

# Resisting the resistance (journalism): Ben Smith, Ronan Farrow, and delineating boundaries of practice

Journalism

2023, Vol. 24(3) 513–530

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/14648849211064379

[journals.sagepub.com/home/jou](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jou)**Patrick Ferrucci** 

Department of Journalism, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO, USA

**Gino Canella** 

Department of Journalism, Emerson College, Boston, MA, USA

## Abstract

In May 2020, New York Times media columnist Ben Smith critiqued Ronan Farrow, charging Farrow with practicing “resistance journalism.” Smith’s column generated significant discussion among journalists. This article analyzed the metajournalistic discourse that emerged following Smith’s column to examine how journalism’s boundaries are negotiated and contested. “Resistance journalism” has three main elements: it is unobjective, targeted, and truth-bending. “Resistance journalism” falls outside of the boundaries of journalism, according to the discourse, due to three practices: it lacks verification, focuses on narrative, and has a propensity to advocate. We argue that the current political economic and technological disruptions within digital media and networked society are creating new spaces for the rhetorical competition over journalism to occur, upending journalistic routines and creating hybrid journalism cultures.

## Keywords

Media ethics, journalism practice, boundary work, role conceptions, metajournalistic discourse, textual analysis

In May 2020, *New York Times* media columnist Ben Smith published an article critiquing Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ronan Farrow. Smith argued that Farrow’s work too often

---

## Corresponding author:

Patrick Ferrucci, Department of Journalism, University of Colorado, 1511 University Ave, 478 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309, USA.

Email: [patrick.ferrucci@colorado.edu](mailto:patrick.ferrucci@colorado.edu)

flouts normative journalism ethics and that, for Farrow, journalism's "old rules of fairness and open-mindedness can seem more like impediments than essential journalistic imperatives" (Smith, 2020). Smith (2020) labeled Farrow's reporting emblematic of a type of "journalism that has thrived in the age of Donald Trump"—resistance journalism. While never explicitly defining resistance journalism, Smith (2020) contended that Farrow and other resistance journalists prioritize cinematic narratives and strongly advocate for causes at the expense of a complete accounting of the facts. Farrow and his ilk, Smith wrote (2020), exclude "the complicating facts and inconvenient details" that would make a story less dramatic and more fair. Resistance journalism, the article implicitly contended, does not properly represent journalism's normative ideals. These charges catalyzed significant media coverage. Summarily, without articulating it exactly, *The New York Times* labeled resistance journalism, and, therefore, Ronan Farrow, outside the boundaries of journalism.

Journalism is an "interpretive community" in that its norms, definitions, and practices are often discursively constructed, contested, and reified over time (Zelizer, 1993). Studying how the boundaries of journalism are set and maintained reveals how "journalism comes to be demarcated from non-journalism" (Carlson, 2015: 2). One of the most fundamental boundary-setting techniques for journalists is delineating appropriate from inappropriate practices of the field. As Singer (2015) wrote, "the survival of journalism as an occupation depends on its credibility, which is gained through the collective behavior of its practitioners" (22). Because journalism as a field is always in a state of flux, columns such as the one written by Smith allow scholars an opportunity to better understand how the field is constructed and thought about at the moment. In his article, Smith (2020) contended that resistance journalists' collective behaviors often eschew journalism norms, and that these behaviors negatively affect journalism's credibility. But what is that behavior, exactly? This is an important question. When Smith's column catalyzed discourse about the field of journalism, it presented an opportunity to understand what some journalists believe are acceptable and unacceptable practices, because implicit norms become explicit in published discourse (Hindman & Thomas, 2013). An investigation into how the industry discursively reacted to Smith's column illustrates the often unspoken norms of the field at the moment (Vos & Moore, 2020). Essentially, while it can be argued that all genres of journalism, such as "resistance journalism," are often just repackaged versions of a prior genre, the discourse surrounding Smith's column provides a window into how journalists feel about various newsgathering and editorial practices. For example, although "public journalism" and "engaged journalism" are often thought of as different genres of journalism, engaged journalism is essentially a rebranding of public journalism; but by studying the discourse surrounding both, researchers can investigate which practices fall inside or outside the boundaries of journalism at a given historical moment (Ferrucci et al., 2020a). This is exactly what Zelizer (1993) called for when labeling journalism an interpretive community. Consequently, while the Smith article asserted that Farrow and other resistance journalists like him produce boundary-bending news, the profession is a fluid, socially constructed entity with ever-evolving practices (Sjovaag, 2015; Tandoc and Jenkins, 2018).

Therefore, the question remains: Is resistance journalism outside the boundaries of journalism? One article arguing a point does not portend industry consensus. Essentially, by making "resistance journalism" part of the journalistic cultural zeitgeist, Smith (2020)

catalyzed numerous pieces of metajournalistic discourse on the subject. This study examined the metajournalistic discourse produced in the wake of Smith's piece. Metajournalistic discourse is defined as "public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception" (Carlson, 2016: 350). These expressions often elucidate "what journalists say about their capacity to do what they ought to do" (Craft and Thomas, 2016: 1). To understand how resistance journalism fits within (or falls outside) the boundaries of journalism, we conducted a textual analysis of journalistic discourse about the Smith column.

## Review of the literature

### *The boundaries of journalism*

The question of what is and what is not a legitimate journalistic practice is characteristically answered through boundary work (Carlson, 2015). Boundary work, typically, views journalism's boundaries as "symbolic contests in which different actors vie for definitional control to apply or remove" normative ideas of the profession (Carlson, 2015: 2). As there are no governing bodies that regulate journalism, journalism is considered an "interpretive community," or a field of practices, where boundaries are legitimized and reified through public discourses from inside and outside the industry (Zelizer, 1993). When studying boundaries, scholars have, for example, examined the "wall" between the editorial and business functions of a news organization (e.g., Schauster et al., 2016), the definitional boundary between hard and soft news (Sjovaag, 2015), the boundary between who is and who is not a journalist (e.g., Deuze, 2008; Ferrucci and Vos, 2017; Maares and Hanusch, 2018), and, most saliently for this study, the boundary between what is and what is not an ethical—or appropriate—journalistic practice (e.g., Ferrucci and Taylor, 2019; Singer, 2003; Tandoc and Jenkins, 2018).

Prior to recent technological and economic disruptions, the delineation between acceptable and unacceptable journalism practices was relatively clear (Deuze, 2008). Now, conversely, "in an open media environment that presents no limits on who can publish, journalists cite norms not only as identity markers of the professional newsworker, but also as boundary markers between professionals and nonprofessionals" (Singer, 2015: 21). Oftentimes, the distinctions drawn between legitimate and non-legitimate practices include the following: professional ethics (i.e., objectivity and verification), narrative style, and principles such as independence and accountability (Singer, 2015). In an era of technological change, however, scholars and practitioners are constantly redefining appropriate and inappropriate journalistic practices—often to understand journalism's role in a democratic society (Ferrucci, 2021; Mellado et al., 2017).

### *Journalism and role conceptions*

One of the most significant forces impacting how journalists do their jobs concerns the manner in which they conceive of their professional role (Graber, 2002). In fact, how journalists conceive of their role (e.g., as a watchdog or disseminator) impacts the content

they produce (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). In general, role conceptions are informal perceived roles journalists occupy, and these perceived roles then influence not only their normative perceptions of the field but also the ways in which they enact their role as a journalist (Tandoc et al., 2013). Thus, the primary manner in which role conceptions impact journalism is through how professionals practice in the field (Mellado et al., 2017). Since the link between role conception and behavior in the field is intransigently connected, studies have shown that roles function in a two-stage manner: the journalist first conceives of a role, and then enacts a series of practices that go along with it (Tandoc et al., 2013). During moments of significant disruption within the field, a variety of new roles and, therefore, new practices emerge—some are welcomed, others are contested (Tandoc and Vos, 2016).

The idea that normative roles within a profession change or evolve is not new, as roles are social constructions that are consistently in flux (Biddle and Thomas, 1979). Within journalism, role conceptions often evolve and shift, or appear and disappear as a function of what a democratic society needs at the moment (Weaver et al., 2007). For example, in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, the watchdog became a popular role as issues such as the Vietnam War and Watergate eroded public trust in government (Schudson, 1992). The journalism industry's reliance on technology for newsgathering and publishing, historically, has introduced new market models for news; market models have also influenced how journalists conceive of their roles (Belair-Gagnon and Holton, 2018; Ferrucci and Vos, 2017).

In recent years, journalists have altered or outright discarded long-standing normative practices, such as objectivity, effectively changing how journalism, as a profession, views its role in society (Vos and Ferrucci, 2018). Each time new roles are envisioned or new practices are introduced, they are derided and rejected by journalists who have, at that moment, epistemic power within the field. In fact, journalists within various niches or “communities of practice” are “tasked with constantly and faithfully redefining their domain as their practice evolves” (Meltzer and Martik, 2017: 221). Through this redefinition, journalists well within the profession's supposed boundaries dismiss emerging practices, such as how to cover elections (McDevitt, 2020; McDevitt and Ferrucci, 2018) or how opinion or “talk” is becoming a norm in the field (Meltzer, 2019). In effect, as new roles and behaviors enter the field, veteran journalists police the boundaries of the field by publicly refuting certain practices and labeling them verboten to the field (Berkowitz, 2000).

According to Ben Smith in his *New York Times* article on Ronan Farrow, shifting role conceptions within journalism results in Farrow assuming the role of “resistance journalist”; this role, Smith argued, includes practices that do not fit within the normative boundaries of the field. Although resistance journalism may resemble prior genres of journalism, it remains important to understand why its practices are currently thought of as potentially outside the profession's boundaries. Accordingly, when professionals in a community of practice such as resistance journalism emerge, they often look to others in the community to publicly deliberate—often through metajournalistic discourse—and discuss which new practices are within or outside the profession's normative ethos. These deliberations can then shape and redefine the field (Meltzer and Martik, 2017). Therefore,

the discursive conversation examined in this study not only reveals something about resistance journalism, but also provides insights about the future of journalism.

### *Resistance journalism*

A central critique of Farrow is the narrative style that he and the so-called “resistance” journalists like him use. Farrow’s stories, Smith and other journalists argued, are overburdened with sensational language and vivid descriptors that give his stories a dramatic and conspiratorial tone (Smith, 2020). This critique of narrative style and language is examined through framing—not the actual story frames that Farrow and other journalists use, but framing as a social process in which meaning, ideology, and values are contested (Zelizer, 2004). Framing debates among journalists reveal how journalism’s boundaries are flexible and influenced by the sociopolitical and economic contexts in which journalist works. Scholars have argued that when journalists engage in framing debates, they are participating in journalism’s rhetorical competition for epistemic authority (Carlson, 2017). Journalists and journalism organizations compete for epistemic authority, for example, by producing factual stories and by performing routines, rituals, and classification activities (Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1972).

Journalists have long debated journalism’s boundaries—from muckrakers to “new” and “literary” journalism in the 1960s and 70s, to public journalism in the 1990s. Each time a new genre or role emerges, its norms and practices are debated and set by those perceived to be “inside” the journalistic field. When a new genre defies collectively held norms, many in the field will argue that its practices are outside of journalism’s professional boundaries. The current networked media environment is complicating this boundary-setting process in several important ways (Ekström, 2002): The spaces where journalists maintain their authority have expanded; the deteriorating labor relations in media have placed journalists and news organizations in precarious economic situations; and algorithms and social media are fracturing publics into niche audiences. Because journalism increasingly occurs through online networks, journalists are in regular conversation with activists, social movements, and grassroots media makers. Castells (2007) described actors who challenge institutional authority as forces of *counterpower*. These actors exert counterpower within networked society by demanding that journalists re-examine their newsgathering routines and update their language.

Facing challenges to their epistemic authority, some journalists have responded to critiques from activists and grassroots media makers by producing diverse and inclusive stories rooted in justice and solidarity with marginalized and oppressed people, and by developing new routines for making and sharing news—routines that, typically, are democratic, collaborative, and transparent. These reporting and publishing methods, however, reflect another critique of Farrow and “resistance journalism”: The economics of digital media incentivize journalists to seek affirmation from their peers and affinity groups.

The critique of Farrow’s style and the charge that he and resistance journalists uncritically parrot social movements at the expense of traditional journalistic standards follows a long tradition of institutional journalists delegitimizing alternative forms of reporting. Yet,

in this age of social media and new market models of journalism, there are numerous hybrid journalism cultures emerging (Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Ferrucci, 2017). One of the ways scholars can examine how epistemic authority and power are contested within networked society is by analyzing metajournalistic discourse (De Maeyer and Holton, 2016).

### *Theory of metajournalistic discourse*

As a profession guided by socially constructed rules and definitions, journalism is understood as a fluid and ever-evolving field that is often, and primarily, influenced through public discourse from actors inside and outside of the field (Carlson, 2016). These published utterances about the field of journalism provide a view into “both the exercise of institutionalized news practices and (the) explicit interpretative processes justifying or challenging these practices and their practitioners” (Carlson, 2016: 350). While some have labeled metajournalistic discourse “what journalists say about their capacity to do what they ought to do” (Craft and Thomas, 2016: 1), Carlson (2016), more generally, contends that metajournalistic discourse may also come from actors outside the field; therein, researchers have studied metadiscourse from commenters (Wolfgang, 2021), bloggers (Vos et al., 2012), television writers (Ferrucci, 2018), and others to understand how boundaries are formed, maintained, and destroyed in journalism.

To bring a constellation of studies together under an umbrella concept of metajournalistic discourse, Carlson (2016) outlined the theory of metajournalistic discourse. The theory contends that there are three main components of discourse to identify when studying metajournalistic discourse. The first component is site/audiences, which is defined as where the discourse is published. The audiences cannot be separated from the site since the publication directly impacts who the audience is and how the audience interprets the content. The second component is the topic, which can be reactive, meaning it examines one specific incident, or generative, meaning it examines the entire field of journalism. Finally, the third component identifies the actors who compose the discourse, either journalists or non-journalists.

This study adds to the growing corpus of research that examines reactive content published by actors inside the field (journalists). In the past, studies of this type primarily include paradigm repair examinations, which consist of case studies analyzing content about a specific ethical breach in journalism (Vos and Moore, 2020). For example, to help understand which practices are inside or outside the profession’s boundaries, researchers have studied metajournalistic discourse that concerns discourse about one specific topic; these include the death of Princess Diana (Berkowitz, 2000), the Jayson Blair scandal (Hindman, 2005), the *New York Times* eliminating its public editor (Ferrucci, 2019), Helen Thomas’ questionable remarks during a press conference (Hindman and Thomas, 2013), and numerous other cases. Case studies provide a window into the field of journalism at a specific moment because they review discourse about journalists’ practices who were covering a particular story. This type of analysis allows for understanding which, if any, of Farrow’s practices fall outside the boundaries of journalism. More specifically, by examining journalists’ reactions to Ben Smith’s article criticizing resistance journalism, this study illuminates how “the interpretive community can exercise

judgment and cast blame (where needed) when an ethical crisis threatens the integrity of the community” (Hindman and Thomas, 2013: 271). Therefore, our research questions are:

RQ1: According to metajournalistic discourse, what is resistance journalism?

RQ2: According to metajournalistic discourse, what practices of resistance journalism fall outside of the boundaries of journalism?

## Method

When conducting a study of metajournalistic discourse, Craft and Thomas (2016) argued that textual analysis is the optimal methodology as it allows the researcher to truly unearth the latent and manifest meanings behind the discourse. In effect, textual analysis illuminates, ideally, all possible meanings behind a text and, in this case, can then lead to an unveiling of how an interpretive community implicitly and explicitly sets its boundaries of practice (Fairclough, 2003). And while this type of work analyzing metajournalistic discourse aspires to “modest empirical goals,” it provides a glimpse into how actors within the industry discursively shape the profession’s boundaries (Vos and Singer, 2016: 149).

For this study, the authors examined how actors within and on the fringes of the journalism industry included or excluded practices associated with what Smith (2020) labeled resistance journalism. To accomplish this goal, the authors collected all published articles from news outlets and trade publications that reacted to Smith’s article for the three weeks following its publication in the *Times*. Studies of metajournalistic discourse often seek to understand how an industry demarcates and legitimizes practices, and how it defines potentially ambiguous but important norms by analyzing a combination of traditional media, trade publications, and media criticism (i.e., Vos & Singer, 2016). Utilizing a sample of articles of this combination is done because the boundaries of practice are formed through a discursive struggle for epistemic power over the field (Vos & Moore, 2020). As is common with this type of research, the researchers determined the date range by simply gathering data until none appeared for several days (e.g., Berkowitz, 2000). All stories or columns published by news organizations and trade publications—outlets which typically set and guard the boundaries of the field (Carlson, 2015)—that specifically discussed resistance journalism were included in the analysis. In total, 27 articles were found and analyzed, a sample that is commensurate with similar studies (i.e., Berkowitz, 2000; Ferrucci, 2019). (Please see Table 1.)

The unit of analysis for this study is each entire article about resistance journalism; consequently, the researchers coded each entire article. Following the template set by Vos and Singer (2016), the findings section does not identify names of journalists or outlets—the goal is to understand the discourse of an entire industry; individual journalists cannot define the field’s norms. Therefore, the findings, paraphrased and quoted, exclude publication citations. By excluding this identifying information, the specific outlets are given the same explanatory weight and the field at large is represented (Ferrucci, 2019). As noted by Vos and Thomas (2019) in a similar study, since this study examines

**Table 1.** Publications included in the analysis.

Publication	Number of articles
Associated Press	1
Columbia Journalism Review	1
CNN.com	1
Crikey	1
Fox News	3
Los Angeles Times	1
Media Post	1
Media-ite	2
National Public Radio	1
New York Post	1
Page Six	1
Poynter	3
Rolling Stone	1
Slate	1
The Guardian	1
The Hill	1
The Intercept	1
The New Republic	1
The Wrap	1
Vanity Fair	1
Washington Examiner	1
Washington Post	1
Total Articles	27

journalism's institutional discourse, "attention is best focused on the discourse than on the site or authors themselves" since that would privilege certain pieces used for quotations or not others just as important to the analysis (400–401). The researchers analyzed the data in the manner outlined by [Emerson et al. \(1995\)](#). This is a three-step process for data analysis. First, the researchers read through the data, jotting down notes. Second, the researchers performed another complete analysis of the data, in this instance seeking emergent themes or patterns. After concurring on themes, the researchers once again did a thorough analysis, this time with patterns and themes in mind, and categorized data within themes and patterns.

## Findings

### *Resistance journalism*

The first research question asked, according to metajournalistic discourse, what is resistance journalism? [Smith \(2020\)](#), in his *New York Times* article, criticized the genre, but did not actually define it. To understand how the genre fits within or outside the

boundaries of journalism, it is imperative to understand what it entails. After a thorough analysis of the data, we identified three main elements of resistance journalism that set it apart from other types of journalism: it is unobjective, targeted, and truth-bending.

*Unobjective.* The most prevalent attribute of resistance journalism concerned its inherently unobjective nature. Objectivity, of course, is one of the fundamental characteristics of professional journalism, but journalists in this study believed resistance journalists did not practice this norm. Instead, resistance journalists very clearly take a side. One article argued that resistance journalism is always “on the right side of social media reaction.” Implicit in this quote is that this emerging genre of journalism approaches its subject from a clear perspective, and that the journalists practicing it permit or tolerate “no dissent and questioning,” which is “perhaps the single most destructive path journalism can take.” If journalists craft a story with an angle in mind or a side of the story they wish to highlight, it comes across to readers as blatantly one-sided. Essentially, the discourse argued that although this practice negatively affects the field of journalism, it could possibly help individual journalists. One journalist wrote that taking a side which may be popular with certain demographics or audiences can become a positive individual attribute. He wrote, “affirming (progressive) orthodoxies can be career-promoting, while questioning them can be job-destroying. Consider the powerful incentives journalists face in an industry where jobs are disappearing so rapidly one can barely keep count.”

When a journalist does not practice objectivity, thus the field and the audience both suffer. Because the journalist does not report skeptically enough about an issue, she risks passing on an incomplete rendering of that issue to her audience. According to one reporter, journalism “has as its core function skepticism and questioning of pieties. Journalism quickly transforms into a sickly, limp version of itself when it itself wages war on the virtues of dissent and airing a wide range of perspectives.” Overall, the discourse argued, when journalism turns away from objectivity, it cannot be inquisitive enough about the side it favors and can lose credibility with audiences.

*Targeted.* The second commonly discussed attribute of resistance journalism is that it is targeted at specific individuals. While this attribute overlaps with objectivity, such that a targeted story inherently lacks objectivity, this element is slightly different. According to the discourse, resistance journalists identify unpopular powerful people and target them with incomplete stories that they know most readers will enjoy because the subject is so universally disliked. Most journalists report on and discuss U.S. President Donald Trump negatively, and some journalists in the metadiscourse claimed that he has been a primary target of resistance journalists. Purveyors of the resistance genre, they argued, publish numerous untruths about the president without repercussion because he is so unpopular with readers. For example, one journalist wrote that because a certain type of person is unpopular now—primarily, men in positions of power—this means that reporters are “not only free, but encouraged and incentivized, to say or publish anything they want, no matter how reckless and fact-free, provided their target is someone sufficiently disliked in mainstream liberal media venues and/or on social media.” In other words, if the public, especially ones who follow “the liberal media,” dislike someone enough, resistance

journalists can publish stories about that person with near impunity. One reporter wrote that “journalistic standards have been consciously jettisoned when it comes to reporting on public figures who, in Smith’s words, are ‘most disliked by the loudest voices.’” The journalist went on to write that “as long the targets of one’s conspiracy theories and attacks are regarded as villains by the guardians of mainstream liberal social media circles, journalists reap endless career rewards for publishing unvetted and unproven—even false—attacks on such people,” and the resistance journalists can do this “while never suffering any negative consequences when their stories are exposed as shabby frauds.”

*Truth-bending.* Although Smith (2020) was quick to point out in his column that Ronan Farrow was not a “fabulist,” he did argue that Farrow takes liberties with his stories. This critique appeared often in the discourse when journalists argued that resistance journalism does not necessarily publish lies; rather, it slightly bends the truth to prove a point. For example, resistance journalism often hints at and suggests “conspiracies without citing any direct evidence to back them up.” In this way, a lie is not told, but an unsubstantiated claim is disseminated. The discourse argued that this type of journalism is “particularly dangerous in an era where conspiracy theories are increasingly commonplace.” Journalists articulated this idea by claiming that President Trump spreads many untrue conspiracy theories which are “quickly debunked by most of the mainstream media.” This, however, often leads to “Trump’s enemies” spreading truth-bending conspiracy theories, which are “never denounced by journalists because mainstream news outlets themselves play[ed] a key role in peddling them.”

Some of the discourse, when discussing the spread of untruths, named other potential resistance journalists in addition to Farrow. One journalist contended that “MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow spent three years hyping conspiratorial junk with no need even to retract any of it,” and that *Mother Jones*’ David Corn “played a crucial, decisively unjournalistic role in mainstreaming the lies of the Steele dossier all with zero effect on his journalistic status, other than to enrich him through a predictably bestselling book that peddled those unhinged conspiracies further.” Very clear in this discourse is that resistance journalism spreads potential untruths without any repercussions because it often feeds “establishment liberals an endless diet of fearmongering and inflammatory conspiracies about (Donald Trump) and his White House. Whether it was true or supported by basic journalistic standards was completely irrelevant.”

### *Boundaries of practice*

The second research question asked, according to the metajournalistic discourse, what practices of resistance journalism fall outside of journalism’s boundaries. The general idea behind this research question is that if Smith (2020) fundamentally contends that resistance journalism falls outside the acceptable boundaries of journalistic practice, then there must be specific practices that violate normative ideals. According to the discourse analyzed, three particular practices fall outside the profession’s boundaries: a lack of verification, a focus on narrative, and a propensity to advocate.

*Lack of verification.* For the journalists responding to Smith's (2020) column, the purported genre's lack of a focus on verification stood out. The discourse concentrated on both Farrow's journalism specifically, and also on what journalists considered resistance journalism generally. To the journalists, "Farrow had not corroborated several specific accusations" in his reporting. This practice, not relying on verification, stood out to journalists as a key feature of resistance journalism. They believed that verification is at the heart of journalism and that without it, the writing is not actually journalism. In the discourse, resistance journalism neglects the "fundamental principles of corroboration and rigorous disclosure," which are absolutely essential. The discourse noted that while reporting can be entertaining, "reporting, on all topics, does need to be careful, and accurate." The implicit contention is that Farrow and resistance journalists are not always careful and accurate in their reporting. In resistance journalism, journalists have "lapses" that often "involve a failure to rigorously corroborate," and they "indulge conspiracies that are tantalizing" but that cannot be proven. To cover up for this lack of verification, the discourse suggested that resistance journalists manipulate the audience. For example, in journalism, "properly conveying magnitude and paucity is a core journalistic responsibility," and Farrow and others often do not "properly corroborate or back up an account, relying on editorial tactics such as vague language to suggest corroboration that isn't there." Verification, historically, is an irreplaceable characteristic of journalism. Resistance journalists who do not practice it, therefore, place the genre outside of journalism's normative boundaries.

*Focus on narrative.* The second practice of resistance journalism that falls outside the boundaries of normative journalistic practice concerns how the genre's focus on narrative style often comes at the expense of the most truthful account of a story. In other words, resistance journalism sands "the inconvenient edges off of facts in order to suit the narrative (it) wants to deliver." Journalists argued that Farrow's style is indicative of the entire genre. As one reporter wrote, "Smith not only asserts that details matter, but that Farrow's alleged carelessness is a pernicious example of a wider problem" in resistance journalism.

The main contention here is that resistance journalism often hues very closely to another genre that the field of journalism as a whole believed outside of the boundaries of the profession: new journalism. In that genre, most popular during the 1960s and 1970s, creative non-fiction authors such as Tom Wolfe told stories with cinematic flair; these narratives, however, often left out inconvenient facts. Resistance journalism, then, often "eschews the messy complexity of truth in favor of dramatic and oversimplified narratives," and it prioritizes "storytelling to the point of ignoring necessary facts." Fundamentally, by focusing on producing the most cinematic or movie-like narratives, resistance journalists end up shaping "truths to have the greatest impact, possibly at the expense of some truths." When inconvenient truths are removed from a story so a narrative can flow more easily, or a political agenda can be satisfied, it leaves the audience with the suspicion that the story is incomplete. Nuanced stories that include "the larger truth" are far "messier." One example of a resistance journalism technique that the discourse consistently noted was "the inherent slyness of fiction's show-don't-tell re-

creation of private conversations.” Overwhelmingly, journalists contended, resistance journalism often veers outside the normative boundaries of practice in pursuit of more entertaining narratives that can only be accomplished by providing accounts that are less than the whole truth.

*Propensity to advocate.* The final practice of resistance journalism that the discourse identified as outside of the boundaries of journalistic practice concerned the genre’s inclination to advocate. For example, discussing a specific example of resistance journalism, one author wrote that the “reporting confirmed exactly nothing about the charge in question. And that should have been enough to ensure the story would never run. But run it did—because the goal wasn’t to get at the truth,” but rather to advocate for a conclusion. By advocating for causes or interest groups, resistance journalism takes the profession “away from fact-based reporting” and “toward speculation.”

Essentially, in its mission to advocate, the genre oftentimes cannot use facts—because either they do not exist or they are too difficult to verify—so readers are left with conjecture, something that traditionally would not fit within the parameters of journalism. This practice speaks to the “increasing popularity of a certain type of agenda-driven journalism,” one that is a “perfect description of a media sickness borne of the Trump era that is rapidly corroding journalistic integrity and justifiably destroying trust in news outlets.” Once again, many resistance journalists were connected to the Trump administration. Trump and other dishonorable people, such as Supreme Court justice Brett Kavanaugh, made it “laudable” for resistance journalists to try and take these people down without verified facts. Advocating for causes or issues, therefore, is a practice that journalists believed to be outside the profession’s boundaries.

## Discussion and conclusion

Although holding people in positions of power accountable has long been a primary function of journalism, *how* journalists pursue this function is increasingly being debated. Due to technological disruptions and a weakened business model for news, journalists and news organizations are working within a changing and disorganized field. In the current networked media environment, activists, social movements, and grassroots media makers are challenging journalism’s normative ideals and upending traditional newsgathering routines (Canella, 2021). Within this context, journalists face profound new challenges: how to attract audiences, how to satisfy their subscribers or readers, and how to respond to real-time feedback and criticisms about their reporting methods and language. The economic incentives within social media, many journalists in this study argued, are playing a major role in eroding journalism’s basic principles—verification, accuracy, and a quest for the truth.

This political economic and social context shows how journalists’ practices and their roles are intimately connected to media power (Freedman, 2014). Editorial decisions, in effect, are political decisions, which are affected by the material social relations in which they occur. Choosing sources, editing information, and selecting which stories demand the public’s attention are practices that are deeply embedded in relations of power. There

is a long tradition of resistance journalism in the United States, and earlier resistance journalists were similarly accused by mainstream journalists of operating outside of traditional journalism's boundaries. Ida B. Wells, for example, was charged with not being "objective" when she compiled data and reported on lynching in the 1890s. During this era, muckrakers exposed corruption and challenged corporate and elite political power, yet they were labeled radicals (Lumsden, 2015). How these journalists characterized information and framed stories revealed their commitment to justice and their willingness to acknowledge and challenge power.

Journalists often cling to long-standing norms to maintain their professional identity (Singer, 2003). Even when they embrace changes brought on by technological or economic shifts, journalists still attempt to not-so-subtly protect the boundaries of the profession—the idea of who is and who is not a journalist—by identifying practices that they believe are not part of the field; practices, such as blogging or citizen journalism (Deuze, 2008; Ferrucci et al., 2020b). Oftentimes, these practices have been a fixture of the profession, but by claiming that they are not within journalism's normative boundaries, journalists attempt to maintain their power within a changing profession (Deuze and Witschge, 2018). Consequently, it is no surprise that journalists who build their professional identities around specific normative practices would also attempt to discursively categorize resistance journalists—reporters who use slightly different practices and conceive of their professional role differently—as outside the profession's boundaries.

Schudson (1992) argued that important historical occasions, such as when the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War, can significantly affect institutions such as journalism. In those particular cases, due to wavering faith in the federal government, journalists identified closely with the watchdog role (Weaver et al., 2007). In effect, as trust in government and public institutions decreased, journalism's role as the watchdog increased. Of course, the watchdog role was at the heart of U.S. journalism since its professionalization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; but roles increase and decrease in their popularity as needed by a society (Graber, 2002). For example, when Woodward and Bernstein first began publishing stories on what would become the Watergate scandal, many rival journalists and news organizations decried the work as unpatriotic, unnecessary, and, implicitly, outside the boundaries of journalism (Schudson, 1992). More recently, post-9/11 U.S. journalism has moved away from the watchdog role because, many argue, trust in government must remain high during times of heightened anxieties over national security (Hellmueller et al., 2016).

The key point here is that the role of journalism in a democratic society is constantly negotiated and contested. Most journalists produce news in ways that the profession and publics deem necessary and acceptable in a specific sociopolitical and historical context. Others reject institutional orthodoxies and create new methods with which to report the news. One could argue, then, that the description of "resistance journalism" articulated by the discourse used in this study is appropriate for the United States' socio-political climate in 2021. From a presidential administration that lied repeatedly and denigrated the press, to widening income and wealth inequality, and the numerous injustices perpetrated against vulnerable communities and broadcast on social media, it seems appropriate that

resistance journalism has reemerged. It seems important then, to hypothesize resistance journalism's continued relevance in a post-Trump America. Although it may seem appropriate to predict a waning of the genre, due to a perceived calming of tensions between the current presidential administration and the press, one can also foresee a potential increase in resistance journalism's popularity due to: increased political polarization, an increase in social activism, and social media activities that expand mainstream conceptions of the public sphere (Hopp and Ferrucci, 2020).

In the column penned by Smith (2020), he both implicitly and explicitly notes the celebrity accrued by some purveyors of resistance journalism. Between this potential for journalistic fame, the continued economic precarity in journalism, a swelling commitment to market-based philosophies within the industry, and increasing role of advocacy within the field of journalism, it seems prudent to expect many of the practices associated with resistance journalism to continue. Therefore, an increasing amount of narratively elegant investigative journalism that tackles important and controversial subjects, while also clearly advocating for a point of view that aligns with the general public's estimation of those subjects, should be anticipated. In the future, some of these practices may come to be seen as inside the boundaries of journalism practice as these boundaries are increasingly permeable (Singer, 2015).

However, and importantly, some resistance journalism practices that were deemed outside of journalism's boundaries will always be classified this way. As noted most prominently by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014), verification is the very essence of journalism; it is what separates the profession from fiction writing. Therefore, although resistance journalism may be a needed genre in an era of political and social turmoil, and a sign that journalists' practices and their authority are being reassessed within networked media, all journalism must include verification and truth. The discourse reviewed for this study often discussed a lack of verification and truth-bending as two key features of resistance journalism, but journalists did not provide specific evidence to back up these claims.

Journalistic authority is changing due to labor precarity within media institutions and the blurring of the field within digital media (Carlson, 2017). It is in this environment where resistance journalism is challenging journalism's boundaries. To accomplish a shift similar to the one that happened post-Watergate, however, the genre, which aims to highlight a diversity of voices and promote a more equitable society, must not violate some fundamental aspects of journalism, such as verification. If journalists bend the truth or mischaracterize data to suit their political or ideological agendas or to appease a highly engaged segment of their audience, they risk further eroding trust among journalists, publics, and the institutions they are entrusted to hold accountable. Rather than seeking to appease the loudest voices on social media for superficial metrics, journalists must recognize how their practices and the stories that they produce are influenced by the power dynamics and economic incentives within media. This recognition will help journalists identify and deconstruct power, and reimagine the future of journalism.

A study of this sort comes with limitations. By examining the discourse catalyzed by one specific instance—the Smith column—we are only able to probe a small segment of the field; this study can by no means proclaim to reflect the feelings of the entire field. As

Zelizer (1993) noted, journalism's normative practices are constantly being updated and revised; understanding how journalists maintain their authority and patrol the profession's boundaries helps us recognize how the field operates at a given moment. For example, Berkowitz's (2000) landmark paradigm repair study about the metajournalistic discourse produced after Princess Diana's death clarified which practices journalists considered to be outside the field's boundaries in that moment. Among journalists today, those practices would neither be universally rejected nor universally accepted. By studying the discourse about Smith's column, we exposed which practices some journalists consider illegitimate, and reviewed how quasi-outsiders and the incentives of digital media are shaping journalism's boundaries. Oftentimes, boundaries are negotiated by labeling anything unconventional as illegitimate. Farrow's success—in terms of legal actions that have resulted from his reporting, and award recognition—reveals how this genre portends to continue remaking the field.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iDs

Patrick Ferrucci  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4535-0210>

Gino Canella  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0344-7644>

### References

- Belair-Gagnon V and Holton AE (2018) Boundary work, interloper media, and analytics in newsrooms: a analysis of the roles of web analytics companies in news production. *Digital Journalism* 6(4): 492–508.
- Berkowitz D (2000) Doing double duty: paradigm repair and the Princess Diana what-a-story. *Journalism* 1(2): 125–143.
- Biddle BJ and Thomas EJ (1979) *Role Theory: Concepts and Research*. Huntington, NY: R.R. Krieger Publishing.
- Canella G (2021) Journalistic power: constructing the “truth” and the economics of objectivity. *Journalism Practice* 13(4): 1–17. doi: [10.1080/17512786.2021.1914708](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1914708). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1914708>.
- Carlson M (2015) Introduction: the many boundaries of journalism. In: Carlson M and Lewis SC (eds) *Boundaries of Journalism: Professionalism, Practices, and Participation*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1–18.
- Carlson M (2016) Metajournalistic discourse and the meanings of journalism: definitional control, boundary work, and legitimation. *Communication Theory* 26(4): 349–368.

- Carlson M (2017) *Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing News in the Digital Era*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Castells M (2007) Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. *International Journal of Communication* 1: 238–266.
- Craft S and Thomas RJ (2016) *Metajournalism and Media Ethics*. Fukuoka, Japan. International Communication Association.
- De Maeyer J and Holton AE (2016) Why linking matters: a metajournalistic discourse analysis. *Journalism* 17(6): 776–794.
- Deuze M (2008) The professional identity of journalists in the context of convergence culture. *Observatorio (Obs\*)* 2(4): 103–117.
- Deuze M and Witschge T (2018) Beyond journalism: theorizing the transformation of journalism. *Journalism* 19(2): 165–181.
- Ekström M (2002) Epistemologies of TV journalism: a theoretical framework. *Journalism* 3(3): 259–282.
- Emerson R, Fretz R and Shaw L (1995) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fairclough N (2003) *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. New York, NY: Routledge Psychology Press.
- Ferrucci P (2017) Technology allows audience role in news construction. *Newspaper Research Journal* 38(1): 79–89.
- Ferrucci P (2018) Mo “meta” blues: how popular culture can act as metajournalistic discourse. *International Journal of Communication* 12: 4821–4838.
- Ferrucci P (2019) The end of ombudsmen? 21st-century journalism and reader representatives. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 96(1): 288–307.
- Ferrucci P (2021) Joining the team: metajournalistic discourse, paradigm repair, the athletic and sports journalism practice. *Journalism Practice* 1–19, (online first). DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2021.1907213](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1907213)
- Ferrucci P and Taylor R (2019) Blurred boundaries: toning ethics in news routines. *Journalism Studies* 20(15): 2167–2181.
- Ferrucci P, Nelson JL and Davis MP (2020a) From “public journalism” to “engaged journalism”: imagined audiences and denigrating discourse. *International Journal of Communication* 14: 1586–1604.
- Ferrucci P, Taylor R and Alaimo KI (2020b) On the boundaries: professional photojournalists navigating identity in an age of technological democratization. *Digital Journalism* 8(3): 367–385.
- Ferrucci P and Vos T (2017) Who’s in, who’s out? constructing the identity of digital journalists. *Digital Journalism* 5(7): 868–883.
- Freedman D (2014) *The Contradictions of Media Power*. New York and London: Bloomsbury.
- Graber D (2002) *Mass Media and American Politics*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Hellmueller L, Mellado C, Blumell L, et al. (2016) The contextualization of the watchdog and civic journalistic roles: reevaluating journalistic role performance in US newspapers. *Palabra Clave* 19(4): 1072–1100.
- Hindman EB (2005) Jayson Blair, the New York Times, and paradigm repair. *Journal of Communication* 55(2): 225–241.

- Hindman EB and Thomas RJ (2013) Journalism's "crazy old aunt" Helen Thomas and paradigm repair. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 90(2): 267–286.
- Hopp T and Ferrucci P (2020) A spherical rendering of deviant information resilience. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 97(2): 492–508.
- Kovach B and Rosenstiel T (2014) *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. Santa Barbara, CA: Three Rivers Press.
- Lumsden L (2015) Socialist muckraker John Kenneth Turner: the twenty-first century relevance of a journalist/activist's career. *American Journalism* 32(3): 282–306.
- Maares P and Hanusch F (2018) Exploring the boundaries of journalism: instagram micro-bloggers in the twilight zone of lifestyle journalism. *Journalism* 21(2): 1464884918801400.
- McDevitt M (2020) *Where ideas go to die: the fate of intellect in American journalism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- McDevitt M and Ferrucci P (2018) Populism, journalism, and the limits of reflexivity: the case of Donald J. Trump. *Journalism Studies* 19(4): 512–526.
- Mellado C, Hellmueller L, Márquez-Ramírez M, et al. (2017) The hybridization of journalistic cultures: a comparative study of journalistic role performance. *Journal of Communication* 67(6): 944–967.
- Meltzer K (2019) *From News to Talk: The Expansion of Opinion and Commentary in US Journalism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Meltzer K and Martik E (2017) Journalists as communities of practice: advancing a theoretical framework for understanding journalism. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 41(3): 207–226.
- Schauster EE, Ferrucci P and Neill MS (2016) Native advertising is the new journalism: how deception affects social responsibility. *American Behavioral Scientist* 60(12): 1408–1424.
- Schudson M (1992) *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Schudson M (2001) The objectivity norm in American journalism. *Journalism* 2(2): 149–170.
- Shoemaker PJ and Reese SD (2014) *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century: A Media Sociology Perspective*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Singer JB (2003) Who are these guys? the online challenge to the notion of journalistic professionalism. *Journalism* 4(2): 139–163.
- Singer JB (2015) Out of bounds: professional norms as boundary makers. In: Carlson M and Lewis SC (eds), *Boundaries of Journalism: Professionalism, Practices, and Participation*. New York, NY: Routledge, 21–36.
- Sjovaag H (2015) Hard news/soft news: the hierarchy of genres and the boundary of the profession. In: Carlson M and Lewis SC (eds), *Boundaries of Journalism: Professionalism, Practices, and Participation*. New York, NY: Routledge, 101–117.
- Smith B (2020) *Is Ronan Farrow Too Good to Be True?* The New York Times.
- Tandoc EC Jr, Hellmueller L and Vos TP (2013) Mind the gap: between journalistic role conception and role enactment. *Journalism Practice* 7(5): 539–554.
- Tandoc EC Jr and Jenkins J (2018) Out of bounds? how Gawker's outing a married man fits into the boundaries of journalism. *New Media & Society* 20(2): 581–598.
- Tandoc EC Jr and Vos TP (2016) The journalist is marketing the news: Social media in the gatekeeping process. *Journalism Practice* 10(8): 950–966.

- Tuchman G (1972) Objectivity as strategic ritual: an examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology* 77(4): 660–679.
- Vos TP, Craft S and Ashley S (2012) New media, old criticism: bloggers' press criticism and the journalistic field. *Journalism* 13(7): 850–868.
- Vos TP and Ferrucci P (2018) Who am I? Perceptions of digital journalists' professional identity. In: Eldridge S and Franklin B (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Developments in Digital Journalism Studies*. New York, NY: Routledge, 40–52.
- Vos TP and Moore J (2020) Building the journalistic paradigm: beyond paradigm repair. *Journalism* 21(1): 17–33.
- Vos TP and Singer JB (2016) Media discourse about entrepreneurial journalism. *Journalism Practice* 10(2): 143–159.
- Vos TP and Thomas RJ (2019) The discursive (re) construction of journalism's gatekeeping role. *Journalism Practice* 13(4): 396–412.
- Weaver DH, Beam RA, Brownlee BJ, et al. (2007) *The American Journalist in the 21st Century: US News People at the Dawn of a New Millennium*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wolfgang JD (2021) Taming the 'trolls': how journalists negotiate the boundaries of journalism and online comments. *Journalism* 22(1): 1464884918762362.
- Zelizer B (1993) Journalists as interpretive communities. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 10(3): 219–237.
- Zelizer B (2004) When facts, truth, and reality are god-terms: on journalism's uneasy place in cultural studies. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1(1): 100–119.

### Author biographies

**Patrick Ferrucci** (PhD, University of Missouri) is an associate professor and the associate chair for graduate studies in the Department of Journalism in the College of Media, Communication and Information at University of Colorado-Boulder. His research primarily concerns itself with how shifting notions of “organization” in journalism lead to influence on journalism practice. Specifically, his work examines organization-level variables' impact on message construction.

**Gino Canella** (PhD University of Colorado Boulder) is an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism at Emerson College. He produces documentary media in collaboration with community organizers and researches how activist media practices have the potential to interrupt social, political, and journalistic discourses about race and labor and promote solidarity.