

Article

“They Always Get Our Story Wrong”: Addressing Social Justice Activists’ News Distrust Through Solidarity Reporting

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Abstract

This study positions social justice activists’ objections to dominant reporting norms as a catalyst for critically reassessing these norms and their connection to diminishing trust in US journalism. Based on a conceptual application of discourse ethics to journalism and qualitative analysis of 28 in-depth interviews with social justice activists, we examine how participants experience and evaluate mainstream coverage of social justice, and why they think journalism could improve its trustworthiness through practices consistent with solidarity reporting norms.

Keywords

activism; journalism; trust in news; social justice; solidarity

Issue

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1. Introduction

Eroding trust in news in the US has prompted a wide breadth of research, public engagement initiatives, and industry responses (see Robinson et al., 2021). One common solution is to encourage media literacy (cf. Plaut, 2023). By teaching audiences to regard journalism as a rigorous, reliable, and superior form of information within digital ecosystems, researchers, news practitioners, and philanthropists have suggested that journalism could restore its mantle of public authority. Despite a range of such interventions, however, trust in US news remains low, based on audience surveys (Knight Foundation & Gallup, 2023).

A popular narrative is that dominant US journalism was once a trusted, authoritative institution that unified society (Obama, 2022; cf. Schudson, 2022). Yet dominant journalism has never been an unanimously trusted institution: Due to dominant journalism’s longstanding tendency to dehumanize, distort, and undermine marginal-

ized groups who struggle for survival (Santa Ana, 2002; Squires, 2009; Walters, 2001), marginalized communities are among the original skeptics and critics of mainstream journalism (González & Torres, 2011).

Decades of scholarship have demonstrated how US journalism often portrays marginalized communities’ collective activism using negative, criminalizing frames aligned with “the protest paradigm.” This coverage tends to ignore (or minimize) the structural causes and demands of collective activism (Boyle et al., 2012; Entman & Rojecki, 1993; Gil-Lopez, 2021; Gitlin, 1980; Harlow et al., 2020; McLeod, 2007). Adherence to the protest paradigm varies depending on factors like issue, location of protest, whether protestors aim to challenge versus protect the status quo, and the ideological orientation of news outlets (Harlow et al., 2020). News coverage is most likely to align with the protest paradigm when activists use radical tactics (Boyle et al., 2012; Lee, 2014) or seek to advance racial justice (Brown & Harlow, 2019). For example, Brown and Harlow (2019)

have found that the protest paradigm is uncommon in coverage of climate action, except when climate action focuses on Indigenous communities.

Against the backdrop of the protest paradigm, our study leverages insights from social justice activists and organizers to interrogate US journalism norms for covering social justice issues and to analyze their implications for trust in US news. We use Varma's (2020, p. 1706) definition of social justice as "dignity for everyone in a society," and define social justice activists as people who participate in collective efforts to challenge and address systemic marginalization (Young, 1990).

Based on 28 in-depth interviews, we argue that low trust in US news may indicate a lack of consensus about the merit of dominant journalism norms, instead of indicating that audiences lack awareness or understanding of these norms. Interviewees identify promising reconstructions in ethical news-making processes that could help journalists develop relationships with social justice movements, in the service of producing more nuanced, accurate, and trustworthy coverage of ongoing struggles for basic dignity.

We begin by synthesizing dominant reporting norms in mainstream journalism and contrasting them with solidarity reporting norms (Varma, 2020, 2022, 2023). Then, we provide an overview of discourse ethics as a framework for justifying this study's focus on social justice activists. Discourse ethics, based on Glasser and Ettema's (2008) application to journalism, calls for deliberation when anyone affected by a norm objects to it, thereby guaranteeing that journalism criticism is no longer restricted to people with journalistic credentials or institutionally-validated expertise. Social justice activists in our study belong to and represent constituencies negatively impacted by dominant journalism norms, which means their perspectives should be incorporated into discussions of trust in journalism that target these norms. We find that participants critique dominant reporting norms and articulate solidarity reporting norms as more trustworthy alternatives. Finally, we conclude by considering the prospects for building trust in journalism through transformed reporting norms, and the implications of solidarity reporting for journalism that attempts to serve heterogeneous news audiences.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. *Contrasting Dominant and Solidarity Reporting Norms*

Dominant reporting norms emphasize accuracy and transparency in pursuit of objectivity (Aitamurto, 2019). With a dominant monitorial role (Christians et al., 2009), journalism aims to shine a spotlight on society's influential institutions, leading to a focus on politicians, experts, and institutional spokespeople (Bennett et al., 2006). Professionalized into prioritizing journalistic autonomy (Carlson, 2017), journalists often take an adversarial

stance toward sources in interviews (Clayman, 2002), strive for balance in reporting, and prioritize detachment, impartiality, and neutrality as signals of credibility, authority, and trustworthiness (cf. Bratich, 2020). Journalists are usually trained to be generalists with procedural expertise in how to report a story without background expertise or prior knowledge of the topics they cover (Perry, 2016). Dominant framing becomes episodic (Iyengar, 1990), individualizing (Bennett, 2016), and emotional when profiling marginalized individuals (Schneider, 2012).

In contrast, solidarity reporting norms (compared in Table 1) move journalism from a monitorial function to an interpretive process (Carey, 1992) of accounting for unjust shared conditions that deny people's inherent dignity. Solidarity reporting brings an ethical imperative for journalism that aspires to be accurate and fair to also represent "the grassroots epistemologies emanating from the streets" (Canella, 2022, p. 5). To do so, solidarity reporting prioritizes people with grounded insights into systems of oppression (for a conceptual explication of oppression, see Young, 1990). Framing in solidarity is societal, systemic, and political (Varma, 2020). News values become radical hope, mutual aid, and collective empowerment (Varma, 2022). Rather than an adversarial stance toward sources during interviews, solidarity reporting develops collaborative and constructive dynamics. Finally, journalists who enact solidarity as an ethical priority reflexively attend to their own positionality and represent the various standpoint epistemologies they encounter in the production of news (Cabas-Mijares, 2022).

Past research has not considered the implications of a solidarity approach to journalism for audience trust. We focus on social justice activists' insights, grounded in their participation in collective efforts to navigate and disrupt oppressive systems, and justify this focus using Glasser and Ettema's (2008, p. 525) application of Habermas' discourse ethics to journalism. Discourse ethics requires consensus among "all affected" by a norm for it to be defensible, and deliberation is set in motion when anyone affected objects to the status quo. Rather than deferring to individuals' consciences, experts, or majoritarian rule, conditions of access and argumentation are required for developing ethically defensible norms (Glasser & Ettema, 2008, p. 524).

Habermas' work has been critiqued for neglecting to account for actually-existing power dynamics in public discourse that create substantial barriers to access and argumentation (Fraser, 1990). Näsström (2011) offers an important addition to the discourse ethics framework through the "all-subjected principle," which adds a power analysis for deciding who, among "all affected," should be prioritized. People subjected to norms experience them as disempowering impositions that they cannot refuse or avoid, whereas people affected may or may not be adversely impacted. Aligned with the all-subjected principle, our study begins with social justice

Table 1. Dominant reporting norms and solidarity reporting norms.

	Dominant reporting	Solidarity reporting
Journalist's dynamic with sources	Adversarial, hostile, extractive	Collaborative, constructive, reflexive
Framing	Individual, episodic, emotional	Societal, systemic, political
News values	Skepticism, conflict, sensationalism	Radical hope, collective empowerment, shared conditions
Narrative structure	Balance between opposing views	Truth based on what is happening on the ground
Sourcing emphasis	Officials, institutional experts	People affected by social injustice or engaged in collective efforts to address social injustice
Journalist's professional skillset	Procedural knowledge of reporting practices	Procedural knowledge as well as subject matter knowledge of social justice issues and histories
Basis for trustworthiness of journalism	Detachment, impartiality, neutrality, transparency	Commitment to people's basic dignity, human rights
Primary purpose of journalism	Shine a spotlight on society's influential institutions	Represent underlying causes of ongoing social justice issues

activists for whom refusing or avoiding dominant news coverage altogether is implausible, given the history of the protest paradigm, as well as their own need to reach a broad, general public beyond their own networks. Mainstream journalists have used activists' work, struggles, and lives in news coverage shaped by norms that activists find objectionable and harmful (Bragg, 2022; Holzer, 2022; Torres, 2015). Thus, affected by and subjected to journalism norms, social justice activists offer specific and relevant insights for enriching journalism as a public service.

Discourse ethics usefully distinguishes between two interconnected levels of justification and application (Rehg, 1994), such that objections at the level of application mean general principles are no longer satisfactory at the level of justification (Glasser & Ettema, 2008). Addressing a crisis of trust begins, we argue, by examining why people do not trust journalism and journalists (see Duchovnay & Masullo, 2021; Robinson & Culver, 2019; Wenzel, 2020), which often arises at the level of application and destabilizes the justification for dominant norms that are taken-for-granted within the journalism profession as hallmarks of credibility. Social justice activists' substantive objections to dominant reporting norms at the level of application mean, based on the logic of discourse ethics, that they should be included in discussions of how to address these issues.

Journalists committed to traditional norms around objectivity and neutrality are, however, typically wary of accepting insights originating from social justice activists and their associated social movements or community groups (Jha, 2008). News organizations may fear that activists' efforts constitute "special interest pleading," but as Ryan et al. (1998, p. 179) note, "only in collective endeavors can marginalized groups accrue the resources

sufficient to enter the news arena." Even when social justice movements' limited resources are redirected to conform to dominant news routines and tailored to court disinterested reporters, journalists may persistently discard this input and ignore structural inequities in their coverage (Ryan et al., 1998). News coverage that sensationalizes or misrepresents collective action further erodes trust in dominant news media among social justice activists (Wasserman et al., 2018). Pragmatically, dominant reporting norms have not preserved or built trust in journalism, which signals a lack of consensus for dominant reporting norms and the need to develop alternatives.

2.2. Journalism and Community (Dis)Trust

Trusting journalism as an institution means believing news media will provide credible information, even when audiences cannot independently verify all claims (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023). This creates a risk, which loyal news audiences accept due to their expectation that news media's professional norms will ensure high information quality with respect to what audiences perceive as accuracy and fidelity to the issues at hand (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

US survey research suggests that the prospects for improving trust in local news are relatively high, with only 18% of US adults having low trust in local news, as opposed to 41% with low trust in national news (Knight Foundation & Gallup, 2023). As Usher (2021) has argued, discourse about declining trust in US news often fails to consider how previous and emerging economic models for journalism—including at the local level—privilege rich, white, and liberal audiences who pay for news, and the fact that there have always been "historical

news deserts” where journalists parachute into areas to produce extractive, stereotypical coverage. By building deeper relationships with communities, journalists may “legitimate their specialized knowledge by knowing places,” and develop “place trust” (Usher, 2019, pp. 131–132).

To address news distrust at a community-level, some news initiatives place themselves within local storytelling networks, a process where journalists engage community members in collectively defining and responding to their problems (Wenzel, 2019, 2020). “Listening literacies” initiatives aim to encourage community members to critically assess information and engage news organizations and journalists as they co-create and share information (Robinson et al., 2021). As Almeida and Robinson (2023, p. 511) ask, “What would it look like for community news outlets to partner with community activists in solidarity and seek reparations for their city’s or town’s historical wrongs?” Local news is well-positioned to develop such a dynamic since relationships between journalists and activists can develop over time, leading local journalists to treat social justice efforts as newsworthy (Kutz-Flamenbaum et al., 2012; related discussion in Varma, 2023).

In the absence of such constructive dynamics within dominant news media, however, activists have often sought recourse in alternative media to articulate grievances, demands, and visions for change on their own terms. While alternative media have historically functioned as intragroup communication within movements (Downing, 2014), digital media have placed more control over external communications in the hands of activists (Richardson, 2020). “The media” is no longer an outside institution to which activists must make appeals, and instead is a constitutive part of the social practices of activism (Canella, 2022). Nevertheless, activists continue to view mainstream journalism as a way to advance social justice (Lester & Hutchins, 2009), despite a commercial media system that is often misaligned with their aims.

We pose the following research questions to guide our examination of social justice activists’ dynamics with dominant news media and the impact of these dynamics on activists’ evaluations of news information quality and trustworthiness:

RQ1: How do social justice activists experience and evaluate dominant journalism norms in mainstream coverage of social justice?

RQ2: What reporting norms do social justice activists articulate for improving trust in journalism?

3. Methods

This study uses qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of 28 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. We began recruiting social justice activists and organizers

in June 2022. First, we contacted organizing groups and asked journalists who regularly cover social justice issues for suggestions. We also circulated a call on a list-serve which includes journalists, activists, organizers, and educators working on social justice issues. Finally, we asked interviewees for suggestions about others to contact for the study. All identifying information has been removed to protect study participants, including the names of individual journalists and local news organizations with whom participants interacted.

We conducted interviews from July to September 2022 via Zoom and in-person across three US cities. Interviews lasted for 30–60 minutes. In each interview, we began by asking activists to describe their involvement in social justice work, and then asked for their thoughts on news coverage of social justice issues and their activism efforts. Next, we asked if they had interacted with journalists directly, and if so, what those interactions were like. Then, we asked interviewees how journalism could improve, if at all, and what advice they would give to a journalist who wanted to cover social justice activism. Qualitative thematic analysis of audio transcripts followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006, p. 87) steps of “generating initial codes” before developing themes based on “coded extracts” situated within the full set of qualitative data. We focus our findings on themes that arose in multiple interviews to encapsulate recurring experiences, critiques, and recommendations. Codes including “news routines,” “newsworthiness,” “perspectives in news coverage,” and “information quality” were prominent across transcripts, as interviewees regularly identified these areas as roots of their distrust of dominant journalism. Through close textual analysis, we found that interviewees primarily critiqued reporting norms, rather than individual reporters or news outlets.

Activists in this study self-described as participating in a range of social justice efforts across multiple, intersecting, and interconnected areas due to their structural understanding of social justice. These areas include reproductive justice, housing justice, labor unions, immigration, climate change, public safety, racial justice, and gender equity. Critiques of dominant journalism norms were consistent across issue areas, as were articulations of solidarity reporting norms as trustworthy alternatives.

Due to ongoing and intensifying attacks on social justice activists in the US, we assured interviewees that they would not be identified, named, or individually profiled in this study. We received Institutional Review Board approval before beginning this study, which requires that we protect interviewees’ anonymity. Also, most participants rejected the idea of categorizing or labeling themselves in terms of a single issue (or an assortment of issues), since they viewed social justice activism as a holistic commitment to societal transformation. For these reasons, we refer to interviewees under the umbrella of “social justice activists,” rather than using issue-specific categories or profiles.

4. Findings

4.1. Dominant Journalism Norms as Obstacles to Information Quality and Trust

Social justice activists primarily described their experiences with news media in negative terms, characterizing their interactions with journalists as “frustrating,” “difficult,” “intimidating,” and “scary.” Most participants attributed this tenor to mainstream journalism norms of professional practice rather than to reporters’ personal politics or unprofessionalism.

In this section, we present activists’ experiences with and assessments of dominant journalism norms in mainstream coverage of social justice. Participants articulated objections to dominant norms, including journalists’ adversarial stance toward sources and journalists’ tendency to use individualizing and episodic framing when covering social justice issues.

4.1.1. Adversarial Interviewing Tactics

Participants regularly critiqued journalists’ approach to interviewing. Journalists conducting interviews, they said, displayed hostility toward communities impacted by social injustice, asked loaded questions laden with skepticism, and attempted to extract quotes to fit a pre-conceived narrative. The adversarial stance that activists described is consistent with how watchdog reporters confront officials in power (Clayman, 2002). In the context of covering social justice efforts, however, journalists’ adversarial stance alienated sources and contributed to activists’ low evaluations of mainstream journalism’s credibility. One activist who refused “to be the victim” shared a frustrating experience with a local reporter who pressed for a response to a question that the activist told the reporter, repeatedly, was based on a distortion:

I was telling the reporter, “I’m not going to answer that”....And she would rephrase it and I’m like, “I’m not going to answer that.” On mic, on camera...“You are trying to get a reaction out of me. You’re trying to sensationalize something and I’m not going to play into it.”

Journalists taking adversarial stances during interviews was expected behavior, according to participants who had a sharp awareness of the protest paradigm (McLeod, 2007). Rather than a sign of rigor and watchdog reporting, activists experienced adversarial interviews as an attempt by journalists to manufacture conflict for the sake of turning social justice issues and activism into a spectacle. In this context, journalists abiding by a norm of maintaining an adversarial stance toward sources contributed to activists’ suspicion and skepticism of journalists’ and news organizations’ motives.

4.1.2. Individualizing, Emotional, and Episodic Framing

Activists in our study tracked news coverage of their efforts and were often disappointed due to individualizing, emotional, and episodic framing (Bennett, 2016; Iyengar, 1990; Schneider, 2012) that omitted collective organizing work. As one activist shared, news stories tended to erase community initiatives and demands, which implied that “we’re just complaining residents who are upset about the world not being the way that we want it.” Another activist articulated the same omission problem at the level of framing:

It’s easy for the movements to become obscured when you’re just talking about a personal story from a worker....Having those emotional individual stories is important, but I think it’s a disservice when it’s not tied to organizations and unions that have been pushing for [change] for many years.

Activists indicated that individual stories focused on emotion were inadequate for representing the scope and dimensions of social justice organizing. As a different participant noted, “The power dynamic is not acknowledged” in stories that use episodic framing, and mainstream journalism often portrays social injustice as “unavoidable.”

Event-framed reporting, activists said, neglects the institutional decisions and structural conditions behind social injustice. One activist provided the specific example of factory layoffs that dominant news media “presented as an unavoidable business cost....The status quo of workers generally not having power is reflected in the media coverage by just not giving them the space.” Officials, business owners, and experts receive disproportionate airtime and amplification through news, activists pointed out, which leads to distorted narratives about social justice issues and further diminishes activists’ trust in journalism.

Participants implicated flagship news organizations in their critiques of mainstream journalism, as well as smaller news organizations. They characterized journalism’s shortcomings as systemic, industry-wide, and entrenched. At the same time, activists rarely endorsed the idea of abandoning mainstream media altogether in favor of focusing their attention exclusively on alternative news outlets. Instead, pointing to the benefits of mainstream journalism’s wide audience reach, capacity for in-depth reporting, and continued influence on public opinion and policy-making, activists articulated specific ways for mainstream journalism to improve, which we analyze next.

4.2. Solidarity Reporting to Address Distrust Among Social Justice Activists

In this section, we examine specific practices that activists indicated would improve social justice coverage

and their trust in journalism. Adopting norms of solidarity reporting including prioritizing grassroots sourcing, replacing dominant news values with solidarity news values, and improving journalists' grasp of social justice concepts and histories were key changes that activists recommended as desirable and effective correctives to journalism's shortcomings (see Table 1).

Rather than attempting to forge opportunities for movement propaganda or public relations through journalism, participants in our study described paths for improving trust that were aligned with their shared interest in truthful, evidence-based reporting. None of the interviewees were in favor of opinion pieces replacing factual reporting, nor did they seek endorsements from news organizations. Furthermore, activists recognized the unmet need for shared public definitions of pressing issues, and expressed concerns about media fragmentation for society (aligned with rhetoric found in journalism trust initiatives, see Robinson et al., 2021):

I see very much the real harms of a fraying media landscape where everybody has their own press. If you don't share facts, you really can't share a government....I fear where this goes. It's hard to see a country persist where everybody's got their own version of the truth.

Truthful reporting on social justice issues and activism, participants argued, requires quoting people with direct experience, and representing structural conditions.

4.2.1. "Quote People": Redefining Expertise by Prioritizing People With Direct Experience

Activists were aware that journalists routinely cultivate relationships with officials and institutions of power to ensure access to ongoing coverage, and said that they would like to see the same dynamic with organizing groups. "First, journalists have to be willing to build relationships with people on issues they're covering," said one participant. Another activist provided similar practical advice: "Quote people. Don't take people out of context. Quote them at length. Don't do sound bites....You don't have to be equal. Just be fair." Quoting people, participants said, would help ensure that coverage was less distorted and dependent on officials. Although quoting people sounds like an obvious practice, activists said that it was rare for journalists to talk to people directly experiencing oppression and groups working to address it. As one activist explained:

I don't see a lot of media or journalists who are willing to make sure they're talking directly to the people they're writing about, which often results in a rehashed version of law enforcement perspective or narrative on the topic at hand with maybe a nod to someone with a different perspective at the end to signal objectivity.

A disproportionate emphasis on academics, corporate management, police officers, and politicians solidified distrust among activists, who said that expanding representation to include people "who are actually on the ground experiencing this in real-time" would improve their trust. However, interviewees also sensed that journalists assumed that non-credentialed people would not have insight worth quoting:

What I've noticed is that [journalists] focus a lot on the politicians...they go and spend 20 minutes with the elected official....And then they go and grab another politician, which is cool, but it's like, "You already interviewed 20 of them."

Aligned with a solidarity reporting norm of prioritizing "all subjected" to social injustice (Varma, 2020, 2023), activists suggested that journalists de-emphasize officials and other elite sources in coverage of social justice. Expanding the sourcing pool and acknowledging the expertise of people experiencing and resisting oppressive systems is consistent with practices showcased by journalists in other contexts who improve the accuracy of their reporting by considering standpoint epistemologies different from their own (Cabas-Mijares, 2022). Centering the perspectives of marginalized people accomplishes more than merely improving representation; it introduces more nuance to reporting norms and produces fuller stories, which participants said could improve the credibility of journalism.

4.2.2. Representing Underlying Causes, Structural Context, and Shared Conditions

At the level of news values and framing, activists said they would trust news with less sensationalism, negativity, and individual profiling, and more explanatory reporting of structural factors and shared conditions. Activists advised journalists to focus on "underlying influences," which would help remedy the problem of portraying social justice issues as isolated "one-offs." Dominant episodic framing (see Iyengar, 1990) treats social justice issues as if they were new, spontaneous, or unexpected, which interviewees said neglects the ongoing and long-term nature of their social justice work and movement strategies.

One activist, whose family's eviction had attracted news attention, noticed that the coverage did not account for how widespread the issue of eviction was in the city:

I think that the part that would've been good to add...was, "Okay, this particular story is happening. How many more like that are happening right now?" To me, one of the things that was interesting in this...day in this courtroom...just sitting through and listening to one story after another, after another, until they got to ours. Wow. Housing court is

full....I was like, “There’s a little industry here. They’re just going.” So, the fact that there’s so much of that going on, it didn’t come through [in news coverage].

To accurately report the extent of social injustices, activists regularly identified a need for journalists and editors to have a better understanding of the basic roots of social justice issues such as housing, eviction, abortion, prison systems, immigration, gender-based discrimination, racism, and labor unions. “Know your topic,” said one activist. Knowing what a union is, what abortion access means, and why major cities in the US are experiencing a housing crisis were three (of many) specific examples that activists provided as illustrations of basic facts that journalists seldom knew, even when setting out to report on unions, abortion, and housing issues.

When journalists lack basic knowledge of what they are covering, activists found themselves needing to not only provide interview quotes but also to educate the reporter in order for there to be any hope that the story would be accurate. Activists lamented that journalists’ lack of background knowledge made interviews frustrating and time-consuming. As one activist noted, “It can be very painful to have to do that education” when a journalist is clearly uninformed or misinformed about what a social justice effort is about in the first place. Another activist said:

What I think I see are a lot of people who come from a fairly homogenous background writing about a topic that they’re not very familiar with and thinking that their collective biases are neutral or that they’re being objective when they’re not.

Some participants conceded that public misunderstandings of movements may come from ignorance rather than ill intent, as many people are unfamiliar with social justice issues and the purpose of collective action. However, in the words of one participant, “Journalists are supposed to find out.” While inexperience, lack of resources, or the pace of news publishing could undermine journalists’ capacity to learn nuances of an issue, participants observed that poor coverage of social justice efforts also frequently comes from well-resourced and well-established outlets like *The New York Times*, *NPR*, and flagship local newspapers in their cities.

Participants urged journalists to seek out patterns of experience within and across communities to better account for the reality of persistent social injustices. “It’s better to interview a community than one person,” said one activist. Here, changes in news values and framing are aligned with replacing dominant news values and individual framing with solidarity news values (Varma, 2022) and solidarity framing (Varma, 2020). Advancing awareness of the historical trajectories of social justice issues and movements is aligned with and extends the logic of solidarity reporting, as it enriches journalism’s ability to represent the roots of ongoing issues.

5. Discussion and Conclusions: Improving Trust Across Axes of Difference With Solidarity Reporting

This study has investigated why social justice activists distrust news and how journalism organizations could address their objections. Social justice activists found dominant journalism norms distressing, demeaning, and distorting. As a result, they tended to evaluate dominant news as having low information quality and, therefore, limited trustworthiness. At the same time, activists rejected the idea that focusing their energy exclusively on grassroots media was a sufficient remedy, due to dominant journalism’s wider reach and influence on public opinion.

Solidarity reporting (Varma, 2020, 2022, 2023) encapsulates much of the approach and specific practices that activists and organizers articulated when asked what would improve their trust in journalism. Through newsworthiness judgments, sourcing prioritization, and framing, wider adoption of solidarity reporting would address many of the critiques that interviewees raised. Related work on engaged journalism projects for community relationship-building (Wenzel & Crittenden, 2021) may also be relevant to addressing these issues. However, none of the interviewees endorsed a more time-intensive dynamic with journalists. Instead, they sought more fruitful interactions that would begin with reporters doing better background research on social justice concepts and histories prior to interviews. Doing so, activists maintained, would enhance the accuracy, fairness, and trustworthiness of news coverage. Activists consistently said that journalists and editors need to educate themselves about social justice before attempting to educate the public.

Solidarity journalism offers a practical alternative to dominant reporting norms, by prioritizing grounded facts and dismantling journalism’s deference to institutional authorities (Varma, 2023). A compatible addition to the solidarity journalism framework, based on activists’ calls for improved social justice background knowledge among journalists, is to incorporate historical and contemporary context into how journalists prepare to report a story, which would mean creating conditions for journalists to learn and become conversant in topics like labor unions, reproductive justice, eviction, and immigration. Aligned with Perry (2016), this study affirms the need for journalists to have a basic grasp of history before they can reasonably expect to be regarded as trustworthy.

Certainly, journalists would benefit from educating themselves about the history of any issue they cover. Some issues, however, are likely closer to journalists’ realm of experience, education, and familiarity than others. Multiple studies have found the US journalism profession to be disproportionately white, cis-male, and middle-to-upper class (Bauder, 2021; Grieco, 2020; Usher, 2019). This homogeneity in newsrooms, along with professional conformity pressures, may contribute

to why journalists have conserved racist, heterosexist, classist, and other biases in reporting (Alamo-Pastrana & Hoynes, 2020; Brown, 2021; Lowery, 2020). Disrupting hegemonic biases requires taking seriously the insights of people outside of newsrooms who are affected by them, as our study has begun to do.

The present study has focused on social justice activists' evaluations of journalism from mainstream news outlets. A major limitation of this study is its exclusive use of social justice activists' self-reported interactions with journalists and evaluations of coverage. We did not ask interviewees to provide examples of coverage that they criticized, nor could we observe their interactions with journalists firsthand. It is possible that journalists already utilize some of the solidarity practices identified in this study. However, our research questions focus on social justice activists' evaluations and articulations, which makes addressing the potential chasm between perceptions and practices an area for future research.

Another area for future research is to assess the role of movements using their own social media accounts to reach the public, instead of relying on journalism. Some activists in the present study mentioned that social media did not offer a viable alternative to news coverage due to having like-minded followers, and due to misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms making truth difficult to parse.

A related future study could examine social justice coverage from the perspective of journalists who develop this reporting to understand why journalists uphold dominant reporting norms over solidarity reporting norms. Such a study could also identify practical barriers that may prevent journalists from doing solidarity reporting. Finally, the present study is of a single country with declining trust in news, and future work could develop a comparative study across countries with rising trust in news to assess whether solidarity reporting norms are more prominent in these countries, or if the mechanisms for trust are distinct depending on country-level context.

Scholarly and practitioner dismay over eroding trust in US journalism signals a disconnect between journalism's self-perceptions and public perceptions. This study's findings indicate that there are clear reasons why people fighting for social justice do not trust journalism. Due to reporting routines that dehumanize, decontextualize, and deny the lived realities of people struggling against the status quo, social justice activists experience trustworthy journalists as the exception rather than the rule. As a result, they express exasperation with trying to improve journalism narratives both as sources and as suppliers of background knowledge for journalists.

Protest paradigm scholarship has diagnosed an important problem that helps explain the tension between social justice activists and journalism, but has seldom provided actionable, plausible alternatives for dominant journalism. Rather than viewing journalism as obsolete or unnecessary, activists interviewed in this study argued that journalism is crucial for the

work of social justice, since—even in a social media era—journalism contributes to constructing a baseline of shared facts across society. By incorporating activists' articulations for how journalism can improve, the present study has contributed a grounded approach for journalism to address dwindling trust through solidarity practices, based on the logic of discourse ethics.

Discourse ethics also includes a consideration of appropriateness, which means that generalizable norms must account for context-specificity (Glasser & Ettema, 2008). Dominant reporting norms may be appropriate for contexts where journalists are, for example, aiming to expose official corruption, but inadequate and ill-suited for covering social justice activism and organizing efforts. Pragmatically, if dominant reporting norms led to accurate, rigorous, and widely-trusted coverage, then there would be little basis or justification for calling for change aside from a group's idiosyncratic preferences. Yet US journalism facing a crisis of eroding trust needs to heed and incorporate specific calls for change—or accept a likely outcome of continued diminishing trust that places journalism on a trajectory toward obsolescence in the eyes of a growing range of people who are unconvinced that journalism seeks to serve the public. To develop trust in journalism, journalism organizations would benefit from moving from asserting their credibility to assessing it based on insights from people who experience journalism not as practitioners but as subjects of it—including social justice activists.

Habermas' discourse ethics calls for consensus among "all affected" (Glasser & Ettema, 2008, p. 525). The present study has focused on one group affected by dominant reporting norms. Analyzing their recommendations provides a step in the direction of developing more defensible journalism on social justice issues. It is possible, however, that trust in journalism is a zero-sum game: What makes journalism trustworthy for those who seek to restore an era in which fewer people had rights, for example, may be fundamentally incompatible with what makes journalism trustworthy for people who aim to advance a more inclusive society. Determining whether recommendations from different groups who object to dominant reporting norms are compatible is an area for future research. The encouraging insight from this study is that many of the recommendations are consistent and compatible with ideas about how journalism should improve from conservatives (Duchovnay & Masullo, 2021), racial minorities (Robinson & Culver, 2019), trans people (Fink & Palmer, 2020), and people who avoid the news (Palmer & Toff, 2020), which suggests that wider adoption of solidarity reporting norms in dominant mainstream news venues could improve trust across axes of difference.

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Conflict of Interests

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