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"Join the Coalition": How Pioneer Journalism Communities Reimagine Journalistic Epistemology from the Periphery

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how pioneer journalism communities reimagine journalistic epistemology from the periphery, and traces how ideas about journalism as a form of knowledge are embodied in their metadiscourses and enacted in their epistemic practice. Empirically grounded in metajournalistic discourse analysis of manifestos, event descriptions, and semi-structured interviews, this cross-national multi-method study explicates (1) pioneer journalism communities' epistemic values found in the manifestos of 20 journalism startups from different parts of the globe and online descriptions of seven innovation-focused industry events; and (2) how pioneer journalism communities put these values into epistemic practice, based on interviews with 30 pioneer journalism producers from four startups located in different journalistic cultures—*Bureau Local* (UK), *The Current* (Pakistan), *DoR* (Romania), and *New Naratif* (Malaysia). The study findings suggest that pioneer journalism communities around the world *imagine* their knowledge production praxis as *relational* and *meaningful*, and through their metadiscourses and storytelling practices, create self-contained spaces of collective action, where publics play an equally important role in the negotiation of knowledge. Pioneer journalism communities around journalism startups/cooperatives go beyond their traditional epistemic role as facilitators of knowledge and adopt a semi-political, ***knowledge-based advocacy*** role, seeking to act upon their visions of "a better future" (Rappler).

Introduction

Journalism has historically occupied an authoritative position as a knowledge production institution, partly due to the ritualistic and institutionalised nature of news production (Carlson 2020; Ekström 2002; Ettema and Glasser 1985; Park 1940; Schudson 1989; Tuchman 1978). However, in the post-industrial era of converged media, broken

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monopoly of legacy journalism, and (inter-)active audiences, institutionalised journalism's epistemic authority is being challenged (Carlson 2017; Ekström and Westlund 2019), with journalists struggling to reclaim their role as facilitators of knowledge. While truthfulness continues to be a universal criterion for persuasive communication, the ways in which truth is determined and constructed are being contested by ever-distrustful publics (Steensen 2019). The increasingly relativistic conceptions of what constitutes truth due to the proliferation of disinformation, the realisation that knowledge is a construct, and the resultant loss of public trust in journalism as a form of knowledge have led to an "epistemic crisis" of journalism as an institution (ibid.). In response to journalism's diminishing epistemic authority, newsrooms have embarked on a process of soul-searching, seeking to rethink core strategic rituals that journalism has traditionally relied on to substantiate its truth-claims, with calls for relational epistemology and a situated, systems approach to how journalists represent the world (Callison and Young 2019). Callison and Young (2019) argue that the crisis of journalism relates to its enduring impersonal epistemology grounded in professional detachment. They challenge journalism's traditional *view from nowhere* and advocate for situated knowledge, radical reflexivity and positionality as a counter to the distanced, "neutral" regime of reporting: "relating oneself and one's knowledge in systems and social order within which knowledge is produced, valued and mobilized" (2019, 13). Digital technology, Callison and Young point out, has amplified and laid bare long-ignored issues related to race, gender, intersectionality, and settler-colonialism, and the representational harms caused by avoiding structural conversations due to journalism's rigidity of methods "rooted in sedimented power relations" (2019, 202). Furthermore, we are seeing a plethora of new styles and strategic rituals—such as authenticity and emotionality—emerge in response to changing media habits, behaviours, sensibilities, and wider technological, political and cultural developments (Steinke and Belair-Gagnon 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019), further challenging journalism's traditional epistemic values, norms and practices.

Epistemic transformations have been most pronounced in journalism communities of practice that are collectively known as "pioneer journalism" (Hepp and Loosen 2021)—networks of journalism producers and local-global collectives that experiment with journalistic forms and practices, and whose *raison d'etre* is to reimagine journalism, its epistemology and its relationship with publics and audiences. Hepp and Loosen (2021) argue that pioneer journalists, through their imaginations and shared visions of journalism's "possible futures", can ultimately effect "the re-figuration of [its] foundations" (15). Crucially, through their knowledge-production practices, these transformation-focused communities have a strong potential to "bring about media-related change" (Hepp 2016, 927), which could sensitize us to shifts in epistemologies of digital journalism production more broadly, including how journalism's 'reimaginings' shape its possible futures as a form of knowledge.

Taking a cross-national perspective on pioneer journalism, this article examines how pioneer journalism communities around the world reimagine journalistic epistemology from the periphery. It does so by tracing how ideas about journalism as a form of knowledge are embodied in the metadiscourses of 20 pioneer journalism organisations in different parts of the world and enacted in the epistemic practice of four startups, based in Malaysia, Pakistan, Romania, and the UK. It sheds light on

how pioneer journalism communities around journalism startups/cooperatives, through their metadiscourses and epistemic practices, transform journalistic epistemology and point to some possible futures for journalism writ large as a knowledge-producing institution.

Literature Review

Traditionally, studies of journalistic epistemology have focused on the institutionalised, established forms of journalism, and the set of practices and discourses involved in the ritual social construction of reality within legacy organisational structures (Schudson 1989; Tuchman 1978). In this strand of research, studies of emerging actors who seek to reimagine journalism are few and far between. Most of the research on these new players places them at the periphery of the field to explore the (increasingly porous) boundaries of journalism. While new journalistic actors occupy a liminal position in relation to their established counterparts, between them, they differ considerably in their self-perceptions, practices, roles and motivations. Some scholars (e.g., Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018; Eldridge 2018) convincingly argue that this requires a more nuanced conceptualisation of these emerging actors to better understand how they redraw the contours of the field. Eldridge, for instance, makes a distinction between "agonistic" and "antagonistic" interlopers—the former defined as "critical friends" who pick holes in legacy media's practices in a constructive dialogue, in line with journalistic ideals, while the latter, as actors "mal-appropriating" journalistic identity for destructive ends (Eldridge 2018, 166–167). Others (Deuze and Witschge 2020; Schapals 2022) call for a conceptualisation that goes beyond the core-periphery dichotomy, arguing that many of the new players are a legitimate part of the institution of journalism. Pioneer journalism communities that form around journalism startups/cooperatives bridge the gap between these conceptualisations and are thus an interesting site to explore how journalistic epistemology is being transformed—while they position themselves firmly outside mainstream journalism (Deuze and Witschge 2020) as peripheral actors (Schapals 2022), they arguably play an integral part of journalism's transformation as they "imagine possible futures of the field" (Hepp and Loosen 2022, p. 121).

In Search of Lost Authority: The Shifting Epistemologies of Digital Journalism Production

Recent literature on the epistemologies of journalism points to a rupture in journalism's foundations as a system of knowledge. Ekström and Westlund (2019) explain that several wider trends in the media ecosystem have had implications for the process of legitimation of knowledge claims, thereby affecting journalism's authority, its performative power and public trust. First, Ekström and Westlund (2019, 19–20) point out that due to the broken monopoly of legacy media, there is now a diversity of competing knowledge claims from various actors, challenging the epistemic authority of traditional news. The dislocation of journalism to non-proprietary platforms and the impact of social media have fomented this process, presenting a serious challenge to the validation of news as knowledge. Second, journalism seems to be moving in

two contrasting directions at once: towards a more transparent, collaborative journalism, on the one hand, and towards algorithmically driven, black-box journalism, on the other, with the latter raising important ethical questions about editorial autonomy and transparency. Third, the increased significance of audience measurement and analytics in newsrooms, Ekström and Westlund argue, has consequences for journalists' epistemic practices and authority vis-à-vis audiences (2019).

Reflecting the changes in the media ecosystem and their impact on journalistic knowledge production practices outlined above, a discrete strand of research has been advanced as a subfield of Journalism Studies, under the banner "Epistemologies of Digital Journalism". In the broadest sense, this nascent sub-field seeks to explore how the changes in digital production are (re)shaping journalism's knowledge claims, its norms, and its practices of knowledge production (Ekström, Lewis, and Westlund 2020; Ekström and Westlund 2019). Recent empirical studies in this vein have included research into data-driven (specifically metrics-driven) news work culture (Ekström, Ramsälv, and Westlund 2022; Vulpius 2022), online sourcing practices (Seo 2020), live-blogging as a genre (Matheson and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020), the epistemologies of breaking news (Ekström, Ramsälv, and Westlund 2021), and the coordination of online live broadcasting (Westlund and Ekström 2021). Few studies of the epistemologies of digital journalism, however, have explicitly linked community-centred journalistic practices to the journalistic production of knowledge. A notable exception is Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim's case study of journalistic participatory practices in a WhatsApp group, a "meso-space" which enabled sustained reciprocal exchanges between journalists and audiences, resulting in the co-production of knowledge (2020). Studies such as the above are important in the context of the epistemic crisis of the present, to explore how journalistic epistemic praxis is being reimagined through embracing active audiences in the collective production of journalism as a form of knowledge. As Domingo and Le Cam (2015) point out, the boundaries between journalism and communities are constantly traversed in news production, turning journalism into a "social practice in dispersion". Actors outside journalistic institutions actively participate in the co-construction of news and "in doing so, they extend the meaning of what we should consider as part of the social activity of making the news" (2015, 138). The narration of news could, thus, be conceptualised as a collective "interdiscursive dialogue", with the news "collectively produced by practices and discourses" (2015, 150). This community-centred, participative perspective is critical in an era characterised by decreasing trust, rising cynicism and rampant misinformation, which has made reconnecting with the public one of the major challenges facing journalism as an institution whose normative societal function is to build and connect communities and whose epistemic authority hinges on it retaining its societal relevance (Waisbord 2018). It would require further attention to the ways in which audiences and communities are now part of journalistic epistemology—or the values, norms, and practices of knowledge production.

Journalism's Reimaginings: "X Journalism" and Pioneer Communities of Practice

With the "post-industrial" turn in the creative industries, more broadly, defined by increasingly networked modes of production (Castells 2010), journalism has been forced to seek ways to adapt to new channels, editorial cycles and logics of media

production, leading to a plethora of 'pioneering' philosophies, practices, and forms seeking to reimagine journalism, and particularly, its relationship with audiences and the public. Journalism's pioneering moments are, of course, not a new phenomenon, and can be traced as far back as the seventeenth century, with the rise of small radical publications in the UK (Harcup 2003). More recently, the emergence of the New Journalism in the 1960s reimagined journalism as a genre, bringing it closer to the literary tradition of deep reporting, development of characters, and long-form narrative (Wolfe 1973). Since the advent of the network society and the internet, pioneering moments have proliferated. Interactive and data journalism, for instance, emerged at the end of the 2000s, reimagining journalism as a process and a news format (Borges-Rey 2016; Usher 2016). Other more recent movements, such as engaged journalism (Schmidt, Nelson, and Lawrence 2022; Schmidt and Lawrence 2020; Wenzel 2020) and constructive journalism (McIntyre 2019; Wagemans, Witschge, and Harbers 2019) go even further in their reimaginings of journalism, transforming its very philosophy—towards involving communities in the production process and offering solutions to societal problems. This cornucopia of pioneering moments in journalism has led to an ambitious yet necessary research project to record all "journalisms", proposing the term "X journalism" to account for its past, present and future metamorphoses (Loosen et al. 2022).

Pioneer journalism has emerged as an umbrella concept that bridges all and any journalism actors or communities of practice that experiment with organizational forms, products, and structures—actors or communities that *transcend* institutional and organizational confines in their efforts to reimagine journalism (Hepp and Loosen 2021). Pioneer journalism is a praxis of journalistic transformation, which can span a variety of cases—ranging from established news organisations to digital media startups, to individual 'pioneer' professionals, thus closing the gap between core and periphery actors. This integrated conceptualisation allows for a more inclusive analysis that enables studying post-industrial journalism as a "dynamic and dispersed practice", one that is in a constant state of "becoming" (Deuze and Witschge 2020, 32). Hepp and Loosen (2021) argue that pioneer journalism communities of practice "maintain a shared construction of journalism's possible futures" (15) and that the dynamics between the individual and supraindividual pioneer actors—established news organisations, startups and professionals—"result in the re-figuration of journalism's organizational foundations" (2021) in a changing media environment. These communities of practice can serve as "models or imaginaries of new possibilities" (2021) when examining journalism's epistemic re-imaginings and possible futures.

While it is arguably the most relevant concept in the journalism field at present to define journalistic processes focused on experimentation and transformation, pioneer journalism does not simply relate to innovation and reconstruction of journalism praxis. Hepp and Loosen (2021) emphasise the collective, community aspect of "pioneer journalism"; they explain that it derives from the concept "communities of practice" (Wenger 1998), which signifies "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (1998). Therefore, pioneer journalism is part of a lineage of two distinct non-mainstream approaches to journalism: on the one hand, community journalism (Fenton et al.

2010; Wenzel 2020), and alternative journalism (Atton 2002; Harcup 2003), on the other. Pioneer communities, Hepp (2016) points out, are collective actors in deep mediatization who share a common identity through their media-related practices and have the self-perception of 'pioneers' driven by a mission to "bring about media-related change" (927). As such, these "imagined collectivities" are a "hybrid figuration" between social movements and think tanks, united by "informal networks, a collective identity and a shared aim for action" (2016). With think tanks they share a mission to produce knowledge and ideas, and thus leave a lasting imprint on policy and the public (2016, 928). Hepp stresses the knowledge-producing capacities in pioneer communities, whereby knowledge is "highly reflexive" and "constitutive" to their goal to promote practices and collectivities, which, he stresses, can be seen in their public metadiscourses. Extant studies of pioneer journalism have focused on how these actors and/or communities experiment with work practices, products, audience relationships, and funding models (Hepp and Loosen 2022), but how they reimagine journalism's epistemology remains an uncharted territory of inquiry, a gap this study addresses.

While the notion of pioneer journalism is grounded in a holistic approach, it is important, for analytical purposes, to distinguish between the different categories of pioneer actors that comprise this integrated conceptualisation—individual newsworkers, mainstream journalism corporate actors, and non-legacy journalism communities—in individual studies of pioneer journalism. For the purposes of this study, what is interesting is to explore pioneer journalism epistemic praxis in the context of pioneer communities such as non-legacy journalism outlets (startups/non-profit cooperatives) to see how they reimagine "what journalism could be" (Zelizer 2017). As Hepp and Loosen (2022) argue, the rise of journalism startups and cooperatives is one of the most "striking indicators" of the "*re-figuration of the organizational foundations of journalism*" (121, emphasis in the original). What distinguishes startups from legacy news organisations is that they are free from the 'shackles' of organisational culture, a "gravitational force, anchoring organisations to their pasts" (Küng 2017, 36), which sometimes holds back digital experimentation in legacy newsrooms. "Clean-sheet players", in contrast, can design their cultures from the ground up (2017) and have "leeway to play with what is possible in journalism … stretch[ing] the limits of journalism" (Deuze and Witschge 2020, 127–128). Studying the self-perceptions of journalists working for digital startups in Australia, Germany and the UK, Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch (2019) found that these 'interlopers' held "idealistic and noble notions of journalism as a profession" and subscribed to "long-held ideals of journalism as a public good" (26, 27). Their findings echo those of Carlson and Usher (2016), Stringer (2018), and Witschge and Harbers (2019), whose studies point to non-legacy news startups' hybrid nature—as both transforming journalistic practices, by embracing digital culture's values of experimentation and innovation as their ontological and ideological core, and conserving, and even reviving traditional journalistic values, re-articulating those within a digital environment. In their *Beyond Journalism* project, which studied 22 entrepreneurial journalistic organisations in 11 countries, Deuze and Witschge found that entrepreneurial journalists were continually reinventing their professional identity in a "balancing act between traditional and so-called innovative conceptualizations and practices" (Deuze and Witschge 2020). Pioneer journalism

communities that form around journalism startups/cooperatives, thus, can be seen as "agonistic interlopers" (Eldridge 2018)—collective peripheral actors that, as hybrid social movement-think tank figurations and through their knowledge-production praxis (Hepp 2016), actively seek to reimagine journalistic epistemology and point to its possible futures.

This study, empirically grounded in metajournalistic discourse analysis and interviews with pioneer journalism producers from journalism startups/cooperatives in different parts of the world, seeks to answer the following research questions:

> RQ1: How do pioneer journalism communities envision the epistemic role of journalism in society?

> RQ2: How do pioneer journalism communities enact their epistemic values in their epistemic practice?

> RQ3: How do pioneer journalism communities, through their epistemic praxis, reimagine journalistic epistemology?

Methodology

This study combines metajournalistic discourse analysis of 20 pioneer journalism communities and seven innovation-focused journalism events around the world with in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 pioneer journalism producers working for four start-ups/cooperatives as part of a two-stage sampling and data collection process: an initial (field-mapping) stage and a focused sampling one, respectively. First, as part of the field-mapping sampling process, in 2019–2020 I attended, physically or online, seven pioneer journalism industry events around the world (Southeast Asia, Latin America, Europe) focused on innovation in journalism. The events were as follows:

1. Journalism (R)evolution: Media Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe, Sofia (November 2018), organised by Association of European Journalists.
2. The Power of Storytelling, Bucharest (October 2019), organised by *DoR*.
3. Outriders Stage, Warsaw (November 2019), organised by *Outriders*.
4. Splice Low-Res (Online), Southeast Asia (March 2020), organised by *Splice Media*.
5. Splice Beta (Online), Southeast Asia (September 2020), organised by *Splice Media*.
6. Media Party 2020: Rebooting Journalism (Online), Buenos Aires (September 2020), organised by Hacks/Hackers Buenos Aires.
7. News Impact Summit, Innovative Storytelling: Audience First (Online), Global (October 2020), organised by the European Journalism Centre.

The idea was to identify a geographically dispersed sample of pioneer journalism actors and recruit interview participants at a later stage. What became particularly palpable during the field-mapping process was how enmeshed pioneer journalism actors were in wider networks of peers (an observation echoed by Ruotsalainen et al. 2021) regardless of their professional self-perception (e.g., journalists, developers, community organisers), status or institutional belonging (startups, legacy news organisations, facilitators of media innovation in journalism), thus giving further weight to

Hepp and Loosen's wider conceptualisation of "pioneer journalism" beyond legacy organisations (2021). During and after the events, I created a list of prospective participating organisations and looked up their work to ensure it met the sampling parameters, resulting in a sample of 20 pioneer journalism startups (Table 1), whose metajournalistic discourse (manifestos and About webpages) was analysed. These parameters were as follows: (1) organisations that employ innovation rhetoric including 'reconstructing' or rethinking journalism; (2) digital media startups, cooperatives or facilitators of journalism innovation; (3) 'audience first', public-powered narrative; (4) journalistic culture variation—organisations from different countries, beyond (but not excluding) the Western World, to ensure a cross-national sample.

I conducted metajournalistic discourse analysis of the seven event descriptions (as they appeared at the time of sampling on the respective event websites), followed by metajournalistic discourse analysis of the manifestos and "About" webpages of the 20 media organisations in Table 1. The idea was to gain insight into pioneer journalism's mission and epistemic values more generally and to find common 'matters of concern' that these communities of practice orbit around (De Maeyer and Le Cam 2015) as they materialize in pioneer journalism manifestos, "About" webpages, and event descriptions. Seeing metajournalistic discourse as "traces of what matters" (De Maeyer 2016, p. 468) to pioneer journalists has allowed me to explicate the epistemic values that bring non-mainstream pioneer journalism communities together.

Ekström, Ramsälv, and Westlund (2021) make an important distinction between "**epistemic values**" (journalists' understandings of news as public knowledge, and their justification thereof), and "**epistemic practices**" (how journalists apply epistemic values in their knowledge production praxis). Following Carlson (2016), I argue that the link between the two can be best explored through combining the analysis of journalistic metadiscourses (i.e., discourses about pioneer journalism communities' **epistemic values**, or what they believe journalistic epistemology should be), with the analysis of their **epistemic praxis**, or how they put their epistemic values into

Table 1. Initial mapping of pioneer journalism organisations.

Journalism startup/collectve	Country
Bureau Local	UK
Coda Story	US, Georgia and Russia
The Correspondent	Netherlands, Global
The Current	Pakistan
Daily Maverick	South Africa
Decât o Revistă (DoR)	Romania
El Surtidor	Paraguay
The Ferret	Scotland
Frontier Magazine	Myanmar
IndigiNews	Canada
Inkyfada	Tunisia
Krautreporter	Germany
New Naratif	Southeast Asia
Outriders	Poland
R.AGE	Malaysia
Rappler	Philippines
Scalawag	US South
Splice Media	South-East Asia
Toest	Bulgaria
Wapatoa	Myanmar

practice, since "shared understandings of journalism arise through discursive processes that are then manifested in practice" (Carlson 2016, 361). Meanings *about* journalism (metadiscourses) and meanings *of* journalism (journalistic discourse) are equally important in the study of journalism's epistemic practice, since "texts are embedded in larger discourses about news" (ibid., p. 364)—especially when these discourses are related to journalism's possible futures and journalism's epistemic role more broadly.

The second stage of data collection followed a mix of purposive and snowball sampling methods as I contacted the editors/CEOs of the organisations in Table 1. The recruitment process thereafter followed the snowball sampling principle, whereby I asked each of my participants to nominate and connect me to other team members who would be relevant to my study. The participant recruitment process took place between October 2020 and May 2021 and resulted in a focused sample of 30 pioneer journalism producers from four media startups (Table 2)—*Bureau Local,* a local investigative journalism outlet based in the UK, widely known for its grassroots processes of community engagement and partnerships with local and national media; *DoR*—an independent print-digital publication in Romania that experiments with storytelling formats such as narrative journalism, solutions journalism, pop-up community newsrooms, storytelling on stage, and prior to the pandemic, organised world-renowned industry events such as the Power of Storytelling Festival; *The Current*, an independent news-lifestyle platform for millennials based in Lahore and

Table 2. List of interview participants.

Code	Organisation	Role	Interview Date
BL01	*Bureau Local*	Community Organiser/Reporter	19/03/21
BL02	*Bureau Local*	Community Organiser	15/04/21
BL03	*Bureau Local*	Journalist	22/04/21
BL04	*Bureau Local*	Journalist	11/05/21
DoR01	*DoR*	Editor in chief	02/11/20
DoR02	*DoR*	Reporter	21/11/20
DoR03	*DoR*	Visual Editor	29/01/21
DoR04	*DoR*	Reporter	30/03/21
DoR05	*DoR*	Digital Editor	24/03/21
DoR06	*DoR*	Web Developer	08/04/21
C01	*The Current*	Editor in chief	19/10/20
C02	*The Current*	Political Desk Editor	16/02/21
C03	*The Current*	HR/Finance Manager/Food and Drama Reviews	16/02/21
C04	*The Current*	Entertainment Desk Head	16/02/21
C05	*The Current*	Graphic Designer	16/02/21
C06	*The Current*	Co-founder	18/02/21
C07	*The Current*	Art Director	18/02/21
C08	*The Current*	Tech News/Membership Model	09/03/21
C09	*The Current*	Lifestyle Desk Head	09/03/21
C10	*The Current*	Political Desk	19/02/21
C11	*The Current*	Lifestyle Desk	19/02/21
C12	*The Current*	Intern / Drama Reviews	19/02/21
C13	*The Current*	Cameraperson	19/02/21
NN01	*New Naratif*	CEO	17/02/21
NN02	*New Naratif*	Illustration/Comic Editor	08/04/21
NN03	*New Naratif*	Membership Engagement Coordinator	04/03/21
NN04	*New Naratif*	Reporter	17/05/21
NN05	*New Naratif*	Social Media Manager	12/03/21
NN06	*New Naratif*	Design Editor	26/03/21
NN07	*New Naratif*	Editor-in-chief	25/05/21

the first journalistic platform to be funded by the Google News Initiative in Pakistan; and *New Naratif*, a Malaysia-based hybrid journalism-think tank platform that identifies itself as a movement for democracy in Southeast Asia. These particular pioneer journalism organisations were selected for a more focused analysis based on Hanitzsch et al.'s classification (2019) to ensure a variety of journalistic cultures—i.e., the UK (monitorial), Romania (advocative), Pakistan (developmental), and Malaysia (collaborative), respectively. The interview questions varied, depending on each participant and their role in the startup, but broadly covered the following topics: (1) role in organisation; (2) the process of knowledge production; (3) relations with the audience/public, including views on audience/community engagement; (4) examples of digital journalism stories produced; (5) challenges, constraints and factors that affect the process of production.

Analytic Method

The data analysis followed the "phronetic iterative approach" advanced by Sarah Tracy (2018)—an abductive approach to qualitative data analysis based on the concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom/knowledge—i.e., it is a pragmatic approach that is based around a practical problem in the field (in the case of this study, the reimagining of journalism's epistemic praxis). The data analysis alternates between inductive (emergent qualitative data), and deductive (existing theory and initial research questions) methods (2018, 63), with the researcher continually finessing the emergent hypotheses, as they "[tag] back and forth between (1) consulting existing theories and predefined questions and (2) examining emergent qualitative findings" (2018). This results in constant iteration between the data and the literature, and revisiting the research questions, as the researcher gradually moves from an open to a more focused coding of the data. Unlike inductive theory-neutral approaches such as Grounded Theory, which allow all conceptual categories and themes to emerge from the data, in the phronetic iterative approach, literature and guiding research questions can sensitize researchers to emergent explanations of phenomena. In this approach to data analysis, the data is coded in two separate cycles—a more open, primary one, and a more focused, secondary cycle. Codebooks are crafted from the emergent primary cycle data, rather than deductively imposed *a priori*, and used in secondary cycle coding and in subsequent data collection stages. This allows for codes to emerge from the data, but also circumscribes the emergent codes to what is practically useful and meaningful for the specific study, informed by the evolving guiding research questions and appropriate literature.

I followed the phronetic iterative approach throughout this project, with each stage of data collection and analysis informing the subsequent one. At the initial stage of data analysis, to get a deeper understanding and explicate emerging themes, I performed open (descriptive) line-by-line coding in Atlas.ti of all the event descriptions (*n* = 7) and 20% of the startups' manifestos (as suggested by Tracy 2018) selected at random—five in total (*The Correspondent*, *Bureau Local*, *The Ferret*, *DoR*, and *Outriders*). I created a preliminary codebook that guided the more focused analysis

of the rest of the manifestos, 'road-testing' this codebook on the rest of the data by iteratively revising (collapsing and fracturing) the codes, as suggested by Tracy (2018). Once new codes stopped emerging, I began identifying the recurrent codes and those that could be grouped together. During the second-cycle coding stage, I began interpreting, organizing, and synthesizing the codes into higher order conceptual categories (2018, 66), initially creating 15 first-level codes and then further synthesizing them into two second level sensitizing concepts and creating a codebook to be used on the rest of the data, during subsequent stages of data analysis. The initial first-level codes that emerged from the metajournalistic discourse analysis were applied deductively to the analysis of pioneer actor descriptions in the interviews until theoretical saturation was reached. The codes were refined iteratively at every stage of data analysis, which resulted in two second-level codes (higher order categories) (Table 3).

The two overarching second-level codes that emerged are *being relational* and *being meaningful*, which should be seen as material traces of what pioneer journalism producers *say* matters, more broadly, i.e., the materialization of ideas and values of what they believe journalism (its mission and role in the world) should be. Table 3 shows these second-order concepts' descriptions. These concepts shed light on pioneer journalism metadiscourses, linking meanings *about* journalism, as found in pioneer journalism metadiscourses, with meanings *of* journalism (Carlson 2016, 364), as they materialise in pioneer actor descriptions.

Results

The data analysis revealed that pioneer journalism communities "imagine" their social role and function as an enactive process that generates epistemic capacities to

Table 3. *Being Meaningful* and *Being Relational*: Second-level codes and descriptions.

Analytic level	Code name	Code description
2nd Level Codes	*Being Meaningful*	**A vision for reimagining journalism's epistemology and role in society through the prism of *being meaningful*—to make a difference, to create a better future through constructive, impactful storytelling, while embracing the best of old journalism ethics – accuracy, accountability, holding power to account, public interest, democracy and human rights, and the new epistemic values – moral compass, transparency, diversity, human dignity, and relational/ situated subjectivity.** The vision goes **beyond information**, towards collective care, advocacy, and action.
	Being Relational	An **emerging relational epistemic praxis** that is community focused and grounded in loved experience, human dignity, and care. The media startups' epistemic praxis seeks to build closer and deeper relations with their community members, networks, and the wider public, and come ***together***. Knowledge production is a collective endeavour that seeks to build an *imagined collective* around pioneer journalism to create stories and reach communities. *Being relational* goes **beyond journalism-audience relations**; it extends to the encounters that pioneer journalism enables between journalism and world, generating epistemic capacities with wider social impact potential (akin to a social movement).

connect people, create impact, and spark change. This perspective goes beyond journalism's traditional function to inform and to represent reality, towards actively embracing a more engaged, advocacy, role in society, which as the analysis of metajournalistic discourse and interviews suggests, could be discerned in both their vision and epistemic praxis. This section begins by presenting the findings from the metajournalistic discourse analysis of the 20 pioneer journalism startups and seven industry events, before zooming in on the ways four pioneer journalism communities put their epistemic values into practice, as explicated from interviews with 30 pioneer journalism actors.

Metajournalistic Discourse Analysis: Pioneer Journalism Communities' Visions for Journalistic Epistemology

Pioneer journalism communities imagine their role in society through the prism of *being meaningful*—which, to journalists, involves making a difference to people and communities through deep reporting and providing "meaningful knowledge" (*Wapatoa*). This idealistic vision—to create a "better future" (*Rappler*), "to make the world a better place" (*R.AGE*) through deep, constructive and impactful storytelling—reinforces definitions of pioneer communities of practice as part-social movements (Hepp 2016). Pioneer journalism communities' metadiscursive focus on impact and social change is particularly visible in *New Naratif*'s manifesto:

> *"New Naratif* is a movement for democracy, freedom of information, and freedom of expression in Southeast Asia. We aim to make Southeast Asians proud of our region, our shared culture, and our shared history. We fight for the dignity and freedom of the Southeast Asian people by building a community of people across the region to imagine and articulate a better Southeast Asia."

Between the Old and the New: A Hybrid Vision of Journalism Ethics

In their public metadiscourses, pioneer journalism communities invoke the best of old journalism ethics—accuracy, accountability, public interest, holding power to account, democracy and human rights, while at the same time embracing new epistemic values such as moral compass, transparency, diversity, human dignity, and relational/situated subjectivity. In so doing, these new players "combine, complement, and interweave" old and new epistemic values, thus "moving beyond the traditional/alternative divide" (Wagemans, Witschge, and Harbers 2019, 563). Bulgarian startup *Toest,* for example, promises to be "a defender of freedom of thought and the exchange of ideas, of equality and freedom as basic human values". Tunisia-based *Inkyfada* states on its website that it "fully assumes the role of counter-power against all injustices that flow from the corruption and impunity of the powers that be." Paraguay-based outlet *El Surtidor* stresses its commitment to providing "accurate, challenging and beautiful information so you can connect with other people and take action." And *Scalawag*, based in the US South, openly expresses "solidarity with oppressed communities in the South" and promises to "shift the narratives that keep power and wealth in the hands of the few and collectively […] pursue a more liberated South".

The Many Facets of "Being Meaningful"

Being meaningful can mean to pioneer journalists, for example, simplifying information for their audiences ("simple content for a more informed life") and being useful to Pakistani millennials (*The Current*), empowering Southeast Asians to take action and build democracy through active efforts to bridge information and action (*New Naratif*), bettering the lives of Romanian communities and building bridges between rural and city communities (*DoR*), or empowering underrepresented communities through inclusive reporting, dialogism, and telling "the stories that matter" (*Bureau Local*). For *Coda Story*, "meaningful journalism" runs through "showing how the local impacts the global and vice versa". For *Wapatoa*, it is more about "building a safe community for young people as a friendly companion for them to be informed, get ideas and learn actionable tips while transitioning to adulthood". For *IndigiNews*, *DoR*, and *Scalawag,* meaningful journalism is ultimately about community care, as expressed in the *IndigiNews* manifesto:

> "IndigiNews cares about people. We understand the importance of developing strong relationships within communities and hearing a range of perspectives. We are trained in anti-oppressive and trauma-informed reporting, and understand that there are often historical and political undercurrents that impact communities today."

Interview Data: How Four Pioneer Communities Put Their Epistemic Values into Practice

Pioneer journalism communities put their epistemic vision and values into practice by making every effort to be *relational*—which, to them, means, first and foremost, shifting the focus to communities and grounding knowledge production praxis in lived experience and community agency, seeking to build closer relations and come together with communities, networks and wider publics. This emerging relational epistemic praxis is consonant with DeVigal's description of pioneer journalists' relational philosophies of engagement that put their public, civic role at the centre of their work, "bring[ing] together the people who accurately represent all of the voices and then […] authentically listen, facilitate and connect those conversations as a reflection of the whole story" (2017).

Together in the Imagined Collective: Mobilising in Collective Action

Emphasising *together-ness* in their discursive constructions of their epistemic praxis (as discerned in the interview data), the pioneer journalists in this study build an *imagined collective* around their journalism—a circle of care, belonging, and trust—by creating deeper connections between journalism and subject/communities reported on, between production actors, between reader and story, and between story and wider world, through deep and resonant reporting focused on impact. That *imagined collective* can be a transnational democracy-building community (*New Naratif*) or a "network of networks" (*Bureau Local*) involving anything from media partners and campaigning groups to community supporters. Pioneer journalists actively mobilise their communities in collective action, recruiting like-minded people to their cause (Figure 1).

Bureau Local, for instance, acts on its mission to reimagine journalism's epistemic praxis by building a "coalition" around it and mobilising its networks of networks to join in the

New Naratif is, first and foremost, a community.

We're creating a little corner where everyone feels invited, accepted, and heard. We're learning and imagining together— for a **better Southeast Asia**.

...and we want **YOU** to be a part of New Naratif

New Naratif

Illustration by **Konijn Sate**

Figure 1. "We want YOU to be part of *New Naratif*" Instagram visual.

campaign. This could also be seen in its metadiscourse, where it uses activist discourse in its calls-to-action, emphasising collaboration and together-ness, to directly recruit like-minded people to its cause: "Get involved. Join the coalition" or "Help us grow the coalition by sharing the project and our tweet" (People's Newsroom launch newsletter call-to-action). *Bureau Local* used this bottom-up, collective approach to develop its manifesto on reimagining local news "Change the Story", inviting its network and wider community across the UK to collaborate and co-create the manifesto. The process culminated in crystalising *Bureau Local*'s two core collective commitments—to "decolonise the news" so that it listens to, and authentically represents, diverse voices and communities, and to produce "news you can use"—stories that are both valued by, and valuable to, communities across the UK.

Mutual Learning: Dialogic and Relational Knowledge Production

Mutual learning and understanding lies at the core of the relations between pioneer journalists and communities as pioneer journalists seek to build closer and deeper connections with their networks and the communities they cover by coming together in the journalism production process. This dialogic process can involve experimenting to see what works for audiences and gauging their opinion (*The Current*), community feedback on how to better package stories for social media (*New Naratif*), soliciting story ideas and consulting supporters on the most relevant approach (*DoR*), or flipping the editorial process altogether, by inviting publics to participate in it from start to finish (*Bureau Local*). Pioneer journalists actively pursue a dialogic, inclusive, non-extractive approach when reporting on communities (especially those mis- or under-represented), embedding themselves in local communities with care and respect, driven by their public service mission, and often completely reimagining the knowledge production praxis from the ground up. In so doing, pioneer journalists challenge the traditional 'journalist-knows-better' mindset, embracing the crosspollination of voices, ideas, and perspectives in their hope that they build trust:

> "Because I do strongly believe that there's a paradigm shift in this profession towards being closer to the public and responding to their needs, so abandoning the traditional role of the journalist as this all-knowing persona. But I think we're still figuring out what works." (*DoR01*)

This open, dialogic approach is rooted in the realisation that the journalist is embedded in a networked media ecosystem where everything is interrelated, and journalism's meaning and significance, and indeed its value, arise from its relationship with communities, audiences and the wider world (Singer 2008). For one of its stories (on routes out of homelessness) for instance, the *Bureau Local* organised "story circle" live events (a concept borrowed from California-based journalist Jesikah Maria Ross) in three cities, where it invited 12 people with lived experience of precarious housing to share their experiences and concerns in a safe environment. The England-based reporter who worked on the story said that was a way to ensure "the voices of the people guided where my reporting would go and what I would focus on" (BL03). Another *Bureau Local* journalist, based in Scotland, said the idea was to create "an intimate kind of circle where people could talk about stuff that was profoundly affecting them in an atmosphere of warmth and hospitality" (BL04). She emphasised the relational, non-extractive nature of the 'story circle' get-togethers:

> "It's just so that people can share and often what you can generate through doing that is, I guess, relationships of trust between people, people sharing information at a much deeper, more complex level than they would normally in a conversation with a journalist… and also creating those conversations between different members of the community." (BL04)

Community Service and Collective Care

The *Bureau Local* pioneer journalism producers also see involving publics in the process of knowledge production as a powerful way to right epistemic wrongs inflicted by legacy media on mis- and under-represented communities, who, by way of participating in acts of journalism, are finally given agency and a voice, as the Wales-based community organiser explained:

"What we do… is thinking, what do people want? They want power where there perhaps hasn't been power before, whether that's locally, or nationally, right? And people don't have power, for lots of reasons. They want information. And without information, arguably, you don't have power. And they want agency. They want to be able to influence their context, their life…Whereas if they are involved in the journalism, to help define journalism, if they're actually taking concrete actions in that journalism, then that is achieving something; they're getting power, they're getting agency, they're getting information." (BL01)

This inclusive, people-powered epistemic approach is also closely related to the concept of collective care—an ethos all the interviewee respondents subscribe to. Care plays a central role in how *DoR* producers, for instance, design their stories and it takes several forms—from taking a thoughtful, considerate approach when planning a story, to being attentive to their community through regular check-ins, to having a duty of care to accurately represent the voices and personal stories in its reporting. The *DoR* rural reporter explained that the team would try to return to the local communities they cover after story publication and re-engage them by organising community events "to bring the stories back to them and have a conversation about what we found, and [see] if they feel their community is reflected in these stories" (DoR02). *DoR* sees its stories as not only representing reality or sharing information/knowledge, but as actants of change, with their own capacity-generating powers. The editor-in-chief stressed that *DoR* strived "to be a source of balance and compassion" (DoR01) for its supporter community, especially in the pandemic times, in the hope that its stories could have a "healing" effect, and help people come together to overcome suffering and rebuild their lives.

Towards Knowledge-Based Advocacy

Pioneer journalism's relational epistemic praxis goes beyond the journalism-audience relations, extending to its capacities to generate wider social or community impact, which makes it similar to a social movement in its focus on effecting "media-related change" (Hepp 2016, p. 927). The *New Naratif* Membership engagement coordinator explained that advocacy lay at the core of the outlet's mission:

"There is a desire on our part and an objective on our part to make positive change. So, it's more than just putting out articles, you know, we do hope to spur people to take some kind of action, even if it's just to research a topic more on their own, you know, or to start thinking about certain issues more critically." (NN03)

The outlet's 'democracy classrooms'—"Baca with *New Naratif*"—are a space where its community can talk about important issues in Southeast Asia. A *New Naratif* freelancer explained that they did not see a conflict between journalism and advocacy: "For me, building a more inclusive, understanding, and accepting society is really the bottom line of journalism" (NN04). *New Naratif* tends to cover subjects such as inequality, excluded or marginalised communities (LGBTQIA+, migrants and refugees), and social injustice (among others). Its Membership engagement coordinator explained that the outlet was "the place that Southeast Asian stories that aren't being told by anyone [else] get told" (NN03).

In some cases, pioneer journalists (those based in Asia) have to navigate draconian press freedom restrictions such as censorship, harassment and intimidation. *The Current*'s editor-in-chief, for instance, explained the team were uncompromising about

their progressive editorial line, which could be difficult in a cultural environment where conservative values prevail:

> "Politically, we don't have an editorial line. But morally, we have an editorial line. For example, we are very pro-women, because we're a woman-led startup, we are pro-minorities, which is difficult in Pakistan to a large extent, because you get a lot of hate if you are pro- certain minorities. We are pro-democracy. So, if there are any stories, and there's quite a few these days, when it comes to, you know, military rule or something, we take the democratic line; that's something we don't draw lines on." (C01)

New Naratif' managing director explained that its *raison d'etre* was to expand the space for freedom of expression in Southeast Asia by also trying to "expand on the definition of, or at least push back on this whole idea of, the role of journalism in society" (NN01). He added that journalism "has a responsibility to educate and empower, not just report" and that journalism should act as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself—a view echoed by a community organiser at *Bureau Local*, based in Wales, who stressed that reimagining journalistic epistemology required "thinking deeply about what journalism is for. What's the point of journalism?" (BL01), and what it *can* and *should* do.

Reimagining Journalistic Epistemology from the Ground Up

The data analysis suggests that non-legacy pioneer journalists reimagine journalistic epistemology from the ground up, together with their communities—a productive, inclusive, and relational conception of journalistic epistemology that goes beyond its traditional function to inform, extending to generating social agencies such as amplifying community voices and empowering the hitherto powerless (mis- or under-represented) members of society. Pioneer journalists create self-contained spaces of collective care and action, in which journalists, communities, publics, networks, and audiences/readers play an equally important role in the negotiation of representations of reality. Pioneer journalism producers go beyond their purely epistemic role as facilitators of knowledge and adopt, and indeed embrace, a semi-political role akin to grassroots activism, or **knowledge-based advocacy**. In so doing, journalists act as agents of change, slowly shifting journalistic epistemology beyond its traditional mission to inform towards social action and collective care, abandoning the *view from nowhere* and actively embedding themselves in the world.

Thus, the data analysis suggests that pioneer journalism communities reimagine journalistic epistemology in five prominent ways:

1. Challenging journalism's traditionally neutral and detached epistemic praxis by abandoning journalists' position as disinterested observers and openly taking a stand on issues that matter.
2. Engaging in *knowledge-based advocacy*—seeking to mobilise, empower, and create impact and democracy-building capacities.
3. Creating a circle of collective care—connecting and building bridges between people, stories and realities, and offering solutions and constructive approaches to issues.

4. Deep engagement and relationality—embedding publics and journalists in the knowledge production process and using non-extractive approaches such as mutual listening and learning.
5. Redressing epistemic injustice by giving people and communities agency.

Discussion: From What Journalism *Could Be* towards What Journalism *Could Do*

The study findings suggest that pioneer journalists in digital startups/cooperatives embrace a semi-political, advocacy function that goes beyond its traditional role of informing people towards generating capacities to spark change and create social impact, while shifting its focus from *showing* to *doing*. In contradiction to other studies on digital-native startups, which found that these new players perceive their role purely as "a filter in an increasingly complex society" (García-Orosa, López-García, and Vázquez-Herrero 2020), this study's findings suggest that pioneer journalists reimagine journalistic epistemology by adopting a more political and engaged role in society—"towards questioning, negotiating, and even reimagining reality" (Medeiros and Badr 2022, p. 1356), thus moving beyond information and closer to something akin to **knowledge-based advocacy.** Pioneer journalists, through their epistemic vision and values, and their experimental epistemic praxis, push the boundaries of journalism, gesturing towards some possible futures and towards not only "what journalism could be" (Zelizer 2017), but more importantly, what it *could do.* Rooted in pioneer journalism's epistemic values—*being meaningful* and *being relational* is the realisation that journalism knowledge production takes place in a network where everything is interrelated and hence, as Jane Singer argues, journalism can "no longer exist in splendid isolation" (2015). Being embedded in a networked media ecosystem means that keeping a distance from events is no longer possible or indeed desirable: "because, in a networked world, there no longer is the 'journalism', 'audience', and 'source'. There is only 'us.'" (Singer 2008, 75). Journalism's meaning and significance no longer come from an authoritative position of power, but from its relationship with the world and how it positions itself in it (Carlson 2017). Its value could indeed lie in how it situates itself relationally, how it connects (with) audiences, communities, and network, and what it gives to the world or at least the communities of which it is an integral part.

Regardless of being located at the periphery of the field, whether we view them as an integral part of the journalistic institution (Deuze and Witschge 2020; Schapals 2022), or as "interlopers" (Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018; Eldridge 2018), some of these pioneer communities' epistemic values and practices have the potential to re-constitute, rather than disrupt, the fabric of the field. The study points to something pioneer journalists do well, and some legacy journalists still struggle with—connecting with their communities and audiences in a deeper, relational, and non-extractive way. This raises the question: how many of these novel epistemic values and practices could journalism-core incorporate? Pioneer journalism epistemic praxis, while emergent, potentially fleeting, and a work in perpetual progress, could one day sediment and stabilise into journalistic normativity—if not all, at least remnants of it, particularly given that pioneering practices do not emerge in a vacuum and pioneer journalism communities are part of wider networks that cut across legacy and non-mainstream

journalism (Hepp and Loosen 2022). This study's limitation lies in the fact it is impossible to predict, as with any study of experimental practice, how much of it will prove ephemeral and how much will, indeed, endure or to what extent pioneer journalism will bring to bear on the broader institution of journalism. This would require an open mindset and concerted efforts in both new and legacy newsrooms to adopt these pioneer epistemic practices (including lots of trial-and-error)—and even then, their stabilisation can be a matter of contingency and chance. How much of this pioneering epistemic praxis is feasible for understaffed, profit-driven newsrooms and, indeed, desirable by audiences and communities? This question offers a productive, and indeed, meaningful, avenue for future research. Future studies could use the conceptual lenses of *being meaningful* and *being relational* to examine journalistic epistemology in different contexts—e.g., legacy newsrooms, and through other methods (newsroom ethnographies, multimodal discourse analysis of stories) for a deeper exploration of journalism's changing epistemic praxis.

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