

THESIS

BREAKING DOWN THE GATES WITH PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM: LEVERAGING  
USER-GENERATED CONTENT FOR TODAY'S JOURNALISTIC PRACTICES

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## ABSTRACT

### BREAKING DOWN THE GATES WITH PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM: LEVERAGING USER-GENERATED CONTENT FOR TODAY'S JOURNALISTIC PRACTICES

With the increase in user-generated content (UGC) with today's information communication technologies (ICTs), there is ample opportunity for journalists to leverage UGC in their reporting. Because media organizations are continuously looking for creative and innovative ways to harness UGC to keep pace with today's ever-changing digital environment, there is a considerable amount of room to explore the effects on what this type of content has on journalistic practices. In an effort to understand how UGC fits into journalists' everyday work routines, this study seeks to understand how UGC encourages or impedes journalists' professional norms and values. This study revealed that journalists experience a considerable amount of internal conflict in leveraging UGC. Journalists expressed that they use UGC as a supplement to their existing reporting practices and avoid engaging with audiences for fear of challenging their journalistic ethics and norms.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

With the pervasive amount of information communication technologies (ICTs) that are entrenched in today's society, traditional journalistic and media roles have shifted due to the audiences' ability to independently publish content. Whereas the traditional media model that typically requires audiences and authors to request permission from journalists and publishers to publish content, ICTs provide everyday users with intuitive platforms to easily publish content (Shirky, 2010; Singer 2005). These interactive publishing capabilities result in user-generated content (UGC), which is broadly defined as content that is developed by everyday users rather than professional journalists and publishers (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008). Due to the overwhelming number of participatory platforms on the web, adoption of these platforms is steadily increasing where seven-in-ten Americans use at least one social media platform to stay connected (Pew Research Center, 2018). According to the Pew Research Journalism Project (2010), 37 percent of Internet users have "contributed to the creation of news, commented about it, or disseminated it via posting on social media sites like Facebook or Twitter" (p. 1). Today Americans are more connected than ever to create their own content, where 69 percent of users today use some sort of social media compared to the 5 percent that had adopted social media in 2005 (Pew Research Center, 2018).

### **Rationale**

With the number of users on participatory platforms today, there is also ample opportunity for journalists to leverage UGC in their reporting processes (Pew Research Center, 2018). Not only can journalists utilize UGC to supplement their current reporting practices, but it can also be harnessed to strengthen the relationship between journalists and the community. For

example, *The Seattle Times* formed a close-niche partnership with several different community websites to collaborate in content production that ultimately provided readers with better and more accurate information (The State of the Media, 2010). In the event of a natural disaster or crisis where reporting resources are scarce, media outlets have modified their traditional reporting strategies by turning to citizens to help fill in the gaps for reporting the news (Haddow & Haddow, 2014; Jarboe, 2005; Loke & Grimm, 2015; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). This was seen during the Hurricane Katrina disaster when journalists relied on citizen journalist's blogs, videos, and pictures for additional sources of information, as it was difficult to get a journalist on the ground in a timely manner (Jarboe, 2005). Al-Jazeera also similarly relied on citizen journalists for information during the Arab Spring protests, as it was difficult for journalists to obtain access to this region for reporting (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

Media organizations have also taken an initiative to make UGC prominent within journalists' reporting processes. The BBC is an example of a media organization that has greatly shifted its routines to include UGC use in a myriad of ways (Harrison, 2010). One way is using UGC in the form of an unsolicited news story, where the BBC originally covered a small story in 2007 about how consumers were filling up their cars with contaminated fuel (Harrison, 2010). The original piece was short in terms of word length, as there were insufficient claims to back up the story, but soon after publication, reader-submitted emails and comments began pouring into the BBC, which allowed the outlet to perform in-depth reporting to create an additional story with a fresh new perspective (Harrison, 2010). In addition, the BBC also has processes in place where it solicits help from its audience for an upcoming story or highlights UGC from the audience that serves as watchdog content that provides additional value to the news piece overall for the audience (Harrison, 2010).

In addition to new strategies that are being developed by media outlets, it is becoming increasingly commonplace for news organizations to allow user-generated comments through social media or an internal commenting feature on articles as a form of engagement for increased audience interaction. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *BBC* are examples of outlets that now incorporate a user-generated commenting strategy into everyday journalistic processes (Santana & Hopp, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, & Wardle, 2010).

There is also the consideration of how UGC might be beneficial to journalists on an individual level. UGC might help journalists be more transparent and critical in their own work. For example, Gillmor (2003) noted that his own reporting for a Silicon Valley newspaper improved when incorporating UGC practices to create feedback loops that encouraged readers to submit their criticisms and reactions on his pieces. Because Gillmor's (2003) readers were knowledgeable of his beat and also highly skilled with participatory platforms, his audience was quick to raise issues with his work. Gillmor (2003) describes his readers' feedback as an opportunity that is mutually beneficial to both entities, as readers receive more accurate information thanks to open discussion, while journalists are also able to improve upon their work during the feedback process.

Aside from functional means to utilize UGC for journalistic purposes, there are also several different economic reasons that help explain why more media organizations are eagerly looking to take advantage of the benefits that UGC has to offer. For example, media outlets have adapted their publishing styles to cater to more lucrative online mediums as a result of declining revenue and profits for their traditional print counterparts (Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007; Singer, 2008; Thurman & Lupton, 2008; Lewis, Kaufhold, & Larorsa, 2010). Along with providing a means for journalists to connect with their readers, UGC also provides an



opportunity to expand business with advertisers with the lure of a more attentive and engaged audience (Storch, 2010). Furthermore, UGC is a free medium that can be incorporated throughout a media organization's content strategy (Tapscott & Williams, 2010).

The research surrounding UGC points to two different observations. First, media organizations clearly see the benefit in UGC use and have taken great strides to make sure that it is included in journalistic reporting processes so that they may reap the economic benefits (Thurman, 2008; van Dijck, 2009). This strategic direction also ensures that media outlets keep pace with the changing technological environment in response to changing audience attitudes and media consumption habits. And as Alan Rusbridger, former editor at *The Guardian*, has stated, "the role of journalists in this multi-media age has not changed: User-generated content will only be a complement to their work" (World Editors Forum, 2008, p. 92). Second, it may be clear for journalists working presently that delving into the realm of UGC is unavoidable due to media organizational pressure. As a result of these strategic changes, impactful changes have been made to the traditional "life cycle of news production" that presents several different "vexing challenges to journalistic norms and values" in terms of journalistic credibility and quality (Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010, p. 163). Among those challenges is the transition to a world of media production that is now comprised of everyday users, where journalists once rigidly controlled, limited, and even restricted audience participation (Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010). Research suggests that many journalists are skeptical of UGC, where many journalists experience tension in sharing their online space with everyday users (Rebillard & Touboul, 2010).

## Overview

Because media outlets are continuously looking for creative and innovative ways to harness UGC to keep pace with today's changing digital environment, there is a considerable amount of room to explore the effects UGC has on journalistic routines and processes. In an effort to understand how UGC fits into journalists' everyday work, this study seeks to understand how journalists handle this new form of content. Because this study looks to understand how journalists leverage UGC within their reporting, this study primarily focuses on the routines and thought processes that journalists take to use UGC within their own reporting. Of course, routines may differ based on where UGC is created, but reader content itself will not be analyzed in this research study.

Although this research strongly focuses on the micro-level perspective by giving precedence to the individual journalist, this study also examines how the macro, organizational level might play an important role in shaping the journalist's perception of UGC use overall. As such, this study relies on Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) hierarchy of influences as a theoretical framework to better understand the complex relationship between journalists and the media organizations they work for. This framework's strength is that it recognizes that content is influenced by several different factors, such as media workers, media organizations, and larger third-party institutions (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). By examining UGC through a broad lens, these results can be used in future research studies that span the entire ecosystem of media production.

This research study examined journalists that are active on social media and whose media organizations offer an online counterpart. Additionally, journalists who regularly write news articles were interviewed as part of this research study. This study also places an emphasis on

understanding how content that is produced by the journalist is affected by external UGC factors.

Stated differently, my overarching research question seeks to understand how professional

journalists' norms, routines, and ethics factor into leveraging UGC in their reporting processes.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

To help understand my research questions, the following literature review examines the current span of research on UGC. First, the literature review will provide a broad overview of existing UGC research. Next, this literature review will dive into Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) hierarchy of influences, which covers concepts from the macro- and micro-level perspective. Finally, the literature review will focus on the individual journalist from an ideological perspective (Deuze, 2005), where this review will outline common characteristics of journalists followed by an explanation of how norms and ethics interplay with those characteristics.

### **The Current State of UGC Research**

**Defining user-generated content.** User-generated content is a broad concept that has been applied to a variety of different content mediums, including blogs, forums, social networking sites, video sharing, and more (van Dijck, 2009). Daugherty, Eastin, and Bright (2008) describe UGC as any form of content that is developed by amateur, everyday users. Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent (2007) state that UGC meets three different criteria, which include publication, creative effort, and creation outside of professional routines and practices. Early research on UGC began with the empirical observation that this new form of content creation is primarily driven by Web 2.0's interactive nature that enables users to easily collaborate and share information among each other (Leung, 2009; van Dijck, 2009; Livingstone, 2004). Since the widespread adoption of participatory platforms, research on UGC has emphasized the notion that the audience role has deviated significantly from the traditional mass media notion of audience. Rather than an audience that is passive in nature that is typically descriptive of a mass media context, research surrounding UGC instead depicts audiences as more active and engaging

due to Web 2.0's interactive participatory platforms that put the user in the driver's seat in terms of content creation (Rice, 1993, McQuail, 2010, Gillmor, 2003, Merrin, 2009). Along those lines, researchers have credited these interactive platforms for blurring "the boundaries between publishers, producer, distributor, consumer, and reviewer of content" (Rice, 1993, p. 29). Elaborating on Rice's distinction of blurred media roles, McQuail (2010) notes that the audience function in mass media has shifted to a participatory model in which each member no longer receives information passively but has the ability to interact by becoming a provider of information. Several terms have emerged throughout research to reference this new hybrid user that is a combination of an audience member and a content producer such as 'prosumer,' 'produser,' and 'co-creator' (Toffler, 1971; van Dijck, 2009; Bruns, 2007). Described as "the people formerly known as the audience," these individuals no longer passively consume content, but instead actively create it (Rosen, 2006; Toffler, 1971). Today's ICTs provide audiences with the ability to act as a user in a variety of roles, such as a commenter, expert, or pulse-taker (Heinonen, 2011). Heinonen (2011) also describes that this active user role can also extend as a collaboration role with journalists, where users can even serve as ancillary reporters by providing journalists with information.

With this new notion of an active audience, research on UGC has stemmed into two different areas: citizen journalism and participatory journalism. Citizen journalism is described as a process where citizens play an active role in creating the news without the help of professional journalists (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Thurman & Hermida, 2010). This area of research looks closely to determine whether citizen journalism can potentially serve as a replacement to professional journalism and how citizen journalists shape up with respect to traditional journalistic ethics (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). In participatory

journalism, users produce and disseminate news similar to citizen journalists, only there is some form of collaboration or interaction with professional journalists or media outlets (Paulussen et al., 2007). This research study aims to focus on the second area of research in participatory journalism by learning how journalists might mediate and utilize UGC in their everyday work. With that said, it is important to keep in mind that UGC is a broad research subject, where all three concepts – UGC, citizen journalism, and participatory journalism – share characteristics of journalistic qualities and news creation. Because of these shared characteristics, a common limitation to UGC research is the fact that these three concepts are sometimes treated loosely or interchangeably, where “a considerable amount of ambiguity and overlap exists among them” (Holton, Coddington, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013, p. 721). As a result, this study works to alleviate this limitation by focusing on the professional journalist and his or her perceptions toward UGC use, rather than focusing on the reader and analyzing his or her comments.

**Defining participatory journalism.** Although this second area of UGC research is much smaller compared to the first, researchers were eager to study UGC effects in a participatory journalism context with the increasing and pervasive amount of Web 2.0 platforms that are now available. The definition of participatory journalism is typically referred to as the “wide variety of initiatives undertaken by mainstream media to enhance the integration of all kinds of user contributions in making of the news” (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008, p. 25). Research in this area is extremely normative in nature, as many advocates of UGC were hopeful to see journalists push and incorporate this new content type into reporting processes as a potential avenue for everyday users to participate more in civic engagement that is conducive to a more democratic environment (van Dijck, 2009; Holt & Karlsson, 2011; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Papacharissi, 2002; Rheingold, 2002; Rebillards & Touboul, 2010). Furthermore, researchers view this

perspective as a shift where the traditional top-down mode of communication is being replaced by an open forum where both users and journalists are engaging in a conversation (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Gillmor, 2004; Kunelius, 2001).

Of course, incorporating UGC into journalistic processes is not without its challenges, as journalists need to adopt effective processes where professionalism and credibility are maintained. In Robinson's (2010) ethnographic study, she discovered that both journalists and readers struggle in determining what with their role means in online places. In her study, Robinson (2010) discovered two very distinct groups of journalists with different philosophies relating to the journalist-reader relationship. In the first camp, 'traditionalists' were people in their 40s and 50s who preferred that journalists continue to maintain their hierarchal and authoritative role in society (Robinson, 2010). The second group, known as 'convergers', were in their 20s or 30s and held the mentality that users should be given more freedoms in online interactions (Robinson, 2010). Robinson's (2010) study demonstrated that conflict still exists between these two groups, despite the fact that media organizations and journalists continue to make headway in engaging readers through commenting and monitoring policies for monetary reasons or to increase brand loyalty.

Critics of participatory journalism have also reacted negatively to the notion of incorporating citizen journalism into professional journalism processes (Lowrey & Anderson, 2005; Lowrey, 2006). For example, Lowrey and Anderson (2005) conducted a study that found that audiences possess a very broad definition of what constitutes journalism, which challenges traditional norms and values from a journalist's perspective. Furthermore, Gillmor (2004) has stated that journalists believe that UGC "threatens to undermine what they consider core values,"

which includes traditional gatekeeping roles that aim to achieve objectivity and transparency (p. 114).

Despite these very critical perspectives on participatory journalism research, Singer (2005) has provided an alternative argument suggesting that media organizations are devising competent processes to leverage participatory journalism so that digital content production is enveloped and embraced to represent today's standard "traditional journalistic norms and practices" (p. 173). In her work, Singer (2005) coined the term "normalization" as a process where journalists treat the Internet as a space to apply old norms and practices (p. 174). In the Internet's early development, the notion of normalization was oftentimes conducted in a "we write, you read" mentality (Deuze, 2003, p. 220). Singer's (2005) research further supports the notion of normalization, as she learned that several political journalistic blogs exerted journalistic norms and values by upholding their traditional gatekeeping role. Although there was evidence of columnist opinions on these blogs, journalists operated in such a way that they upheld traditional norms and values rather than being dictated by the new media technologies (Singer, 2005).

With these developments in mind, it has been several years since Singer's (2005) study, and therefore it is still important to examine how journalists operate with today's technology platforms, keeping in mind the potential impact UGC can have on journalistic processes. With easy and accessible publishing capabilities that are available to the everyday user, it is important to reexamine whether the notion of normalizing is still being employed by today's journalists where UGC is prevalent in an environment that supports a modern, many-to-many communication model (Bruns, 2008; Gillmor, 2004; Harrison & Barthel, 2009; Kunelius, 2001; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008).



## Introduction to Hierarchy of Influences

In *Mediating the Message in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Shoemaker and Reese (2014) proposed the hierarchy of influences as a theoretical framework to study media content. Drawing heavily from a media sociology perspective, the framework accounts for a variety of influences that are said to shape content (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). As such, the hierarchy of influences includes five levels of analysis that range from macro to micro levels: social systems, social institutions, media organizations, routine practices, and individuals. The intent of this framework is that the sequence of levels can be interpreted differently depending on the nature of the research question under study, where one level of analysis may influence one or more of another level of analysis (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). This framework lends itself to this research study, as this study is concerned with understanding journalists' perceptions of user-generated content, as well as organizational means to utilize this form of content in reporting processes. The following will review each level of analysis in the hierarchy of influences.

**Social systems.** The social system level of analysis is described as the macro-level base in which “all media content is constructed” (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 93). It is broad and all-encompassing and seeks to understand the cumulative effect of different perspectives and relationships in society (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). This level of analysis looks at how ideological forces shape media content as a whole. For the purposes of this research study, mass media can be viewed as an institution of society, which McQuail (2010) defines as a set of media organizations and their activities with “their own formal or informal rules of operation...” that are “set by society” (p. 59). The mass media institution has several different features, where the core activity is the production and dissemination of information (McQuail, 2010). Unlike governmental regulatory agencies in health, education, or the military, there is no formal

institution for mass media. Instead the mass media institution is largely self-regulated and subjects itself to voluntary codes of conduct (McQuail, 2010). Finally, the First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, helping to ensure the mass media are largely independent of political and economic interests.

Shoemaker and Reese (2014) note that a social system is comprised of several different subsystems: ideological, economic, political, and cultural. It is important to note that these subsystems often overlap with one or more subsystems.

The ideological subsystem is defined as an “individual belief system” and is regarded as one of the most important out of all the subsystems (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 70). Several ideologies exist within the mass media institution, such as the ideology of democracy, which enables citizens to elect their representatives into power. Again, the First Amendment of the United States Constitution gives rise to the free press media system, where media organizations hold elites’ actions accountable to serving the public.

The economic subsystem is defined by today’s capitalist economy. Although media organizations will be covered later on in detail, a capitalist economy has an impact on the mass media institution as a whole. Although media organizations operate to hold stakeholders accountable for their actions, these organizations are still an economic business unit that seeks to generate revenue for profit (McQuail, 2010). Media consolidation has occurred as a result of the economic media model, where media organizations have experienced an array of mergers and acquisitions. Today, a handful of media conglomerates have concentrated control over what audiences hear and see across television, radio, print, and Internet (Freepress.net, 2017; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

The political subsystem is extremely relevant in the context of this research study, as news has an important function to a democratic society (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). For example, Habermas' (1962) public sphere posits that the public can "direct the nature of the political system when communication spheres" can be open and not driven by power alone (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 72). As such, the political subsystem focuses on journalists delivering unbiased coverage of elected representatives' stances and actions to the public so that they can be informed. Without this subsystem in place, the public sphere is constricted to allowing the public to participate in the democratic process.

Finally, the cultural subsystem helps define the underlying norms and values that make up a social system's values (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). As mentioned with the ideological and political subsystems, notions of democracy permeate and gain dominance in Western society. There are several hegemonic forces at work within the cultural subsystem that illustrate forms of cultural imperialism (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). One example is the prioritization of domestic coverage over international coverage, where few news outlets dedicate regular coverage to foreign entities unless it has an angle that relates back to American interests. Another example is frequent news coverage about the violation of people's constitutional rights, which is responsible for shaping media content overall.

**Social institutions.** Next is the social institutional level of analysis, which examines the relationship between the variety of forces that interact with media organizations. Although media organizations will be discussed in more detail in the next level of analysis, the media are regarded as a "generalized institutionalized space" or public sphere where politics is allowed to be played out (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 95; Habermas 1962). Because of this distinction, it is important to recognize that this level of analysis is not concerned with specific norms and

routines that make up a media organization, but rather focuses on broad generalizations of journalism and media work (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). As such, media work is also treated as a “homogenous social practice,” where media organizations focus on upholding their authority, autonomy, and economic success (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 95). Finally, this level of analysis looks at different relationships and their influence with the media and how it shapes media content (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Shoemaker and Reese (2014) state that the more powerful the entity, then “the more likely they are to enter into a collaborative symbiotic relationship” with media (p. 95).

Traditional journalism in the United States has a long history of upholding journalistic independence, which has helped create separations between different social institutions in the past (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Today those separations are becoming increasingly difficult to compartmentalize due to today’s ICTs, where boundaries between social institutions are overlapping and becoming increasingly blurred (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). As such, the biggest challenge at this level is defining each social institution’s boundaries, where researchers must recognize that gatekeeping power is not the end all, be all (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). In fact, there are many influences at play in which media obtain information for news coverage. Today’s media organizations do not simply rely on official news sources as the sole source of information, but instead also draw upon information from everyday citizens, bloggers, and special interest groups to create balanced coverage as well (Shoemaker & Reese. 2014). The next section of this literature review attempts to outline different influences that affect media organizations as a social institution, as well as potentially influencing the content that they create.

***Governmental regulation and policy control.*** In the context of this research study, western ideology reveres the free press model that is made possible thanks to the First Amendment, which guarantees freedom of speech and protects against censorship (McQuail, 2010). Although the United States government typically does not play a role in media regulation, Benson and Powers (2011) caution that the government will always have some influence on media systems, and the question should not be how much a government is involved in policy control, but rather *how* they are involved. Along these lines, McQuail (2010) defines freedom of communication as “the equal right and possibility for citizens to have access to channels of expression and publication as well as access as receivers,” in other words, a “right to communicate” (p. 193). Today policy makers have voted to rollback net neutrality protections, which previously treated all data equally. Internet Service Providers (ISPs) will soon have the freedom to choose which content their users receive and at what cost. This in turn influences how media content is disseminated to audiences. This is just one example of how government policy can directly affect access to media content.

***Advertising.*** Media organizations today are dependent on advertising as a significant revenue source, which undoubtedly influences media content. McQuail (2010) notes that there is a normal, routinized influence of advertising that occurs in media organizations to match “media content patterns according to the consumption patterns of targeted audiences,” essentially creating a symbiotic relationship where both media and advertising organizations work together to achieve their economic needs and goals (p. 292). UGC creation is regarded as an active behavior rather than a passive one, and as a result, may be attractive to advertisers (van Dijck, 2009). van Dijck (2009) also argues that participatory platforms are more lucrative to advertisers because they attract active and passive users alike who are both digesting the content on the

platform. Thurman (2008) also wrote about how the *DailyMail.co.uk* profited from implementing several different advertising strategies on its website. One such strategy was implemented through “intelligent hyperlinks within postings,” where a reader post including an organization’s name would essentially be transformed into a sponsorship opportunity for the *DailyMail.co.uk* (Thurman, 2008, p. 47). With these thoughts in mind, advertising institutions have considerable influence over media organizations and content creation, where these examples demonstrate how journalists may adopt new routines to generate more revenue for the organization.

***Marketplace of content.*** Because the United States media system operates in a capitalist economy as defined in the social systems level of analysis, media organizations must deliver compelling content that retains readership to remain appealing to advertising stakeholders (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). This marketplace of content is propelled by an economic drive that has the potential to affect content creation by media organizations (McQuail, 2010). Although most journalists and media organizations prescribe to the ideology of delivering ‘need to know’ news, both of these entities are acutely aware that sometimes certain content is rewarded more than others in terms of viewership (Meiseberg, Lengers, & Ehrmann, 2016; Tjernstrom, 2002; Logan & Sutter, 2004). Audiences may not need to know about the latest celebrity gossip, but sometimes these type of fluff pieces generate the most impressions and keeps advertisers happy. In the case of UGC, reader submitted content can be easily leveraged to accomplish this.

***Media sources.*** Although the act of newsgathering is considered a routinized function of journalism and will be explained in more detail in the routines level of analysis section, it is important to note that sources of news can influence media content creation in powerful ways. Shoemaker and Reese (2014) note that the most obvious influence is when media sources withhold information or lie, influences can also occur in more indirect ways, such as the context

in which information is presented or how easily information is obtained. Traditionally journalists have relied on official sources for newsgathering due to their convenience and reputation for providing factual information (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Today's ICTs have changed the landscape, making it possible for journalists to gather information from a variety of media sources. Not only do journalists rely on official sources of news, but they also have the ability to draw from special interest groups and the everyday citizen as well.

Special interest groups seek to influence public opinion and legislation and by holding events and demonstrations to catch the eyes of reporters (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Additionally, special interest groups may rely on experts that help frame an issue to journalists in a certain way. In respect to the everyday citizen as a media source, indirect influences on content are similar where journalists must carefully vet information for accuracy. However, leveraging information from everyday citizens may be relied upon depending on circumstances of news events (i.e., sites of disaster or protests) based on convenience and proximity. These are a few examples that demonstrate how different media sources can influence media content, and media sources will be discussed in further detail in the routines level of analysis section.

**Media organizations.** Sitting square in the middle of the hierarchy of influences theoretical model is the media organizations level of analysis. This level's placement between the social institutions and routines levels of analyses is helpful in understanding the complex relationships and interactions that occur on each level of analysis. For example, some routines may be enforced at the organizational level, while others may be a result of larger social institutional influences at play or at an individual level. As Shoemaker and Reese (2014) state, both this level and the routines level of analysis "stress that media content is produced in an organizational and bureaucratic setting," but there are cases in which those routines may "run

counter to organizational logic” (p. 135). In other words, understanding the macro to micro level perspectives that are illustrated in this theoretical model help tease out different influences at play and how tensions may occur as a result of them.

According to Shoemaker and Reese (2014), a media organization is described as an entity that “creates, modifies, produces, and distributes content to many receivers” (p. 130). An organization is typically conceptualized as a cohesive entity working toward a common goal, such as creating a positive product or service, which ultimately provides the basis for the organization’s identity and image (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). McQuail (2010) also notes that an organization typically governs and conducts itself according to “formal or informal rules of operation and sometimes legal and policy requirements set by the society” (p. 59). In the case of media organizations, their primary function is driven by economic motives to generate a profit for the business (McQuail, 2010). To put media organizations’ goals into full perspective, it might be argued that a second function of media outlets is to create and deliver high-quality content to the organization’s audiences, which bolsters and supports the first initiative (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Although the primary functions and goals of media organizations have largely remained unchanged throughout history, these organizations’ benchmarks and policies that are set for achieving those goals have undoubtedly shifted due to new and disruptive technologies, which have left a lasting impact on how organizations conduct day-to-day operations (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

With the rising popularity of the Internet, traditional media formats, such as newspapers and television, diffused parts of the business to the Internet, where these organizations introduced an online presence that supplemented their offline counterparts (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Part of this shift was due to the increasing uncertainty around traditional media



formats and declining revenue, where media outlets hoped that they could rely on online media formats as a new and diverse source of revenue for the organization (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). With this shift to a digital format, blogs were introduced as a new and compelling medium for media organizations. In the early stages of the Internet, blogs were typically regarded as little more than an amateur arena for the everyday individual to write his or her personal accounts (McQuail, 2010). Since the conception of the Internet, however, blogs have potential for disseminating the news in different ways, where some journalists are required to contribute to a blog in addition to reporting on everyday news (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). The evolution of blogs has been met with criticism and praise alike. On one hand, some critics of blogs consider the new medium to be a factor in diluting the quality of traditional journalistic integrity by becoming more and more user centric (Boczkowski, 2005; Ursell, 2001). On the other hand, Deuze (2003) argues that this kind of argument is much more complicated, as online journalism has matured and transformed to flow across a “continuum ranging from purely editorial content to public connectivity-based websites” (p. 207).

Where UGC is concerned, online journalism offers media organizations several different advantages. Not only are organizations no longer limited to the traditional restriction of making content ‘fit’ within a dedicated space, but there is also an unlimited “opportunity to call upon a range of sources” through hypertext links (McQuail, 2010, p. 289; Singer, 2008). With this capability in mind, there is concern among researchers that the ability to include links from several different sources may potentially “threaten the ‘ownership’ of the news by journalists” (McQuail, 2010, p. 289; Archetti, 2008). As previously mentioned, several studies suggest that professional media organizations are holding their own through similar normalization practices that are described by Singer (2005). For example, Gasher and Klein (2008) conducted a study

across three mainstream news sites, which included *The Times*, *Liberation*, and *Haretz*, which are located in the United Kingdom, France, and Israel, respectively. In this study, the researchers determined that each news site rarely veered away from mainstream news and sources in the publication's geographic market (Gasher & Klein, 2008). Messner and Distaso (2008) also have emphasized their notion of a "source cycle" in which traditional media utilize each other as sources, creating a circular relationship, where both sources are eventually legitimized through repeated and frequent mention by different media organizations (p. 448).

***Ownership pressures.*** A primary concern for media organizations is the extent to which they can exercise autonomy and authority with respect to the parent organization (McQuail, 2010, p. 291). Described as having "ultimate power," parent organizations can dictate what information or news should be included or left out (McQuail, 2010, p. 291). This type of ownership pressure has led many media organizations to develop their own policies that are less likely to cause a stir for the parent organization, but also maintains journalistic autonomy (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; McQuail, 2010). Speaking to this notion, Holt and Karlsson (2011) state, "it can be argued that these factors contribute to shape a more or less articulated policy of what the news organizations should publish" (p. 6).

As noted previously, pressure is put on media organizations to be a successful business unit that generates revenue, which is done by delivering high-quality content that audiences demand (McQuail, 2010; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). To put ownership pressures into full perspective with respect to a media organization's UGC use, organizations have several different reasons for and against employing UGC in editorial strategies. On one hand, it might be argued that media organizations tend to develop a pattern of relying on authoritative, official news sources that uphold the organization's credibility, which helps drive and strengthen the business

from an economic standpoint (Holt & Karlsson, 2011, p. 322). Traditionally, media organizations have displayed a tendency to gather information from official or authoritative sources, as emphasized in Bennett's (1990) study on the US media's coverage of Nicaragua. It might be argued that ownership pressures could potentially contribute to less UGC use by media organizations. Furthermore, this type of reliance on similar, authoritative news sources might contribute to a narrow perspective of delivering the news. In a study conducted by Reese, Grant, and Danielian (1994), findings showed that media organizations relied on very consistent and dependent use of similar sources, where the researchers believed that it contributed to a "systematic convergence on the conventional wisdom, the largely unquestioned consensus views held by journalists, power-holders and many audience members" (p. 85).

On the other hand, UGC use might be considered more acceptable by the parent organization for several different reasons. First, UGC is easily accessible—any journalist or reporter can easily search online on social networks or article comments to assemble materials and information for a given story (Thurman, 2008; van Dijck, 2009). Second, this process of accumulating UGC is a relatively free prospect in terms of monetary expense (Thurman, 2008; van Dijck, 2009). However, that is not to say that employing UGC within the organization is not without its expenditures, as many journalists find the process of incorporating UGC into his or her work to be a tedious and time-consuming task (Harrison, 2010). Strictly speaking from parent organizational pressures, however, senior management may potentially argue that UGC allows reporters to gather information quickly, which allows the journalist to be more productive by churning out more content at a faster pace (Harrison, 2010). Finally, there might be something to be said about using UGC content as an additional supply of diverse information to choose from in writing the news. For example, journalists can create more engaging community pieces,

by drawing from reader commentary to better illustrate community opinions on a given topic. Although this type of content might not be hard news, it can help fill the void of content on slower news days. McQuail's (2010) thoughts support this notion, where he emphasizes that economic pressures commonly drive media organizations, creating the "need to minimize cost, reduce conflict and ensure continuity and sufficiency for supply" (p. 329).

***Organizational processes.*** Shoemaker and Reese (2014) describe organizational processes as to "how the work of the organization is accomplished, given its structure" (p. 153). Although journalists often rely on an internal gatekeeping mechanism to help determine what should be covered in a given day, it is important to note that the individual journalist is not the sole decision maker when it comes to content creation. Organizations primarily dictate and disseminate different strategies to increase workplace efficiency, where the most common and prevalent example is the creation of a beat for a journalist to follow, as it would be impossible to try to cover every event that presents itself (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). As Holt and Karlsson (2011) note, researchers must be careful to acknowledge that even though media organizations play an important role in creating and disseminating the news, they "do not operate in a vacuum" (p. 6). Although media organizations can dictate content coverage by outlining broad strategic initiatives, these strategies can change due to different pressures stemming from parent organizations, advertisers, and interest groups.

According to McQuail (2010), media organizations may have different processes for how they select information and deliver news to their audiences. Given the standard 40-hour workweek, organizations are aware that their employees are pressed for time to report and deliver the news in a timely manner. Media organizations have learned that audiences are generally receptive to articles that paint a picture of a person in a personalizing way (McQuail,

2010). Because of this trend, newsgathering typically focuses around people, which make it an easy choice for UGC use (McQuail, 2010). Traditionally, media organizations have displayed a tendency to gather information from official or authoritative sources, as emphasized in Bennett's (1990) study on the US media's coverage of Nicaragua. As outlined in this literature review, however, interactive technologies are providing the everyday citizen with the ability to easily share his or her opinions (Holt & Karlsson, 2011). In turn, this provides media organizations the ability to find and select from an array of different sources, such as soliciting input from readers through social networks, article comments, or email.

Media organizations may also determine their sources based on the proximity of news events (McQuail, 2010). Furthermore, it is common for media organizations to assign reporters to locations where they can effectively gather information and deliver news on their beat (McQuail, 2010). McQuail (2010) states that "the news beat is established in order to facilitate the uncovering of 'news events,' but it inevitably leads to the construction of events" (p. 214). Arguing on this notion, however, Singer (2008) has emphasized in her work that media organizations are typically carrying out their operations on digital platforms, which transcend physical limitations. Because reporters can only be at one physical location at a particular point in time, it is certainly plausible that a news event might emerge in a different and remote location. This type of situation might allow media organizations to more freely rely on UGC for their news gathering processes. Reflecting on the future of journalism, Singer (2008) states, "digital journalism becomes a joint collaboration among journalists and non-journalists, including many of the people and organizations who are now journalists' sources" (p. 123). Journalistic routines typically stem from the organizational level, as it typically dictates routines that will help journalists accomplish the organization's goals, which potentially creates different

tensions (Hirsch, 1977; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Furthermore, organizations and journalists have developed different ways in which they can perform their day-to-day responsibilities like a well-oiled machine (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). In this section, common routines will be discussed that many journalists employ with today's ICTs and how they apply to UGC use. Additionally, a majority of the routines that are discussed are based on Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) work in their book, *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century*, as these two researchers provide the most comprehensive take on journalistic routines from a media sociology perspective.

**Routines.** The routines level of analysis is focused on different ways in which journalists perform their jobs (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Routines may be established at the individual level or at the organizational level, and rules are typically created to increase workplace efficiency (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Shoemaker and Reese (2014) define routines as unspoken roles that are adopted by journalists and recognize that routines often shape content creation. Reese (2001) also describes routines as the “constraining influences of work practices,” where routines help us understand how individuals do not have “complete freedom to act on their beliefs” and must conduct themselves within limits that are imposed by time and space in order to create and deliver content in a timely manner (p. 180).

It is common for journalists to perform several different routines throughout his or her day, such as checking on the status of their assigned beat or proofreading copy before the publication of an article. It is also important to note that unlike ethics or norms, routines also lend themselves to constraints and efficiency in news making production. Because of this distinction, journalists' routines may be subtle in that routines frequently take the path of least

resistance to boost workplace productivity, and as a result, journalists' routines may or may not be deliberate actions.

***Gatekeeping.*** In 1943, Kurt Lewin devised his “channels and gate keepers” theory to study how postwar food choices could be changed. Today, gatekeeping theory is used frequently in media communication studies and is described as a process where an authority figure, such as a journalist, selects and filters information (Hoskhins & O’Loughlin, 2011). Applied to a theoretical perspective, gatekeeping is similar to Lazarsfeld’s two-step flow theory, where opinion leaders convey information in a way that is reflective of their values (Baran & Davis, 2012). McQuail (2010) has further explicated this concept by defining gatekeeping as a routine where “selections are made in media work, especially decisions whether or not to admit a particular news story to pass through the ‘gates’ of a news medium into the news channels” (p. 308).

Gatekeeping is commonly associated as a practice that journalists employ when creating and disseminating the news (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). From a macro-level perspective, news organizations might exercise gatekeeping as a routine depending on the demands of advertisers. At a micro-level perspective, journalists might exercise gatekeeping as a routine by determining what is newsworthy and essential for the public to know. It is also important to recognize that journalistic news values are inherently embedded within the concept of gatekeeping. Although journalists are individually unique and may make different decisions on whether information passes through the gates, research suggests that many journalists’ decisions are consistently determined by similar ethical notions of journalistic news values that influence what should be considered newsworthy (Shoemaker et al., 2001).

Singer (2008) notes that “normative principles” or “journalism ethics” are expressed through a journalist’s gatekeeping functions (p. 63). An example of normative principles

includes those that are listed in the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics, where journalists independently commit themselves to "seek the truth and report it" (SPJ, 2014, p. 1). Although the notion of gatekeeping seems like an undemanding and simplistic concept, the challenges of upholding journalistic ethical values are challenged under the stress of a networked environment, making the gatekeeping function much more complex (Singer, 2008). Sonenshine (1997) also raises similar concerns with the rising influx of photo submissions that are received from non-journalistic freelancers and accepted by publishers due to their accessibility and convenience:

Publishing material shot by freelancers or everyday citizens who happen upon news is not, by itself a bad thing—as long as there are competent journalists and editors making informed decisions about when to cover events and how. But news editors' power has waned as more and more information pours in to more and more places. Lost in all the information traffic are the "information cops," who used to be called "gatekeepers."

These editors, news directors and publishers would ask the tough questions: where did this material come from? Was it properly obtained? Do we have more than one source on that story? Is it a story? (Sonenshine, 1997, p. 11-12)

Although Sonenshine's (1997) comments are applied to a photojournalism perspective, these sentiments offer important considerations that can be similarly applied to any journalist deliberating on UGC use. Shoemaker and Reese (2014) describe these complications in today's networked environment as fragmentation, where any Internet user "can be a sender or receiver or information," which provides more complexities as to how journalists will decide how to use the increased flood of information that is available (p. 180). Although it has been challenged that gatekeeping theory is not as relevant as it once was in the traditional sense because everyday



users can also publish content, Reese and Shoemaker (2014) argue that the traditional gatekeeping process is still relevant for journalists and editors, as they still go through a routines of selecting or rejecting items to cover, may run an article in its entirety or choose to edit it down to its most relevant pieces, or change the particular style and tone of a piece. That is to say, it might be argued that media organizations still have the final say in what content is published, but there may be more deliberation as a result of interactive online environments.

To consider gatekeeping theory from a UGC use perspective, research suggests that although journalists understand that a collaborative relationship between their readers can result in content that better serves their audiences, they are still reluctant to incorporate user-generated content into their reporting processes (Domingo et al., 2008; Holt & Karlsson, 2011; Singer, 2005; Singer, 2010; Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). For example, in the Domingo et al. (2008) study, researchers determined that audience members were not included in the selection and filtering stage of news production, suggesting that the majority of sampled media organizations “had largely kept the journalistic culture unchanged even when exploring participation opportunities for the audience” (p. 335). In Williams, Wardle, and Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2011) study on BBC UGC routines, it was discovered that “long-established reporting practices such as ensuring accuracy, authenticity, and impartiality are of paramount importance to the journalists when dealing with audience material” (p. 93). When utilizing audience material for their stories, the study determined that journalists at the BBC included several different sources to round out the coverage (Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). As a result, many journalists have stressed the need to moderate UGC content so that it does not compromise traditional journalistic values (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011).

***News versus Newsworthiness.*** As a part of a journalist's gatekeeping abilities, journalists engage in a subtle routine of deciding what is newsworthy for their audiences. Newsworthiness is typically measured in terms of whether the news in question possesses one or more agreed-upon characteristics, such as prominence, conflict, human interest, timeliness, or proximity (Stephens, 1980; Baskette, Sissors, & Brooks, 1982; Dennis & Ismach, 1981; Lee, Han, Shoemaker, & Cohen, 2005). Additionally, there is a distinction between the conceptualization of news and newsworthiness, where news is a social artifact that can be read, and newsworthiness a cognitive process that anyone can perform (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). A journalist can determine whether a piece of information is newsworthy in several different ways. An editorial team might collectively decide what is considered news, while a managing editor or editor-in-chief provides direction on what should be covered for the day (Clayman & Reisner, 1998). Today media organizations have the ability to leverage commenting features on their website and social media networks, which provide journalists with the option to tap into their audiences to see what is most important to them (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

***Defensive Routines.*** Although the gatekeeping function helps guide journalists in their selection of news to cover for their audiences, journalists also employ several different defensive routines that are utilized to verify the accuracy of information. One defensive routine is fact checking, which is frequently used to avoid publishing errors that could potentially cause damage to the journalist's credibility (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Although journalists have traditionally relied on this defensive routine for years, research suggests that every day bloggers do not hold themselves to the same ethical norms, including journalists who also blog (Cooper, 2006). With that said, Cooper (2006) explains that another fresh pair of eyes on a news piece can help eliminate potential errors that may be overlooked (Cooper, 2006). Notably, it will be

important to see how fact checking is upheld with today's ICTs, as the function has most likely changed compared to traditional newspaper operations, where there was a dedicated individual who was responsible for fact checking news articles.

A common defensive routine is objectivity. And although objectivity is regarded as a journalistic ethical value, the act of writing content objectively helps thwart public criticism (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). Gans (1979) speaks of objectivity as a news routine, where every story could potentially face an attack from competitors, as well as its publics, without the objectivity routine in place.

***External Sources of Content.*** In the traditional media setting, it is very common to see journalists utilize external sources for their stories, which might include authority figures or public relations professionals. Similarly, it is not uncommon to see journalists form a professional relationship with those external sources to help ensure a steady stream of news as events arise (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Although journalists may utilize UGC from comments on the media organization's website or through social media, there is still the possibility that a journalist can pull UGC from non-affiliated blogs from the community on the Internet to include in their reporting. Lowrey (2006) suggests that although journalists have traditionally developed relationships with external suppliers of content, which might not be the case with blog owners. Suggesting a hesitation for developing a professional relationship with amateur blog owners, Lowrey (2006) states, "News organizations may be more interested in containing and directing the blogging phenomenon than in fostering democratic participation," (p. 493). Referencing back to Singer's (2005) study on mainstream journalism blogs, journalists may have developed a routine through the use of hyperlinks to acknowledge UGC use rather than developing a

relationship with these writers, perhaps as a way to uphold their journalistic autonomy and independence in the mainstream news arena.

**Individuals.** The final level of analysis in Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) hierarchy of influences theory is focused on the individual. This level of analysis recognizes that individuals possess 'free will' and unique characteristics that may give way to making unique decisions (p. 204). Shoemaker and Reese (2014) outline four factors that can be examined at an individual level:

- personal demographic characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences
- current attitudes, values, and beliefs
- background factors, roles, and experiences relating to the individual as a professional
- relative power of the individual within the organization

***Personal demographic characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences.*** These characteristics are most basic in nature and include ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Although researchers have argued that the influence of characteristics on content may be minor given the larger role of organizational routines, Shoemaker and Reese (2014) argue that researchers should be asking questions around what characteristics in particular influence content the most (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991).

***Current attitudes, values, and beliefs.*** Shoemaker and Reese (2014) note that even though individuals have unique attitudes, values, and beliefs, journalists have a shared set of values and beliefs. Gans' (1979) work is one example that helps reflect journalists' values from a political perspective, where he outlines several different characteristics, such as ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, individualism, and more. Deuze's (2005) ideology

of the professional journalist is another example, which is described later on in this literature review.

***Background factors relating to the individual as a professional.*** Although an individual possesses his or her own unique characteristics, this level of analysis recognizes that an individual has characteristics that may stem from a professional context. Shoemaker and Reese (2014) also note that personal and professional attitudes, values, and beliefs are interdependent and may reinforce or affect each other in different ways. As such, whether or not a journalist has a formal education in journalism may affect how content is shaped in their everyday routines.

***Relative power of the individual within the organization.*** This final factor recognizes that individuals possess some degree of power in the organization (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). An individual with a high degree of power in the media organization may be able to shape content in ways that is more in line with their personal values and beliefs, thereby “overriding” media influences and restrictions (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 210).

This concludes a review of Shoemaker and Reese’s (2014) hierarchy of influences, which examines various levels of analysis that may influence and shape content creation from the macro to micro perspective. Because this research study is focused on understanding journalists’ perceptions of UGC, along with understanding the different routines employed with respect to UGC use in reporting, this literature review will continue with a review of Deuze’s (2005) ideology of professional journalists as an additional way to understand professional journalists’ and their attitudes, beliefs, and values that may or may not go into shaping the content they create.

## **Deuze's (2005) Ideology of Journalism**

As Deuze (2005) notes in his research, the study of journalism as a discipline is widely acknowledged among researchers at both the national and international level, where this area also receives a high level of scrutiny across varying disciplines, such as researchers who have an interest in education, critical humanities, social studies, and more. As such, the majority of literature relies upon a shared understanding of key theories and concepts, which introduces the limitation of a lack of consensus when it comes to operationalizing and defining journalism (Deuze, 2005). Part of this limitation is due to the fact that journalism is discussed and researched not only from an educational and academic perspective, but also from an industry perspective, where more and more research questions are fueled from changes that affect how media operate today (Deuze, 2005).

The following section builds on Deuze's (2005) work on the ideology of professional journalists, where he recognized a need to better operationalize and define what it means to be a professional journalist in a "pragmatic way" (p. 443). Basing the model after the work done by Golding and Elliott (1979), Merritt (1995), and Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001), Deuze (2005) developed his concept of journalism as an occupational ideology to help provide a bridge for journalism and education studies. As a result, Deuze's (2005) ideology naturally lends itself in benefiting this research, where there is interest from both an academic and industrial perspective regarding journalists' use of UGC. Considering journalists from an ideological perspective is important because it provides researchers with more insight into how "journalists give meaning to their work," which is essential to understanding this group's perspectives and feelings toward UGC (Deuze, 2005, p. 444). Furthermore, the notion of the journalist through an ideological perspective allows researchers to continuously refine and recreate a consensus on what a

professional journalist looks like in today's digital climate (Deuze, 2005). In his article that analyzes professional journalists from an ideological and global perspective, Reese (2001) argues that an ideological perspective also provides understanding into journalists' decision-making processes, where we can analyze media content from the "service of power" perspective (p. 183). Stated differently, ideologies not only allow us to understand meaning from the individual, journalistic level, but they also allow us to understand how journalists' work and decisions directly work in conjunction with the media organization from a macro-level perspective (Reese, 2001).

**Public service.** According to Deuze's (2005) ideological framework, the public service feature is oftentimes characterized by journalists' aspirations for serving the public. It is important to note that journalists do not aspire to serve the public by providing them with the information they *want* to read. Instead, journalists aspire to serve the public by serving as watchdogs and holding different entities accountable for their actions (Deuze, 2005). However, the notion of public service has become more complex due to the shift to online technologies. Plaisance (2014) is careful not to oversimplify the fact that journalists aim to "serve their communities," as the Internet now allows journalists to serve multiple audiences and communities (p. 118). Alluding to a potential problem in online journalism, Plaisance (2014) states that "[the] ability to customize news has accelerated the trend of audience fragmentation, with everyone increasingly 'balkanizing' themselves by limiting their exposure to news based on their narrow interests" (p. 118). To put this notion in full perspective with respect to UGC use, it may be argued that journalists feel a need to strike a careful balance of serving its public by being cautious of their UGC use. In particular, journalists need to walk a fine line between

offering its audiences additional diversity through their sources, without compromising or giving into pressures from special interest groups (McQuail, 2010, p. 290).

**Objectivity.** The second characteristic of Deuze's (2005) ideological framework is that journalists tend to carry out their actions in an objective manner, which then naturally lends journalists into conducting themselves in a credible manner. In particular, this characteristic has been self-identified by journalists in several different studies throughout history (Mindich, 1998; Ognianova & Endersby, 1996; Reese, 1990; Schudson, 1978; Schudson, 2001). Although there has been much debate on whether objectivity is achievable through the journalistic capacity, Deuze (2005) notes that the notion of objectivity has been frequently conceptualized by researchers through synonymous words, including "'fairness', 'professional distance', 'detachment' or 'impartiality' to define and (re-)legitimize what media practitioners do" (p. 448). On that note, Plaisance (2014) notes that ethical decision making rarely ends with clear-cut answers. As journalists traditionally attempt to carry out their actions by upholding their credibility through ethical decision making, it might come as no surprise that journalists engage in a deliberative process to deliver truth in the news that they disseminate (Plaisance, 2014). With respect to the notion of credibility, Plaisance (2014) states that "credibility increases or recedes based on how intended audiences perceive the communication to be upholding" journalistic values (p. 46). Additionally, a journalist's credibility is of the utmost importance to his or her success, because without it a journalist does not offer audiences any "compelling reason to pay attention to his message" (Plaisance, 2014, p. 46). From the context of journalistic credibility, most journalists would agree to aspire to delivering audiences with the "unflinching commitment to the pursuit of the truth, even when that pursuit becomes unpopular" (Plaisance, 2014, p. 46). Along those lines, Burns (1977) found that a journalist's credibility was also driven



by the organization's overall mission to deliver quality content to television audiences, which is also undoubtedly considered another success metric for the individual journalist.

***Authenticity.*** Because authenticity is often associated with the idea of credibility (Singer, 2008), this norm fits nicely within the scope of the objectivity characteristic. Authenticity is a process that can be applied to the entire publication process from a micro- to macro-level perspective. Beginning at the micro-level, journalists authenticate the quality and accuracy of the information they deliver to audiences (Singer, 2008). At the macro level, a news organization authenticates the journalist throughout the process of editing and publication of content (Singer, 2008).

Singer (2008) notes some important differences when this concept is applied to ICTs. Although authentication is important to journalists and news organizations, it is a concept that can be easily overlooked in the digital age. Because there is a high expectation for news to be immediately available, authentication may be overlooked, especially with respect to breaking news (Singer 2008). Regarding reader-submitted content, Singer (2008) also notes that the authentication process might be entirely bypassed, as several news organizations have UGC strategies that provide users with a set of ethical guidelines to follow. To reiterate, UGC is sometimes handled in ways where readers are asked to “voluntarily adhere” to proposed guidelines, which is primarily dependent upon “some degree of trust rather than” a gatekeeping function (Singer, 2008, p. 66). Singer (2008) reiterates this point by noting that authentication is largely left up to the community to verify inaccurate information. More interestingly, Singer (2008) states this level of trust that is given to the user can be attributed to legal reasons rather than ethical ones, where the media organization does not have to be liable for inaccurate information.

In networked environments, authenticity has shifted from the institution to the individual (Singer, 2008). In traditional print publications, it is more common to associate values of authenticity with brand names and institutions such as *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*. Because of the Internet's expansiveness, along with more significance being placed on search engine traffic, individuals become more important in displaying values of authenticity on the web. According to Singer (2008), we are "moving toward a situation where authenticity or credibility becomes more a matter of the relationships that an individual establishes with his or her readers than with the institutional role of the media organization" (p. 67).

**Autonomy and independence.** Deuze's (2005) third element in his ideological framework of professional journalists focuses on journalistic autonomy and independence. This value provides journalists with the freedom to report the news without any oversight and makes it possible for journalists to uphold their responsibilities of serving its citizens with accurate information (Singer, 2008). This value suggests that journalists must be free of censorship and relatively free from pressures put on by parent organizations and different entities within the media organizations (Deuze, 2005). Although this is a value that many journalists defend in their work, there is resounding concern on whether autonomy can be realistically achieved (Deuze, 2005; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). "Now that news and business functions are integrated in the restructured news organizations of the 21st century, we have to ask whether journalistic autonomy is sacrificed for profitability," Shoemaker and Reese (2014) state, expressing their concern over this ideological value (p. 157). Expressing similar concerns, Reese (2001) reminds researchers that news is inherently an organizational product at the macro level, where media organizations are "complex economic entities" that possess "far-reaching relationships in their ownership patterns and connections to non-media industries" (p. 181). To help illustrate this

problem, there are six large media conglomerates that have ownership over print industries in the United States (2017) today, and as such, it becomes increasingly difficult for journalists to anticipate conflicts of interest that might arise from the parent company's interests, which in turn affects issues that may make it difficult to report the news (Freepress.net, 2017; Reese, 2001).

As mentioned previously in the media organization section, the use of UGC is a lucrative draw for advertisers, as the medium inherently draws both active and passive users. Consequently, it may be argued that editors and journalists who are creating content may also be collaborating with different departments in the media organization, where they are “increasingly drawn into greater marketing schemes that concentrate on research about what the audience wants” (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 157-158). As Shoemaker and Reese (2014) definitively note, it is important that journalists uphold editorial independence, as “there will always be concern when messages are selected not for their importance to the audience, their newsworthiness, or their artistic significance, but instead for how they fit into a larger organizational marketing scheme” (p. 158).

The notion of autonomy also lends itself as a difficult value to uphold in online spaces as well. Online spaces serve as a place for interaction and dialogue between citizens and journalists, where UGC is becoming more prevalent through several different formats (Shirky, 2010; Singer, 2005). Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that journalists no longer operate in a vacuum—instead, they now must learn different mechanisms for coping with and utilizing competing sources of information on the web to their benefit (Singer, 2008). For example, Gillmor (2003) explains how audiences have turned to new technologies to engage in citizen journalism, oftentimes serving as watchdogs for journalists. Although this shift might be uncomfortable for journalists in online spaces, Singer (2008) stresses the importance of learning to manage with

decreased autonomy. On a final note, Singer (2008) summarizes her argument by noting that “Autonomy is increasingly difficult if not impossible to maintain within a network, which is inherently about relationships and connections. Seeking to remain apart from such relationships may render journalists less admirably independent than dangerously isolated and even irrelevant” (p. 72).

**Accountability.** This traditional journalistic norm is associated with the notion of responsibility (Singer, 2008). Similar to authenticity, the news value of accountability has gone through several different permutations since the introduction of the Internet. In the most traditional sense, journalists’ sole job function was to report the news in an objective and uninvolved manner (Singer, 2008). Traditionally, journalists have been regarded as authority figures who cover news without having to explicate his or her reasons why for covering that news or how detailing how information has been gathered. Described as a “norm of nondisclosure” by Singer (2008), the traditional communication model emphasized the “we write, you read” mentality, where journalists were not brought into question and it was not required to conduct their jobs with crystal-clear transparency (Deuze, 2003, p. 220). However, the Internet has changed how journalists are functioning in online spaces. Because of the expansiveness of the Internet and individuals’ reliance on relationships within it, readers are demanding an honest, truthful, and open relationship from their information providers (Singer, 2008).

Although many theorists argue that a careful line must be walked with regards to transparency, as too much of it can weaken authority (Singer, 2008; Tompkins, 2003), some are more hopeful that this type of environment will prove to be “the best way to build public trust and accountability” (Plaisance, 2014, p. 72). According to Plaisance (2014), Web 2.0 platforms

have “reaffirmed our claims that openness is the best way to build public trust and accountability” (p. 72). According to Singer (2008), journalists are doing this in two different ways in online spaces. First, journalists must be accountable in the information that they provide by going “beyond simply asking the public to trust them” (p. 69). Journalists do this by employing the Internet’s features by highlighting their sources through hypertext links, where their content becomes “part of a multi-sourced amalgamation of information about a given topic” (Singer, 2008, p. 69). Secondly, journalists might engage in a personal disclosure process by actively starting or responding to a discussion on social networks about their reasons for covering news in a particular manner (Singer, 2008). Posts might include information on journalistic or editorial actions and motives for covering the news (Singer, 2008). Not only are journalists conducting their work in a more accountable manner in online spaces, but we are also seeing journalists utilizing social networks and technology to humanize their work (Singer, 2008). This type of humanizing effect might be seen when journalists explicate their feelings on a particular news issue, such as when journalists elaborate on what it is like to cover natural disasters or tragedies in the news (Jarboe, 2005; Singer, 2008). Similarly, Gillmor (2004) emphasizes that the relationship should be a conversation in online spaces rather than a one-way mechanism that churns out news to its audiences without question. Although Singer (2008) believes that increased accountability on the web largely stems from commercial motives, she also believes that these actions invite readers to participate in a two-way conversation with journalists. In short, the journalistic norm of accountability has gone well above and beyond traditional gatekeeping and journalistic function, where it might be argued that the public in traditional contexts overlooked the norm. Although this value of accountability might place more weight on journalists’ shoulders, it also provides an additional avenue for readers to relate and

connect with information providers at an individual level rather than an institutional one (Singer, 2008).

**Immediacy.** The fourth element in Deuze's (2005) model concerns immediacy. As one would expect, a journalist's primary responsibility is to deliver the news. Traditionally, this responsibility "lends... an aura of instantaneity and immediatism, as 'news' stresses the novelty of information as its defining principle" (p. 449). As several media sociology studies have shown, this immediacy was reflected through a journalist's expectation to deliver news on a daily basis within the American newspaper industry, where there was increased pressure to deliver the news on a strict deadline and to adequately fill the medium with content (Gans, 1979; Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 1978). The notion of immediacy has only grown more complex thanks to digital technologies and organization's newly-adopted online presences. As Pavlik (1999) states, we now live in a world of "ubiquitous information" (p. 54). The Internet allows a variety of content from around the globe to be accessed at any time, where "news junkies have never had it so good" (Pavlik, 1999, p. 54). Consequently, immediacy is a continuous concern for journalists, as they increasingly feel compelled to deliver the news on a 24/7 schedule (Pavlik, 1999). Deuze (2008) also suggests that because immediacy is a prominent characteristic of online journalism, media work online has experienced a transformation compared to traditional print counterparts. Deuze (2008) states that digital news is constantly changing and "distinctly liquid," where stories may be "edited, tweaked, changed... without explanation, and without explicit editorial policies guiding the users and producers" (p. 205). As a result of this change, Deuze (2008) suggests that media organizations are unsure how to apply traditional print routines in their strategies, which may give more power to individual journalists in how they approach their reporting online. As we have seen in situations where journalists are reporting on

natural disasters or tragic events, scholars have noted that there has been a tendency to prioritize getting the news out to the outlet's publics rather than spending more time verifying the accuracy of information. With respect to UGC use in reporting practices, journalists must be able to deliver the news in a timely manner—without compromising the accuracy of its content.

**Ethics.** The last component in Deuze's (2005) journalistic ideology framework focuses on ethics. Although there are varying perspectives on what should be included in a journalistic code of ethics, most journalists would agree that they operate "through a sense of ethics" (Deuze, 2005, p. 450). This study analyzes how traditional ethics fits in with respect to journalists' use of UGC. As we go through each ethical value in the following section, we will see that each value is intrinsic in nature and provides journalists guidance on how to act (Plaisance, 2014). Although Deuze (2005) did not go into great detail about specific ethical values in his framework, it warrants expansion, as there seems to be a distinct lack of research on UGC from the traditional ethics perspective. As a result, the following is a conceptualization of several different media ethics, which are primarily based on Plaisance's (2014) notion of ethics in his book, *Media Ethics: Key Principles for Responsible Practice*.

**Transparency.** As Oliver (2004) describes, today's notion of transparency is not so much about having all information out on the table, as it is more about the process of "active disclosure" (p. 3). In other words, an important question that is continually raised regarding transparency is *why* information is chosen to be disclosed by a source (Oliver, 2004). With respect to journalistic adherence to transparency, they are driven by the overall belief that disclosure of information is the "public's right to know," which allows journalists to uphold their watchdog role on behalf of the public (Oliver, 2004, p. 3; Plaisance, 2014, p. 72).

On the other end of the spectrum, the degree of transparency in regard to newsroom deliberations is often a concern for journalists, where they are hesitant to undermine their journalistic tenet of autonomy by depicting and rationalizing their reporting decisions to the public (Plaisance, 2014). However, as the SPJ Code of Ethics (2014) states, journalists are encouraged to clarify news coverage transparently and promote civic dialogue with readers about “journalistic practices, coverage and news content” (p. 4). In particular, transparency requires us to consider how we might handle informing readers about UGC use in reporting strategies. Does using UGC within an article provide the audience with any benefits, such as providing a diverse reporting source or including information that cannot be found elsewhere? Does relying on UGC have any negative implications in regard to the journalist’s accountability or credibility?

The ethical notion of transparency is heavily tied to Immanuel Kant’s (1785/2002) “principle of humanity,” where an individual should “act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means” (p. 429). This notion is tied to Kant’s (1785/2002) “categorical imperative,” where an act is deemed moral if the behavior is acceptable for everyone (Plaisance, 2014, p. 76). Stated differently, an individual is considered a moral being if he or she treats others with respect by treating them as ends to themselves, rather than a means to an end, where Kant describes the later as an act of degradation (Plaisance, 2014).

To bring this philosophical notion of transparency back to journalists’ use of UGC, they need to deliberate their use on whether it provides any service to their audiences rather than using it simply because it is an overly accessible content source that may potentially make life easier for the journalist. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) succinctly note, “transparency means embedding in the news reports a sense of how the story came to be and why it was presented the



way it was,” (p. 83). Acting in such a manner allows journalists to demonstrate their accountability, where he or she is “continually engaged in examining whether their coverage has fully taken into account the interests of all involved in or affected by their coverage” (Plaisance, 2014, p. 88).

As Plaisance (2014) makes clear, the Internet provides journalists with several different temptations, where he or she has an unlimited number of sources to choose from and they might think that they can easily “gloss over the ethical requirement of transparency, or assume that such old ethical standards don’t really apply to the new technology” (p. 92). However, journalists would be wise to believe that this is not the case, as the Internet provides stiff competition for different media organizations that are vying to get audiences to trust their information. On this note, Plaisance (2014) also warns that, “If anything, transparent behavior is gaining even greater currency on the Web... Who can people trust? Which sources are reliable? How will you know whether you’re just getting a sales pitch?” (p. 92). In today’s digital climate, there is no better time for a journalist to uphold and boost his or her credibility by demonstrating true acts of transparency.

**Justice.** At its heart, the notion of justice as an ethical virtue is concerned with “behaving rightly” or adhering to the old adage, “Do as you would be done by,” where individuals should avoid taking part in actions that harm others so that they do not harm themselves in the process (Plaisance, 2014, p. 98). The modern-day view of justice not only focuses on the person who committed the act of wrongdoing, but it also encompasses the demand of “just treatment and the concept of a citizen to whom just treatment is due” (Hellsten, 2001, p. 95). The SPJ Code of Ethics (2014) explicitly outlines several different guidelines that journalists should adhere to, where “journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting

information” (p. 1). Additionally, the SPJ Code of Ethics (2014) also outlines that journalists should “deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist external pressure to influence news coverage” (p. 3). As already raised within this literature review, the ethical value of justice helps us understand pressures that journalists may potentially face with respect to UGC use. The Internet and its digital platforms allow journalists to choose from a wide swath of sources that can help improve reporting practices by including diverse sources. However, this type of use of UGC must be carefully deliberated, as it could potentially undermine journalism’s tenet of delivering the news objectively. Furthermore, it may be potentially impossible for journalists to find neutral reader commentary for inclusion in their work, as users are primarily driven by their own personal motivations, whether that may be an internal or external one. Where justice is primarily concerned with the notion of fairness, journalists must be able effectively deliberate whether a reader-submitted comment under consideration offers beneficial or worthwhile information to the public as a whole—rather than trying to serve one particular group over another (Plaisance, 2014).

**Harm.** The notion of harm can be difficult to conceptualize, as it can be viewed in several different ways depending on situational context. With that said, several philosophers have provided their own arguments to help us tease out what should be included in the definition for harm. Immanuel Kant (1785/2002) provided us with some guidance on the notion of harm, where he believed that we have a duty to respect others by treating individuals as “ends” in themselves rather than trying to leverage an individual for our own personal gains. John Stuart Mill (1859/1991) also conceived what is now known today as the harm principle, which states that “the only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others” (p. 9). But as Plaisance

(2014) notes, stating that you will not harm others does not provide enough counsel on how an individual should carry out his or her actions ethically, as “what exactly constitutes ‘harm’ often form a central issue in ethical dilemmas” (p. 124).

With this in mind, Feinberg (1984) provides a nice compilation of what the definition of harm should include, such as acts that explicitly “sets back” someone’s interests or acts that undermine someone’s human dignity (p. 45-46). The SPJ Code of Ethics (2014) has also elaborated on what it means to harm in the journalistic function. The code advises that journalists do their best to minimize harm by showing “compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage” and being “sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy,” (SPJ, 2014, p.3). Furthermore, it is important that journalists not only weigh potential harm from sources, but also consider potential harm from audience members as well. In regard to considering harm from audience members, a guideline to follow might be to ask whether or not an action negatively reflects or impacts the entire business as a whole. One question to consider, for example, is whether a journalist’s action in their reporting style or coverage damage their reputation or that of his or her organization? The 2013 Boston Marathon reporting is an example of this, where journalists’ use of UGC in their coverage not only harmed innocent individuals who were not responsible for the event, but their decisions also were extremely damaging to the media organization itself (Haddow & Haddow, 2014; Zhang, 2013).

***Autonomy.*** Although the notion of autonomy has been discussed from a more applied perspective within this research proposal, this concept does hold weight as an ethical value, as it plays an important role in the successfulness of a journalist’s actions in their day-to-day work. Typically, autonomy is closely associated with concepts such as freedom or liberty (Plaisance,

2014). However, autonomy cannot be used synonymously with freedom or liberty, as autonomy is more concerned with “limiting oneself to upholding moral principles and doing ‘the right thing,’” (Plaisance, 2014, p. 150). As Berlin (1969) explains, freedom is concerned with an absence of obstacles to an individual’s will (p. 146). Note that because the concept of autonomy is normative and deliberative in nature, it is concerned with what we *should* do and that journalists have a responsibility to conduct themselves as moral, autonomous agents (Plaisance, 2014). Speaking to this deliberative nature, Feinberg (1989) states that an autonomous individual can “define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives, and take responsibility for the kind of person they are” (p. 20). Furthermore, as Finnis (1987) notes, autonomy is not only concerned with acting for an individual’s own self-satisfaction but is also concerned “out of respect for the demands of morality” (p. 441).

Regarding media work, autonomy is essential to a journalist’s independence. Although not explicitly referred to in the SPJ (2014) Code of Ethics, there are several directives that embody autonomy as an ethical value, such as avoiding conflicts of interest and remaining “free of associations and activities that may comprise integrity or damage credibility.” And as Plaisance (2014) emphasizes, a journalist’s impartiality is directly tied to perceived credibility, and without a high level of credibility, then a journalist’s job may be at risk (p. 164). As a result, journalists need to be on the lookout for having their independence compromised not only by internal entities within the media organization itself, but also with the sources they are utilizing, paying careful attention to be serving the public in an objective way.

***The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) code of ethics.*** Throughout the decision-making process, journalists uphold their credibility through several different key values that are adhered to in the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) code of ethics. Within this code, the

SPJ outlines four different directives that provide journalists with a guideline for how to operate in their day-to-day tasks in reporting and disseminating the news. These four directives include the following (SPJ, 2014):

- Seek truth and report it. Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting, and interpreting information.
- Minimize harm. Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.
- Act independently. Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.
- Be accountable. Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, and each other.

To delve into more detail, the first directive to “seek truth and report it,” focuses on verifying “the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error” (SPJ, 2014). With respect to a journalist’s UGC use in his or her reporting, it is important that he or she verify that the information provided by readers is accurate. As we saw during the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, accuracy was not upheld during the event in lieu of speed, where *The Boston Globe* presented itself as a platform for misinformation after converting its website to a live blog that pulled in live tweets from Boston authorities, along with ordinary citizens (Haddow & Haddow, 2014). As a result, the media organization found itself in a crisis, where the outlet needed to rectify the situation to repair the damage that had been done to its perceived credibility (Haddow & Haddow, 2014). Continuing on self-inflicted, but albeit unintentional, damage created by journalists during the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, *The New York Post* found itself in a defamation lawsuit after wrongly placing two innocent Boston Marathon runners on the cover of their publication, stating that the FBI was looking for these

two individuals (Zhang, 2013). As a result, the images of the two innocent men were floating around on several different UGC-driven websites, such as Reddit and 4Chan, where active users took to the Internet to sleuth out the true bombing suspects (Zhang, 2013). This example shows how *The New York Post* failed in adhering to the “Minimize harm” category, where the outlet needlessly created victims because it provided inaccurate information to its publics (Zhang, 2013). *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Post* examples show us how journalists should continue to act under the third directive, which is to “Act independently” whenever possible (SPJ, 2014). Finally, each of these outlets had a responsibility under the “Be accountable” directive by admitting to mistakes and taking an honest approach to correcting them (SPJ, 2014).

### **Problem Statement**

This leads us to address the following research questions relating to UGC and its impact on journalists’ professional norms and values within the newspaper industry:

RQ1: How do professional journalists perceive the value of UGC in their reporting?

RQ2: How do media organizations perceive the value of audience engagement?

RQ3: In what ways do professional journalists’ norms, ethics, and routines impact the process of using UGC in their reporting?

RQ4: What are the challenges and benefits of including UGC?

This research study seeks to understand journalists’ perceptions and attitudes toward using UGC in their content. Furthermore, this study examines journalists’ profession norms, ethics, and routines to better understand if these components play a role in UGC use. This study also examines media organizations and seeks to understand their strategy and goals and whether they encourage or impede UGC use for journalists.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Because this study seeks to understand journalists' perception and attitudes toward UGC and is exploratory in nature, qualitative one-on-one semi-structured interviews were used as the research method. There is little research that explains journalist's perceptions toward UGC, which is why the researcher has relied on an exploratory method approach to answer the study's research questions. Journalists are natural storytellers and effective communicators, which makes them ideal subjects to learn more about this topic. With semi-structured interviews, the goal was to draw out journalists' reflections into their everyday work to obtain meaningful data to answer the study's research questions. Semi-structured interviews provided a flexible way to obtain information by inviting respondents to describe their experiences and feelings in detail (Silverman, 2013, p. 238). Because this research study seeks to understand journalists and their routines with regards to utilizing UGC, semi-structured interviews provided a means for journalists to expand on their "rationales, explanations, and justifications for their actions or opinions" (Tracy, 2013, p. 132). By utilizing an exploratory approach in this study, results can be used in future quantitative research to help refine research questions and discover new findings.

### **Sampling Participants**

The population of interest for this study included journalists who write regularly and are active on social media for a news organization in the United States. According to 2015 census data from the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Florida International University, there were about 32,900 full-time journalists that worked at nearly 1,400 daily newspapers in the United States ("2015 Census," 2015). Although a database of journalists would be preferred for this research study, no database

was accessible through Colorado State University that could be utilized. As a work around, the researcher manually created a database of journalists by going through a list of media organizations in the United States. The researcher used the website [allyoucanread.com](http://allyoucanread.com), which lists top news media organizations in the United States on the national level and by state. Using this website, the researcher manually went through the list by state and visited each media organization's website to pull journalist contact information into a spreadsheet. Journalists included in the spreadsheet included individuals with 'journalist' or 'reporter' in their job titles, therefore eliminating the possibility of including media staff that did not meet the study requirements. After compiling a list of journalists, Qualtrics, a survey software tool with email functionality, was utilized to send a mass email blast to invite journalists to schedule time with the researcher for a one-on-one interview. In this email blast, the researcher's contact information and an informed consent statement was provided according to IRB protocols. Of the 2,201 journalists contacted in the mass email blast, 14 journalists agreed to participate in this research study. All 14 journalists worked for a media organization that produced print newspapers and had an online counterpart. Additionally, this research study included participants with a diverse array of beats, including government, military, business, education, sports, food and dining, business, climate change, and breaking news.

## **Procedure**

Regarding the semi-structured interview design, questions were developed in line with Tracy's (2013) best practices and written in an easy-to-understand manner that was free of jargon. An interview guide was developed and included a series of open-ended questions that were repeated in the same order and wording to each interviewee (Tracy, 2013, p. 139). The interview guide also avoided double-barreled questions, where questions were "straightforward,



neutral, and non-leading” (Tracy, 2013, p. 144). Although yes/no questions were used, the researcher encouraged interviewees to follow up on an answer by asking amplifying questions or asking for anecdotes (Berger, 2000, p. 115; Tracy, 2013).

Interviews were conducted by telephone and interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions as listed in the interview guide. The researcher encouraged interviewees to expand on their answers using amplification techniques, such as asking questions like “And then what happened?”, “Why did it happen?”, or “What was the result?” (Berger, 2000, p. 115). A traditional style to interviewing was employed for this research study, where the researcher conducted interviews in an objective manner throughout (Tracy, 2013).

Interviews were conducted in a time limit of 30 minutes, no more than five interviews per day were conducted by the researcher to avoid fatigue (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Interviews were conducted via telephone and were captured with the TapeACall app for iPhone for transcription purposes. The interview process was repeated for a total of 14 times, where the researcher felt confident that saturation had been achieved, as participants were saying similar statements and no new information was presented. The 14 journalists interviewed from urban and rural parts of the United States were spread across several different beats that included climate, education, military, sports, food and dining, business, investigative, and city government reporting. Additionally, journalists were given a pseudonym following the interview to protect their identities.

### **Pretesting**

Although the research proposal originally called to pretest the interview guide, this did not occur in this study due to time and resource constraints. Instead, the interview style was

adjusted to phrase questions slightly differently to accommodate minor understandings in the first few interviews that were conducted.

## **Data Analysis**

After collecting the data, audio files were sent to the third-party service rev.com to transcribe the interviews. After receiving the transcribed interviews back from the third-party service, the researcher listened to the audio files and cleaned the transcripts for any errors that may have been made. Next, a content analysis procedure was used to analyze the data, where the researcher followed Berger's (2000) process of coding, which is similar to the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). The researcher began the content analysis process by reading over the material to gain a general understanding of the data. Next, the researcher began with one transcript and created an initial list of all topics that were covered. This process was repeated with several transcriptions, where the researcher continued building a list, while also creating and assigning abbreviations to each topic. After a substantial list had been developed, the researcher cleaned up any duplicate topics and categorized the list by research question. If a research question was lacking in content to analyze, the researcher spent time thinking of additional topics to include. Topics were written to include descriptive action verbs and followed Wimmer and Dominick's (2011) recommendations, where each category was mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and reliable. After repeating this process for several transcripts, no new topics emerged, and the researcher felt confident that saturation had been achieved. After the researcher had finished coding the data, the data was collectively analyzed to observe what patterns occurred. The researcher grouped and analyzed coded statements by interviewee, followed by research question. Finally, all statements were broadly analyzed together to

conclude the code analysis process. Each pattern and its implications for journalists and media organizations with respect to creating news will be detailed in the following results section.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

As mentioned previously, research participants were diversified in their beat coverage, ranging from breaking news, investigative reporting, food, sports, and more. Despite the wide array of beats, journalists' decisions around UGC use were driven by the need to uphold traditional ethical values. The most prevalent values that occurred consistently throughout this study were ethical values of accuracy, credibility and transparency. The following section will examine the different ways in which journalists employ various norms and routines into their reporting, either deliberately or inadvertently, to uphold these ethical values and assert journalistic autonomy, as well as maintain journalistic professionalism. This section will then conclude with an examination of how media organizations perceive the value of audience engagement and how this affects journalists and their reporting when it comes to UGC use.

### **Journalists Inherently Distrust their Audiences**

Although journalists expressed positive sentiments toward the usefulness of UGC and reader comments, study participants alluded to an inherent distrust of readers in online environments. This inherent distrust emerged as a norm when several journalists struggled to justify their reasoning for not using reader comments in their reporting. "A lot of times we don't really credit readers with story ideas just because... I don't know... we've never done that," said one journalist (Sally, personal communication, January 25, 2018). More journalists, however, hinted that this subtle disconnect can be attributed to the Internet's function of online anonymity and the ease in which readers can easily provide inaccurate information with little consequence. "You can't just assume everyone's telling you the truth, especially on social media," said one journalist (Angie, personal communication, January 30, 2018). Another said, "We really don't

give them a lot of weight because they are anonymous. Some people put their names, but a lot of people make them up.... I don't trust online comments... because they can be anybody and some people love trolling news media," (Carla, personal communication, January 30, 2018). These examples illustrate that when journalists approach a reader comment in online environments initially, they are inherently wary about the information's validity. Whereas a journalist may be more inclined to trust a reader in face-to-face interactions, this norm appears to have shifted to an immediate distrust of readers in online environments. As a means to alleviate those tensions, participants stated that they rely on a verification or gatekeeping mechanism to validate accuracy.

When journalists in this study were asked to outline what steps are taken before deciding to use a reader comment in their reporting, many of participants responded that they would not outright include that online material without verification. Many journalists were driven to verify information to satisfy an internal need of upholding accuracy and professional credibility in their reporting. As this results section will later explore, journalists are very concerned with how they can uphold accuracy and adhere to the traditional watchdog role. When journalists saw a reader comment of interest, many would start the verification process by looking at the profile page of the commenter to make a subjective assessment as to whether they are dealing with a credible audience member. Examples of this routine include scanning the profile picture, name, and social media activity to determine the individual's credibility. Next, nearly every journalist in this study stated that they would reach out to the person to get an in-person or over-the-phone interview to verify the identity of the reader, as well as obtaining more information to verify the credibility of reader's statement.

The routine of reaching out to readers via in person or over the phone is non-negotiable. "I think as far as I can tell in my little corner of the world here, we don't source social media without checking it.... We don't cite anything that isn't 100% vetted," said one journalist (Angie, personal communication, January 30, 2018). Another journalist explained that this process is a requirement at the organizational level. Emphasizing the need to ensure accurate reporting, one journalist stated:

I do make a point of reaching out to that person. It is required for us to make sure that person is a legitimate source. We have to contact the person through the phone at least and just verify that the quote is correct and verify its context so that eliminates any chance of inaccuracy. (Christopher, personal communication, January 29, 2018)

Another journalist described his process for engaging in this routine, where he scanned the user's profile page and looked for suspicious indicators that would suggest that the person was using a fake account (Sheldon, personal communication, January 30, 2018). Indicators included cartoonish profile pictures or information that the journalist knew was factually false (Sheldon, personal communication, January 30, 2018). Not only do these examples illustrate how participants are driven by a deep-rooted need to ensure credible and accurate information in their reporting, but they also drive home how this this doggedness in providing accurate information comes into play with a journalist's decision-making and gatekeeping processes. Driven by the ethical need to provide accurate information, journalists in this study came to the conclusion that prioritizing accurate information was paramount in conducting themselves in a professional manner.

## **Leveraging UGC as a Supplement to Traditional Reporting Practices**

Throughout this study, journalists articulated different ways in which they use user generated content and social media to supplement their reporting practices. Journalists in this study did not find that user generated content alone was sufficient for their reporting but stated that it is beneficial in addition to traditional reporting practices. The following section examines those routines in detail.

**Utilizing UGC as a feedback mechanism.** One example of how participants find value in UGC is when readers give feedback to the journalist on social media, which they felt improved their abilities as a reporter. Common examples listed by journalists in this study included spelling and grammar mistakes, which journalists would immediately rectify as an automatic routine if the information was indeed incorrect. A food journalist stated that responding to reader feedback was beneficial to humanize themselves as an ordinary person that makes mistakes on occasion (Christopher, personal communication, January 29, 2018). Another journalist explained how this type of reader engagement is beneficial in increasing the accuracy of their coverage:

There's certainly... been times in my career where someone has pointed out that we made a mistake, we misread a document, we misheard somebody, and if they can convince or satisfy us that the mistake was in fact ours, we absolutely will fix it. (Mason, personal communication, January 25, 2018)

In other words, participants are primarily motivated to respond to these type of reader comments to uphold accuracy in their coverage, which helps alleviate their inherent desire to uphold the ethical tenet of journalistic accountability. Secondary motivations include upholding professional credibility and building rapport with readers, as well as occasionally increasing

transparency into journalists' individual reporting decisions. To illustrate these motivations, a journalist stated that he made a correction to an article after erroneously stating that a domestic violence hotline was operated by one group when it was being operated by another. Speaking positively about this type of reader engagement, this same journalist said, "It is wonderful to be a part of a newspaper that is working to hold power accountable, but it is also a very good thing that readers are holding us accountable," (Wesley, personal communication, January 26, 2018). Another journalist stated that it is important to listen and respond to this type of reader feedback to build credibility with readers and potential story opportunities. "I think it's good to listen to your audience at the end of the day and... to take things into account if you think that they are actually bringing something new to your attention where you could improve," he said (Dustin, personal communication, January 29, 2018). Despite the fact that participants in this study experience an inherent distrust of readers, journalists welcome constructive criticism and rely on reader feedback to engage in a routine to quickly fix mistakes to increase accuracy and accountability with their readers. Journalists also felt it was important to fix mistakes in a timely matter to retain their professional credibility. It is important to note that journalists see this as a professional benefit, where they view this type of content as a supplement to their reporting practices rather than a collaborative relationship with readers. Although participants expressed an appreciation for readers in pointing out their mistakes, these examples demonstrate a one-sided relationship with their audiences, where journalists find reader feedback advantageous to upholding accuracy, accountability, and professional credibility.

**Journalists follow authoritative sources on social media.** When it comes to how journalists perceive UGC's value in their reporting, all interviewees stated that they found UGC as a beneficial tool to source tips and stay on top of their beat. However, journalists in this study



made a clear distinction that they routinely use social networks to follow authoritative sources relating to their beat rather than relying on readers for information. The norm of journalists' inherent distrust of audience members trickled down into this routine of leveraging UGC as a tool to source tips for authoritative sources of information. In other words, journalists in this study implied that authoritative sources of information were considered more credible in their ability to provide accurate information, reinforcing the idea that journalists are driven to prioritize their ethical obligations toward professional credibility and accuracy in their reporting. Finally, a minority of participants stated that they rarely rely on reader comments within their reporting but rely on UGC to stay on top of their beats and steer their reporting, emphasizing the internal norm of distrusting readers and prioritizing credible and authoritative sources. Examples of this routine at play is when a military reporter said that he relied on the military bases' social media pages to source information and story ideas (Jim, personal communication, January 25, 2018). This relationship extended offline, where the journalist was comfortable in reaching out to the media relations personnel to pitch stories and gain access to experts for upcoming stories. Similarly, a sports journalist said he would check athletic director's pages to keep up to date on schedule changes or announcements (Dustin, personal communication, January 29, 2018). Unlike journalists' feelings toward their audiences, journalists in this study inherently trust authoritative sources and are comfortable engaging with them in online and offline environments. Although not explicitly stated in participant interviews, these feelings of trust may stem from the fact that journalists see authoritative sources as experts and credible sources of information.

**Journalists frequently check social media for tips as a routine and norm.** Journalists in this study also admitted to checking social media feeds multiple times a day for tips.

Journalists find this routine beneficial to find leads and stay on top of their beat. Journalists performed this routine in a few different ways and emphasized that the process of scanning social media feeds is important to supplement reporting practices. One food reporter explained that he would frequently tap into a Facebook community that was geared toward foodies who shared amateur restaurant reviews (Christopher, personal communication, January 29, 2018). Christopher described it as a “valuable resource” to learn what restaurants were popular in town, but he was careful to admit that users’ reviews may not be reflective of what is the best eatery in town (personal communication, January 29, 2018). This subtle distinction demonstrated the norm of inherent distrust in audiences, which provides insight into how Christopher might exercise a gatekeeping routine in his reporting. Another business reporter explained that she relies on Twitter hash tags to find stories and keep tabs on new businesses opening in the area (Sally, personal communication, January 25, 2018). “...A lot of times you’ll get weird stuff that you don’t necessarily want to know about, but at the same time sometimes a new business will throw something on there on there [Twitter],” Sally explained (personal communication, January 25, 2018). Similar to Christopher, Sally takes comments with a grain of salt, but ultimately finds value in scanning UGC to give her an advantage in her reporting.

Journalists in this study stated that they were accustomed to checking social media throughout their day. One journalist said, “I see alerts pop up on my phone. If somethings relevant, I’ll check it out. Social media is pretty much a part of the information, at least it’s a part of the tip building aspect of my job,” (Chester, personal communication, February 2, 2018). Another journalist expressed, “I check social media far more than I wish. Part of it is because that is where I get a lot of my story leads. There’s no doubt about it” (Joel, personal communication, January 30, 2018). Although Joel and many journalists expressed that they were

ashamed to admit that they checked social media too frequently, they frequently contradicted themselves and admitted that they spend little time, one to two hours at most, engaging in this routine. This disconnect suggests that the process of checking social media throughout the day is both an engrained norm and routine, where participants are very acclimated to regularly performing this routine. In other words, journalists in this study do not have to think hard about this routine, and it seems as natural as grabbing a morning cup of coffee to start the workday.

**Leveraging UGC for breaking news.** When participants were asked whether they thought UGC could be used as a standalone source of information for emergency situations or breaking news, many stated that only in extreme situations is it acceptable to solely rely on UGC for their reporting. As a rule of thumb, if a journalist can be sent to the scene for a high stakes story, this was preferable over relying on social media content from readers. One journalist described a situational example of an inaccessible location as a result of a police blockade, where a reader may post their experience on social media (Sheldon, personal communication, January 30, 2018). In this situation, this journalist stated that he would not solely rely on that information but would try to follow up with that individual to have it supplement the story (Sheldon, personal communication, January 30, 2018).

Another journalist explained how their newsroom decides on whether to leverage UGC for breaking news:

We may use a submitted photo from either a viewer, the fire department, or whoever was on the scene while the flames were actually visible if our photographer couldn't get out there. But usually we try to use our sourcing and our own reporting before we put something out there under our masthead to the public. (Chester, personal communication, February 2, 2018)

This example follows consistently with the norm of distrusting audiences and the routine of verifying information before including it in a story and suggests that journalists will exhaust all options to verify options unless it is absolutely impossible to do so.

However, journalists in this study did see the value in using UGC for natural disasters. One journalist described her experience in covering a hurricane and how reader engagement became critical to her reporting. "This is really a big deal during a hurricane because we really trusted our readers to tell us what they were seeing, what they needed and what they didn't have," she explained (Hazel, personal communication, January 29, 2018). Readers were able to communicate to Hazel where there was water, food, gas, and where the worst damage was as a result of the hurricane (Hazel, personal communication, January 29, 2018). "It's just one of the few times I've really seen this entire newsroom care really deeply about what their audience had to say, and I think the audience shared that relationship," Hazel said. Hazel's experience illustrates a very rare example in how journalists are more likely to break away from their engrained norms to trust and even empathize with their audiences in extreme and tragic situations.

**Using UGC for background information and to track sources.** Journalists in this study stated that they find UGC beneficial to track down sources. "For example, I see a name in a court record that doesn't have any contact information, thankfully Mark Zuckerberg has pretty much created a database of everybody that I can usually get a hold of," one journalist joked (Chester, personal communication, February 2, 2018). And journalists utilize social media networking sites like Facebook and Twitter as a database to get in contact with potential sources. One journalist recalled an experience where she had to break the story of a popular high school girl who died on the soccer field. "Everybody was devastated, and we broke that story. It was a

very, very difficult story to write from a number of perspectives,” she said (Carla, personal communication, January 30, 2018). She had heard a rumor that the mother of the high school girl was going to start a charity foundation, and she wanted to write a follow up story. She ended up using Facebook to find the mother and message her for a phone number for an interview. Similar to how journalists would use a phone book to find sources a decade or two ago, journalists have now shifted this routine to online environments and instead utilize social media networks as a tool to connect them to sources.

Similar to using social media to find sources, participants also use social media to scout for background information before writing a story. One journalist explained that he utilizes social media to find background knowledge on sources before interviewing them (Dustin, personal communication, January 29, 2018). Both of these routines demonstrate how journalists will leverage social media and UGC as a means to be better equipped for interviews, as well as being armed with more information to deliver credible and accurate content.

### **Using UGC for Public Service**

Throughout this study, journalists in this study reached the same conclusion that it is their duty to serve their community and uphold the traditional watchdog role. “I think the three most important things [of being a journalist in the United States] are building trust with your audience, telling the truth, and using your position of access to reveal things people don’t know,” explained one journalist (Hazel, personal communication, January 29, 2018). Like Hazel, many journalists articulated that prioritizing accuracy and unbiased coverage were critical components in upholding the watchdog role. One journalist described how he and his colleagues try to achieve this in the newsroom:

Our tagline for the newspaper is ‘to give the news impartially without fear or favor.’

... We are dedicated to providing the best information possible to our community.... We want to inform readers well because we understand that there’s too much going on each and every day in our community for the average person to keep up with. We, as reporters, define what we believe are matters of confidence to our community and we really work well together with our editors to make sure that the... writing we publish is clean and efficient... and as informative possible while trying to divorce ourselves from partisan leanings. We want to paint a full picture, but a clear picture. (Wesley, personal communication, January 26, 2018)

Although journalists in this study inherently distrust their readers to provide accurate information in online environments, journalists were also willing to use UGC to help them fill niche needs in their coverage if they felt it would better help them serve the public’s needs. The following describes a few different routines that journalists will employ to include UGC into their reporting, without compromising the norm of upholding accuracy in their reporting.

In certain instances where journalists want to be unbiased in their coverage, they would look to social media to round out opinions on a given topic as a routine. “My thoughts on the matter don’t come into play,” explained one journalist in how he strives to be unbiased in his coverage (Chester, personal communication, February 2, 2018). “If there are various viewpoints on a matter... that’s what I look for when I’m turning to social media [for] sourcing a story I need someone’s opinion on,” Chester explained. Another journalist explained how he sees a disconnect in delivering unbiased coverage, despite the fact that many journalists tend to lean on authoritative sources:

I try to get a number of sources from a broad spectrum for any given issue in that you can have official sources with a good deal of knowledge on the issue but unless you're also touching upon the people and the topic's given impact... I try to strike a good balance with any given story. (Sheldon, personal communication, January 30, 2018)

Stated differently, journalists in this study understand that it is important to illustrate a picture that is meaningful to their audiences and will use UGC to help round out opinions in their stories to deliver balanced, need-to-know news (Christopher, personal communication, January 29, 2018; Sally, personal communication, January 25, 2018). Several journalists stated that they do this by using personal or branded social media accounts to solicit opinions from readers for upcoming stories. However, as both Christopher and Sally alluded to in how they approach social media to generate tips, the process is taxing and requires effort to sift through and find information that is consistent with their journalistic norms and ethics.

On occasion, participants also monitor social media feeds and look for patterns of reader comments for story ideas. If enough readers commented about a differing opinion on a story, the journalist may then begin to think about that topic differently and may even write a follow up story. For example, one journalist stated that rumors in his rural community often get started on social media, which occasionally provided him with the opportunity to write a story to provide accurate information on the topic (Chester, personal communication February 2, 2018). In one instance, Chester felt obligated to address rumors about fatalities from a tornado that had gone through the town. "We actually had a little blog section on our website hitting these rumors in bullet points of what's true and what's not. Most of them were untrue but after putting that out there, it calmed down a lot of people," Chester explained (personal communication, February 2, 2018). In other words, Chester found this routine of validating information to be a service to his

community, as well as upholding his dedication in ensuring accuracy in his coverage. In this study, journalists were more likely to consider new perspectives and follow up stories if enough reader comments were made in numbers. Although not explicitly stated, the number of comments may have provided journalists with an easy indicator on whether there may be a story opportunity to follow up on.

There were also instances of when journalists in this study would write a new story based on if they believed their audience would find value in being educated on a topic. An example of this is when an environmental reporter recalled a time when a reader tweeted asking about how scientists would be able to know what climate change would look like in 100 years (Hazel, personal communication, January 29, 2018). Ignoring her initial knee jerk reaction of someone who was riffing on climate change, she instead decided to write an explainer story on how climate change modeling works. "Actually, it was a really good question. I don't actually know how [climate change modeling] works, I just know that it works. I should actually figure out how it works, and I should explain it simply enough that I can tell my readers about it," she explained (Hazel, personal communication, January 29, 2018). In both of these instances, journalists found an opportunity to write a story from a different perspective and ultimately provide accurate information to educate readers. Leveraging UGC as a routine to explain complex topics or debunk myths allowed these two journalists provide better reporting through an interpretive role.

### **Maintaining Professional Credibility Makes Reader Engagement Difficult**

When journalists were asked about whether they engage with audiences in online environments, however, there was a resounding consensus that they avoid engaging with readers whenever possible. As outlined thus far, journalists in this study demonstrated that they feel an inherent distrust toward readers as a result of their ability to provide accurate information in



online environments. An additional layer of complexity factors into these feelings of distrust, where journalists expressed that they are less likely to engage with readers that act maliciously in their comments. Journalists stated that this was a common sentiment across the organization and their colleagues. One journalist described how her newsroom felt about reader comments:

Let me preface it by saying that we, the reporters at the paper, try not to even look at the comments on our stories because people can be so mean and awful, and also there's no way of verifying who they are, so they can be trolls or whatever, and it's hurtful and not productive. (Carla, personal communication, January 30, 2018)

Carla also went on to explain that she has experienced times where her life was threatened, but also explained how this behavior may affect journalists with higher profiles or polarizing beats. Another journalist expressed similar sentiments about her how her newsroom approached reader comments:

'Don't read the comments,' is the thing everybody says even though... that's maybe an outdated way of thinking about your audience. We really care about who is reading our stories... but I think the format in which we mostly see feedback is people commenting on our stories on Facebook or on the website and they don't really add to the discussion most of the time (Hazel, personal communication, January 29, 2018).

Hazel's statement alludes to journalists' aspirations of being more engaged with their audiences online and suggests that this is prohibited by readers' malicious conduct. "We've got a great readership... aside from the angry Facebook commenters because the Internet is a toxic wasteland," joked one journalist (Wesley, personal communication, January 26, 2018). These examples demonstrate that many journalists lament the fact that they were unable to have meaningful discussions with their readers, which many attributed to the state of today's online

environments and ease of conducting activities anonymously as previously mentioned.

Furthermore, the idea of thinking the Internet is a ‘toxic wasteland’ may be the resulting factor in which journalists take reader’s comments with a grain of salt at a normative level (Wesley, personal communication, January 26, 2018). This feeling can only be relieved once journalists are able to verify the accuracy of information from readers before including it in their reporting.

When it comes to engaging with readers who act maliciously in online environments, journalists seemed to avoid engagement for two reasons. Perhaps the most obvious reason is that journalists have an aversion to being put in a vulnerable position. Rather than reading the comments at face value, many journalists admitted that they would simply avoid them altogether. Additionally, many journalists in this study stated that these types of malicious comments do not provide value to the discussion, which suggests that journalists would rather put their time to better use. Second, if journalists do read malicious comments, they were not motivated to respond for fear of threatening their professional credibility. “Sometimes if a comment is really incendiary sometimes I won’t use [it]... because that... puts you in a position of possible liability or slander or what not,” one journalist explained on how it is important to conduct oneself carefully due to legal implications (Jim, personal communication, January 25, 2018). Another journalist explained that as a rule, he never argues with readers on social media (Mason, personal communication, January 25, 2018). He admitted, however, that he will respond to emails for transparency’s sake, such as clearing up misinformation or making a clarification. “If they start arguing with me about why I wrote what I did or what my personal feelings are, then the conversation ends,” he explained (Mason, personal communication, January 25, 2018). In the end, Mason felt compelled to respond to readers if he felt it would increase transparency with his readers, but ultimately would avoid engagement if readers acted maliciously to retain his

credibility and autonomy. Although Mason was extreme in his sentiments toward readers, these same feelings were shared amongst all journalists in the study, where many were disillusioned with reader's malicious behaviors in online environments.

### **Media Organizations Have No Clear Strategy for Reader Engagement**

Several journalists in this study stated that their media organization encourages online engagement with their readers. At a minimum, many organizations require journalists to disseminate their content on their social media accounts. In addition, media organizations also encouraged journalists to respond to reader comments, despite the fact that this routine varied from organization to organization as to whether it was required. Although both of these routines are a far cry from actively engaging with readers, journalists suggested that these routines are often driven by the fact that social media can help increase referral traffic to the organization's website. Beyond disseminating content, however, journalists were largely unable to articulate different ways in how media organizations put this encouragement into practice via policies and strategy. After some reflection, many journalists agreed that reader engagement is encouraged by media organizations, but never seriously pushed with stringent policies or routines. Some journalists expressed throughout their interview that staff resources are tight and there is not much room for social media engagement as a result. Additionally, when a journalist was asked whether his media organization encourages reader engagement, he stated that his media organization prioritizes delivering the news. "No, that's a waste of time. Neither I nor my editors want me sitting around jabbering with people on Facebook when I could be out gathering news," he explained (Mason, personal communication, January 25, 2018). Although Mason may be projecting his own stance of reader engagement on his media organization's perception of UGC use, there may be some truth in that organization's may prefer that their news staff stay steadfast

in reporting quality news that upholds journalistic ethics and standards. Another journalist said, “My direct boss never says, ‘I saw someone tweeted at you about this story. Did you respond to them?’ Even though that’s something technically our company wants us to do,” (Hazel, personal communication, January 29, 2018). Although Hazel does not provide specific reasons as to why her boss behaves in this manner, her comment illustrates that there is a disconnect in how media organizations set their strategy and organizational routines for their news staff, despite encouraging staff to engage with readers.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there were a few organizations that had a reader engagement strategy in place beyond simply disseminating one’s content on social media that are worth noting. As one journalist explains, “Our metrics team will talk about the importance of sharing on social, more recently because we know that Facebook is changing its algorithm in the news feed soon to devalue brand accounts and value your relationship accounts,” (Anna, personal communication, January 25, 2018). In other words, some media organizations encourage engagement on social media so that posts receive higher visibility and hopefully increased traffic as a result. Of course, this is a far cry from being considered a reader engagement activity. Another journalist explained that his organization tracks “total engaged minutes” rather than relying strictly on the traditional pageview performance tracking metric (Joel, personal communication, January 30, 2018). He explained that his organization’s move to total engaged minutes ultimately resulted in better, more quality content to readers:

Yes, you still want eyes on your content. You want people to click on your stories... but the value is that not just that they click on it and click off again because they don’t like what’s there. Because you wrote some headline that was maybe deceiving, or maybe they didn’t get what they wanted. The idea is that your work [will] be compelling enough that

‘I’m not going to click on that story, I’m going to spend some time reading it. I’m going to read from top to bottom... We’ve really shifted heavily toward that being as a better judge of quality. (Joel, personal communication, January 30, 2018)

Throughout this study, journalists stated that their media organizations are highly focused on measuring traffic by traditional pageview metrics versus engagement metrics. Joel’s example of how his organization has moved away from traditional metrics to engagement metrics presents a new perspective into how organizations can better engage with readers without having to sacrifice ethical values or accuracy in delivering news. Although Joel’s organization was a minority in how it approached reader engagement, it paints a fresh perspective on what it means to be engaged with audiences in online environments.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The following section revisits Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) Hierarchy of Influences and explores how each level of influence has an impact on journalists' perceptions and use of UGC today. As each level in the hierarchy is explored, this section discusses why journalists tend to rely on UGC in their routines as a supplement to their work. Additionally, this section will also examine why journalists experience internal conflict in leveraging UGC. Both of these tendencies stem from the notion that journalists are wary of engaging with their audiences for fear of challenging their journalistic ethics and norms.

### **Social Systems**

Starting at the macro-end of the spectrum for the hierarchy of influences, this study's findings suggest that the mass media social system does self-regulate itself with involuntary codes of conduct by reinforcing ideologies of a free press system and democratic society (McQuail, 2010; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Journalists alluded that ideological, political, and cultural subsystems existed in a democratic context by stating that it is critical for both journalists and media organizations to uphold the watchdog role to empower readers to make informed decisions and spark deliberative discourse with respect to authoritative entities. This notion was further exemplified as all research participants stated that their media organization would prioritize accuracy in the news that is published over speed, even despite acknowledging that there is some pressure to deliver news in a timely manner due to the inherent nature of a 24/7 news cycle. It could be argued that adhering to these broad traditional concepts of democracy and a watchdog mentality is what makes it difficult for journalists to navigate their role with audiences in online environments. As we will see in subsequent levels in the hierarchy

of influences, these concepts will often tie into how journalists often experience tension when deliberating on UGC use (Deuze, 2005; Domingo et al., 2008; Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010; Lowrey & Anderson, 2005; Lowrey, 2006; Rebillard & Touboul, 2010).

### **Social Institutions**

As a reminder, the social institution level in the hierarchy of influences look at the different forces that interact with media organizations and how they shape media content. This level looks at broad generalizations of media work rather than examining specific norms and routines (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). In this study, journalists implied that media organizations are dedicated to delivering quality news over the speed in which it is published. Media organizations encourage this behavior by disseminating different routines to journalists, which in turn reinforce these ideologies and impact how journalists interact with larger institutions overall. Those routines will be covered more in the media organization section, but for now this section will focus on the outside influences that shape media work in a way that prioritizes a media organization's authoritative position in delivering the news.

**Business economics and the marketplace of content.** As mentioned in the literature review, media organizations operate as a business unit that is driven by economic principles, which may impact content creation (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014; McQuail, 2010). Researchers have suggested that media organizations may be motivated by economic reasons in encouraging journalists to leverage UGC (Storch, 2010; Tapscott & Williams, 2010; Thurman, 2008; van Dijck, 2009). However, media organizations in this research study did not seem overly motivated to encourage journalists to leverage UGC for economic reasons, where journalists stated that their media organizations prioritized the delivery of accurate and vetted need-to-know news. To look at this insight from another perspective, it can be implied that a media organization applying

traditional journalistic values might be more beneficial in retaining readership and increasing economic success overall. Similar to the adage 'slow and steady wins the race', media organizations in this research study suggest that taking the time to vet and deliver accurate news helps generate credibility and readership and ultimately ensures economic success over the long term. Of course, journalists mentioned that there are day-to-day strains on delivering news in advance of competitors or delivering inaccurate news due to a breaking story, but if there is an opportunity to be selective between accuracy and speed across content generation overall, accuracy will always be prioritized over speed. To conclude, although UGC may have several different convenience and economic benefits, media organizations may take the stance that there is too much risk to brand credibility and reputation to rely on UGC too easily without any verification process in place.

**Media sources.** Shoemaker and Reese (2014) stated that it is likely that powerful entities that interact with each other will enter a "collaborative symbiotic relationship" (p. 95). This effect was seen when journalists stated that they often use UGC to keep tabs on authoritative sources by following their social media profiles. To further exemplify this symbiotic relationship, some journalists admitted that those relationships extended offline, where authoritative sources would reach out to the journalist by phone to pitch a story that they believed warranted coverage. Although this routine happens at the individual level in the hierarchy of influences, it may stem from the media ecosystem and its dedication to delivering accurate, need-to-know news. In other words, there is a fear at the social institutional level that quality may be sacrificed if information is not sourced from authoritative avenues. As a result, media work leans strongly on authoritative sources, which impacts how audience perspectives are being included in media coverage. This tendency is consistent with existing research that



suggests that media organizations are more likely to rely on authoritative sources as a stable and safe avenue of information, which may result in a narrow perspective of delivering the news (Bennett, 1990; Reese, Grant, & Danielian, 1994; Holt & Karlsson, 2011). Although journalists said that they feel a public service need must be fulfilled for their audiences, the fact that they excessively rely on authoritative sources suggests a large disconnect in who journalists are actually serving. Not only does this reliance have the potential to impact fair and balanced coverage, but it also may play a role in how public discourse is shaped. UGC advocates suggested that utilizing this new form of content in journalistic processes could potentially serve as an innovative way to engage and build relationships with audiences (Gillmor, 2003; van Dijk, 2009; Holt & Karlsson, 2011; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Papacharissi, 2002; Rheingold, 2002; Rebillards & Touboul, 2010). However, this study has validated that the opposite is true, which suggests that even the media ecosystem experience strain in navigating how to provide quality journalism in this relatively new age of online digital journalism. This gap may be perceived as an effort versus reward problem, where it is much more efficient for media organizations and news staff to rely on authoritative sources than to sift through large unvetted quantities of UGC. Until new technological advancements are made in machine learning or automation to help journalists streamline the process of seeking out diverse sources of information, it will be too labor intensive for journalists to routinely seek out diverse voices for their reporting with their limited resources.

### **Media Organizations**

As Shoemaker and Reese (2014) have noted, the hierarchy of influences is developed so that the media work can be analyzed from different interactions and relationships that occur in different levels of the hierarchy. Because this research study focuses primarily on the individual

journalist, it is somewhat difficult to make generalizable conclusions about how media organizations perceive UGC. Despite this limitation, it is important to analyze this level with the rest of the hierarchy's levels to tease out different relationships and influences that may exist to better understand how media organization's may or may not find value in UGC. The following section focuses on two different ways that illustrate how media organizations are responding to this relatively new content format.

**Enforced verification routine protects media organizations from threats.** As explained in the social institutional level, media work is treated as a "homogenous social practice" so the media social system can focus on upholding authority, autonomy, and economic success (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 95). This trickles down into the media organization level of the hierarchy of influences as media organizations often require that journalists follow a gatekeeping routine to determine what is worthy of being published. This trend was demonstrated in past research, where media organizations that adopted UGC practices into their editorial strategies also adhered to traditional norms and ethics by requiring journalists to perform their gatekeeping responsibilities to vet information for accuracy (Harrison, 2010; Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). As seen in the study, this verification process authenticates online comments before they can be used as a source. In other words, this verification process is a routine that is forced at the media organizational level as a result of social institutional values of quality over speed in news that is published. It is important to recognize that the verification routine fits in both the media organization and routine level in the hierarchy of influences, as there are different reasons for employing this routine for media organizations and journalists. To analyze this routine from the perspective of the media organization, there are several reasons why businesses require journalists to follow this

mandatory routine. First, it is an extra measure that helps ensure journalists deliver accurate news to their audiences, ultimately ensuring that a quality product is delivered to readers to help a media organization's bottom line in the long run. Second, this also serves as a cautionary measure to help avoid libel lawsuits against the media organization. Both of these reasons can stem from the social institution level in the hierarchy of influences and the need to make economical business decisions. Additionally, although media organizations do not have any policies in place to discourage journalists from using reader comments as a potential source, journalists continue to gravitate toward building relationships with authoritative sources and rely on them more compared to everyday readers. In other words, journalists may rely more on authoritative sources thanks to their convenience and accessibility, which results in increased efficiency around verifying sources of information. In addition, journalists save time by obtaining accurate information from their established relationships, rather than sifting through social networks for additional, unverified information. This tendency falls in line with Holt and Karlsson's (2011) study where they found that even though media organizations promoted participatory journalism, authoritative sources were heavily relied upon as a means to uphold the organization's credibility. Holt and Karlsson (2011) also stated that "the promise of participation is quenched by professional, economic, and other constraints [that] surround the production of news" (p. 30). Because media organizations stress the need to deliver accurate information to audiences and require journalists to vet information via gatekeeping mechanisms, journalists are limited to the kinds of perspectives they can offer in their reporting without compromising journalistic accuracy or their precious time. This may serve as an additional explanation as to why journalists feel a disconnect in wanting to engage with their audiences, but rarely do so in reality.

**Delivering the news dominates reader engagement.** As stated in the results section, media organizations see a need to encourage journalists to engage with audiences in online environments. As seen in this study, media organizations require that journalists disseminate their content on social networks as a means to help increase traffic, which suggests that they see value in online engagement from an economics perspective. Beyond this single routine, media organizations have not set a strategy to help journalists be successful in reader engagement. Drawing conclusions from the importance of accuracy and quality of news in prior levels in the hierarchy of influences, media organizations may shy away from outlining reader engagement policies for several reasons. It is possible that there is lack of resources for news staff, where media organizations would rather have staff prioritize their time in delivering need-to-know news. If media organizations were to put more stringent policies in place, this may conflict with the organization's goal of delivering quality content and driving revenue (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). In other words, "UGC is not a cheap option," where it takes time and resources before media organizations may see any tangible benefit of having their staff engage with readers (Harrison, 2010, p. 244). Additionally, media organizations may also be wary of how journalists should engage with readers, as there may be some who fear repercussions to the media organization's brand and credibility, and the threat of impacting the media social system's democratic role in delivering the news (Lowrey & Anderson, 2005; Singer, 2005). In general, there is a general cautiousness of how newsrooms approach UGC, where many organizations are reluctant to include everyday citizens in the news production process (Domingo et al. 2008).

## **Routines**

The routines level in the hierarchy of influences helps researchers understand how journalists perform their job (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Additionally, the routines that

journalists establish are typically used to increase workplace efficiency and sometimes serve as a "constraining" influence of work practices (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 180). The following section will cover the various routines demonstrated in this research study with respect to the vast amount of literature that focuses on journalists and their routines.

**Gatekeeping.** In this study, journalists exercised gatekeeping routines in various ways that were motivated by both social institutional forces and individual, journalistic ethics. It is important to note that gatekeeping is subjective in nature, where an individual's unique decision may differ from another individual. From the micro-level, individual perspective, journalists in this study were driven by "normative principles," such as the inherent need to "seek the truth and report it" (Singer, 2008, p. 63; SPJ, 2014). The two most prevalent routines in which journalists exercised the gatekeeping mechanism were by scanning social media feeds for tips as well as verifying online information in person or by phone before using it as a source in an upcoming article. As an extension of the journalists' gatekeeping abilities, they also exercised different routines to determine what is newsworthy for their audiences. Examples include when journalists found value in relying on UGC to consider a follow-up story from a new perspective or to dispel rumors and educate audiences on a particular topic.

It is important to recognize that these gatekeeping routines are used by journalists to keep themselves at an elevated level to reassert their authoritative role in public discourse. It may be argued that these gatekeeping routines that are driven by inherent journalistic ethics and norms related to accuracy may prohibit effective collaboration and meaningful discourse with everyday readers, as advocates of UGC originally posited (Gillmor, 2003; Gillmor 2004; van Dijck, 2009; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Papacharissi, 2002). Even when media organizations take a more proactive approach to utilizing UGC in their editorial strategies, they are wary of including

content that may potentially challenge editorial values (Harrison, 2010; Singer 2014). To conclude, this research study's findings are consistent with research on gatekeeping and UGC, where Williams, Wardle & Wahl-Jorgensen's (2011) study found that journalists at the BCC moderate UGC via a gatekeeping mechanism to ensure that it does not compromise traditional journalistic values. As this study demonstrated, participants were predominately driven by routines and the inherent ethics and norms that drove them to make decisions around what is newsworthy. This suggests that gatekeeping is still very much a routine that is entrenched in ethics and plays a larger role in journalists' decisions compared to their individual characteristics (Shoemaker et al, 2001).

**Defensive routines.** Although listed as an extension of a gatekeeping routine, journalists in this study stated that they will verify online information via phone or in person before including it in a story. This routine is also used as a defense mechanism for traditional fact checking, where the majority of organizations have shifted this responsibility onto individual journalists rather than a fact checking team. Although this is implied from study respondents, there may be resource issues that bring tension to individual journalists that may be a contributor as to why journalists tend to lean heavily on authoritative sources in online environments. Research suggests that media organizations have looked to utilize UGC to help in improving their declining revenue (Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007; Singer, 2008; Thurman & Lupton, 2008; Lewis, Kaufhold, & Larorsa, 2010). It may be argued that because media organization's face challenges in being profitable, this may explain why the fact-checking routine has been shifted to the individual journalist for cost-saving measures.

## Individuals

The final level in the hierarchy of influences (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) recognizes the individual's ability to make independent and unique decisions based on his or her demographics, personal beliefs, and attitudes. The following section will focus on Deuze's (2005) ideology of the professional journalist, as many journalists in this study displayed similar attitudes, values, and beliefs across the spectrum of their work. As a reminder, Deuze's (2005) ideology of the professional journalist is divided between five different characteristics that include public service, objectivity, autonomy and independence, immediacy, and ethics.

**Public service.** The public service characteristic was prominent throughout this research study, where journalists aspired to hold those in power accountable for their actions (Deuze, 2005). Across the board, journalists stated that they believed that upholding the traditional watchdog role was one of the most fundamental qualities to being a journalist in the United States. To mirror that belief, journalists stated that they would prioritize need-to-know journalism to their audiences. Researchers have raised concerns about UGC's ability to draw from a multitude of sources, which could potentially result in journalists unintentionally delivering news that serves narrow and fragmented interests (McQuail, 2010; Plaisance, 2014). This study unveiled that journalists do not serve special interest groups despite UGC's convenience as McQuail (2010) and Plaisance (2014) suggested, but instead journalists find a sense of relief in relying on authoritative sources for their stories. It may be argued as a result of this research study's findings that journalists are unintentionally undermining their public service duty through what appears to be an exclusive reliance on authoritative sources for information. As mentioned in the results section, this reliance may stem from journalist's uncertainty of navigating online environments to find and vet credible sources of information and may be

adopted as both a norm and routine to save the journalist's time in their workday. However, it is important to consider the potential consequences of continually confiding in authoritative persons as media sources, coupled with the fact that journalists typically veer away from using reader comments as credible sources of information. Not only is this reliance potentially counterproductive to upholding the watchdog role and holding those in power accountable for their actions, but it may even isolate journalists from their audiences. In other words, this behavior may inhibit journalists from engaging in UGC's promise of participatory journalism and perhaps revert the relationship between journalist and reader to the more traditional, top-down mode of communication.

**Objectivity.** Journalistic objectivity was apparent in this research study, where journalists explained several different routines and norms that demonstrated that they behave in a professionally distant and detached manner (Deuze, 2005). In line with Plaisance's (2014) statement that journalists will act objectively to uphold their professional credibility, this rang true in this research study where many journalists were cautious in how they interacted with readers in online environments. Perhaps one of the most obvious ways in which journalists demonstrated objectivity was in their preference to protect their credibility by avoiding heated discussions with readers. Journalists felt that these types of interactions could suggest bias or place the journalist in a vulnerable position with respect to their autonomy. These findings will be discussed in detail in the next section.

It is important to emphasize that journalists primarily demonstrated norms of objectivity through the routine of verifying or authenticating information before incorporating it into a news story. Singer (2008) noted that in the early days when UGC was just emerging as a new content form that there was potential for the authentication process to be overlooked thanks to the



increasing focus on a 24/7 online news cycle. As previously mentioned, it is true that the authentication process has shifted from the media organization to the individual journalist (Singer, 2008). As a result, journalists were less likely to engage in a participatory environment that encouraged a many-to-many communication model due to the need to uphold journalistic objectivity. Additionally journalists were reluctant to engage with readers in a collaborative production process or provide them with a “degree of trust” in online interactions. Instead, journalists at best only allowed themselves the burden of verifying inaccurate information and conducted their behavior similar to a traditional top-down communication model (Singer, 2008, p. 66; Domingo et al., 2008). As a result, it may be argued that because journalists are overburdened with upholding accuracy with respect to their gatekeeping responsibilities, journalists experience a great deal of trouble in navigating today's mediated environments, which prohibits them from reaping the benefits of a truly participatory environment. These troubles stem from the fact that journalists inherently distrust readers to provide accurate information, and the process of verifying the accuracy of information provided by readers is easier said than done and is a drain to the journalist's resources.

**Autonomy and Independence.** The characteristic of autonomy and independence may be the strongest factor that explains why journalists tend to limit their interactions with readers. As mentioned in the previous section, journalists not only feel reluctant to engage readers in heated discussions, but they also typically avoid readers unless there was a legitimate inaccuracy in their content. To further emphasize this norm of distrusting readers, journalists explained that they would typically only engage if there was enough noise collectively generated by readers in which the journalist felt compelled to respond to uphold their decisions in their coverage. With the exception of addressing legitimate inaccuracies in journalists' coverage, journalists were

hesitant to justify their reporting decisions to readers. However, if enough readers were outspoken and journalists perceived those comments as a misunderstanding about their decision-making processes, then they would typically take the time to be transparent and educate readers about how their ethical values played a role in their reporting. This behavior demonstrated that journalists will defend their journalistic autonomy and independence from readers unless they feel that enough noise is generated that could potentially affect their professional credibility negatively. Again, this is also tied to the norm of upholding objectivity and therefore protecting the journalist's professional credibility.

Previous research on autonomy and independence questions whether it is possible for journalistic autonomy and independence to be achieved in today's online environment (Deuze, 2005; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, Reese, 2001). However, these claims assume that media organizations may put pressure on the journalist to help remain a successful and profitable business unit. Although there is research to suggest that media organizational pressures exist, journalists in this study felt that their media organization supported them in their efforts to serve the public by delivering accurate news (Freepress.net, 2018; Reese, 2001). This was further demonstrated by media organizations' lack of strategy around UGC for journalists, where many organizations give their staff the freedom to choose when to engage with readers. These findings are consistent in both the Domingo et al. (2008) and Williams, Wardle, and Wahl-Jorgensen (2011) research studies that demonstrated that even though media organizations were eager to adopt participatory journalism practices, they also provided journalists with a high degree of autonomy and independence, where were of "paramount importance to the journalists when dealing with audience material" (Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011, p. 93). Stated differently, journalists in this study felt that media organizations gave them power to uphold their

individual autonomy and independence to a very high degree. Of course, there may be organizational pressures that were not mentioned by journalists, and as such, this would be a great opportunity for additional research to learn more about the media organizational-journalist relationship with respect to journalistic autonomy and independence.

**Immediacy.** Throughout this study, journalists stated that pressure exists to deliver news on a 24/7 news cycle. However, they also stated that they check their social media feeds to stay up-to-date on their beat, which suggests that this is a routine that helps them cope with this pressure around immediacy. It is important to note that in this study journalists felt that adhering to journalistic characteristics of public service and ethics in accuracy were paramount compared to being the first to break a story. There were exceptions to this mindset, however, where a few journalists expressed the minority opinion that UGC is acceptable to use in situational occasions, such as in a breaking news story or natural disaster (Singer, 2008; Haddow & Haddow, 2014; Jarboe, 2005; Loke & Grimm, 2015; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). This situation is similar to how Heinonen (2011) depicts a user role that actively collaborates with journalists in new production processes. Although journalists relied on readers as a last resort, they would participate with audiences if meant working with them to obtain vital information that couldn't be accessed anywhere else. As a final note, it is possible that journalists may have expressed an over inflated sense of dedication to accuracy in these interviews. As such, more research will need to be conducted in this area specifically on journalist's behavior in the newsroom to determine whether accuracy is truly prioritized over immediacy throughout their workday.

**Ethics.** Several ethical values have been covered throughout the individual level of the hierarchy of influences (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) and Deuze's (2005) ideology of the professional journalist, where this study demonstrated that journalists collectively adhere to

values such as, accuracy, authenticity, credibility, autonomy, and objectivity. Furthermore, this study also demonstrated that journalists rely on their internal ethical values and norms rather than letting individual characteristics and interests become a major factor in decision making. To not overstate what has been stated in this paper, this section will focus on how ethics collectively has an impact on the individual journalist.

In Singer's (2005) study that examined political journalists and their work on blogs as a relatively new content medium, she coined the term 'normalization' as a process in which journalists applied traditional norms and practices to ICTs. This study was written in the perspective that journalists were grappling with how to conduct themselves in the new frontier of online environments, where Singer (2005) suggested that the process of normalization helped journalists navigate their way through ICTs without compromising their professional duties or ethics. A decent amount of time has passed since Singer's study in 2005 and after reflecting on this study's findings, it may be argued that the process of 'normalization' has shifted from an exploratory routine to an outright norm that journalists are accustomed to applying in a variety of situations in online environments. In this study, journalists similarly exercised gatekeeping mechanisms through verification routines as well as scanning social media feeds for information. Stated differently, Singer's (2005) concept of normalization today may exist as both a norm and routine in which journalists can exercise ethical values relating to accuracy, accountability, objectivity, credibility, and more in their everyday work. On the surface this ingrained norm may seem like a positive trait to adopt into the journalist's individual skillset with respect to their everyday work, but it may also serve as an inhibitor for giving journalists the skills they need to face new challenges that come with online environments. In other words, journalists may rely on

this norm to feel a sense of complacency and may sit back and approach news in the "we write, you read" mentality that is seen in traditional modes of communication (Deuze, 2003, p. 220).

### **Journalists Lean Back into Traditionalist Role in Online Environments**

Robinson's (2010) ethnography study that examined the journalist-audience relationship in online news sites is much warranted discussion as her findings connects these two frameworks together nicely. Much of Robinson's (2010) findings have been demonstrated in this study with a few varied nuances. Journalists that fit the profile of both 'traditionalists' and 'convergers' appeared throughout this study, and similar to Robinson's (2010) findings, journalists jointly expressed a great deal of conflict with their relationship with their audiences. As a reminder, the first group, described as 'traditionalists,' included journalists in their 40s and 50s who preferred to maintain their authoritative position with their audiences in online environments (Robinson, 2010, p. 131). The second group, described as 'convergers,' were in their 20s or 30s and believed that the gap could be bridged between journalists and their readers by giving audiences more freedom in their interactions (Robinson, 2010).

Robinson (2010) stated in her findings that journalists in both camps used information in the comments as a tool to extend journalism. This finding is overwhelmingly consistent in this study, where journalists expressed several different routines in which they rely on UGC to supplement to their work by using UGC as a means to stay abreast of their beat, using reader comments as a feedback loop to correct inaccuracies, and taking comments into consideration to write follow up stories. Although several journalists also expressed that they were motivated to engage with audiences in a sort of community building, facilitator, role that Robinson (2010) had similarly seen in her own study, the information analyzed in the routines level in Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) hierarchy of influences and the dedication to the five characteristics in Deuze's

(2005) ideology of the professional journalist suggests something different. As outlined previously in the discussion section, it may be argued that ethical values and norms are responsible for how journalists conduct themselves with readers. As discussed previously for both frameworks, journalists on the individual level feel a deep connection to their traditional gatekeeping responsibilities and journalistic values of accuracy and upholding the traditional watchdog role. As such, journalists may be more entrenched in a traditional role than what they care to admit and may be actually be veiling the notion of community building as a front for upholding the traditional watchdog role. It may be argued that to a journalist, the notion of community building may be centered around delivering audiences with the most accurate news so communities engage successfully in today's democratic society by being equipped ample information needed to make decisions.

The biggest differentiator in this study that did not align with Robinson's (2010) findings was that participants were primarily made up of traditionalists compared to convergers. Although there were several journalists who lamented that the fact that they did not engage frequently with readers and seemed to adopt a converger-type mentality, these same journalists stated that they spent little to no time reading comments or responding to readers. Furthermore, Robison's (2010) participants cited comment monitoring as a laborious drain to the journalist's time, where journalists in this study stated that this was not a concern. Stated differently, it may be argued that journalists in this study realize that comment monitoring is laborious, and they inherently choose not to dedicate too much time in exercising this routine. Although not said outright, journalists in this study may be alluding to the fact that they engage with readers on a very limited basis, which would help explain why they do not feel constraints or pressures around reader engagement. To further emphasize the lack of reader engagement into perspective for

journalists in this study, it is important to remember that a majority of them stated they rely on UGC to follow and build relationships with authoritative sources. It is difficult to fully comprehend why journalists in this study tend to behave as such, but as many conveyed that they avoid reader comments altogether as many are malicious in nature and do not provide any value to the discussion. More research with respect to the journalist-reader relationship with respect to malicious interactions online will be needed to fully explore this behavior, but it may be argued that because of this trend in malicious reader comments, journalists are leaning back on traditional tendencies in online environments to protect their professional credibility, in line with Deuze's (2005) ideology of the professional journalist. To conclude thoughts on Robinson's (2010) study, there has been a shift with journalists' relationships with their audiences, which has caused them to reevaluate how they conduct their interactions online. Wary to put themselves in a vulnerable position, journalists in this study are treating online spaces in a traditional, top-down mode of communication, not in a multi-directional, one-to-many relationship that Robinson (2010) had suggested from her findings.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The following section will conclude in highlighting this study's findings, where journalists continue to experience tension in working in online environments with their readers without compromising their norms and ethics. Furthermore, this section will emphasize the potential dangers of journalists' reliance on authoritative sources and what it means for the future of journalism. This section then will conclude with a brief discussion on limitations and future research ideas.

When all is said, there is truth in Robinson's (2010) statement that journalists still struggle in understanding their role with audiences in online environments. Not only are journalists very committed and entrenched in their traditional ethics and norms, but this serves as the catalyst to help them prioritize their authoritative role consistently across a variety of routines. This study's findings established that there is a disconnect between what journalists say they do versus what they actually do. Similar to research on online interactivity, the strong reliance on traditional norms and ethics hinders journalists' efforts from reaping the potential benefits that participatory journalism has to offer (Deuze et al., 2004; Domingo, 2008). The findings of this research study bring several questions that may be helpful to future researchers. Is participatory journalism possible for journalists and readers with respect to the state of their relationship today? In what ways can journalists mitigate the negative effects of online engagement while trying to find innovative ways to create and deliver their work in online environments? What impact does journalists' reliance on authoritative sources mean for how journalism will be treated today and in the future? Finally, how can journalists step into a more collaborative role with their audiences to ultimately build trust and ensure a future for the



journalists of tomorrow? To that end, technology continues to evolve in unpredictable and surprising ways, and journalists will need to continue their exploration to find optimal ways to operate successfully in today's online environments. As such, this area of research has ample opportunities for future research and insight into new perspectives into the future of digital journalism, which will be covered in detail in the next section.

### **Limitations and Future Research Opportunities**

This research study was ambitious in several ways, where the researcher was originally interested in fully understanding how the different facets of the entire media ecosystem, from the macro, organizational level to the micro, individual journalist, factored into how UGC is perceived. The following discusses different challenges and limitations experienced throughout this research study, as well as future research opportunities related to each limitation discussed.

**Qualitative versus quantitative approach.** A qualitative methods approach was adopted for this study as there was no comprehensive database of individuals that could be utilized for this study. The qualitative, in-depth interview approach taken in this study was immensely helpful in understanding the individual journalist and unveiling their motivation for their ethics, norms, and routines. This approach provided more in explaining and teasing out macro-level concepts, which will be covered in more detail in the subsequent sections. A future research study that utilizes a quantitative approach would be a great next option in this research area, where researchers can continue to compare and analyze new relationships and findings. Coupled with findings from this qualitative research study, a quantitative component would help in gaining insights around a true and well-rounded picture of what is happening in this research area.

**Journalists give limited insight to media organizational perspectives.** Although this study did attempt to incorporate media organizational questions to research participants, it was difficult to draw meaningful conclusions about what media organization's perceptions around UGC were. As a natural limitation for in-depth interviews, journalists can only tell us what they think they understand about their media organization, and as a result, it is difficult to determine whether the journalist is accurately depicting their media organization's intentions or rather simply unintentionally letting their own opinions on the matter shine through. As such, another research study that focuses specifically on media organizations and their policies related to UGC would be beneficial. Research from the media organizational perspective is particularly sparse, where Robinson's (2010) and Harrison's (2010) work are probably the most comprehensive studies done on UGC strictly from the media organizational perspective. As such, media organizational studies on UGC are very much needed to continue research in this area. Ideas for a study of this nature would include ones that open studies up to different roles within the organization, such as C-level executives, marketing departments, and editors to get a better picture of how the media ecosystem truly interacts and operates with respect to UGC use.

**Understanding what journalists say versus what they do.** Again, a natural limitation for in-depth interviews is that it is difficult to determine whether the participant truly does what he or she says. There is no way of knowing whether a participant has lied or whether they are projecting their opinion as to what is most important to them. As such, new research studies around how journalists conduct their work is warranted. For example, journalists in this study stated that they had an unflinching commitment to unveil truths and report them to their audiences, however it is impossible to measure to what degree a journalist does this in their workday. It is possible that a journalist may feel this strong degree of commitment but may get

caught up in the flurry of the unpredictable workday, where a journalist may unintentionally make an error in their reporting as a result of getting caught up in trying to deliver a story quickly to audiences. As such, ethnographic studies and content analyses on journalists' behaviors would be extremely beneficial to future research in illustrating how they truly work.

**Journalists and their relationships with audiences.** As a final note, this research study unveiled that journalists experience a very complicated and complex relationship with their audiences that suggests that participatory collaboration with readers is easier said than done. The sentiments expressed by journalists about avoiding malicious readers was unanticipated and perhaps an oversight at the onset of this research study. However, research questions were originally developed to answer in what ways, if any, journalists used UGC in their reporting, and to what degree media organizations influenced journalists and their use of UGC. Furthermore, research in this area has been overwhelmingly focused on the individual journalist with very minimal focuses on dissenting comments. This finding would warrant expansion to better understand this now tense and complicated relationship journalists experience with their audiences, as well as perhaps understanding what may have caused such a shift in the last few years. As such, to fully understand UGC's impact on content today, research on solely journalists is insufficient. It will be important to continue research on both the media organization and audience level as well to deepen our current understanding of how media organizations and journalists can co-exist with their audiences in online environments with compromising the journalistic ethics and values that make up our democracy.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me more about yourself. How did you decide on a career as a journalist?
  - a. Probe: Did you major in journalism in college?
    - i. If yes: Did your department require you to take an ethics course?
    - ii. If yes: Did your department emphasize digital media practices?
      1. If yes: In what ways? What sorts of classes did you take?
2. Can you describe what a typical day looks like to you?
  - a. Probe: What beat do you cover?
    - ii. Who are the primary sources for your beat?
    - iii. How do you seek out voices beyond your traditional sources?
  - b. Probe: Do you check social media any time throughout your day?
    - i. If yes: Do you check social media to see comments on your content?
      1. How often?
      2. Do you find you have time in your job to read and respond to messages from readers?
    - ii. If yes: Do you check social media for a story you're working on?
    - iii. If no: Why? (Too time consuming?)
3. When you're assigned a story, how do you go about choosing sources to interview?
  - a. Probe: Do you turn to social media to help in sourcing your content?
    - i. If yes: Are there certain types of stories where you think social media might help you find sources?
    - ii. If no: Why?
4. Are there any instances of where you have quoted UGC in your own reporting?
  - a. Yes or no answer. Ask for an example.
5. Do you think using UGC makes your reporting better?
  - a. Is it faster to get a source from social media to find a witness in other ways?
6. Let's say you've decided to quote a reader comment in your next story. What do you look for in that material before you include it in your story?
  - a. Do you find it difficult to sort through comments?
  - b. What clues help you determine whether a person is credible?
    - i. Do you look at the reader's user profile?
    - ii. Do you try to reach out to a person before using their content?
    - iii. Do you try to interview that person before using their content?
    - iv. Will you use an anonymous online source?
  - c. If you have good content from readers for a breaking news event, would you still go to the scene? Would you consider reader-provided content sufficient?
7. Does your organization want you to spend time talking to your readers online?

- a. If yes: Ask who in the organization makes this request? (i.e., editorial supervisor or upper management?)
    - i. Why do you think your organization wants you to engage with your readers or avoid?
  - b. If no: Why not?
  - c. If yes: Do you experience any challenges in engaging with your readers?
    - i. If yes: Can you give an example of a time you experienced a challenge when you engaged with a reader?
  - d. How much time do you spend engaging with readers?
    - ii. Do you feel like you spend too much time doing this?
    - iii. How often do you check social media during the workday?
  - e. Do you feel that your supervisors provide you with enough support to actively engage in online formats?
8. Imagine you are the leading editor for your team. What changes would you make to how on your team sources news?
9. How do you think your organization defines quality journalistic content?
  - a. Does your organization value accuracy in the news that is published?
  - b. Does your organization value the speed in which news is published?
10. Have you experienced a situation where a reader comment has prompted feedback? (i.e., changes to an article, caused journalist to write new story, or think about story differently.
  - a. Do other journalists in your organization read and respond to comments?
  - b. What do colleagues say about commenting in your office?
11. Have you ever changed an article on feedback from a reader comment?
  - a. Have you ever written a new article based on feedback from a reader comment?
  - b. Have you ever thought different about a story or related-issue after reading reader comments?
12. Does your organization monitor whether you're with engaging with your audience?
  - a. If yes: In what ways?
13. In general, how much do you trust your audience members?
14. In your own words, what are the three most important things about being a journalist in the United States? (gets at professional ideology)
15. Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you would like to add?



## APPENDIX B: IRB INFORMED CONSENT BRIEFING

Hi, my name is Blair Kellerhals, and I am a graduate student seeking my master's degree in Public Communication and Technology at Colorado State University. We are conducting a research study on journalists and their attitudes and perceptions toward using user-generated content for their work in their organization. I am the co-principal investigator, and the principal investigator is my advisor, Dr. David Wolfgang who is an Assistant Professor for the department of journalism and media communication at Colorado State University.

We would like you to answer a few questions in a brief, 30-minute interview over the phone. With your permission, the call will be recorded for transcription purposes. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

We will be collecting personal information, such as name and email address, but your data will be anonymized with all other data and will be reported in the aggregate. To protect your information, I will store personal information on a password-protected computer and will password protect all files relating to this study. There are no known risks or direct benefits to you, but we hope to gain more knowledge on journalists and their attitudes towards using user-generated content in their work environments today.

If you would like to participate, please respond directly to this email to schedule a time to be interviewed. You are welcome to reach out to me or Dr. Wolfgang for any questions that you have about this research study. Our contact information is enclosed below. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553.

Thank you for your time,

Blair Kellerhals  
Co-Investigator, Colorado State University  
[Blair.kellerhals@gmail.com](mailto:Blair.kellerhals@gmail.com) | 970-380-3700

Dr. David Wolfgang  
Principal Investigator and Assistant Professor, Colorado State University  
[David.wolfgang@colostate.edu](mailto:David.wolfgang@colostate.edu)

## APPENDIX C: IRB DETERMINATION MEMO



Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office  
Office of Vice President for Research  
Fort Collins, CO 80523-2011  
(970) 491-1553  
FAX (970) 491-2293

**Date:** January 10, 2018

**To:** David Wolfgang, Ph.D., Dept of Journalism & Media Communication  
Blair Kellerhals, Dept of Journalism & Media Communication

**From:** IRB Coordinator, Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office  
(RICRO\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu)

**Re:** Leveraging User-Generated Content for Today's Journalistic Practices

**Funding:** Unfunded

**IRB ID:** 243 -18H **Review Date:** January 10, 2018  
**This project is valid from three years from the review date.**

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The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Coordinator has reviewed this project and has declared the study exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations with conditions as described above and as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b):

Category 2 - Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

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The IRB determination of exemption means that:

- **This project is valid for three years from the initial review.** After the three years, the file will be closed and no further research should be conducted. If the research needs to continue, please let the IRB Coordinator know before the end of the three years. You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.
- You must carry out the research as proposed in the Exempt application, including obtaining and documenting (signed) informed consent if stated in your application or if required by the IRB.
- Any modification of this research should be submitted to the IRB through an email to the IRB Coordinator, prior to implementing any changes, to determine if the project still meets the Federal criteria for exemption.
- Please notify the IRB Coordinator (RICRO\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu) if any problems or complaints of the research occur.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review by the IRB. **Only the IRB or designee may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a similar study in the future.