Journalism's ontology of oscillation: a metamodern perspective.

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Journalism's ontology of *oscillation*: A metamodern perspective

Abstract

This conceptual paper makes the case for a metamodern perspective in the study of digital journalism. Identifying *oscillation*, the movement in-between opposing poles, as the overarching defining principle of digital journalism's ontology, the paper argues that we should abandon old tropes related to postmodernism and instead situate journalism's struggles for autonomy and authority within present-day culture's structure of feeling. Metamodernism is defined by "an oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment", which could be seen in the works of modern artists who "increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favour of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth and metaxis" (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). Moving beyond postmodernist conceptualisations of journalism's struggles over its identity helps shed light on its efforts to reinvent and rebuild itself in the post-truth age, and metamodernism offers a fruitful conceptual lens through which to examine the negotiations between multiple forces and imperatives that vie for power over what journalism *is* and *should* be.

Keywords: digital journalism, cultural studies, critical theory, postmodernism, metamodernism

Introduction

21st century journalism is in a mercurial state of existential quandary: oscillating between competing external forces and the need to preserve its autonomy, between increasingly active and distrustful audiences and the need to reach them, between continuity and change, between tradition and innovation, market and journalistic values, business and social function, between the way things once were and the way they could be, chasing a "horizon that is forever receding" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010) in an effort to reclaim its authority and social position it once held.

"How can journalism foster empathy, tolerance, reasoning, and other central values of democratic communication at a time of broken-up public life?," asks Silvio Waisbord (2018) in a succinct and true encapsulation of the challenges and responsibilities of journalism in a post-truth public sphere defined by chaotic participatory culture, affective and exaggerated displays of public opinion, societal polarization, and a declining trust in institutions. When a select few platforms control the distribution and flow of information, and users' data related to their media habits and behaviours, when the public are increasingly unsure of who they can trust, how can journalism reclaim its authority as a trusted voice?

Caught up in a never-ending existential battle over the future of journalism, news organisations old and new are increasingly seeking ways to rebuild, rethink, and reinvent its old "refractured paradigm" (Broersma, 2013), thereby challenging its traditional boundaries and changing its cultural production processes, its products, and the ways it relates to publics and acts as "an information provider" and "mediator of societal values" (Josephi, 2016). The battle of journalism, therefore, is not just a battle for survival. Former *Guardian* editor-in-chief Alan Rusbridger (2018) argues that, in a reality dominated by uncontrolled horizontal spread of information where we cannot tell fact from fiction, a new democracy of knowledge "has swept over us in the blink of an eye" that could be "liberating, energising and transformative", just as it could be insidious, dangerous and "sort-of-slightly-true enough to be turned into toxic demagoguery". In this unprecedented participatory environment, defined by an "affective turn" where appeal to human emotions is becoming a strategic ritual of communication (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), what is really at stake is "how societies would exist without reliable news" (Rusbridger, 2018).

This carries an onus of social responsibility, with no guarantee of success: as fragmenting audiences migrate to alternative sources of information, re-engaging these

audiences becomes a Sisyphean task requiring ingenuity, sensitivity to audience behaviour, tastes and needs, and concerted efforts to create a closer relationship between producer and audience. As a result, news producers have begun experimenting with storytelling formats, harnessing the interactive affordances of digital media, remediating forms and styles associated with literature, theatre and art, and borrowing concepts from user-centred design to make their output more vivid, authentic, human and relatable (Borges-Rey, 2016; Dowling & Vogan, 2015; Hiippala, 2016; Jacobson et al.., 2016; Kwong, 2017, 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). It is therefore critical to examine journalism's efforts to rebuild, reclaim and reconstruct its ways-of-being and ways-of-doing, with a keen sensitivity to the present conjuncture.

This paper begins by outlining the socio-cultural contours in which journalism's attempts to reclaim its performative power are situated, departing from the dominant view of news production as an institutional process towards a conceptualisation of digital journalism as a 'post-industrial' creative practice and system of knowledge. It goes on to review scholarly efforts to conceptualise digital journalism as a field, arguing that the definitional ambiguities observed can be fruitfully explained through the metamodernist concept of *oscillation*. Taking a conjunctural approach and following calls for a *beyond-journalism* ontology (Deuze & Witschge, 2018; 2020), I argue that digital journalism oscillates between institutional and cultural imperatives, between structure and agency, and between multiple forces vying for power over what journalism is and could be. The paper offers an exploration of the expressions of metamodernist cultural sensibilities in digital storytelling along the three axes proposed by van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (2017) – **historicity**, **affect**, and **depth**, which intersect and find expression in digital stories' **form**. The paper concludes by proposing a research agenda where the metamodernist framework could be applied.

A conjunctural perspective on digital journalism

Reviewing the literature on digital journalism, in their Introduction to the *Theories of Journalism in a Digital Age* special issue of *Journalism Practice*, Steensen and Ahva (2016) predict a move away from traditional conceptual thinking on journalism structures and practices. While this prediction has materialised in the rise in socio-material practice-focused studies of digital journalism, normative theories of journalism are experiencing something of a resurgence (Singer, 2019; Pickard, 2020; Schudson, 2020) in light of the challenges posed by the endemic spread of misinformation, the rising importance

of social media channels for communication, and the wider affective turn in the public sphere. This is due, in no small measure, to a historic shift, which 2016 presented: in this watershed moment, the crisis of journalism, its plummeting authority and the implications of public loss of trust in the institution of journalism for deliberation and democracy, became most palpable and manifest in unprecedented political decisions such as Brexit in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US. It could be argued that this was the culmination (possibly just one of many to come) of wider socio-political and economic high capitalist shake-ups in the last two decades – including the global financial crisis, media convergence with its supposed 'democratisation' of public discourse, the de-ritualisation of media consumption, the concentration of media power in the hands of a few technology companies – developments, all of which have chipped away at journalism's authority, eroded public trust in the media and posed the existential question of journalism's survival. In an age when journalistic audiences are exposed to the fallacy behind journalism's claim to truth, aware that "news does not convey *the* truth but *a* truth", news organisations are finding it harder to reclaim their performative power, and hence their authority and credibility that result from it (Broersma, 2013, p. 43). The strategic rituals it has traditionally relied on to substantiate its claims to truth, such as the objectivity regime, no longer hold sway, and are being rethought and re-imagined in the digital world. While truthfulness continues to be a universal criterion for persuasive communication, we are seeing a plethora of new styles and strategic rituals – such as authenticity and emotionality - emerging in response to changing media habits, behaviours, sensibilities, and technological, political and cultural developments.

This paper follows calls for culturalist perspectives and culturally situated approaches to journalism (Bogaerts & Carpentier, 2013; Hanitzsch, 2007; Singer, 2019; Zelizer, 2004), viewing journalism "as a socio-discursive struggle that reaches far beyond the material dimension of individual and institutional practice" (Bogaerts & Carpentier, 2013, p. 70). This demands a conjunctural sensitivity and an awareness of the wider shifts in media, society, and culture. A conjunctural approach pays attention to the position of cultural phenomena within a particular discursive formation, in which they are "anchored very directly in relation to different forces", or articulated in a complex unity-in-difference of a structure (Grossberg & Hall, 1996, p. 142). Couldry (2006) argues that media studies should avoid media-centrism and offer wider sociological perspectives beyond its "excessive focus on the centralised systems of media production" (p. 186), situating media within the context of culture and real-life social experience. Media studies, he points out, should attempt to explore questions around, among other things, how media creates knowledge of the social world, and how that

knowledge is acquired, distributed, and used. Negus argues that the process of creative production should not be examined merely through an industry-focused lens, or conversely, from individual creative expression perspective, but should be positioned in the wider environment in which it takes place, acknowledging "the cultural, inter-personal and aesthetic struggles through which the work of a creative artist is realised, recognised and valued" (Negus, 2006, p. 208).

In a media environment shaped and continually reshaped by blurred, *and blurring*, boundaries and crumbling walls (Carlson, 2015; Eldridge, 2018; Ferrer-Conill & Karlsson, 2019; Usher, 2019), actors, actants and activities not traditionally associated with journalism challenge its norms and values, and infuse its rituals of meaning-making with new logic, thereby transforming journalism's function as a system of knowledge production. A conjunctural approach answers calls for a *beyond-journalism* ontology, which requires a broader conceptualisation of journalism beyond individuals and institutions (Deuze & Witschge, 2018; 2020), as "a profession in a permanent process of becoming" due to the fact, as Deuze and Witschge explain, that in practical terms, being a journalist in the 21st century means having to "perform *beyond journalism*" (2018, pp. 12-13). It is analytically sensitive to "the historical forces which have produced the present, and which continue to function as constraints and determinations on discursive articulation" (Grossberg & Hall, 1996, p. 144). Digital journalism, this paper argues, is a 'site of struggle' (Grossberg, 1996) oscillating between institutional and cultural imperatives, between structure and agency, and between multiple forces vying for power over what journalism is and could be.

Digital journalism's ontology of *oscillation*

A study of digital storytelling requires some conceptual attention to the ontology of digital journalism, or more precisely, what (if anything) makes digital journalism distinctive from traditional journalism. A recurrent, though not explicitly articulated, theme in the literature on the boundaries and ontology of digital journalism is that of *oscillation*, which, I argue, defines current digital journalism's nature of being, characterised by multiple oscillations: between continuity and change, digital and journalism, between the creative and industrial, between individual expression and organisational logics, between agency and structure, and between multiple poles of external forces – economic, public, and technological – that vie for power over what digital journalism is and could be. These tensions are not new: McQuail points out that journalists have always had to operate within various constrains, influences, and structural factors that affect their output. As Barger and

Barney succinctly explain: "The market requires giving the public what it wants; democracy requires giving the public what it needs" (2004, p. 199). The tensions that arise from oppositions such as constraint vs autonomy; routine production vs creativity, commercial vs art, and profit vs social purpose, are "at the heart of media-making" (McQuail, 2000, p. 246). Influences constraining the freedom of editorial output, which could come from proprietors, routines, advertisers, public relations, the social environment, and audiences, can be resisted, contested, or negotiated (Harcup, 2009, p. 18). Schudson (2013), for instance, points out that throughout history, journalism has always been robust and resilient to external forces and developments, invoking the metaphor of "birch trees whose trunks in the storms of winter bend very far over without breaking" (p. 195). But, to extend the metaphor, it could be argued that in the unpredictable climate of the participatory era, journalism is exposed to hurricane after hurricane which batter its foundations, leaving it exposed to the elements, the unrelenting winds and storms sweeping up whatever little comfort it may have into a muddy gushing river of information, forever threatening to burst its banks. In this life-or-death situation, journalists are faced with two choices: either hold on for dear life or go with the flow. What they do, in fact, is oscillate between the two.

Six years after the launch of *Digital Journalism*, Eldridge et al. (2019a) invited leading journalism scholars to reflect on what makes digital journalism distinctive (or not) from traditional journalism, publishing their contributions in a special issue of conceptual articles. In this collection, the editors, Eldridge, Hess, Tandoc and Westlund contend that digital journalism should be viewed as its own field, not a sub-field of journalism studies, as the latter would demand a journalism-centric approach, while what we need to consider is "the interplay between news, digitization, and the wider social spaces where everyday audiences and media users generate engagement with matters of public interest and the world(s) around them" (Eldridge et al., 2019a). Not only is "digital" more than a reference to technology, it "must always be situated within a larger socio-technical environment" and a broader set of dynamics. Digital journalism, Eldridge et al. argue, "is defined in part by its technological shifts, and in part by its journalistic legacy, the push and pull between an emphasis on continuity and change, or between digital and journalism" (2019b). A close look at the definitions offered by the scholars invited to contribute to the journal's special issue shows a wide variety of approaches and critical emphases, with no apparent consensus on what constitutes this new scholarly terrain. However, three overarching themes emerge from these definitions:

1. Transformation (of practice and forms)
2. A focus on journalism's relationship with publics/audiences
3. Journalism's networked nature

What could be discerned in the attempts to define digital journalism is a conceptual preference for either the "digital" or "journalism". Duffy and Hwa Ang's definition, for instance, emphasises the *digital* in digital journalism as an embodiment of the "philosophies, norms, practices, values and attitudes of digitization as they relate to society" (2019, p. 382). Waisbord stresses digital journalism's networked nature that is "characterized by network settings and practices that expand the opportunities and spaces for news" (2019, p. 352). For Zelizer, however, the difference between journalism and digital journalism is "a difference in degree rather than kind". She argues that digital journalism is just one of the "many conduits over time that have allowed us to imagine optimum links between journalism and its publics", pointing out its rhetorical nature as one that attempts to sustain journalism as worthwhile. It is in fact journalism that "gives technology its purpose, shape, perspective, meaning and significance, not the other way around," Zelizer stresses (p. 349). Zelizer thus places an emphasis on *journalism,* with the "digital" in digital journalism seen as "a modality, not an environment, a foreground, not a background, a stage not reality." In their thorough multifaceted definition in this special issue, Steensen et al. (2019), stress digital journalism's nature as a transforming social practice, changing genres and formats, and an increasingly symbiotic relationship with audiences, while also arguing that digital journalism studies "is journalism studies - with a little twist".

Capturing these definitional ambiguities, Eldridge et al (2019b) argue that digital journalism oscillates between "*digital* and *journalism*, and between *continuity* and *change*", and that studying this fledgling field requires an acknowledgement of its fluid nature, but also a certain anchoring. To help with that, they present a heuristic device - the Digital Journalism Studies Compass, which "allows us to navigate the geographies of a dynamic field and embraces the continuums between *digital* and *journalism*, and between *continuity* and *change*". To understand how these tensions arise and how they are negotiated, we should abandon old tropes and concepts related to postmodernism such as disruption, dislocation, and the death of the grand narratives, and instead situate these struggles within the "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1954) that defines present-day culture, which requires heightened conjunctural sensitivity. This is important for two reasons. First, there has been an understanding in the world of literature and art that postmodernism is

no longer the vanguard at least since literary critic Linda Hutcheon (2002) called for a new vernacular to better capture the essence of the new cultural sensibilities that have emerged since the start of the new millennium. As van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017) explain, postmodernist concepts have lost their critical value in relation to the current historical moment and we need new language to explain what it is like to live, and experience, in the 21st century. Secondly, while the postmodern challenges to journalism defined by scholars in terms of disruption, dislocation, liquidity, the loss of journalism's grand narrative, and convergence (Bogaerts & Carpentier, 2013), are still valid, moving *beyond* such conceptualisations of journalism's struggles over its identity helps shed light on how journalism tries to 're-imagine' itself.

In this respect, the concept of metamodernism has a lot of critical value to offer digital journalism research. Described as a "structure of feeling" and a general sensibility which arose in the late 1990s and is fully unfolding today, Vermeulen and van den Akker posit that metamodernism has replaced postmodernism as a way to experience the world, to "try to grasp the sensibility of the metamodern condition, to comprehend what it means to experience and live in the twenty-first century" (van den Akker & Vermeulen, 2017, p. 11). Deriving from Plato's term metaxy, (Greek: μεταξύ) meaning 'in between' or 'the movement between opposing poles', metamodernism is defined by "an oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment", which could be seen in the works of modern artists who "increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favour of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth and metaxis" (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). The cultural theorists explain that metamodernism is a structure of feeling, a high capitalist world phenomenon that "emerges from, and reacts to, the postmodern as much as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today's stage of global capitalism. As such, it is shot through with productive contradictions, simmering tensions, ideological formations and … frightening developments…" (van den Akker & Vermeulen, 2017, p. 5). Borrowing the term "structure of feeling" from Raymond Williams (1954), van den Akker and Vermeulen explain that this is "a sensibility, a sentiment that is so pervasive as to call it structural", which encapsulates a sense of time and place, and expresses a common 'unity-of-experience' of a period (2017, p. 6). They argue that, just as Fredric Jameson (1984) attributed the 1960s as the transitional decade for postmodernism to take shape, the 2000s were a transitional period for the crystallisation of metamodernism as today's dominant cultural logic in response to a fourth configuration of Western capitalist societies (Kaletsky, 2011; van den Akker & Vermeulen,

2017, p. 12, 18). Metamodernism as a cultural logic has emerged in response to the current conditions of neoliberalism and capitalism, structured by historical developments in society, politics and economics such as globalisation and growing global inequalities, 9/11, the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the global financial crisis (2008), climate change, Web 2.0 and network culture, with its associated forms of digital labour (Crary, 2014; Kaletsky, 2011), the perceived excesses of the free market, the general disenchantment with neoliberalism, and the lack of viable alternative model to replace it (Harari, 2019). A metamodern vernacular can help us analyse creative production/cultural practices and their relation to the objective conditions/conjuncture in which they are grounded, by which they are structured, and to which they respond.

Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates:

> between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity…. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm.
> (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010)

This oscillation is "a shorthand for the dominant way in which the various senses of a bend are manifest in today's artistic representations, cultural mediations and political discourses" (van den Akker & Vermeulen, 2017, p. 6). Van den Akker and Vermeulen point out that since the turn of the millennium, new overlapping aesthetic phenomena have emerged (such as New Romanticism in the Arts, the New Mannerism in crafts, the New Aesthetic in design, the New Sincerity in literature, the New Weird in music, and Quirky Cinema), each of which characterised by "an attempt to incorporate postmodern stylistic and formal conventions while moving beyond them" as "we witness the return of realist and modernist forms, techniques and aspirations (to which the metamodern has a decidedly different relation than the postmodern)" (2017, p. 3). The concept of *oscillation* should be interpreted as a *both/neither* dialectic between modern and postmodern predilections. The metamodern sensibility is characterised by *informed naivete* - sincere and self-aware efforts to reconcile irreconcilable differences and (often doomed) attempts to negotiate polarities, in which artists chase an ever-receding horizon of possibilities (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). Unlike postmodernism, the metamodernist impulses do not constitute a radical break, but rather, a (drive/hope for) a return to positive entities which postmodernism, in its 'sense of an end',

had nihilistically denied – such as meaning, authenticity and depth. Metamodern epistemology is defined by an *as-if* dynamic, "inspired by a modern naivete yet informed by postmodern skepticism", which involves "consciously commit[ting] to an impossible possibility" (ibid., p. 5). Metamodernism, Vermeulen and van den Akker explain, "moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find" (ibid.).

Digital journalism's metamodernist expressions: Historicity, Affect, Depth, Form

But what are the expressions of the dominant metamodern cultural logic in digital journalism practices? These are mapped out below, along the three axes proposed by van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (2017), which follow Fredric Jameson's conceptualisations of the cultural logic of postmodernism: **Historicity**, **Affect** and **Depth** (1984). To these three, I have added **Form,** following Broersma (2010), who argues that form and style are a manifestation of the social code between journalists and audiences and therefore, a vehicle to understanding journalism's performative power. Exploring the expressions of the cultural sensibility of the current historical moment in digital journalism along these axes allows for a nuanced conjunctural analysis, in which present-day knowledge production practices can be empirically situated.

Historicity: Re-constructing journalism and a return to its grand narrative

The metamodern regime of historicity finds expression in the oscillation between tradition and innovation, a struggle that manifests in discourses of reconstruction and efforts to return to journalism's Fourth Estate, public service ideals through practices such as engaged or constructive journalism, while it is debatable whether such efforts, albeit altruistic, are sustainable or to what extent they reach the public.

Firstly, despite the precarious situation that legacy journalism finds itself in, digital journalism is seen as an opportunity to rebuild journalism, using the affordances of new technologies, while embracing their traditional journalistic values (Schudson, 2013; Vos & Ferrucci, 2019). Digital journalists see themselves as the "salvation of journalism", or "the future of journalism", and enjoy an elevated standing in modern-day newsrooms, tapping into legitimating discourses such as audience engagement and profitability, while believing that they are a new breed "evolved to survive in the age of technological and economic disruption" (Vos & Ferrucci, 2019, p. 40). At the same time, there is a hearkening back to traditional notions of good journalism, which are being "recuperated in the online world"

(Bogaerts & Carpentier, 2013, p. 69). This "metamodern regime of historicity" is a defining trait of the contemporary cultural moment, whose "present opens onto – in an attempt to bring within its fold – pasts [sic] possibilities and possible futures" (van den Akker, 2017, p. 22).

New approaches to storytelling have emerged that seek to bridge the gap between journalism and the public, to reimagine journalism while embracing its normative commitments. There is a return to the idea of public journalism (Glasser, 1999), to journalism's normative civic responsibility as a champion of the public's right to know who is actively involved in public life. For instance, "slow journalism" (Ball, 2016; Dowling, 2016; Masurier; 2015) is an approach to storytelling that moves away from traditional news reporting based on simplification within the rigid confines of news values towards long-form storytelling seeking to provide contextual and nuanced information. In impact-driven approaches such as "constructive journalism" (Bro, 2019; Mast et al., 2019) and "solutions journalism" (Amiel & Powers, 2019; McIntyre, 2019), journalists go a step further to offer solutions to societal issues, embracing their public service role and social responsibility as information providers.

As a response to the resurgent discourse of fake news and misinformation, Vos and Thomas observe a "revival of the gatekeeping metaphor's normative force" and the promotion of "a return to greater gatekeeping oversight" since 2017, the year after Donald Trump's election and the Brexit vote in the UK, the results of which are widely alleged to have stemmed from the dissemination of false facts and conspiracy theories (2019, p. 410). Gatekeeping, therefore, or the practices of news selection, editorial direction and control, and editorial oversight, is seen as a return to "something journalism had traditionally done well, but the internet had not". The oscillation between a realisation that its legitimacy is under threat, and a sincere desire to seek to reclaim that legitimacy, authority and power, "force journalism into identity work, accepting some rearticulations while rejecting and fiercely fighting others" (Bogaerts & Carpentier, 2013, p. 70). Positioning the democracy/journalism paradigm as the backbone of journalistic normativity, Ward (2018) calls for "a democratically engaged journalism" which "clearly understands the conditions for egalitarian democracy to flourish and is prepared to use the best methods of journalism to promote this political goal" (pp. 32-33). Thomas (2019) argues for a more expansive treatment of journalistic normativity, which requires a back-to-basics approach: turning our gaze to the "glue" that holds journalism together (p. 377). He posits that journalism's public obligation to be helpful should be regarded as its normative anchor. Engaged journalism, for

example, is seen as a return to the traditional values of journalism in its mission, standards, and identity, while at the same time embracing the interactive affordances and participatory values of digital media. Thus, we see calls for the re-articulation of journalism's mission, which Fancher (2019) argues "should be principled and consistent with the historic public service mission of journalism" but also "practical, acknowledging the shifting relationship between journalists and the public".

In these efforts to reinvent itself in the digital world, oscillating between practices and challenges that disrupt its traditional ways of being, and a further entrenchment in traditional functions and values such as truth-seeking and public service, we can discern a return to the grand narrative of journalism's central role as the guardian of truth and democracy.

Affect: Emotionality as a strategic ritual and an aesthetic

Alison Gibbons argues that the resurgence of affect is one of the defining traits of the cultural logic of metamodernism:

> In a crisis-ridden world, subjects are once more driven by a desire for attachment to others and to their surroundings…In such a fragile and fragmentary reality, the decentred self asserts itself by grounding its subjectivity in lived experience as well as in the interactions between our bodies and our environments. (Gibbons, 2017b, p. 130).

Gibbons advances the argument that relationality is an important dimension in contemporary subjectivity, in which, she explains, identities are understood to be both real and constructed (ibid.). She suggests conceiving of metamodern subjectivity and affect as situated: "the represented subject seeks to situate or ground their self corporeally in the world, including in relation to others…" (Gibbons, 2017a, p. 120). This shift towards embedded relationality has found expression in the increasingly personalised, affective, and emotion-driven storytelling strategies journalism outlets employ to engage the hearts and minds of audiences (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013, 2016, 2019). The search for affect manifests as a strategic ritual in modern-day digital storytelling practices which aim to generate empathy, emotional understanding, and compassion. It is driven, in no small part, by the affordances and architecture of social media platforms, which facilitate, and encourage, public expressions of affect (Papacharissi, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Wahl-Jorgensen argues that the shift in journalism's epistemology in the digital era "has opened up new spaces for more emotional and personalised forms of expression in public discourse" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016, p. 128). These developments – including the de-ritualization" of

news consumption, the fragmentation of mass audiences, and a shift in discourses of citizenship from "civic" to "managerial" requirements (Broersma & Peters, 2013) – have been ongoing since the 1990s and, as Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) explains, remain "profoundly destabilising and transformative". Drawing on a discourse analysis of Pulitzer Prize-winning stories, Wahl-Jorgensen points out that journalistic genres are "infused with emotion" and "use emotion as a journalistic tool in an institutionalized and ritualized fashion" to elicit emotional reaction in the audience (p. 55). Emotional storytelling has become "central to the world-making powers of journalism" (ibid., p. 36) and we need to regard emotionality as a strategic ritual in its own right that is "a valued form of cultural capital in the journalistic field" (ibid., p. 55). With rising evidence that visual content adds vividness, engages the emotions of the audience, and generates empathy (Powell et al., 2015; Robinson, 2002), digital teams increasingly refer to what they do as "visual storytelling", which is reflected in the design and development of new formats characterised by visual salience (Anderson & Borges-Rey, 2019).

The regime of affect manifests as an oscillation between embedded and detached relationality in digital journalism's attempts to connect to, and understand, their audiences. The mobilisation of empathy in digital storytelling represents (efforts to) move away from postmodernist detachment. It "goes against the liberal tradition's emphasis on the dispassionate and disembodied ideal of public debate, suggesting that, instead, we can only appreciate the circumstances of the concrete and embodied other." (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 78). At the same time, journalists remain incapable of knowing if that effect has been achieved due to constraints in the ways they envision their audiences through over-reliance on quantitative metrics of audience engagement (Carlson, 2018). Due to the ambiguous position of journalistic audiences – "between creative and quantified" (Anderson, 2011), or between real and constructed, the results of these efforts to relate to the public swing between embedded and detached relationality. Whatever the intent behind emotional claims and the context in which they occur, Wahl-Jorgensen posits that they should be regarded as "regimes of truth, intimately connected to and constituted through power relations" (2019, p. 173).

Depth: The search for, and illusion of, authenticity

The metamodern 'structure of feeling' is also characterised by attempts to reconstruct a long-lost sense of depth, meaning and sincerity. Vermeulen (2017) argues that we are witnessing the "resurfacing of depth", seen in examples of strategic rituals of public discourse such as performatism, curated authenticity and earnestness in politics. While in the

19th and early 20th century surfaces were presumed to reflect depth,

postmodernists repudiated that model, insisting that late capitalism has flattened the

distinction between the real and its representation, resulting in a simulation of reality,

a world pervaded with simulacra precluding the creation of

anything original (Baudrillard, 1994 [1981]). The postmodern 'crisis of representation'

is being replaced by a contemporary yearning for depth and authenticity: as Vermeulen points

out, artists, activists and writers "feel that appearances may well inspire sensations of an

outside, of an elsewhere – even if the existence of that elsewhere is by no means certain,

often unlikely or impossible" (2017, p. 149). Vermeulen explains that while "the modernists

excavated depth from the surface, [and] the postmodernists flattened it by means of the

surface, the metamodernists apply depth to the surface" (2017, p. 149). Vermeulen points out,

however, that this desire for a return to depth often remains an illusion: "…the return of

historicity, affect and depth … is a return that should be understood above all as a desperate

but wishful attempt to think, feel and perceive historically, spatially and corporeally" (p.

149).

In the wider public sphere, this metamodernist tendency finds expression

in demands for actors and institutions to 'perform' sincerity, truth and authenticity in order to

gain trust, a development also linked to the rise of the "audience democracy" (Brants, 2013)

and the important part the audio-visual affordances of mobile technologies, with their

immediacy, visuality and rawness, play in people's daily lives (Blaagaard, 2013). The

emergence of a 'new authenticity' propelled by these participatory

developments (Chouliaraki & Blaagaard, 2014) has given rise to a "new system of truth

claims", a new episteme, whose performative power lies not in the authority of objectivity,

but in "the truth inherent in unrehearsed, unpolished and personal accounts of ordinary

people" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016, p. 135). This observation transposes the power of truth-

claims from the depths of their immanent truth value to the surface of their expression since

they are only perceived to be credible and persuasive when they *appear* raw and

authentic. Wahl-Jorgensen et al. (2010) explain that the "understanding of authenticity

advanced by audiences involves the idea of an uncensored outpouring of personal

storytelling, emotional integrity, realism, immediacy and identification" (p. 135).

The rising currency of authentic expression is also emphasised by Browse (2017),

who offers post-truth politics as an example of an important domain that is defined by the

performance of depth and sincerity, and the "triumph of 'truthiness' over truth". 21st century

politicians increasingly deploy the rhetorical strategy of 'curated authenticity' in which "the

appeal to ethos is the argumentative modus operandi", but ultimately, while appealing to public demands for authenticity and appearing "plain-speaking, gutsy and authentic", the post-truth politician projects yet "another depthless surface" (Browse, 2017, p. 168, p. 181). In a similar vein, Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) points out that mediated emotions such as anger and phenomena such as Trump's angry populism, which are the flavour of the day, are inherently ideological - these, too, are closely related to performative authenticity as a regime of truth.

The public's expectations of authenticity stand in stark contrast to journalism's traditional approach of professional distance and detachment. Journalists are not exempt from public demands for authenticity and transparency as a test to 'prove' their truthfulness and credibility, and in their attempts to bridge the gap of trust with their audiences, news organisations are engaging in more humanized, authentic, and personalised forms of storytelling (as explained above) while retaining their gatekeeping function. The stakes of not responding to audience demands are high: as Waddell's study (2018) suggests, audience reactions are an important factor in the equation when it comes to the overall perception of journalism's truthfulness and credibility. Waddell (2018) found that audiences' angry comments on news stories can have a negative effect on perceptions of importance of the news, an effect that is amplified if these comments are particularly vivid and authentic.

In its efforts to move beyond depthless surfaces towards more meaningful and authentic representation, digital journalism oscillates between varying degrees of interactivity and immersion (Anderson & Borges-Rey, 2019), in which surfaces (the interface) reflect depth (the backend code), but depth remains inscrutable to the reader. In interactive storytelling, for example, certain UX design techniques create the impression of depth of engagement whereby the user experience remains static from the perspective of the user, but 'under the hood' it is carefully crafted, curated and tightly controlled by the author. This produces an "illusion of interactivity" (Appelgren, 2017, 2019) on the surface, with a depth that remains opaque. Similarly, an illusion of presence and authenticity is achieved in VR journalism, which seeks to immerse audiences in a virtual story world. Creating the impression of depth, of a source that is not directly accessible, is a core technique of the aesthetic practice of performatism, an effect that is created, for example, through the technique of double framing in contemporary photography (Eshelman, 2017).

Form: **Digital journalism's super-hybridity and stylistic 'upcycling'**

Huber and Funk (2017) argue that critical attention to form allows for reconstructing the aesthetic and formal features of a work as a site of encounter between producer and audience. Form is, crucially, also the discursive and material space where the cross-cutting axes of historicity, affect and depth intersect, and where the various expressions of the metamodernist cultural logic are most visible. It is the space of experiential and representational possibility of creative reconstruction, embodied relationality, and depth aesth-ethics (as described above).

The form of digital journalistic works is characterised by an oscillation between multiple cultural practices, which finds expression in the "upcycling" of past styles, conventions, and techniques. The aesthetic approach of "upcycling", van den Akker and Vermeulen argue, differs from postmodernist aesthetic predilections of shallow eclecticism through "recycling" canonical works, in that metamodern artists "pick out from the scraphead of history those elements that allow them to resignify the present and reimagine a future" (2017, p. 10). The latter, they stress, aims to do justice to the original and add value, rather than expose a lack of substance, through parody and pastiche, thereby "not radically parting with [postmodernist] attitudes and techniques but by incorporating and redirecting them towards new positions and horizons..." (ibid.)

In digital journalism, this bent for deep, meaningful and judicious syncretism manifests in the "hybridity" of journalistic styles, which Mast et al. (2017) argue, expresses "the creative transformations, productive collaborations and innovative developments, witnessed in contemporary journalism, which is always 'in progress' or 'under construction'". The hybrid nature of digital stories is evident in the combination of various semiotic modes, such as text, images, looping videos, soundscapes, or voiceovers, into a cohesive narrative (Hiippala, 2016). Anderson et al. (2012) claim that "the dynamic range of journalism is increasing along several axes at once" and that "the internet has unleased demand for more narrative and more data-driven news, for a wider range of real-time sources and wider distribution of long-form pieces" (p. 107).

As social media platforms play an ever-prominent role in the distribution of news, there are seemingly two polar trends in media organisations' efforts to reach their ever-migrating audiences. On the hard news front, articles are being packaged in short, modular, atomized formats, in a trend called "structured journalism". *New York Times'* R&D team, *NYTLabs*, and *BBC News Labs*, for example, have developed the concept of 'particles' – allowing for deeper, contextual, semantic information to be integrated into bite-sized, social-media shareable news stories (Caswell, 2019; Lloyd, 2015). At the other end of the spectrum, digital longform features are created for lean-back immersive consumption – adding colour and depth to the factual, but also a stylistic effect (Dowling

& Vogan; 2015, Jacobson et al., 2016), and presenting a significant genre-bending shift as they merge the factual and the aesthetic by "seamless[ly] integrat[ing] multimedia into the narrative" (Jacobson et al., 2016). Digital storytelling often weaves together techniques that are typically associated with cinematic and fiction narratives, remediating existing cultural forms and languages, such as those associated with the literary and the documentary. Digital longforms, for instance, present a "break from the stereotypically distracting and superficial nature of online news", offering immersive, self-contained, narrative-driven online experiences that combine "print longform narratives' novelistic techniques with cinematic data visualization" (Dowling & Vogan, 2015). Jacobson et al. point out that the use of multimedia techniques like video loops and digital formats like parallax and single-page scroll also "represent the integration of technology in storytelling that holds literary purposes of its own", thereby pointing to a merging of legacy art forms and journalism (2016). One of the distinguishing characteristics of these emerging forms of journalism is the principle of "remediation" (Bolter & Grusin, 2000), which can be seen in the way stylistic conventions borrowed from other domains such as film, literature, theatre and gaming, are re-contextualised in digital journalistic stories.

This is, of course, not a development that is uniquely related to digital journalism. Heiser explains that "super-hybridity" is one of the expressions of metamodern cultural logic in cultural production more broadly, described by Heiser as "a set of artistic practices involving the use of a great number of hugely diverse cultural sources to create work", with 'super' designating "a tipping point in quality by way of quantity, under conditions of potentially global digital access, acceleration and accumulation" (Heiser, 2017, p. 55). Heiser explains the logic behind the term with the fact that "ultimately *all* new cultural practices – all ideas – are borne out of the sticky mess of existing practices and ideas, even if in their newness they seek to deny that very fact" (p. 56). Heiser argues that super-hybridity needs to be explored "as more than just a set of artistic practices, but as a social practice that can be exploited for all sorts of ideological and political ends", while emphasising that super-hybridity is "a method of responding to, or exploiting, the technological accelerated possibility of converging sources and influences; it is not an aesthetic programme in and of itself, lest an ethics" (2017, p. 56).

Conclusion

The paper takes a metamodernist perspective on digital journalism, specifically novel forms of storytelling, which are becoming increasingly prevalent practices for re-engaging audiences, regaining trust and credibility, and reclaiming journalism's authority in a post-truth world. Having situated digital journalism in the wider conjuncture and its 'structure of feeling', this paper has argued for a metamodernist approach to the study of journalism

phenomena as a way of teasing out the many oscillations - between continuities and discontinuities, idea contestations and normalisations - that define digital journalism's ontology of ever-becoming (Deuze & Witschge, 2018; 2020). This conjuncture-sensitive approach situates journalism's attempts to reclaim its authority within a wider social ecosystem at a specific cultural moment, which, if explored empirically, would shed light on how regimes of truth function and how knowledge is created in contemporary society more broadly.

Viewing digital journalism through the prism of oscillation, this conceptual paper offers a brief ontological exploration of digital storytelling as a wider cultural phenomenon, a performative discourse, and a system of knowledge and representation. Situating digital journalism in the current "structure of feeling" (Williams, 2001 [1954]) of metamodernism, a high capitalist development which Vermeulen and van den Akker convincingly argue has replaced postmodernism as a way to experience the world (2010, 2017), this paper maps out how metamodern cultural logic manifests in digital journalism along the three axes proposed by van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (2017): 1) **Historicity***: reconstructing journalism and a return to its grand narratives*, 2) **Affect***: emotionality as a strategic ritual and aesthetic*, and 3) **Depth***: the search for, and illusion of, authenticity*. The paper also gives consideration to **form**, defined by *super-hybridity and stylistic 'upcycling'*, as an important site of intersection of these crosscutting axes and the space where the expressions of metamodernist logic are most visible.

The conceptualisation proposed in this paper is a departure from established postmodernist notions such as disruption and dislocation, moving beyond a focus on journalism's struggles towards its (often failed, nevertheless crucial) efforts to "reinvent, reconfigure and create something new from the scraps of postmodernist decay" (Oscillate!, 2014). Future studies of digital journalism could use the metamodernist concepts presented here as a starting point, to inform epistemological approaches and methodologies for studying how meaning is created, or more specifically, co-created in digital journalistic storytelling. This would help reveal as much about meaning-making journalistic practices in 21st century journalism as it would about the symbolic nexus between journalism and its imagined/constructed audience, and journalism's increasingly contested place in the public sphere.

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JOURNALISM'S ONTOLOGY OF *OSCILLATION*: A METAMODERN PERSPECTIVE

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Three epistemological premises

- Premise 1: Journalism as knowledge and art

- Premise 2: Conjuncture-sensitive analytical lens

- Premise 3: Journalism as an oscillating *site of struggle*

Digital journalism's ontology of oscillation

Definitional ambiguities

The Digital Journalism Studies Compass:

"… allows us to navigate the geographies of a dynamic field and embraces the continuums between *digital* and *journalism*, and between *continuity* and *change.*"

(Eldridge, Hess, Tandoc, & Westlund, 2019, p. 387)

A metamodern perspective on digital journalism

- Metamodernism: a "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1954)

- Metaxy (*μεταξύ*) – Plato

"… an oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment, which could be seen in the works of modern artists who increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favour of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth and metaxis."
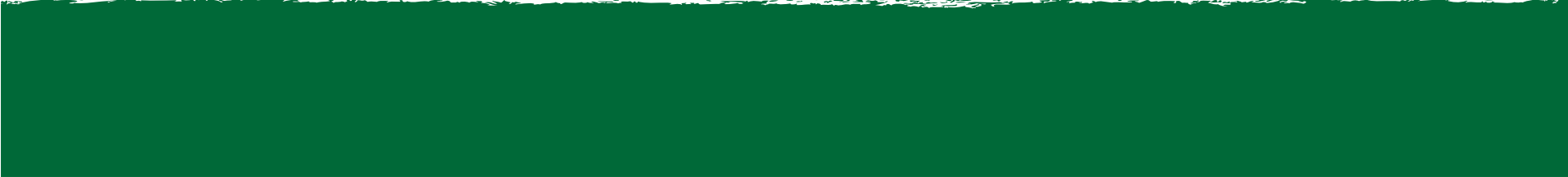
(Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010)

A defining principle of *oscillation*

"… a shorthand for the dominant way in which the various senses of a bend are manifest in today's artistic representations, cultural mediations and political discourses"

(van den Akker & Vermeulen, 2017, p. 6)

- *A both/neither* dialectic between modern and postmodern predilections
- Not a radical break, but a (drive/hope for) a return to positive entities, such as meaning, authenticity, and depth

Digital journalism's metamodernist expressions

- *Axis of Historicity*: Re-constructing journalism and a return to its grand narrative

- *Axis of Affect*: Relationality as a strategic ritual and an *aesth-ethic*

- *Axis of Depth*: The regime (illusion) of authenticity

Intersection Point of Form: Digital journalism's super-hybridity and stylistic 'upcycling'

Historicity: Re-constructing journalism

- Oscillation between tradition and innovation

- New approaches to storytelling: engaged, constructive, solutions journalism

- Discourses of reconstruction and efforts to return to journalism's Fourth Estate, public service ideals

- A return to the grand narrative of journalism's central role as the guardian of truth and democracy

Affect: Relationality as a strategic ritual and 'aesth-ethic'

"In a crisis-ridden world, subjects are once more driven by a desire for attachment to others and to their surroundings…In such a fragile and fragmentary reality, the decentred self asserts itself by grounding its subjectivity in lived experience as well as in the interactions between our bodies and our environments."

(Gibbons, 2017b, p. 130)

- Empathy: efforts to move away from professional detachment

- Embedded vs detached relationality

Depth: The regime (illusion) of authenticity

"Contemporary artists, activists and writers feel that appearances may well inspire sensations of an outside, of an elsewhere – even if the existence of that elsewhere is by no means certain, often unlikely or impossible."

(Vermeulen, 2017, p. 149)

"…the return of historicity, affect and depth … is a return that should be understood above all as a desperate but wishful attempt to think, feel and perceive historically, spatially and corporeally" (ibid.)

Depth: The regime (illusion) of authenticity

- The new "audience democracy" (Brants, 2013)

- Emergence of "new authenticity" (Chouliaraki & Blaagaard, 2014)

- "Illusion of interactivity" (Appelgren, 2017; 2019)

- Oscillation between varying degrees of interactivity and immersion in digital storytelling

Form: Site of encounter between producer and audience

- Point of intersection of *Historicity, Affect*, and *Depth* axes

- The space of experiential and representational possibility of *creative reconstruction*, *embedded relationality*, and *affective/depth aesth-ethics*

- Metamodern aesthetic approach of *stylistic 'upcycling'*:

"pick[ing] out from the scraphead of history those elements that allow [creators] to resignify the present and reimagine a future."

(van den Akker & Vermeulen, 2017, p. 10)

Form: **Super-hybridity and stylistic 'upcycling'**

- "Hybridity" of journalistic styles:

"the creative transformations, productive collaborations and innovative developments, witnessed in contemporary journalism, which is always 'in progress' or 'under construction'"

(Mast, Coesemans, & Temmerman, 2017, p. 9)

"A set of artistic practices involving the use of a great number of hugely diverse cultural sources to create work", whereby 'super' designates "a tipping point in quality by way of quantity, under conditions of potentially global digital access, acceleration and accumulation"

(Heiser, 2017, p. 55)

Towards a metamodernist research agenda

Analytical coordinates:

1. *Historicity*: Creative destruction/reconstruction
2. *Affect:* Embedded/Detached relationality
3. *Depth 'aesth-ethics':* The regime (illusion) of authenticity
4. *Form*: Producer-audience dynamics and stylistic 'upcycling'

THANK YOU!