TikTok - *The Washington Post* offers a unique scenario that warrants scholarly inquiry. As stated by Schwalbe et al. (2018), looking at frames across media platforms can highlight media messaging differences from an organization, as well as track differences across platforms.

#### 4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Due to audience demographics differing across platforms, as well as social media platforms having different characteristics and audience expectations, this exploratory study seeks to understand if *The Washington Post's* frames of the Russian invasion of Ukraine differ across Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. This study analyzes if the coverage of the beginning of the conflict plays out differently, depending on the platform one is using to consume content. In turn, the study asks:

**RQ1:** What early frames emerged of the Russia-Ukraine war from *The Washington Post's* social media platforms?

**RQ2:** Do textual and visual frames of the Russia-Ukraine war differ across *The Washington Post's* social media platforms?

#### 5. METHODOLOGY

The researchers conducted an inductive content analysis of *The Washington Post's* early frames of the Russia-Ukraine war. Data was collected from February 17, 2022, to March 3, 2022 - a week before the invasion of Ukraine and a week into the invasion - to get a sense of how frames changed after the invasion began. This was a time period when the framing of coverage could have an initial effect on the audience's understanding of the war, quickly influencing their opinions about the event. The unit of analysis was the media outlet's social media posts on their owned Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok platforms.

On all platforms, a post can consist of textual and visual frames in a variety of different ways. The biggest issue is text often overlays images or videos, particularly in Instagram and TikTok content. Therefore, it was important for the researchers to define what to consider text and what to consider a visual. Across all platforms, the caption of a post was considered text. Defining visuals was more complicated.

On Facebook, a post can consist of text in a caption, image, or video. For example,

the majority of *The Washington Post*'s Facebook content consisted of a link to an article housed on their website. Facebook generates that link into a visual containing an image with a headline. Because the headline is generated as part of the image, the researchers consider it part of the visual frame.

In an Instagram feed, content can consist of a card (one image), a carousel (up to 10 images one swipes through), or a video. Text can overlay photos and videos on this platform, separate from the caption. Therefore, the text contained within the images was coded as part of the visual. The same was done for TikTok videos.

To simplify the data, the researchers only looked at Instagram posts in the feed, not Instagram stories. Instagram stories disappear after 24-hours unless they are put into Instagram highlights. At the time of the study, *The Washington Post* was not utilizing the highlight feature to curate their Russia-Ukraine Instagram stories. Therefore, the researchers only collected stories in the feed that do not disappear unless deleted by *The Washington Post*. Also, the researchers collected X/Twitter data but found that *The Washington Post* repeated the same content on Facebook and X/Twitter, seeing that the structure of both platforms' feeds is very similar. Therefore, at this time, although X/Twitter data was collected, the researchers chose to only focus on Facebook posts as it has a larger audience. Furthermore, the researchers collected web articles that were linked to posts, but for this study the articles were not analyzed. Again, the unit of analysis was the post contained within social media platforms.

Data for Facebook, X/Twitter, and TikTok was captured by the researchers by taking screenshots of every post, or screen recordings if the post contained video, related to the war every day. Instagram data was collected using Picodash, an Instagram data collection tool. There was a total of 392 Facebook posts (70 before, 322 after the invasion), 97 Instagram posts (13 before, 84 after the invasion), and 19 TikTok posts (3 before, 16 after the invasion). Data was organized in an Excel file containing a link to the post, the date of the post, the caption, and a link to the screenshot or recording.

When conducting the inductive content analysis, researchers looked for the dominant textual and visual frames only. This is in line with Keith et al.'s (2009) coding scheme focusing on dominant frames. For example, the imagery that appeared most in a video or the imagery that appeared most in an Instagram Carousel. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, only the dominant theme in a post's text and visual(s) was recorded at the time.

The researchers conducted a preliminary content analysis, both coding 10 percent of the content. Then, they came together to determine if they found similar frames. After finding consistency, the researchers split the data and continued the analysis. Due to the large amount of data collected during the week after the invasion on Facebook and Instagram, the researchers randomized the data and analyzed them until they reached saturation. This was not necessary in the week leading up to the invasion on Facebook or Instagram, nor with the TikTok data, due to the small amount of

content collected during the time frame. Next, the researchers reviewed the frames that emerged across platforms to determine any differences.

## 6. FINDINGS

Research Question 1 asked what frames emerged of the Russia-Ukraine war from *The Washington Post's* social media platforms. Several frames emerged during *The Washington Post's* initial coverage of the war. Table 1 lists the textual frames and Table 2 lists the visual frames that emerged from the inductive qualitative analysis.

In the week leading up to the invasion, coverage was small compared to the week after, as is expected. In the seven days before February 24, 2022, the most dominant textual and visual frames were Figure Heads, Economic Impacts (i.e. sanctions) and Military/Political Movement. In the first week of the invasion, the former remained dominant textual and visual frames with the addition of Refugees/Civilians, Fact-Checking, Reporters, Explainers, Anti-War Protests, and Opinion Pieces. The majority of visual frames reflected the textual frames with the addition of Humor, which was only found on TikTok. Also, there were no visual representations of Opinion found on any platform.

It is important to note that the visual frame of Humor on TikTok was much more prevalent before the invasion, but did make appearances after the invasion, though in a much smaller way. In fact, *The Washington Post's* TikTok team recognized that their content would need to shift tone and posted a video on February 28, 2022, explaining their move to more hard news with less humor to cover the war (*The Washington Post*, 2022c) stating:

“This will include more footage from our brave colleagues on the ground in Ukraine and plenty of TikToks explaining what’s happening on a daily basis. And if you’re like Sam [referring to a can of spam with googly eyes] and have some questions, comment below. We’ll do your best to answer as many questions as we can sourced directly from Washington Post reporting.”

However, smaller, humorous instances were still found within the content. For example, the mention of “Sam” in the above-mentioned video was an inside joke for *The Washington Post's* TikTok fans. Sam refers to a can of Spam with the “P” blacked out, googly eyes, and a paper hat made from a newspaper clipping. Sam is often an easter egg of sorts, found in the background of many of *The Washington Post's* TikTok videos.

Table 1: Textual Frames

Frame	Mentions of:	Platform
Figure Heads	Putin, Zelensky, Biden, Trump, U.S./NATO/China Officials - their thoughts on the conflict or analysis of their actions	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Refugees/ Civilians	What they are doing: fleeing, sheltering, made it to safety, making food, other military support items	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Economic Impact	Mentions of economic sanctions on Russia, citizens boycotting Russian products, what sanctions mean for U.S. economy; potential cyber attacks	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Fact- Checking	Fact-checking viral images or videos; mentions of misinformation	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Military/ Political Movement	Military or political moves made by Ukraine, Russia or U.S./NATO	Facebook, Instagram
Reporters	Experiences of <i>The Washington Post's</i> reporters on the ground	Facebook, Instagram
Explainer	Explanation of military terms or list of current sanctions	Facebook, Instagram
Anti-War Protests	Protest in Russia or by Ukrainian allies	Facebook
Opinion Pieces	Contempt for authoritative rule/sympathy for democracy, Black voices, dangers of colonialism, and other takes on what this war means for our society/world	Facebook

Note. Textual frames found through an inductive content analysis.

Table 2: Visual Frames

Frame	Images of:	Platform
Figure Heads	Putin, Zelensky, Biden, Trump, EU/NATO/Chinese officials, or CEOs of major companies	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Refugees/ Civilians	Refugees fleeing, sheltering, making it to safety, or civilians that stayed to make food or other military support items	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Economic Impact	Money, stock market, or business logos	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Fact- Checking	Viral images deemed misinformation, with text or audio for context	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Military/ Political Movement	Military equipment, bombings, city scenes of destruction, soldiers, maps of Ukraine indicating changes in military movement	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Reporters	<i>The Washington Post's</i> reporters on the ground in Ukraine; or <i>The Washington Post's</i> TikTok team members at home or office	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Explainer	Solid background with text (i.e. Instagram card or carousel)	Facebook, Instagram
Anti-War Protests	Protesters in Russia or Ukrainian allied countries; Ukrainian flags, sunflowers	Facebook, Instagram
Humor	Use of humorous acts through video, sound, and images	TikTok

Note. Visual frames found through an inductive content analysis.

Research Question 2 asked if textual and visual frames of the Russia-Ukraine war differed across *The Washington Post's* social media platforms. As is visible in the third column in Tables 1 and 2, many of the textual and visual frames are found across all platforms: Figure Heads, Refugees/Civilians, Economic Impact, and Fact-Checking. However, some differences were found.

First, although the researchers found the Economic Impact frame across all platforms, it was most prevalent on Facebook and Instagram. While TikTok videos would quickly mention a new sanction, Facebook and Instagram posts would take deep dives into what these sanctions mean for Russia, but mostly what they mean for U.S. citizens. Further, while the Fact-Checking frame was found in Facebook and Instagram posts, it dominated many TikTok posts. Of the 16 TikTok videos posted after the invasion began, seven included the Fact-Checking frame; 44 percent of *The Washington Post's* TikTok coverage.

Next, TikTok videos included visual frames of military movements – showing military equipment, bombings, city scenes of destruction, and soldiers. They did not include textual frames of military or political movements. There were no mentions of moves being made by military or political powers in the war. Also, TikTok coverage was unique by being the only platform that told the news solely through the reporters on the ground or from the studio back home. Of the 19 TikTok videos, all but one showed and used a reporter as the face of the story, much like a standard broadcast video package. This differs from Facebook and Instagram where the majority of content was either a post linking back to an article housed on *The Washington Post's* website or photos with embedded text.

A unique characteristic of Instagram was the use of the Explainers. Many Instagram carousels and captions were used to educate the audience on military terms or list current sanctions with only a black background and text for the visual. This frame was also found on Facebook, but the majority was found on Instagram.

A distinctive finding on Facebook was the use of Opinion Pieces and Anti-War Protests. *The Washington Post* only posted opinion pieces to their Facebook account. Further, textual representation of the Anti-War Protest was found in Facebook captions, but visual representation was prevalent on Instagram with the use of Ukrainian flags and sunflowers. Lastly, as stated above, TikTok was the only platform to use Humor.

## 7. DISCUSSION

Media coverage contains powerful frames that bring salience to certain points of a story and can influence opinions (de Vreese, 2005; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019; McLeod & Detenber, 1999). What makes a frame is linked to internal journalistic factors like workflow, sources, and editing (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). As the researchers moved through *The Washington Post's* early social media content of the war, we were reminded of Marshall McLuhan's notion that the "medium is the message." Every platform has a unique audience, characteristics, and expectations, meaning

not only is the practice of journalism creating frames, but the utility and use of social media platforms by a news consuming audience is influencing how the news is told and, in turn, the opinions of a given audience. The current study found, depending on what platform you are using to consume *The Washington Post's* content, it may influence your understanding of the Russia-Ukraine war.

In the early coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, some of the frames that Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified as general frames journalists use during the conflict - adversarial dynamics, human interest, and economic impact - could be seen on all three platforms. Similar, yet unique to Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) adversarial dynamics, the researchers found many social media posts framed around a single Figure Head. Rather than one post being about major players going head-to-head, the dominant textual and visual frame would be about one particular figure head. For example, on March 2, 2022, on *The Washington Post's* Instagram, they posted an image of Putin with the headline "What's Putin Thinking?" (*The Washington Post*, 2022g). The caption is an analysis of why Putin is making particular military moves in Ukraine. On that same day in a separate post, we see an image of Zelensky with the headline "Assassination plot against Zelensky was foiled and unit sent to kill him was 'destroyed'..." (*The Washington Post*, 2022b). Figure 1 shows how two different posts on the same day focus on one figure head rather than pitting the two together in one textual and visual frame.



Figure 1: *The Figure Head Frame*

Note. Two Instagram posts on the same day (March 2, 2022) focus on one figure head at a time (*The Washington Post*, 2022g; *The Washington Post*, 2022b).

One must remember that at this point in time, Instagram users were at the mercy of the algorithm. Therefore, depending on where these posts landed in a consumer's

feed or how far one scrolls in one's feed, one might consume information about one figure head but not the other.

Similarities to Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) human interest and economic impact frames were also found. The researchers found frames of Refugees/Civilians on all three platforms. There was great focus on the citizens of Ukraine and what they were doing, whether that was images and texts about them fleeing or sheltering in place, making it safely across the border to Poland, or of many staying to support their military by making food or Molotov cocktails.

Further, this study also found an Economic Impact frame across all platforms. However, here is where researchers began to see differences in frames among platforms. Post captions of economic sanctions on Russia took a much deeper dive into what sanctions mean for the U.S. economy on Facebook and Instagram versus TikTok. For example, captions on Facebook read, "Wheat and seed oil exports could be dramatically impacted, and it could take years before a return to normalcy because of disrupted planting schedules," and "Investors are braced for economic whiplash as sanctions add a new dynamic to the volatility that has largely defined trading in 2022." While on TikTok, the three posts that touched on Economic Impact were much more surface level, only listing new sanctions for their viewers. For example, a caption read, "Western companies are cutting ties and suspending business dealings as the conflict continues in Eastern Europe (03/01/22) #bp #gm #shell." The accompanying video uses humor, showing a member of *The Washington Post's* TikTok team standing in front of images containing British Petroleum, General Motors, and Shell logos, holding up their hand in a peace sign or waving goodbye, and then walking out of the frame, as if saying "peace out" to Russia (*The Washington Post*, 2022f).

*The Washington Post* clearly understands the difference in audience on each platform. The Facebook and Instagram general audience is much older than TikTok's. In turn, the older platforms have an audience with much more spending power than the latter - an audience much more concerned with what this war means for their bottom line. Therefore, it makes sense for *The Washington Post* to focus more on the Economic Impact frame on Facebook and Instagram, because the content is much more likely to be relevant to the audience on those platforms. TikTok users being much younger and with little spending power, coupled with the platform's reputation of being used for entertainment value, makes the small mention of sanctions with no explanation of consequences understandable. However, the lack of effort to educate a younger generation on the potential implications of sanctions on the U.S., their parents or guardians, is concerning in the long run. This could mean a fairly serious gap in the younger generation's understanding of what is at stake during the war.

Another difference found in frames across platforms was the focus on fact-checking on TikTok versus Facebook or Instagram. After the invasion of Ukraine began, *The Washington Post's* TikTok team knew a change in their content's tone was needed. As mentioned earlier, this change to cover the war included a video explaining their move to more hard news with less humor (*The Washington Post*, 2022c). After their



initial warning to their audience, the TikTok team spent much time and effort trying to warn their users of misinformation about the war. Several videos walk users through manipulated video, how the TikTok team was able to verify the authenticity or lack thereof, and how TikTok users can verify other videos themselves. Captions read, “No matter how devastating, enlightening or enraging a post is, wait to share it. Assume everything is suspect until you confirm its authenticity. #euphoria #medialiteracy” (*The Washington Post*, 2022d), “A guide to watching videos with a critical eye. #factcheck” (*The Washington Post*, 2022a), and “Reply to @krystalm4 Reuters fact checked the images, saying they do not show Zelensky fighting. (03/03/22) #factcheck #medialiteracy #osint” (*The Washington Post*, 2022e).

It is clear that *The Washington Post*'s TikTok team of three recognized that they had an important role in the “TikTok War” - to help squash misinformation. Although the time periods of the studies are slightly different, this study's findings are in line with Sotiraki (2023) who used framing theory and a content analysis of *The Washington Post*'s TikTok coverage during the first two weeks of the Russia-Ukraine war. Sotiraki (2023) found the main coverage categories to be verification and misinformation, and says it is evident *The Washington Post* used a “proactive approach to resolving verification hurdles and disinformation concerns” (p. 5).

The generation that uses TikTok the most is a generation that tends to go to social media for news versus legacy media. The Poynter's MediaWise project has a separate teen fact-checking network because they and their partners recognize the importance of this generation needing to become better fact-checkers (Boney, 2019; Poynter, n.d.). Several countries have started media literacy efforts as a part of their school curriculums as they realize they must help the younger generation combat information issues (Fedorov, 2014; Zhang et al., 2020). Even UNESCO has media education literacy as one of its top priorities (Fedorov, 2014) and has launched several initiatives, including assessments of teacher training on the subject. In essence, *The Washington Post*'s TikTok efforts are a part of a larger effort to help the younger generation navigate information. However, TikTok is not the only platform being abused by bad actors. Many Facebook groups are echo-chambers filled with conspiracy theories and Instagram is filled with bots. Why not utilize an effort across all platforms to point out misinformation? This is particularly important because it has been found that the older generation is more likely to share false news than the younger generation (Funke, 2019; Guess et al., 2019).

This fact, combined with the finding that *The Washington Post* only posted Opinion pieces on Facebook, is concerning. It is almost as though they were playing into the platform's algorithm, which favors content that is more “emotional and provocative” (Merrill & Oremus, 2021, para. 2). This is a story *The Washington Post* themselves have covered in detail. Though Facebook says they have changed their algorithm since this assertion, perhaps *The Washington Post*'s Facebook audience has come to expect this content. We cannot say why *The Washington Post* only published Opinion about the

conflict on Facebook, but we can assume it plays well with their audience on that platform.

In addition, though *The Washington Post's* TikTok content did take a more serious, hard news tone after the invasion of Ukraine began, much of the content still contained small humorous elements. The TikTok team tried to maintain a semblance of what their audience expects of them on the platform. However, in times of war, the question is if this is the right frame for a media organization to communicate.

While *The Washington Post's* content can be consumed on all platforms, many people favor one platform over the other. Therefore, this study finds that the difference in framing found in *The Washington Post's* content posted to their Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok could allow consumers to see the Russia-Ukraine war in slightly different ways. The current study cannot say if the unevenness of framing can have consequences to a user's understanding of the war. Yet, we know from centuries of framing research that media frames can influence opinions.

## 8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As an exploratory study, there are limitations to our approach. While studying framing across platforms for one media outlet makes this study novel, it is not generalizable as we only examined a two-week period and for one news organization. Further, there are difficulties with measuring content across different platforms with different formats. However, now that we understand what forms content can take and the dominant frames that have emerged, we can expand the study both in terms of time and scope, providing us with stronger data. We can also develop a coding book for quantitative analysis. Moving from an inductive to a deductive approach will allow us to compare and contrast *The Washington Post's* frames of the Russia-Ukraine war to other media organizations. Furthermore, we now have a better understanding of how to compare frames across platforms, allowing us to explore this method and deepen our understanding of cross platform frames for all media organizations.

## 9. CONCLUSION

News organizations, like *The Washington Post*, are tailoring content to the various social media platform audiences, which is a smart business decision; media organizations need strong audience numbers in order to financially survive. In media literacy courses, students are frequently told to review coverage from more than one media organization for a fuller picture of a situation. However, if one media organization posts different narratives on its different platforms, perhaps the key is to also look at more than one platform.

Academia has largely ignored how framing stories differently on various platforms can provide audiences different information on the same event. The literature does not show how one media outlet potentially covers stories of the same event

differently on its various platforms. As this study has shown, there could be major implications to an audience's understanding and opinion of a particular event if they only use one platform for the bulk of their news consumption.

Social media teams are often siloed by platform in the newsroom. Journalists who provide content to TikTok might not pay attention to the Instagram team's content. It is important to bring industry attention to issues of siloed teams and the importance of cross communication between those teams.

At the heart of this discussion is the larger question of journalism's role in society. If journalism should inform and tell people what they ought to know, then only providing parts of a story on one platform has large implications. By excluding important angles and information to certain parts of a media outlet's overall audience, knowledge gaps may develop. For example, if a media outlet does not tell their TikTok audience of the financial implications of a conflict, it creates a knowledge gap for that audience. One can certainly argue that items such as financial implications are important; it is a topic that all audiences, on all platforms, need to be aware of. If the media is only selecting parts of a story that is suitable for a platform's utility and that platform's audience, is it fulfilling the true information function of journalism? Is the medium more important than the message?

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# MULTIPLICITY OF MEDIA CHOICES AND PRIVATISED MOBILITY IN QUARANTINE

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper deals with specific ‘polymedia repertoires’ of young people with the characteristics of their changing, adaptive and often parallel/simultaneous movement across different platforms and legacy media within their daily interactions during quarantine. Audiencing practices where it is especially important to examine relationships with technologies in contemporary media manifold were approached through the analysis of the media diaries of young people, aged between 21 and 25 years. The conclusions of the analysis point to a technological/media transformation, a transformation of practices in everyday life and a radical mediatisation which plays an important part in the changing generational structure of feeling. This paper argues that a generation-specific relationship with technologies forms a generation-specific structure of feeling or specific subject cultures that develop as by-products of deep mediatisation, in which digital media, especially during quarantine, expanded into all spheres of their social life.*

Keywords: polymedia repertoires ▪ quarantine ▪ media diaries ▪ young people

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary media environments, the radical integration of technologies into daily life can only be analysed by considering both aspects of communication—textual/symbolic and material/artificial, hence the practical aspect as well. Under contemporary conditions, it is especially crucial for every audiencing analysis to also examine relationships with technologies in contemporary media manifolds. Couldry and Hepp (2017, p. 5) called this a shift towards materialist phenomenology of the social world, where both symbolic and material aspects of technological practices are included in media consumption analysis. Akin to Kittler’s (1999/1986) ‘technomaterialism’ and a descendant of ‘cultural materialism’ proposed by Williams (1980), the notion stands as a designation of considering media as technology and cultural form

simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> To paraphrase Williams's 'cultural materialist' view of television analysis (1990/1974), smartphone usage concerns as much the cell phone technology as a material artifact and the practice of handling it, as it concerns the practice of using the phone as a symbolic cultural form as well as interpretative and production strategies related to these symbolic forms. Therefore, as McLuhan (2004/1964) observed a few decades ago, the sheer materiality of the media should also be understood as a message.

This 'deep mediatization', as Couldry and Hepp (2017, pp. 53–56) called the third wave of mediatization or the contemporary complex digital media environment, is a stage in the civilisation process and a result of various mediatization waves in the past. Against this backdrop, modern technological society should be understood as a historical process marking the increasingly deepening technological dependence and the constantly intensifying influence of mediatization on the functioning of all social entities and their interrelationships. When it comes to empirical studies of 'audiencing' practices during deep mediatization, the concept of communicative figurations has especially taken root in the German intellectual milieu; communicative figurations may be viewed as conceptual tools enabling one to 'study how the transformations that we relate to the term mediatization actually take place' (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018, p. 18). The concept derives from Elias's figurational sociology (1978, 2000) and draws on the assumption that, rather than an individual, humanity or society, objects of sociological research are a group of individuals and a long-term transformation of figurations that they form with each other. While relationships, thus, constitute the primary social ontological category, Bourdieu and Elias were paradigmatic thinkers investigating social phenomena through the optics of relationships. More importantly, Elias 'grasps the role that material infrastructures play /.../ and insists on thinking about the consequences of that material infrastructure, of technology, from the point of view of the human beings entangled within them and their *human goal*' (Couldry, 2022, p. 12).

The paper begins with the assumption that media practices cannot be validly treated as distinct and unrelated practices/platforms and that digital media operate and are used as an integrated structure or as polymedia<sup>2</sup> repertoires (Madianou, 2014; Tagg & Lyons, 2021). In this situation, the media encourage certain genre-based practices of use and production in relation to each other. Therefore, polymedia, as an integrated structure of capabilities, is not only the naming of a media environment but also the use of these capabilities to manage relationships and emotions. In

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1 As regards the tradition of media studies, mention ought to be made of authors such as Roger Silverstone, Paddy Scannell and David Morley.

2 A polymedia environment is formed when certain conditions, such as accessibility, affordability and digital literacy, are met. Here, we draw upon the concept of polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2013; Madianou, 2014), which represents an attempt to name an integrated media structure in which each medium is defined and has meaning only in relation to other media and in which media selection is a social act that involves normativity, definitions of the situation and social conventions.

the context of this research approach—which is a result of epistemological paradigmatic changes as well as of new audiencing practices where people move between platforms—the aim of this article is to analyse the changes that occurred in students' communication practices and media consumption, as well as in the communication characteristics and relations in this 'figuration', under the severe restrictions<sup>3</sup> during the COVID-19 pandemic and to draw tentative conclusions regarding the cultural and social implications of these transformations. Media diaries were used as a method, as they provide 'unique possibilities to approach the mediatized life worlds of people, and to empirically assess individuals' complex media practices in times of digitalization' (Wagner et al., 2022, p. 65).

The case study of audiencing as a cultural practice that cannot be investigated without considering the material and technological context in which it takes place focused on a group of students as a mediatised figuration, that is, a 'figuration of individuals that share a certain meaningful belonging that provides a basis for action and orientation-in-common' (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 168). What distinguishes a group of individuals as a figuration from that as a simple group is the existence or absence of a network of interdependences and a figuration matrix with an individual as its part.

The quarantine (lockdown), as a way of tackling the pandemic, brought about a transformation in the space-time of everyday routine. The physical and social differentiation of the spaces of everyday life (work, leisure, entertainment, private sphere, public sphere, front stage, backstage, etc.) collapsed. According to Fuchs (2020), it was difficult to organise day-to-day life in this convergent space of the physical home, which had turned into a supra-locale of what had once been separate spaces of everyday life. During the lockdown, the gradual blurring of distinction between spaces that had been advanced by the neoliberal organisation of work<sup>4</sup> and the pressure of constant availability was suddenly taken to its extreme. In this regard, the Corona crisis can primarily be viewed as a crisis of space and time, a state of racing stillness, as Virilio (2012) and Rosa (2015) indicated. According to Rosa (2015), high modernity is characterised by fragmented and contingent temporality that turns life into a series of short-term projects and where preservation of the status quo relies on constant acceleration of different social dimensions (from economic growth to constant innovation). To capture this contradiction (where the status quo is maintained through constant acceleration of change and growth – a so-called mode of dynamic stabilisation), he used Virilio's notion of racing stillness – stagnation at top

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3 In Slovenia, these were above all the restrictions of movement to municipalities and that on crossing the state border, the closure of schools and faculties, the restriction on night movement, the closure of all social venues (bars, night clubs, etc.) and the prohibition of all cultural and sports events (concerts, competitions, etc.).

4 For a discussion on a general argument about the acceleration of life in late capitalism and about a dramatic restructuring of workplaces in the face of economic forces, see Wajcman (2015), especially chapter 5, where not only spatial aspects but also the relationship between work and time in the context of digital technologies is critically approached.

speed – to describe the complementarity of compulsion to change and the tendency to freeze. During the lockdown, we faced time and spatial shrinking – the space was radically reduced and mostly confined to one's own apartment, and we lived through a general deacceleration of everyday life, economy, mobility, etc. However, while there was a reduction in physical and material movement and speed, there was a corresponding acceleration in our digital lives. This had been going on for some time, but it was greatly intensified by the lockdown during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, ordinary interaction rituals were suspended once digital communication pushed aside the physical aspects of sociality and bodily interactions among people. As a result of mask-wearing and transferring face-to-face interactions to digital platforms, a whole variety of cues (facial, bodily, etc.) that are normally used in interaction rituals in direct contact and are crucial for sociality weakened or completely vanished from communication. Regular performance of formal and informal rituals in physical presence is also critical for the preservation of institutions. As Božić observes, drawing on the micro-interactional sociology of Collins (2020), the suspension of interaction ritual chains at all levels of social reality leads to the problem of lacking emotional energy and thinning solidarity because digital media only enable a limited and strictly complementary maintenance of interaction ritual chains. The diminished ceremonial nature, the blurred distinction between Goffman's notions of front stage and backstage and the reduction of physical and direct communication have undoubtedly had a transformative effect on social life. In other words, in quarantine, most of this life unfolds in 'synthetic situations' (listening to lectures on Zoom, playing video games on the internet, flirting on Tinder, etc.), where technical means are implied as 'intermediaries/channels that allow access to other contexts' (Knorr-Cetina, 2009).

## 2. COMMUNICATIVE FIGURATIONS IN SYNTHETIC SITUATIONS

'Relational shift' counteracts methodological individualism and promises to transcend useless dualisms in social sciences regarding the relationship between an individual and society, between structure and functioning and between mind and body. Therefore, Hepp and Hasebrink (2018), too, believed that the concept of figurations can link the micro-analysis of practices performed by individual actors to the meso-analysis of individual areas and to macro-social questions. The authors defined communicative figurations as typical cross-media patterns of interweaving through communication practices. They provided an example of family members who, although physically separate, remain connected and maintain family relations with the help of multimodal communication practices—from phoning and emailing to content sharing on social media platforms. In contrast, organisations as communicative figurations exist through both databases and communication via the internet and other classical channels. In addition to communication practices involving eye contact, Schrøder (2018) highlighted the interweaving of communicative figurations

with media at the following three levels or, rather, aspects: the entire media environment available at a given moment, media selection used in a certain social domain and media repertoires used by individual actors in everyday life. This manifoldness of modern media generates remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999), where new media build on and recreate the previous ones and vice versa, while old media—from printed books to television—which defined the past civilisations/empires (see Innis, 2018/1951), remain in use.

Couldry and Hepp (2017, pp. 170–172) distinguished between two key types of collectivities in relation to media: media-based collectivities (e.g. online groups that can only be formed with the help of media) and mediatised collectivities that are not constituted by media and can therefore exist without them (e.g. families and peer groups) but that are nevertheless increasingly constructed and formed through media-mediated communication. It is not only common communication practices and personal interactions that define ‘networked media collectivity’ but also the question of power as the key aspect of communicative figurations. Rather than being static, these only begin to be articulated in an ongoing communication process during which rules are also being produced communicatively. Thus, figurations work as forces of empowerment or disempowerment by giving voice to some and excluding others (see Hepp et al., 2014).

Therefore, communicative figurations have a defined constellation<sup>5</sup> of actors that can be understood as their structural basis either through close-knit communities or loosely connected groups blurring traditional social boundaries (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018). In addition, each communicative figuration has predominant frames of importance that steer its constitutive practices. These frames define the topics and, hence, the characteristics of a communicative figuration. However, this also concerns specific communication practices that are interwoven with other social practices and ordinarily entangled with a media ensemble (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018). In the given case (students enrolled in the same faculty and attending the same study programme), it is a close-knit, mid-sized group with a strong group identification that, on one hand, frequently communicates via Facebook Messenger and Zoom or Facebook Messenger videocalls for work and, on the other hand, shares media repertoires and referential frames. Friemel and Bixler (2018) stressed that mediatisation signifies not only gradual quantitative changes regarding media usage, but that the rise of digital technologies and their everywhere-ness change the way of relating and contribute to the transformation of ways of constructing social subjectivities and collectivities, for example, to the transition from spatially located to networked lifeworlds (see Rasmussen, 2014).

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5 A key definitional characteristic and analytical advantage of communicative figurations is scalability, which provides analytical flexibility to the application of figurations ranging from ‘the smallest everyday grouping, such as a family or a municipal committee, to the largest (supra)national collectivity, such as a country’s public sphere, or the global financial market’ (Schroder, 2018, p. 410).

### 3. CASE STUDY: ANALYSIS OF MEDIA DIARIES DURING THE QUARANTINE

One of the most appropriate methods to articulate deep mediatisation in a specific communicative formation during the quarantine is the use of a media diary because it enables researchers to tackle the complexity of communicative interactions in everyday life and the question of integrating media and social life. Issues of technological structuring of everyday life, perception of space and time related to the use of technology, sociability and structure of feeling framed using technology, demanded a detailed description of the course of their day and all routine and ritual micro-situations associated with it and around technology, as well as the embodied experience of technology. The most important advantage of this method is that it does not focus on a single media platform but rather offers insights into the interweaving of complex media repertoires in both mobile and static situations (see Berg & Düvel, 2012). In particular, as Wagner et al. (2022, pp. 57–58) highlighted, the diaries allow for a joined and continuous observation of media use episodes and situations that do not stand out of but are an integral part of individuals' way of living. Media diaries can grasp the subjective meanings allocated to media use, the past and present experiences people have (made) with media and the relationality of media practices to people's everyday lives at the same time (ibid.). Methods such as recall questionnaires on one's average or customary media practice are not applicable to our research questions, which aim to probe the technological structuring of everyday life and the embeddedness of media practices into other daily cultural practices. In a situation of intensive mediatisation, the method of memory retrieval would also pose an epistemological issue because the use of media technology is intricately linked to the daily routine and forms its integral part.<sup>6</sup>

In this study, 39 third-year students of Media and Communication Studies maintained their media diaries in April 2020, specifically during the first quarantine and distance learning, and 27 students maintained their diaries in April 2021, when most restrictions were lifted. The additional value of including the second group of students lies in their reflection on differences between both years. Each student completed their diary with a short (two-page) analysis and reflection on their practice, which indicated the evaluation regime and legitimation strategies framing their consumption. Aged between 21 and 25 years (the majority 22 years) at the time of journaling, all diary keepers represented the so-called 'natives' of new media technologies. With journaling, they aimed to establish how their everyday lives were structured

<sup>6</sup> As an example of a recall questionnaire and individual evaluation of one's practices (e.g. the number of hours using social media daily or weekly), see the survey of the National Institute of Public Health (Gabrovec et al., 2020). Two assumptions that are found problematic for the media-related segment of this research but are nevertheless implicitly built into it are the assumption that the respondents (students at Slovenian universities in the time of the quarantine) clearly divided their time between work and leisure and the implicit assumption concerning the potentially pathological nature of new media strictly at the level of individual practices and individual solutions (i.e. methodological individualism).

through media technologies during the quarantine and what forms of sociality they developed to identify possible effects of this deep mediatisation and consequences of the de-differentiation of spatial distinctions and to determine the radical limitation of unmediated physical interaction, including the transfer of teaching 'genres' (lectures, seminars) to the digital space.

To make their diaries formally comparable, the participants maintained detailed records of their everyday media practices in a predetermined table, which nonetheless allowed for individually adapted entries; its organisation into thematic clusters also enabled the participants' answers to be both personal and structured. The diary keepers recorded their media consumption regarding (a) the use of a single media platform or several media/applications simultaneously; (b) the space, situation and circumstances under which media/technologies were used and (c) the contents that they consumed, used or produced through media or applications. While we are not concerned about the reliability of data in the diaries, they vary, to some extent, in terms of complexity and quality. Some entrances were more condensed, while some were detailed. Among the limitations of our approach is sample bias, the first being certainly generational and class/status homogeneity since the sample represents a student population of social sciences, and the other is gender bias, as almost 75% of the writers were women. Thus, the results should be interpreted as an illustration of a theoretical argument. Although diaries crafted for research can lack intrinsic motivation and focus might be influenced by the researchers' demands, as Wagner et al. (2022, p. 59) note, all our participants were highly motivated and all of them returned the diaries. In their reflections, they showed a high degree of reflectivity, noting also some limitations of the method, with some suggesting that an application tracking their media consumption would be more suitable in the future.

### **3.1. Intensifying Existing Mediatised Practices and the Emergence of New Forms**

Not surprisingly, the analysis of media diaries kept during the quarantine points to intensified integration of technologies into everyday life and its mediatisation. As previous research (Luthar & Oblak Črnič, 2017; Luthar & Pušnik, 2021) has shown, the most important characteristics of integrating technologies into the daily life of this particular age group are (a) the radical personalisation of consumption, (b) its integration into everyday life, (c) the permanent use of media/media technologies, which promotes (d) the fragmentation of attention and a permanent state of partial attention and (e) the naturalisation of social media as a 'space' of sociality. As Wagner et al. (2022, pp. 53–54) emphasised, the importance of the situatedness of media use and media choice within broader everyday contexts has become more apparent and less easy to ignore than in previous media environments and given earlier media practices, while media use is increasingly taking place as non-exclusive.

During the quarantine, too, a key characteristic of daily media use was the constant (day-long) access to social media platforms. The continuous flow of irregular

interactions helps us maintain the ‘feeling of permanent connection, an impression that the link can be activated at any time and that one can thus experience the other’s engagement in the relationship at any time’ (Licoppe, 2004, p. 141). In this way, a permanent connection is clearly integrated into everyday life to the point of being completely normalised; or, as already stated, the naturalisation of ‘cultural connectivity’ creates the impression that gathering on social media platforms is a natural form of sociality and expressive collectivity. Irena (23) thus concluded that ‘it had taken me no more than three weeks to develop an incredible co-dependency with my phone, which is (I am proud to say) not something that I am normally used to. [...] I can say with certainty that my cell phone does not represent any of that under normal circumstances’. Media technologies thus became an integral part of all other social practices, including maintaining contacts, which are otherwise performed through face-to-face interactions. Despite differences in selecting platforms and contents, all participants used the smartphone as the predominant means of communication that accompanied them twenty-four hours a day. They woke up to it, held on to it throughout the day and used it while performing other activities (listening to lectures, watching TV, etc.; like Špela (21), for example: ‘Often, this also holds for Netflix because I frequently check my cell phone while watching a series and reply to messages or merely check the latest on social networks, sometimes without any real purpose’); finally, they fell asleep to it.

Food preparation, including grocery shopping and different types of workout and recreation, which before the quarantine were practiced in a non-mediatised form, underwent a drastic change during the lockdown. However, as the diaries demonstrate, both practices had a mediating ritual role—establishing and maintaining contacts or, rather, doing something together online with those with whom we already have a relationship. Thus, Žana (21) was encouraged by her friends to take up workout with the Instagram trainer/ ‘influencer’ Pamela Reif: ‘So, for instance, I did my workout at home watching a YouTube video of an Instagram influencer. I first came across this influencer in the “stories” of my friends, who also work out at home. Before that, I never used a home workout video’. Tina (21) spent a Saturday afternoon in her kitchen watching the video No bake Oreo cheesecake on The Cook ‘n’ Share YouTube channel on her cell phone and followed the instructions to make the desert. Immediately after that, she worked out in her room watching Pamela Reif’s video on YouTube, using her smart Apple watch and a workout application. While doing her workout via YouTube, Ema (21) usually listened to podcasts; Nina (21) took an hour every day for a guided workout using a social network on her laptop, and Neli (25) did her guided yoga workout via YouTube before attending Zoom lectures.

During the quarantine, nearly everyone increased the use of technologies and media in food preparation. Irena (23), for example, baked potica, a Slovenian traditional nut roll, via a phone conversation with her grandmother, and Larisa (23) opened a link in FB Messenger that her mother had sent her and baked a sponge cake following a recipe from the cooking website Okusno.je. Before lunch, Pavla (21) always



searched for recipes on Google or Pinterest. All of these examples point to a specific communicative figuration in which nearly all diary keepers reported the same media technologies and contents as constantly used during the quarantine. These technologies also became an integral part of other daily social practices because they had become inaccessible in the physical world and were partially transferred to the digital world (workout, baking, etc.). Within the framework of their communicative formation, the students maintained and restored contacts with those who had formed part of their narrow personal circles (i.e. strong ties of closed networks) and continued to interact with those with whom they had already been involved in 'interaction ritual chains' via face-to-face communication. In contrast, the random and risky unpredictability of weak ties, alternative views and social capital derived from weak ties were left on the backburner. In his most recent interview, Rosa (2021), drawing on Collins (2004), observed that the quarantine period was marked precisely by the lack of irritating, unexpected as well as pleasant or unpleasant social interactions, which resulted in dissipated energy due to the weak density of social interactions. As Wajcman pointed out (2020, p. 20), the experience of lockdown has affected the sense of time, where the feeling of 'deceleration' has been one of the most common experiences and has contributed to additional digital practices.

Compared to the complete integration of technologies into the everyday routines of all diary keepers, moments of deliberate disconnectedness from technological connectivity were brief and inconsequential, and some diary keepers did not practice them at all. A few resorted to strategic non-use or, rather, the avoidance of technology and media. During the quarantine, Anamarija (24) took up gardening, which only partially allowed her to disconnect from her cell phone and laptop or, better, to successfully integrate the use of social networks into her new hobby. In contrast, Božidar (22) made sure to spend his spare time in nature away from technology: 'After a Zoom lecture, I go out for a breather, and I avoid using any technology'. The rare cases of disconnections and interruptions, instead of being strictly focused on the permanent connection, are those that, in fact, improve the understanding of what it means to live in the time of a complete naturalisation of everyday life being saturated with media flows (see Agai, 2022; Kaun & Schwarzenegger, 2014). Both Bucher (2020) and Kaun (2021) argued that disconnection<sup>7</sup> should not be approached (merely) in empirical terms and in terms of possibilities for disconnection. Bucher (2020, p. 615) contended that, with algorithms and machine learning, notions of voluntary and involuntary actions become blurred and that our ontological conditions already imply a techno-social co-existence. Consequently, there 'is nothing to disconnect from in the digital world' (ibid., p. 610). In contrast, Kaun (2021, p. 1580) saw digital disconnection as a form of negative bonds that are characteristic of the

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7 For a powerful argument on how digital disconnection in work contexts is simultaneously 'framed as a technology of *individual self-optimization* and an instrument of *collective self-care*' and how the ongoing platformisation of work that already incorporates disconnective technology turns workplaces into spaces of digital labour, see Fast (2021, pp. 1624–1625).

current mode of hyperconnected modernity. As distrust and partial non-use of social media disconnection reinforce this focus on individual choice to assert oneself in comparison to other individuals and social groups, and here, disconnection emerges not only as a coping strategy but also as a civic virtue (ibid.).

### **3.2. Online Lectures as Part of ‘Media Repertoire’: Attending with the Camera Turned off and Multitasking**

During the quarantine, the diary keepers’ daily lives were most strongly affected by the process of distance learning and the implementation of lectures through a designated platform, most often Zoom. Distance lectures are a reference point through which the communicative figuration is formed (see Couldry & Hepp, 2018). Although the students appeared to have made the lectures effortlessly part of their general media consumption and use of technology, most of them stressed about having problems with the attention deficit caused by this form of study process. They unanimously described feeling their attention drift due to the simultaneous use of other media and content. At 9:30 am, still in bed before the lectures started, Katja (22), along with her boyfriend, checked the news and her social networks (Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram). At 10 am, she listened to lectures via her computer, after which she made a phone call and a video call, texted, listened to music while making lunch and then watched the series *Gossip Girl* on Netflix for two hours, starting from 1 pm.

As is evident from their diaries and reflections, the students more often watched the Zoom lectures rather than actively participating in them, sometimes even off-camera and in pajamas (‘... I also noticed that I often stayed in my PJs during the lectures themselves...’, Gabriel, 22) —hence, much like they followed ordinary video and TV content. Stanislav (22) observed, ‘I find such lectures much more comfortable, of course, because I can attend them from bed. This time, I followed from my kitchen, listening to the professor while having breakfast’. Despite feeling more comfortable, however, he also observed that ‘my attention span is even shorter than when I had to attend lectures in person, in the lecture hall’. As their quarantine diaries demonstrate, the students embedded online lectures into the flow of the most ordinary tasks performed in a completely routinised way and with the minimum amount of attention. The difficulties in concentrating were also reported by other diary keepers, for example, Ivo (22), who was admittedly trying to ‘get as much as I can [from lectures], which is not as simple as I’ve imagined because, at least in my case, being physically present in the lecture hall, “fires up” those brain cells that communicate to me that I am in an educational institution and that I need to focus on the lecture’. Larisa (22) reported on her problems stemming from the increasingly blurred distinction between the space-time of work and that of non-work and the related difficulty in multitasking.

The key consequences of permanent online connectedness are ‘continuous partial attention’ (Stone in Chayko, 2008) and fragmented attention because the diary keepers

were constantly ‘on’ and yet absent by following several different media simultaneously. The former physical and social differentiation of locales (home/faculty) and the ritual delineation (ordinary course of daily life/attending lectures) collapsed and, with them, the interactional distinctions between front stage and backstage (Goffman, 1959/2012) as well as between the discursive/interactional situation of entertainment and the intellectual discourse/educational interactional situation. In this regard, Hjorth and Richardson (2009) talked about highly fragmented and dispersed communication as a characteristic daily routine. One example of this is ‘multitasking’, that is, the simultaneous use of several media communication technologies and platforms on which people perform countless minor dispersed and mutually interrupting activities. A typical example of a media diary (Marijana, 23) pointing to the integration of lectures into overall daily media consumption is provided below.

Table 1: Example of Media Diary

08:30 am	Laptop	Zoom application, lecture Introduction to...	Home, at desk, alone
09:10 am	Cell phone	Break during lecture—checking Instagram, Facebook Messenger	Outside, alone, backyard
09:20 am	Laptop	Zoom application, lecture Introduction to...	Home, at desk, alone
09:50 am	Laptop	Break during lecture—YouTube, watching videos; Facebook, returning messages	Home, at desk, alone
10:00 am	Laptop	Zoom application, lecture Introduction to...	Home, at desk, alone
10:40 am	Cell phone, laptop	Break during lecture—checking Instagram, Facebook Messenger, TikTok + listening to background music on laptop	Home, during breakfast, alone
10:50 am	Laptop	Zoom application, lecture Introduction to...	Home, at desk, alone
12:00 am	Laptop	Facebook video call with family	Home, at desk, alone

Media technologies structured the students’ attention in a way that most often allowed for no more than a superficial presence in lectures. During the quarantine, a specific mediated figuration was formed, with its actors sharing their attendance in Zoom lectures, which had become completely integrated into their overall media consumption, making it no longer possible to draw a line in their daily lives between the closely interweaving practices of attending lectures, eating breakfast or surfing social media. The diminished ceremonial nature—e.g. going to the faculty, coupled with all the front-stage requisites (one’s clothes and posture, the lecture hall, the physical presence of the lecturer and the fellow students)—and the resulting emotional energy suggest a reduction in Durkheim’s social solidarity.<sup>8</sup> The absence of the ritual aspect of the ‘lecture situation’ leads to the degradation of relationships and the transformation of lectures into nothing more than utilitarian communication

8 R. Collins (2004, p. 63) discusses this in the context of considering the consequences of abandoning courtesy conventions in electronic correspondence.

deprived of its ritual distinctiveness as an educational or intellectual practice by being integrated into a series of other media practices and, hence, commodified. The integration of lectures into overall media consumption is also an aspect of the dehierarchisation of cultural formats, which, according to Reckwitz, contributes to the dissolution of cultural universality typical of classic modernity, where cultural practices are linked to specific ritual contexts—cinema, concert hall, lecture hall—and to the generally applicable canon, now replaced by various forms of singularisation (see Reckwitz, 2020). In the digital world of extraordinary abundance, all cultural formats are equalised; for the diary keepers, Zoom lectures were thus part of the ecology of texts, images and voices competing for visibility in the continuous process of change and, as such, subject to the same mechanisms of attention and distractedness and the same regimes of evaluation as the rest of the digital culture.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

For the dominant sociality generated by social media and especially for our age group, a state of permanent connectedness and permanent anticipation is characteristic (see also Lupinacci, 2021). This encourages restlessness, instability and feelings of eventfulness and ephemerality. As Hand (2016) argued, even temporal moments that might have previously been considered ‘empty’ are now being routinely filled with repetitive acts of presencing, tacking and connecting. ‘Taken together, they also point to the impossibility of “absence” or solitude in contemporary culture, a condition intimately related to the heightened “here and now” qualities of digital boredom’ (Hand, 2016, p. 6). In this article, a group of students was defined as a ‘figuration of individuals’, with a shared affiliation serving as the basis for shared activities (i.e. practices). In other words, the study focused on a specific generational ‘structure of feeling’, which, according to Williams (1971/1961), signifies a common selection of naturalised perceptions and values, hence a kind of emotional structure through which a certain generation orients itself, living and producing it, and which finds its clearest articulation in cultural forms and conventions. According to the study, the media consumption diaries kept by young people, aged between 21 and 25 years, point to a technological/media transformation, a transformation of practices in everyday life and a radical mediatisation which plays an important role in the changing generational structure of feeling. The generation-specific relationship with technologies forms a generation-specific structure of feeling or specific subject cultures that develop as by-products of deep mediatisation, in which digital media, especially during quarantine, expanded into all spheres of their social life.

The diary keepers exhibited ‘privatized mobility’, as Spiegel modifies Williams’ concept (in Morley, 2007, p. 200). Permanent media use further accentuated the fragmentation of attention, turning lectures into a media practice that, owing to its full integration into overall media practices, lost its ritual distinctiveness and locality outside commercial culture. In particular, various teaching genres—spanning

lectures, seminars and consultations—have a formal form where corporeality, symbolic access to authority and performative space play a vital role. Although lectures as a conventionalised formal event and genre form are criticised for representing a rigid space that freezes hierarchical relations and deprives students of the responsibility to respond, they also generate the feeling of collectivity among participants and include them in the ‘dramatic performance’ (see Thesen, 2007). Therefore, in the context of the micro-interactional approach, the situation of lectures represents a spatial concept.<sup>9</sup> The shift from the direct interaction of material bodies in physical space into a ‘synthetic situation’ also changes the definition of the situation. Lectures are part of the ecology of popular culture, into which the synthetic situation of Zoom lectures is integrated.

Amid this ‘deep mediatisation’ or, rather, the ‘mediatisation of everything’ (Livingstone, 2009), the diary keepers were so deeply caught up in media practices that their focus became increasingly scattered, which led to continuous fragmented, partial attention. In this context, a new social order has been emerging in which media materiality—that is, media as a technological artifact—appears ever more crucial. Contemporary media technologies force us to recognise that ‘the materiality is no longer merely external environments for interaction, but are embedded into it’ (Rasmussen, 1997, p. 12). The subject in communicative figurations is, therefore, constituted not merely within the framework of a certain symbolic and discursive order, but, historically, specific subject forms also develop against the backdrop of the world of artifacts of historically specific technological networks, which thus become tightly integrated into day-to-day practices as constitutive elements of sociality. Among the key questions for future research, a question of the formation of a specific subjective type in the context of the interrelation between digital and other everyday practices emerges. More importantly, it is not clear if this change relates to technological affordances and practices, connected with media ecology in its present commodified form, or if this change must be interpreted in the context of wider cultural change related to the hegemony of neoliberal culture.

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<sup>9</sup> K. Knorr-Cetina (2009), indeed, questions this assumption in terms of shared temporality rather than spatiality, it is impossible to build on her position at this point.

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# EXPLORING AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF DATA JOURNALISM PRACTICES IN NIGERIAN ONLINE NEWS MEDIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Despite the growing momentum of data analysis in Africa, scholarly attention has largely overlooked the promotion of data-driven content for enhanced audience engagement. Grounded in the sociology of news paradigm, this study examines engagement practices of online news platforms in Nigeria and explores the potential influence of audience engagement metrics on editorial decision-making. The in-depth interview research method was adopted for the study. Heads of data journalism units in four purposively selected online news media platforms in Nigeria with established data journalism practices were sampled as respondents for the study. The study identifies six innovative strategies being adopted by online news media in Nigeria to enhance audience engagement. Findings also confirm the centrality of audience engagement metrics to news-making decisions, but with the understanding to also consider the potential societal impact of stories in determining issues to produce data-driven content on. The implication for data journalism practice in Nigeria and its positioning for greater societal impact is discussed.*

Keywords: data journalism ▪ audience engagement ▪ engagement strategies ▪ online news media ▪ artificial intelligence ▪ Nigeria

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Journalism entails information gathering and reporting on the activities of society, providing necessary information and knowledge for the citizenry to make informed decisions, stimulate public discourse, and drive policy formation (UNESCO, 2022). As the bedrock of democratic societies, journalists serve as societal watchdog, acting in the overall public interest by holding public officials to account while granting media access to audiences to express their views (Oso, 2012). The audience is an important component of information flow in journalism practice, often the prime target of journalism content. The digital revolution further enhanced audiences' relevance in the news production and dissemination process, with news media organizations

increasingly gauging their continuing relevance and sustenance based on audience acceptability (Meijer & Kormelink, 2019). The extent to which they access and engage journalism content tend to enhance journalism potential in achieving public good.

Data journalism lends credence to journalism practice by building public trust in media reports. It reduces perceived subjectivity in general reporting based on assumptions, allowing authentication of claims with verifiable facts in public data. Lewis (2021, p. 86) explores various aspects of data journalism, defining it as “the primary reliance on numerical evidence as a journalistic tool in detecting patterns, or the visual representation of numerical evidence to enable audiences to discern patterns”. Lewis's definition emphasizes the need for data journalism output to be centered on providing information to the audience through a clear presentation of patterns in data. Bradshaw (2024), however, cautions against limiting the contextualization of ‘data’ in ‘data journalism’ only to numerical data noting it can be applied to varied forms of structured information on the public and in very diverse areas of human endeavors. Regardless of the data information being reported, huge effort is exerted into producing data-driven journalism content to ensure that available data is appropriately collated, cleaned, analyzed and presented in the most appropriate format for easy public understanding (Martin et al., 2022). With the rigor in producing data-driven journalism content, it is expected that such content reach wide, attracting high public engagement among relevant stakeholders. Journalists and other newsroom personnel who have invested enormous resources in producing data-driven reports would expect such content to attain maximum audience reach and stimulate public engagement for desired societal impact.

However, reaching the audience can be complicated in an age of information overdose where various contents compete for the audience's attention online. Promoting data-driven journalism content is particularly important due to the technicalities involved in story presentation which may not be so palatable to the general audience. Data journalism is essential for promoting accountability in governance and across all sectors of public relevance. Over the years, the wide adoption of data journalism in many developing countries has been hampered by a lack of relevant and up-to-date data (Kenya, 2019). Efforts are ongoing to strengthen the penetration of data journalism in developing countries of the world through capacity building of newsroom personnel, collaborations among journalists, and increasing availability of public records for public scrutiny (Internews, 2018; Martin et al., 2022).

The situation is not any different in Nigeria, where journalists often identify a lack of relevant data as a major inhibiting factor to producing data-driven stories (e.g., Ugbede, 2024). Efforts are also ongoing in the country to address the data challenge. Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) has improved its capacity to provide insightful data on the country's diverse socio-economic indices, offering regular updates on public data on its website as soon they become available. Some organizations, and coalitions of journalists and civil society groups such as BudgIT, Code for Africa, *Dataphyte*, etc. are also rising to the challenge to meet journalists' demand

for public data through the digitisation of public records by gathering, processing, and publishing previously unavailable data wherever possible, while also supporting government in the open governance drive increasingly being promoted for public accountability (Abdullah, 2021; Owolabi & Adeniran, 2023). Nigerian journalists are being provided with requisite data journalism skills to enhance their data journalism practice through training from local and international media organizations, with collaborations from digital and technology companies, and relevant government agencies (Akinfemisoye-Adejare, 2019; Okocha & Odeba, 2022). The trainings are often done with donor funding (Otoibhi, 2023), with support from local and international government agencies (Okocha & Odeba, 2022).

These efforts appear to be yielding results as more data journalism platforms and units are established within existing newsrooms in Nigeria (Ugbede, 2024). Few media organizations are increasingly publishing well researched data driven stories to tell the Nigerian story (Okafor, 2019). The reach of this data-driven content remains unclear as media organizations in the country often shield such information from the public. However, it is most likely they are not achieving maximum reach, barely generating just a few thousand clicks. In Nigeria's fast-paced, competitive, and turbulent media environment, many online news media platforms have emerged in recent times, but most often resort to poor quality journalism and sharp practices to attract audience attention (Idris, 2020). Hence, quality journalistic content, such as data-driven stories, compete for limited audience attention in an online news media environment where gossip and entertainment stories hold sway (Knepple, 2022).

These factors tend to limit the potential of data-driven stories to drive public agenda, promote accountability, make an impact, and stimulate necessary changes within society. Despite challenges hindering the penetration of data journalism practice in Nigeria, few online news platforms are championing data journalism practices, producing high-impact, data-driven stories. Although some traditional broadcast and print media organizations sometimes produce data-driven content around specific national and socio-economic issues (e.g., politics, health, economy), data-driven journalism is more entrenched in a few trail-blazing online news platforms committed to quality and accountability journalism in the country.

There is no doubt that efforts in entrenching data journalism practice in Africa deserve scholarly attention to better understand its dynamics across the continent. Unfortunately, published studies on data journalism practices in the region have been minimal (Sackey et al., 2022). Previous studies have focused on journalists' data skills, and perception of their data journalism capabilities (Gondwe & White, 2022; Okocha & Odeba, 2022; Ugbede, 2024); adoption, prospect and challenges in data journalism practices (Martin et al., 2022; Okafor, 2019; Ugbede, 2024); and analysis of data-driven content (Akinfemisoye-Adejare, 2019; Munoriyarwa, 2020). None examine the data-journalism audience nor their influence on data journalism practices. Sackey et al.'s (2022) review of related studies on data journalism also failed to acknowledge the exclusion of the audience in studies on data journalism practices,

but noted a seeming preference for print media in data journalism scholarship in Africa.

This study extends the frontiers by focusing on online media and their efforts in increasing audience engagement with their published data-driven content, while examining how such drive for greater audience engagement subsequently influences their data journalism practices. To achieve this aim, heads of selected online news platforms, with significant data journalism practice were interviewed using the semi-structured in-depth method. The following section provides a brief review of literature exploring the significance of audience engagement and tracked metrics to contemporary media practice, specifically in data journalism. It explores the sociology of news paradigm as a supporting framework to investigate the potential influence of audience engagement metrics on the editorial decision-making process in data journalism practice, leading to the formation of two research questions that guided the study.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Media practitioners are increasingly interested in understanding their audiences and how they engage with media content. Such information have implications for content creation and editorial decision-making, advertisers and other stakeholders, (Idris, 2020; Nelson 2018). Over the years, print and broadcast media practitioners have relied on gathered information on their audiences to promote their platforms to advertisers and also influence content output to suit their respective audience demographics (Broersma, 2019). The digital media environment offers new opportunities to track and measure audience characteristics in real-time, not by audiences' claims on how they consume media content but by tracking their digital interactions on published content. Almost all media organizations now have an online presence facilitating the assessment of user engagement for every individual accessing media content online through generated "online behavior metrics" subsequently utilized in editorial decision-making (Broersma, 2019, p. 2).

Audience engagement has been described as an "aspirational buzzword" with contested meanings but is increasingly touted as a key criterion for measuring the success or failure of journalism (Nelson, 2018, p. 528). Generally, it suggests the extent of users' interaction with media content. Broersma (2019, p. 1) describes audience engagement as "the cognitive, emotional, or affective experiences that users have with media content or brands", noting it "denotes an active and intentional orientation toward what users read, view, or hear. Audience engagement is conceptualized in this study to describe varied ways by which media audience experience and interact with published news content in varied formats and across varied platforms possible. This spans beyond content disseminated via the news media platform or websites, including newsletters delivered via emails and varied content shared on social media platforms, and all avenues created for audience interaction with published content.

Scholars have explored audience engagement from varied perspectives, with significant attention paid to the potential of audience metrics in sustaining journalism (Nelson, 2018). For instance, Nelson (2018) conducted an ethnography on an audience engagement firm, *Hearken*, which services news media organizations. His findings noted prevailing ambiguities in the definition and measurement of audience engagement within the news media industry, making it impossible to sufficiently quantify inherent gains. This, he noted prompted *Hearken* to focus on appealing to clients' intuition, who then hope for some benefits from the firms' interpretation of their audience engagement metrics. Olmstead et al. (2011) explored the dynamics of audience engagement to examine how people get linked to news pages they visit, and their exit. Möller et al. (2020) examined the navigation routine of online news consumers, exploring the navigation sequence of users in interacting with news content.

In contemporary news media practice, media practitioners often base the success or failure of journalistic content on audience metrics rather than real-time societal impact (Knepple, 2022). Audience metrics can, however, generate unexpected outcomes. Notably, increased content posting may not necessarily translate into greater engagement, as audiences appear to engage more with content that resonates with them (Ferrer-Conill et al., 2023). Data journalism is one aspect of journalism that focuses on using data to tell stories. Data-driven journalism content tends to produce content with greater societal impact and audience engagement even in societies where the practice is not yet widespread (Internews, 2018). Data journalism is a rigorous endeavor requiring requisite but scarce skills. Hence, data-driven content, when eventually produced, should attract greater audience attention, evoke appropriate reactions to drive public discourse and achieve greater societal impact (Green-Barber, 2021).

Data journalism tends to be audience-centered, presenting journalism content to the audience with a higher level of credibility, and allowing them to interact with published data using varied visualization techniques (Bradshaw, 2024). Audience engagement is thus at the earth of data journalism practice with content often designed to be interactive for users. Therefore, understanding audience engagement with data journalism content enables practitioners to “maximize its (data journalism) positive impact and demonstrate its value to audiences” (Green-Barber, 2021, p. 247).

Few studies have explored the relationship between audience engagement and data journalism, particularly how audience engagement can transcend tracking metrics to enable collaboration in creating data-driven “stories with social impact and a global reputation” (Palomo et al., 2019, p. 13). Michalski (2016) examines the degree of audience engagement and integration in two related data-driven projects by *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* on police killings in the United States. His detailed case study provides an empirically driven description of the extent and nature of audience engagement with these projects. A more recent study by Martin et al. (2024) explores journalists' motivations for audience engagement and their

strategies for integrating audiences into journalistic practices. These studies suggest an increasing expectation and facilitation of audience engagement with data-driven media content among media practitioners.

Generally, the relationship between audience engagement and data journalism has received little attention in studies on data journalism, which mostly focus on the practices and capabilities of practitioners, leaving a significant gap in audience reception studies (Sackey et al., 2022). This study examines the dynamics of audience engagement metrics related to data journalism practices in Nigerian online news media. Premised on the sociology of news paradigm, it investigates the efforts of selected online news media platforms with established data journalism practices to promote published content and enhance engagement, and how extracted metrics on audience engagement impact editorial decision-making.

The sociology of news paradigm proposes examining the “social process by which journalists decide what is news and the social forces that influence or limit how journalists gather and assemble news from raw materials into a journalistic product” (Berkowitz, 1997, p. xii). It explores issues around journalists’ selection of information to report as news, and the intervening variables influencing what is eventually presented as news content to the general public. In relation to this study, data-driven content tends to engage readers by presenting otherwise complex information in ways that are more relatable. Therefore, data journalists need to balance audience information needs with other news determinants in their editorial decision-making on what issues to focus on and publish data-driven content about. The sociology of news paradigm thus guides our examination of how online news media organizations in Nigeria seek audience engagement for their data-driven content and how generated feedback influences future production and dissemination of such content.

Hence, this study explores the audience factor in the data journalism editorial decision-making and seeks to understand the extent to which audience engagement data and practices determine issues data journalists in Nigerian online news media focus on. What efforts do online news platforms in Nigeria put into the dissemination of data-driven content, and how do audience interactions on published content influence content creation and dissemination. This becomes pertinent as studies on data journalism in Sub-Saharan Africa (Akinfemisoye-Adejare, 2019; Gondwe & White, 2022; Martin et al., 2022; Munoriyarwa, 2020; Okocha & Odeba, 2022; Sackey et al., 2022; Ugbede, 2024) have overlooked evaluating audience role in producing data-driven content. This study thus sought to answer the following questions:

**RQ1:** How do Nigerian online news media build readers’ interest in data-driven content?

**RQ2:** To what extent do audience engagement metrics influence data journalism editorial decision-making among Nigerian online news platforms?

### 3. METHOD

This study is designed as a descriptive and exploratory study due to limited literature on the topic within the study area (Swann, 2023). It adopts the in-depth interview method to examine audience engagement practices on data-driven content by Nigerian online news media. Four online news media platforms reputed for producing quality and original data-driven reports are purposively selected and sampled for the study. They include *Premium Times*, *The Cable*, and International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) and *Dataphyte*. The first three listed platforms are general news platforms with fledging data journalism desks/teams producing regular data-driven reports. These organizations are reputable online news platforms that have earned accolades for fearless and independent reporting in a saturated online media space proliferated with news aggregators mostly feeding on content produced by established news organizations (Adepetun, 2017). *Dataphyte* is a more recent addition established in 2020 as a wholly data-driven news media platform committed to exploring issues with data-driven insights.

The heads of the data journalism team from the sampled organization were interviewed for this study to provide insights on online media audience engagement practices for data-driven content. When the editor was not available, a representative from the data journalism team was interviewed instead. The team lead or any data journalist closely involved in the team's operations was considered a suitable respondent, as the focus was on the platform's operations rather than individual perceptions or activities. Interviewing multiple team members was unlikely to yield additional insights, as respondents were clear about the information they could share. However, two respondents were interviewed from *Premium Times* due to identified gaps in the responses of the initial respondent. The lead editor was later interviewed to provide further insights into the organization's practices, thus filling those gaps.

In total, five respondents were interviewed; three team leads and two senior data journalists, consisting of four males and one female. The interviews took place between February and March 2023, coinciding with Nigeria's general elections period, influencing respondents' references to data-driven election coverage in the interview excerpts. Each session lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. Respondents were anonymized, but their organizations were not, to highlight their unique characteristics. Interview excerpts were attributed to respondents based on their organizational affiliations where necessary

### 4. FINDINGS

Findings from the in-depth interviews are thematically analyzed and presented in themes in this section. The themes explore organizational commitment to data

journalism practice, audience engagement practices, and influence of audience metrics on editorial decision-making.

#### 4.1. Commitment to Data Journalism Practice

Findings from the study suggest that data journalism practices are deeply ingrained across the sampled organizations. Respondents confirmed that their organizations have dedicated data journalism teams, which regularly publish data-driven content inspired by contemporary issues and available data to highlight, validate, debunk, or substantiate the current state. Respondents affirmed their organizations' commitment to data journalism practices. For instance, the respondent from *Dataphyte* describes his organization as,

... the leading data-driven media organization in Nigeria and Africa. We go deep into analyzing data and contextualizing it. We also use data to expose corruption, demand accountability, indicate key issues that need the attention to policymakers, and offer explanations in-terms of explainers about what demand accountability, indicate key issues that need attention from policymakers and offer explanations in terms of explainers about what data may be saying.

Respondent @ *Dataphyte*

According to respondents, in considering topics to produce data-driven content on, they focus on contemporary and “topical issues, bothering on the economy, climate change, governance, health, security” etc., “that tend to invoke the most reactions from Nigerians... (with) serious policy implications”. They all expressed commitment to providing data-driven content audiences can readily understand and relate with for a better understanding of pressing public issues while “using data to amplify the voices of the underserved.”

#### 4.2. Audience Engagement Strategies

Respondents reported adopting different strategies to widen the reach and engagements on published data-driven stories.

##### Compelling Storytelling Techniques

Respondents noted a dearth of data journalists producing data-driven content, alongside audience apathy in consuming data-driven content. This necessitates data journalists to present their content in very compelling and simplified manner to ease audience understanding and sustain their interest.



Data is regarded as being boring by most people, so we try to humanize the data... we try to make the story as relatable as possible. From the lead of the story, we are drawing you with something catchy... engaging before you even start to see the data embedded in the story. If we are using the infographics approach, we ensure that we use very captivating graphics ... design it in such a way that it will bring the attention of the readers on first notice.

Respondent @ *The Cable*

We are intentional in putting our readers in mind...We understand that this is data journalism, and having this in mind guides how we write the story, how we make it easier and fun to read, how we make the visualization, and how we don't disturb people with data. I mean, we are in Nigeria, and life is hard already. Don't make it harder with data when people are reading the story. Also, we understand that people no longer have a large attention span, too... So we put all these in mind to ensure that we have more engagement on data stories.

Respondent @ *Dataphyte*

### **Humanizing Story**

Respondents agreed that data stories anchored in personal experiences tend to resonate with audiences and capture their attention. They stressed the importance of situating data stories within everyday contexts, thereby humanizing the narrative. To achieve this, they often focus on linking data to individuals' lived experiences, making reported stories relatable to the average reader. According to one respondents,

Sometimes you have data, you analyze the data, you finish sorting and everything, but then you find out there's no story because you cannot link it to a human angle to be able to tell their story, then there's no story... If it's something people are interested in...data people want to know. If you link it to people, if you find the human aspect to it, people automatically become interested.

Respondent 1 @ *Premium Times*

### **Visualization is a Key**

Respondents noted the importance of visualizations in driving audience engagement of data-driven content, enabling easy sharing and facilitating constructive dialogue among the audience. They disclosed that effective data visualizations on contemporary issues tend to capture audience attention and stimulate engagement on topics that might otherwise be overlooked.

People tend to get bored with numbers, and statistics. So, to sustain interest, you have to do visualization... charts, Infographics, interactive maps, etc... So when data is visualized, it aids understanding, it enhances comprehensibility, so people tend to appreciate that, and that sustains their interests... It drives more people to view, to read.

Respondent 2 @ *Premium Times*

Data visualization is increasingly being used in the media to report on germane societal issues to drive public discourse, as evidenced in the coverage of elections and the COVID-19 pandemic. According to respondents, Media coverage of Nigeria's 2023 general elections was closely monitored by Nigerians and the global audience as media organizations published various visualizations on election-related data, which were regularly updated and presented to engage the audience and update them on relevant pre/post-election data. Respondents noted that the high audience engagement on the data-driven coverage of Nigeria's 2023 general elections portends a good omen for data journalism content in the country.

There are circumstances that you have huge audience engagement for data-driven content. Like this season of election... People wanted to know the number of registered voters in the country, which state had the largest number of registered voters, which had the least, which states had the record of voting in millions which had the record of low voters' turn out... So imagine if what we are doing is just to write stories to say this candidate has won this state with 700 or 950 thousand votes. This is how people voted. So if you are writing a story and giving out these numbers of 18 candidates, what scores did they get in this state? ... How many people will have the time to read such? They won't. But through data visualizations, you can have your data (at a glance), the stories are there, you are just telling it in a data format, and you've gotten your audience engaged, and it has gone far than you can imagine.

Respondent 1 @ *Premium Times*

### Online Content Promotion

To drive readership and build audience engagement, respondents noted promoting data-driven stories and accompanying visualizations on various platforms as appropriate. The content is usually disseminated through their respective websites, SM handles, newsletters, etc. Twitter appeared to be the most favored platform across sampled organizations, even though respondents noted the uniqueness of each platform in promoting specific kinds of content. This was aptly rationalized by respondent from *The Cable* thus,

I say Twitter because, Twitter has an audience that is more interested in conversations, more interested in engaging content that you put out, as opposed to other platforms. Yes, more Nigerians are active on Facebook, but they are less likely to engage data infographics on Facebook than on Twitter. Facebook is more of a familiar setting where people want to talk about things that they are up to...It is similar to Instagram... So yes, Twitter is the platform because of the nature, and the habits and preferences of the audience there.

Respondent @ *The Cable*

The selected organizations boast a substantial online presence, with a large following across various social media platforms, enabling them to extend their reach beyond their news websites. All sampled platforms leveraged Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and email to promote their content. Additionally, they are exploring other platforms like Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, and YouTube to expand their audience reach and tap into the potential of these platforms to engage diverse audiences with data-driven content.

We are very active on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. We are coming up with more activity on social media, even TikTok...We understand that the generation we have now youths mainly youth and many youths are on social media. We also have older people on social media, so it is an ample way for us to reach them and sell the kind of journalism we do.

Respondent @ *Dataphyte*

We do heavy promotion on social media; we use Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube... Recently, we started making videos from our infographics. We had done an explainer infographics about the manifestos of the presidential candidates. It was published as Infographics, but we realized we could get more eyes on other platforms, so we decided to make it into a video format using the same infographics, just putting audio and some music background. So, we keep thinking of new platforms to use; we've started TikTok, too, to amplify some of the things that we do. So majorly, we understand that social media is where the new generation is, even the old generation, they are all moving to social media, so, we meet them there...Another platform we use is Whatsapp, people underestimate the importance of WhatsApp. It is probably the most populous platform for sharing fake news and that says a lot about how much time people spend on the platform.

Respondent @ *The Cable*

### Strategic Content Release

Respondents reported adopting strategic dissemination of published data-driven

stories. Such stories are reportedly presented in appropriate formats suitable for the planned disseminating platform. Among adopted strategies include summarizing key points of published stories into “snackable bits” for easy dissemination on various social media platforms. To achieve this, core facts are summarized and visualized in aptly designed infographics, charts, maps, etc., and published as *data cards*. Respondents also noted producing short promotional videos, threads, etc., often accompanied by a link to the full story on their respective websites for seamless sharing across social media platforms.

We have an amplification strategy across all platforms and the different social media we use. For all the ones we use, there’s always a strategy. So, when we have a story, we focus that story to fit on the platform. What works well for Instagram will likely not work well for Twitter. For instance, if you do a thread, you should know that a thread will only work based on Twitter. So, if you want to send that same content on Instagram, you should know the best thing you should be thinking of to drive it is individuals...So, what we do is understand each platform and know the best way to reach it.

Respondent @ ICIR

The organizations have also developed innovative strategies to promote their data-driven content. For example, *The Cable* has a dedicated Twitter handle, *The Cable Index* (@thecableindex), solely for sharing data visualizations from its reports. *Dataphyte*, on the other hand, produces a weekly electronic newsletter called *Data Dives*, which provides in-depth analysis and insights on key socio-economic issues and events in the country. The newsletter is sent to subscribers and aggregated email addresses. Additionally, *Dataphyte* has a dedicated webpage (<https://www.Dataphyte.com/visualisation/>) for publishing visualized data elements on various socio-economic issues, utilizing hashtags like #DailyDataCard and providing concise captions for each visualization.

Respondents noted the importance of publishing data-driven content that resonates with the public’s current interests and concerns. They highlighted the need for strategic timing in releasing data-driven content, aligning it with pertinent issues and trends in society, to maximize its impact and relevance.

If you are pushing out data-driven content during the election, know that it is what a lot of people are interested in. If you decide to push out data stories around health or COVID during election season, it is definitely not going to get traffic. Because that’s not what people are interested in. So..you have to plan the stories and see to the right time to push them. So, I will say if you are mindful of timeliness, (and) your amplification strategies, you will generally do well.

Respondent @ ICIR

### Journalists as Content Promoters

Statutorily the digital team at the sampled organizations manages content promotion. Journalists are, however, encouraged (but not obligated) to promote published content on their respective social media handles for wider reach. Respondents noted that journalists consider promoting their content a norm having invested enormous resources into producing such. Respondents, however, acknowledged content promotion as an additional responsibility, but one journalist voluntarily took up its inherent benefits. They noted that the amount of rigor that goes into producing good data-driven content makes it imperative to share them widely to have more informed citizenry. They agreed that journalists are also able to build their professional profile by promoting their content. According to respondents,

Statutorily the digital teams at the sampled organizations are responsible for content promotion. However, journalists are encouraged, though not mandated, to share published content on their personal social media platforms to expand their reach. Respondents indicated that journalists consider content promotion a standard practice, given the significant resources invested in producing high-quality data-driven content. While respondents acknowledged content promotion as an additional responsibility, one journalist voluntarily embraced its inherent benefits. The respondent emphasized that the rigor and effort invested in producing exceptional data-driven content necessitate its widespread dissemination to foster a more informed citizenry. Moreover, respondents agreed that promoting their content enhances journalists' professional profiles and reputations.

Yes... But I will not call it a burden because I don't think any newspaper imposes a rule on their journalists to share their content online. As far as I know, no newspaper does that. But like I said, people have an investment in stories, being a reporter, being the editor, or just like it. You just want to promote knowledge. You just want to aid public understanding of that issue. So, you also share it. Data journalism is an aspect of enterprise journalism. So, if you are a journalist, who has done enterprise reporting, not just turn in press releases here and there, you will want to promote it... It just feels like duty-bound to promote it. It is self-fulfilling...It's something you sat on...used some tools...it requires skills to produce. So, you want to showcase it.

Respondent 2 @ *Premium Times*

It's not something that is so serious that a journalist has to be conscious about, it's just normal routine. I mean, a journalist works, you have to just put your work out there...; putting out data-driven insights can be very much intriguing for the reader because you're bringing them new perspectives and a lot of new realities...People are on Twitter following journalists, on LinkedIn or Facebook... they have a right to also benefit from that kind of

information. So.... It's just something that should happen subconsciously. If a journalist is proud of his/her work, they would want to put their content out there.

Respondent @ *Dataphyte*

#### 4.2. Audience Engagement Metrics' Influence on Editorial Decision-making

Findings from the study reveal that each sampled organization has a dedicated digital team responsible for monitoring audience engagement metrics on published content. There, however, appears to be some observed secrecy in the operations of the digital tracking team, with limited disclosure on the nature and usage of garnered audience metrics. Efforts to get the digital team leader or any other member in any of the sampled organizations to serve as respondents for this study were abortive. Responses discussed here are thus limited to how generated audience data influence editorial decision-making in the sampled organizations, which respondents were willing to share.

Respondents confirmed that audience engagement metrics significantly influence editorial decisions regarding the publication of data-driven content. They emphasized the importance of focusing on topical issues that garner widespread public interest. To inform their decisions, respondents rely heavily on Google Analytics and other social media analytical tools to track audience engagement metrics for published content across their website, social media platforms, email newsletters, and other channels.

We use (mostly) Google Analytics to track audience engagement...every month, we get reports on what people are reading, what they are talking about, where they are reading from, demography, kind of the search engines that they are getting our sites from, the keywords that they are looking for, so yes, we rely on Google analytics primarily.

Respondent @ *The Cable*

Practically all social media platforms have their analytics, so we track it... (But) one that is universally used is Google Analytics. Google is technically one of the best search engines there's been in the business of gathering analytics for quite a while.

Respondent @ *ICIR*

The analysis of tracked audience metrics provides valuable insights into the topics and subjects that resonate with the audience, enabling the platforms to identify opportunities to create relevant data-driven content that caters to their interests. Additionally, this analysis offers a chance for the media platforms to investigate the

factors contributing to low engagement with certain content and utilize this knowledge to refine their approach and improve future content performance.

Audience metrics are major drivers...What we do is, when we see that this is what people are searching for, this is what is trending or more topical at this point in time, we then brainstorm to come up with content...story ideas we can execute and feed them with. So, it is basically a sort of relationship where what they want is what we are delivering... because if you don't pay attention to the metrics, then you're actually working blindly...So sometimes, with more (audience metrics) data, we know the time we can prioritize certain places more, especially if the significance of that thing that issue, or that incident is of national importance.

Respondent @ *The Cable*

Although audience metrics are integral to their operations, respondents expressed caution against overreliance on these metrics. In the online environment, numerous content pieces vie for the dwindling attention span of audiences, creating pressure on news platforms to produce content with broad appeal to capture a significant share of audience engagement (Adepetu, 2017). Respondents emphasized the need to deemphasize audience metrics as a dominant determining factor in driving data-driven content production, as engagement patterns may not necessarily reflect content quality or societal impact (Ferrer-Conill et al., 2023). Instead, they stressed the importance of targeting relevant stakeholders who can take meaningful action on the issues reported, rather than solely prioritizing audience engagement.

We know that in this industry... sensational stories with click-bait headlines tend to move a lot more. But we understand the importance of what we do... we know that everything does not start and end with metrics or data analytics. At the end of the day, we still have responsibilities as journalists to report what is happening, to educate and to inform...We understand that you can actually spend months on some stories and will not get more than five thousand views. But there are stories that you may write just sitting by your desk within thirty minutes, and within two hours of publishing, you are already getting fifty thousand clicks or more. So...I always encourage journalists to forget about the number of views that your important stories get, what you pay attention to is the quality of the eyes viewing it. Do you have stakeholders paying attention to your stories? Do you have policymakers paying attention? Do you have relevant persons who can provide some impact for the stories?

Respondent @ *The Cable*

“We won’t stop writing a particular story or publish an investigation because the last investigation published didn’t get enough engagement. If a story is important, if a story would make a change, if a story is very keen on policy formation for the underserved, if the story is going to expose ills, of course, we’ll write it regardless of what analytics comes out of it.

Respondent @ *Dataphyte*

Respondents thus noted prioritizing stories’ impact over reach, while being strategic in increasing audience engagement on published content. For instance, respondent at *Dataphyte* noted his organization prefers to focus on the impact of their stories in achieving desired goals. According to him, *Dataphyte*’s reports on governments’ failed or non-performing contracts were soon completed after publishing data-driven reports on them due to the level of public engagement such published stories attracted the citizenry and policymakers.

Respondents thus noted prioritizing the impact of stories over their reach, while adopting strategic approaches to enhance audience engagement with published content. For example, the respondent from *Dataphyte* highlighted that his organization focuses on the tangible impact of their stories in achieving desired goals within the society. He noted that *Dataphyte*’s data-driven reports on governments’ failed or non-performing contracts led to their swift completion after publication, thanks to the high level of public engagement and attention from policymakers and citizens. The respondent from *ICIR* concurred, noting that,

At *ICIR* we are more or less focused on impact...Of course, we want people to read us, but we are more interested in our stories making impact... If we report that there’s corruption somewhere, we prefer to have that corruption fixed or have whoever is responsible arrested than having a million people read it. I am not saying that we do not want a million people to read it, but...the impact is what we actually focus on...because what we want is good governance.

Respondents dismissed the idea that audience metrics influence the evaluation or ranking of journalists within their organizations. Instead, they viewed audience metrics as a tool for shared learning and professional development among colleagues in the newsroom, fostering a collaborative environment where journalists can learn from each other’s strengths and weaknesses.

As an online newspaper, we understand that we need more views constantly and continuously, so we always work towards that, but we do not judge reporters by the number of views their stories get. We only look at quality because...we understand that the most viewable reports do not exactly get the most views or readership, so we just focus on the quality.

Respondent @ *The Cable*



The story that every journalist writes at Dataphyte is important. So what the analytics does is to help us learn from one another. That's the core of our work, teamwork and bonding. So, if a story got more read than the other, we want to understand what this writer is doing to get more read and why. It may be a case of at that point, that issue is trending, and everyone wants to read. So, how can we leverage this to promote other stories? So, it doesn't make a journalist bigger than other journalists in the newsroom. We just use that process to learn, not to arrogate power to ourselves.

Respondent @ *Dataphyte*

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1. RQ1: Building Readers' Interest in Data-Driven Content

This study highlights how Nigerian online news media build the interest of readers in data-driven content within the context of the sociology of news perspective. Findings indicate online media platforms in Nigeria use innovative storytelling techniques, multi-platform dissemination of content, data highlights through appropriate visualizations and key point summaries to build audience engagements on published content. The selected platforms recognize the importance of being strategic in engaging their audiences and are continuously innovating ways to expand their reach. They seem to understand the implication of the huge competition for audience attention in the online space (Idris, 2020) and the nature of data-driven content, which attracts less audience attention (Meijer & Kormelink, 2019), which the organizations then use appropriately for data news-making decisions.

Reported efforts in the study on content simplification for audience understanding is fundamental to data journalism (Bradshaw, 2024), with the potential to promote awareness and public accountability, build citizens' consciousness, and strengthen governance in the country. Findings from this study support previous studies on increasing adaptation of digital media tools for effective dissemination of data-driven news content in Nigerian media space, despite observed challenges (Okafor, 2019; Ugbede, 2024). It extends the frontiers by identifying specific strategies being adopted by data journalism-inclined online news platforms in Nigeria to ensure a wider reach for data-driven content and informed news-making decisions.

The use of social media for distribution and tracking audience engagements on data-driven content enhances data journalism's potential for greater societal impact. Social media has been noted for driving audience news consumption (Möller et al., 2020). This is particularly so with Nigeria having a high internet and social media penetration rate, with an increasing proportion of the population relying on digital devices and social media platforms for their news consumption (Adeyemo & Roper, 2022). The regular use of appropriate social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, and experimentation with others (e.g., Whatsapp, Instagram, Tiktok) is

a welcome development capable of further entrenching data-driven content among the populace. Nonetheless, Twitter, the most favored among respondents in disseminating data-driven content, is the fifth most-used social media platform in the country (Adeyemo & Roper, 2022; Sasu, 2023). This may have necessitated the versatility of the sampled organizations in adapting their produced data journalism content to more popular, but less conventional platforms for news dissemination and audience engagement. Disseminating data-driven content on diverse platforms invariably extends its reach, a necessary condition that must be met before further engagement can be achieved and tracked.

Adopting multiple audience engagement strategies, evidenced in this study, is a welcome development toward widening the penetration of data-driven content among the citizenry. Newsrooms need to prepare for the AI disruptive future where AI will likely limit featured links in search engine queries (Rinehart, 2023). This, according to Rinehart, will require newsrooms to depend more on building audience engagement on their own platforms and “a variety of specialized e-mail newsletters, podcasts, and Whatsapp or SMS groups” to direct the audience to their news content (Rinehart, 2023, 3.00 minute). As AI-optimized search engines may render news content more elusive, this proactive approach will become increasingly vital.

## **5.2. RQ2: Influence of Audience Engagement Metrics on Data Journalism Editorial Decision-Making**

This study also examines the extent to which audience engagement metrics influence data journalism editorial decision-making among online news platforms in Nigeria. Findings suggest that audience engagement metrics significantly influence editorial decision-making, prompting the kind of issues to produce data-driven content on, nature of presentation and dissemination, location, etc. These support existing literature on online news platforms (e.g. Knepple, 2022; Meijer & Kormelink, 2019), establishing the centrality of the audience in deciding what news to cover (Stringer, 2020). Today’s media audiences assume a participatory role and are increasingly integrated into content development, news information processing, and dissemination (Palomo et al., 2019). This is particularly true for data journalism, where data-driven content is contextually produced and disseminated to meet the diverse needs of audience members (Bradshaw, 2024).

Beyond promoting data-driven content that resonates with their audiences but may have little or no impact on society (Ferrer-Conill et al., 2023), the news platforms examined in this study appear committed to their social responsibility role within society. Respondents stressed the need to prioritize the potential impact of data journalism content over audience metrics in deciding what to publish (Knepple, 2022). Such understanding remains pertinent to the normative environment of the media population under study. Nigeria is a developing nation with varied developmental challenges. It is imperative for news media organizations in such environments to

cautiously promote developmental goals and good governance through their journalism practices.

The sampled organizations' emphasis on the societal impact of their published data-driven stories may be attributed to their non-profit orientation, as they rely on donor funding to support specific journalism initiatives, including data journalism practice examined in this study. Hence, they are more likely to commit to promoting accountability through data-driven content as expected by their funders. Therefore, editorial considerations for audience metrics can be less focused on the revenue-generation and more centered on fulfilling their public obligation, as noted by Knepple (2022). The findings suggest a deliberate shift away from prioritizing audience metrics solely to drive traffic to published content, as observed by Nelson (2018). Despite the challenging media landscape in Nigeria, the sampled organizations demonstrate a commitment to upholding core journalistic values, prioritizing public interest and good governance over audience engagement metrics. While the desire for greater audience engagement is evident, the ultimate goal remains the promotion of public accountability and sustainable journalism practices. Therefore, audience engagement metrics are just one of several considerations in data journalism editorial decision-making, rather than the sole driving factor.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study examines the production of data-driven content and how audience engagement metrics on published content tend to influence editorial decision-making. Findings indicate the production of data-driven content within a social process supported by the capabilities of data journalists to creatively engage the audience for a better understanding of published data-driven content. Audiences' preferences, in turn, exert a significant level of influence on issues on data-driven content is eventually published. Newsrooms, however, need to ensure their audience engagement practices are optimized for expected AI disruptions in the near future, if not now.

In relation to the study's supporting framework, the sociology of news paradigm, this study concludes that the sociology of data journalism news-making in Nigerian "reputable" online news media is dependent on meeting and sustaining the information needs of media audiences, while remaining mindful of the need to create significant societal impact through publication of relevant data-driven stories irrespective of the level of engagement such stories could attract. The emphasis here is on "reputable" indicating this conclusion only resonates with platforms acclaimed for good journalistic practices over the years (Adepotun, 2017). This is particularly important as the Nigerian online media space is saturated with supposed news media platforms primarily interested in attracting audience traffic to their websites, thereby resorting to poor-quality journalism and sharp practices to achieve their aim (Idris, 2020).

This study is thus limited to online platforms committed to good quality journalism. Its findings may not be generalizable to the larger Nigerian news media

landscape despite almost all media platforms having an online presence. This is largely due to the peculiarities of online news platforms, which significantly differ from other media genres. The findings in this study support an increasing centrality of news media audiences in the production of data-driven news content. Further studies are, however, encouraged to examine audience perception and engagement with such content.

Access to data on audience metrics is a key factor in understanding audience engagement with news media content, but such data is often jealously guarded by news media organizations in Nigeria. The inability to get personnel on the digital tracking team of the sampled organizations to participate in this study is a major limitation to its findings, preventing real-time evaluation of how audience data influences content creation, production, and dissemination of data journalism content. Media practitioners are often at the forefront of campaigns for open data. It will be a welcome development for them to make their audience data available for research purposes, thus aiding our understanding of data journalism and audience engagement of data-driven content in Nigeria and similar media environments.

Irrespective of the noted limitations, this study explores a less researched area of data journalism scholarship in a developing country where the practice is less entrenched. It provides a clear description of how entrenched audience-centered data journalism practice is being adopted and contextualized within the Nigerian media landscape. With Nigerians increasingly relying on online news media for their news consumption, it is pertinent to understand what this portends for news media practices in the country. With the increasing datafication of society enabling more sources for data-driven content, more audience-centered studies are encouraged for better understanding and development of data journalism practice in the country.

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