

Fighting an indestructible monster

Journalism's legitimacy narratives during the Trump Era

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U.S. journalism during the Trump era has experienced numerous legitimacy attacks by the leading political figure. Building on the concepts of institutional legitimacy and intentional trust, this study analyzes legitimization narratives in projections of journalism's future, using the Harvard University's NiemanLab Predictions of Journalism from 2017 to 2021. Projectory narratives are meaningful constructions of a field's future and provide guidance for its actors. The qualitative analysis of a Trump-related subset of predictions (ca. $n=130$) convey (1) confrontational narratives of threat, self-reproach, and epistemological authority loss. Confrontational narratives serve to secure consent for suggested transparency and audience relationship building solutions. These (2) solution narratives represent trustification strategies. Lastly, (3) survival narratives aim at regaining authority and agency through legacy mythopoesis and the construction of a cautiously optimistic post-Trump outlook for journalism. Hence, the analysis of projectory narratives reveals how an organizational field collectively prepares for change to regain legitimacy.

Keywords: digital journalism, discourse, disinformation, fake news, future, legitimacy, politics, renewal, Trump, truth

1. Introduction

President Trump's enemy-of-the-people tweets in February 2017 represent one of the most severe legitimacy attacks to news media in a democratic country uttered by political elites. The tweets are a systematic approach to delegitimize journalism as an institution (Kreis 2017), aiming at regaining sovereignty over public spheres. Yet, Trump's accusations may be an indicator for a broader structural change of trust in journalism (Ladd 2012) in a disinformation and clickbait environment

(Munger 2020). Trump's tweets are vastly visible outbursts that may represent the tip of an iceberg of a general mistrust towards "liberal" or "mainstream" media (Lee and Hosam 2020; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2020) and a disconnect between audiences and journalism (Karlsson and Clerwall 2019).

Gills, Patomäki, and Morgan (2019, 291) argue that "Trump's words, actions and inactions are potentially deeply damaging to the legitimacy of the office he holds and to the continuity of the institutions defining that position." Severely challenging journalism's legitimacy, Trump's fake news accusations cause struggle over journalism's role in society and intensify the need to renegotiate legitimacy in society (Koliska, Chadha, and Burns 2020). Trump's accusations attack trust in news organizations' good intentions which implies opportunism (Korkeamäki and Kohtamäki 2020). In response, journalism struggles over retaining legitimacy in a meta-journalistic discourse (Carlson 2016; Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2020). Especially projectory narratives focusing on the future of journalism may reveal meaningful shared visions for the field (Messerli and Vertesi 2015) and initiate change (Landau, Drori, and Terjesen 2014). Against the background of Trump's fake news accusations, this study asks, *how does journalism strive to discursively restore its legitimacy in future projections?*

Previous research focused on the analysis of news content and social media discussions as locus for re-legitimation in the Trump era (Koliska, Chadha, and Burns 2020; Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2020; Whipple and Shermak 2020; Egelhofer et al. 2020; Lischka 2019). The goal of this explorative study is to understand how journalism as an organizational field collectively reconstructs legitimacy. Gills, Patomäki, and Morgan (2019, 298) expect that even Trump's removal from office "would not in itself resolve the underlying and long-standing problems that caused him to be elected." This poses the question as to whether journalism has to cope with a permanent situation of deconstructive criticism (Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2020), beyond Trump's presidency. Thus, the broader question this study contributes to is whether there can be renewal for journalism as an institution.

Empirically, this study explores legitimacy narratives in the NiemanLab Predictions for Journalism from 2017 to 2021. These predictions are written by journalism practitioners and partly by journalism scholars and are published by the end of each year to predict issues in journalism in the coming year. Ruotsalainen (2018) argues that the NiemanLab Predictions are diverse and rich because experts can express their view on journalism freely without predefined questions. The NiemanLab Predictions represent discursive practices that constitute the objects of which they speak, according to Foucault's (1977) definition of discourse, potentially guiding imagination and action regarding the future of journalism.

2. Literature review

Drawing on the concept of organizational legitimacy, this section describes legitimacy dimensions of journalism and discursive legitimation strategies.

2.1 Legitimacy

Legitimacy is a “perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, 574). Legitimacy is relevant for organizations since this “social judgment of acceptance, appropriateness, and desirability, enables organizations to access other resources needed to survive and grow” (Zimmerman and Zeitz 2002, 414). Audiences more likely supply resources to organizations that appear legitimate, regard them more worthy, meaningful, and trustworthy (Suchman 1995). In contrast, organizations that are assessed as dishonest are also perceived as unnecessary (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Suchman (1995) argues that organizations can gain three dimensions of legitimacy. First, pragmatic legitimacy refers to the usefulness of an organization for its audiences, second, moral legitimacy to a normative evaluation that an organization is doing “the right thing”, and third, cognitive legitimacy suggests that an organization is taken for granted and is not questioned (Suchman 1995). According to an institutional view, collective legitimacy of an entire field reveals what is legitimate beyond the distinct organizations within that field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Legitimacy underlies a dynamic process and needs to be maintained. Legitimation is a process in which organizations justify their right to exist to external audiences (Maurer 1971). In this process, an organization can seek legitimacy by symbolic actions such as the choice of the organization's name, external endorsements, or corporate communication as well as substantive actions such as producing high-quality products or services. The legitimation process can contain feedback loops and be “highly chaotic” (Suchman 1995, 593). For instance, newly legitimated actors can delegitimize those institutions they owe their autonomy to (DiMaggio 1988). In this regard, news media is considered an institution rendering legitimacy to actors in society (Bitektine and Haack 2015). Thus, President Trump, who could have used news media coverage to enhance his political legitimacy, has attacked journalism with his fake news accusations. Moreover, gaining trust is a central part in the legitimation process (Jackson and Gau 2016). Korkeamäki and Kohtamäki (2020) distinguish intentional and competence trust. The latter includes the assumption of corporate ability and performance regarding processes or results, the former the evaluation of good intentions and refrainment from opportunism, including truthfulness (Korkeamäki and Kohtamäki

2020). Against this background, Trump accuses journalism to be opportunistic, questioning the intentional trust of the field.

2.2 Journalism legitimacy

Journalism's public service in democratic societies is to "provide people with relatively accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely independently produced information about public affairs" (Nielsen 2017, 1251). To do so, journalism's epistemic authority was enabled through commercializing news products and the evolvement of a party-independent press (Burrowes 2011). First, for audiences, however, following commercial interests may compromise good intentions, i.e., it may question intentional trust (Korkeamäki and Kohtamäki 2020). Consequently, perceiving journalism as commercialized is one source for audience's incredibility judgment (Ladd 2012) and doubting journalism's epistemic authority (Carlson 2016). Second, in view of U.S. politics, predominantly Conservatives argue that news outlets are positively biased regarding the Democrats, constructing a "liberal media" bias argument (Watts et al. 1999). These claims have led to the belief that there is a liberal slant in the news (Domke et al. 1999).

Beyond "liberal" bias, a novel source for delegitimation represents technological change (Tong 2018; Lischka 2020). In the digital environment, public service norms of journalistic knowledge production may not have changed, but the loss of epistemic authority can be ascribed to the loss of public spheres as journalism's sovereign territory. While journalism used to serve as exclusive gatekeeper and agenda setter between politics and publics, digital platforms enable a direct contact between politics and publics (Hallin 2019). Trump's fake news accusations can accordingly be regarded as a discursive deflection strategy that is used "to demonstrate allegiance and as a cover for his own spreading of mis- and disinformation that is framed as truth" (Ross and Rivers 2018, 1), ignoring news media.

As a response to losing epistemic authority, transparency addresses journalistic processes to enhance procedural legitimation according to Suchman (1995). Transparency measures enable audiences to better judge journalistic practice. However, Broersma (2019) complains, "showing readers how the cake is baked" will not suffice. Similarly, Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau (2021) assess that transparency measures are strategically used to reinforce journalism's epistemic authority rather than indicating critical reflection. Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau (2021, 13) describe that transparency is "creating a glass barrier through which audiences can admire – but not meddle in – the journalistic process." Transparency measures may thus represent at best symbolic but not substantive conformity signals. Instead, Broersma (2019) emphasizes that legitimacy can be claimed based on agreed-on normative principles and their translation into news.

Tong (2018) suggests that a digital, technology- and data-savvy image of journalism focusing on a democratic mission will provide legitimacy. These suggestions are in line with the concept of legitimacy being ascribed by one's constituencies based on what they consider appropriate (Bitektine and Haack 2015). Establishing a digital image is a symbolic conformity signal of rebranding journalistic ability, i.e., the expertise to produce high-quality goods (S. Kim and Rader 2010).

Yet, fake news accusations represent antagonistic media criticism. Because this hostile criticism aims at destroying rather than challenging the boundaries of journalism, it inhibits a critical reflection of professional practice argue Shin, C. Kim, and Joo (2020). Moreover, journalists perceive hostile criticism in the form of fake news accusations as an indicator for their epistemological authority (Lischka 2019). Hence, it may not be worthwhile reconsidering journalistic norms and practices. In contrast, journalistic ability appears to be effective as the news enrages those in power.

2.3 Discursive legitimacy signaling

Signaling legitimacy can be reached with discursive legitimation strategies (Suchman 1995), which are argumentation schemes aiming at communicatively constructing legitimacy (Vaara and Tienari 2011). Based on immigration control orders, van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) identify authorization, rationalization, moralization, and mythopoesis as employed legitimation strategies. These strategies are applied in news articles responding to Trump's fake news accusations (Lischka 2019).

Authorization answers the question "Why must it be so?" using a "Because so-and-so says so" answer referring to external sources of laws, regulations, experts, or generally accepted conventions to imply the rightfulness of a matter (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 104). The attribution according to a source is an example of authorization legitimation. Rationalization refers to the utility or function of practices or decisions, for example, referring to definitions, explanations or solutions (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). To restore competence trust, companies can rationalize through ability narratives referring to expertise, product quality, utility, and benefits (S. Kim and Rader 2010). To regain intentional trust, trustification demonstrates refrainment from opportunism by references to benevolence, honesty, and fairness (Korkeamäki and Kohtamäki 2020). Moral evaluations represent references to values that moralize an activity, such as public interests, which van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999, 108) describe as the "one of the least explicit forms of legitimation." Mythopoesis is telling an often negative moral story to provide evidence for a matter (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999), for instance through cautionary tales that give warnings or stories about single cases.

Vaara, Tienari, and Laurila (2006) analyze news reports about a global industrial restructuring and add narrativization and normalization to the set of discursive legitimation strategies. Building on mythopoesis, Vaara, Tienari, and Laurila (2006) conceptualize narrativization as using narrative structures for concretion or dramatizing. Dramatic narrativizations can portray actors as winners, losers, or culprits (Vaara, Tienari, and Laurila 2006). Normalization renders something as normal or natural, for instance by using retrospective or prospective similar cases, events or practices as the matter at hand (Vaara, Tienari, and Laurila 2006).

Especially narratives are used in professional contexts to define and advocate legitimacy (Landau, Drori, and Terjesen 2014). Analyzing legitimacy narratives in an organization going through a period of change, Landau, Drori, and Terjesen (2014) find narratives of the past that remind of an organization's legacy, narratives that confront change, and narratives about consequences of change that are accompanied by survival narrations. Legacy legitimacy is constructed by rationalization and moralization of values and vision. Legitimacy of change is contested through moralization of values and old paradigms. Survival narratives construct legitimacy of change through rationalization of science, market, and technology development (Landau, Drori, and Terjesen 2014). These narratives evolve over time, and sustaining narratives can structure social reality (Landau, Drori, and Terjesen 2014). Discursive legitimation strategies and legitimacy narratives can reveal how journalism as a struggling field disputes with legitimacy attacks and how the future of journalism is discursively constructed.

3. Method

This study explores a meta-journalistic discourse using a grounded theory approach for the analysis of discursive legitimacy narratives.

3.1 Case selection

As a representation of an U.S.-focused meta-journalistic prospective discourse, I analyze the NiemanLab Predictions for Journalism between 2017 and 2021, covering Donald Trump's four presidential years and the first post-Trump year. With constant legitimacy attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020, the period represents an extreme era for journalism. The NiemanLab is part of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University and invites "the smartest people in journalism"¹ every year to share their predictions for the coming year, with a focus on people working in the U.S. While the selection procedure of authors for the predictions is not revealed, it may combine convenience and reputational

author sampling. Due to their visibility, the NiemanLab Predictions represent a reputational case of predictions in journalism.

Projectory narratives such as the NiemanLab Predictions make an imagined future meaningful for actors and can affect their present choices (Messerli and Vertesi 2015; Landau, Drori, and Terjesen 2014). That is, involved actors discursively construct future in projectory narratives “of the ‘imaginary,’ made concrete and traceable through circulated documents that codify a community’s orientation” (Messerli and Vertesi 2015, 56). Projectories represent strategic narratives for communities to develop and work on a vision of their shared future (Messerli and Vertesi 2015). Thus, the predictions may “get things done, accomplish real tasks, gather authority” (Said 1986, 152) and facilitate implementing measures that may lead to a desired future (Landau, Drori, and Terjesen 2014).

3.2 Material selection

The sample frame includes 140, 177, 205, 133, and 157 individual predictions for each year (2017 to 2021), summing up to 918 predictions.¹ The headline and sub-headline of each prediction are subject for analysis as they represent the core theme of an article (Andrew 2007). For example, one Trump-related 2021 prediction written by María Sánchez Díez who is an operations editor at the *Washington Post* consists of the headline “Traffic will plummet – and it’ll be ok” and the sub-headline “The ‘Trump bump’ is already waning. The question now is: How many of those readers will remain loyal and enter their credit card info again once the sense of alarm that moved them in the first place dissipates?” The essay itself consists of 612 words. The essay was only considered to understand the background if the headline was ambiguous or very short.

Following a grounded theory theoretical sampling approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990), multiple sampling rounds were conducted until all informative predictions for the research questions were identified and theoretical saturation was reached. First, those predictions possibly addressing legitimacy issues were selected using the key words “Trump,” ($n=20$) “fake” ($n=21$) or “truth” ($n=31$). These predictions were analyzed in a first round. Second, this sample was extended using the key term “trust” ($n=56$), which appeared as a major theme in the first sub-sample. In a third round, further predictions were added when they informed a theme found during the analysis. Fourth, the 2021 prediction headlines

1. Sources: 2017 – niemanlab.org/collection/predictions-2017/; 2018 – niemanlab.org/collection/predictions-2018/; 2019 – niemanlab.org/collection/predictions-2019/; 2020 – niemanlab.org/collection/predictions-2020/; 2021 – niemanlab.org/collection/predictions-2021/.

were closely read in total to detect possible novel themes. The analysis is based on about 130 predictions.

3.3 Analysis

For analysis, emerging themes were identified in predictions using open coding as an initial step. Open coding compared predictions with other predictions in terms of similarities and differences, labelling and grouping concepts into categories (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Once conceptual categories were set, legitimization strategies per category were identified. Therefore, the set of legitimization strategies of authorization, rationalization, moralization, and mythopoesis (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999), extended with narrativization and normalization (Vaara, Tienari, and Laurila 2006) is used. In a second round, selective coding was applied to select the core and most frequent themes and connect the themes to each other. Therefore, legacy, confrontational, solution, and survival narratives based on Landau, Drori, and Terjesen (2014) were identified. Finally, a set of three legitimacy narratives and their discursive function was generated based on core themes and discursive legitimization strategies (see Table 1).

4. Findings

The NiemanLab Predictions for Journalism critically analyze journalism's environment and apply discursive defense strategies to repair journalism's legitimacy. This section describes major legitimacy narratives along their core themes and discursive legitimization strategies.

4.1 Confrontation

The predictions confront journalism with a substantial legitimacy threat, facing a post-truth era, while ascribing journalism some responsibility for this situation. The confrontation narrative describes the baseline situation of journalism and prepares for the rightfulness and acceptance of restoration measures in three major themes.

First, predictions construct a universal *threat* for journalism around Trump's fake news accusations using mythopoetic moralization. The accusations are put into retrospective relating to the liberal media argument: "None of this is brand new; politicians have always sought to smear journalism they didn't like" (2018), indicating a normalization of fake news accusations that Conservatives have con-

structed over time (Domke et al. 1999; Watts et al. 1999). The reference to historic example renders the bias argument as ordinary.

Against these common bias arguments, Trump's fake news accusations are accentuated as a serious threat. The predictions record the severity of Trump's legitimacy threats: "A dangerous anti-press mix" (2017) using a cautionary tale addressing journalism as an institution: "What's new is that the attack is no longer about this or that story, but about journalism itself. It's a challenge to the very notion of an independent accounting of facts" (2018). The moral evaluation of agreeing to a generally acceptable truth has become void under Trump. Predictions refer to Trump and expected changes in tone of public spheres, e.g., "[w]elcome to fear and loathing in Trump's America" (2017). The universal attacks threaten journalism as a social institution providing merit to democracies. Hence, the combination of retrospective normalization and dramatic mythopoesis referring to moral evaluation functions as a discursive strategy to alarm journalism and warn about substantial legitimacy struggles for the entire domain. Journalism must not regard Trump's accusations as similar to past liberal bias arguments but acknowledge the novel, destructive character of his fake news accusations.

A second confrontation narrative identifies journalism's focus on commercialization as reason for losing legitimacy, suggesting *self-reproach* of journalism. A 2017 prediction argues that journalism has to earn audience trust, indicating that it is not taken for granted and providing a narrative of direct responsibility, i.e., to "earn trust by working for (and with) readers". This prediction diagnoses journalism as deficient because it is commercialized: "I'm not surprised that audiences think journalism's highest aim is to hijack their attention and trick their eyeballs into spending a split second on banner ads" (2017), referring to a clickbait media environment (Munger 2020) in which audience attention is central for news outlets (Myllylahti 2020). Hence, according to Korkeamäki and Kohtamäki (2020), the intentional trust dimension for audiences is compromised. The clickbait aspect reappears in a 2021 suggestion to "[d]efund the crime beat" because "[i]t's racist, classist, fear-based clickbait masking as journalism", addressing issues of social responsibility that journalism has for its audiences. Here, the moral evaluation of commercial aspects for the funding of journalism is subordinated to its moral evaluation regarding doing the right thing for audiences.

The general tension between revenues and journalism's social performance is debated: "journalism is a cultural form worthy of our support and protection and not a commercial product in search of a business model" (2017). Critical predictions such as, "[w]e've gotten to where we don't deliver the news people need – we deliver the news people want. And I think that's dangerous" (2017) can be understood as requesting a focus on news in the public interest. This issue can be related to research into normative benefits of journalism for society (Nielsen 2017). Such

economic tensions affecting performance have been discussed since the digitization of journalism (Picard 2004; Hamilton 2004).

These guilt narratives ground in a deficiency assumption of journalistic work, implying a low pragmatic performance of journalism and explaining an assumingly low intentional trust. Beyond commercialization critique, election news reporting is criticized, implying responsibility for Trump's election victory:

- (1) Feeling blue in a red state: I hope the left-leaning elements of journalism (of which I would be a card-carrying member if we actually printed cards) take a minute for reflection before moving onto blaming only fake news and Russian hacking for the rise of Trump. (2017)

This prediction refers to an inability of journalism to interfere against Trump but largely follow his agenda. With identifying own responsibility, predictions identify and suggest measures for regaining audience trust and thus legitimacy.

As a third confrontation narrative, the predictions construct the absence of truth – both, truth deficiency accusations towards news organizations as well as the truth deficiency of the socio-political environment – as precondition for *epistemological authority loss*. Consequently, the moral devaluation of truth undermines trust towards journalism.

Predictions ascribe Trump and the news environment a lack of intentional trust, i.e., unfair and dishonest opportunistic activity. This environment challenges the epistemological journalistic norms of objectivism and empiricism (Hanitzsch 2007). In this “post-Enlightenment era” (2018), consensus dies (2019), “lies get further normalized” (2020), “nothing is true and everything is possible” (2020), and “text and reason are substituted by images and emotions” (2018). Journalism remains largely unable to intervene against Trump who is “like an indestructible monster in a Godzilla movie” (2019). Although “authorities keep firing at him, but he just keeps walking through town, gaining power” (2019). Using mythopoesis, Trump's authority is constructed in fiction but stronger than journalism's authority. As a result, instead of journalism being an active gatekeeper, “a president leads, the press follows, reality fades” (2020). The disability experience of journalism due to the loss of epistemological authority serves as basis for retrospective reflecting journalism's performance during the Trump era and constructing the post-Trump future of journalism in 2021.

4.2 Solution

Predictions refer to transparency of journalistic processes and investing into audience relations as two major starting points to restore trust. These measures are

rationalized as solutions to the problem at hand and are accompanied with optimistic outlook narratives.

Regarding *transparency*, introducing transparent routines is discussed as one central measure to restore audience trust. In order to have the audience understand journalism, predictions recommend to “baking transparency into our routines” (2017), request “[m]ore transparency around newsroom decisions” (2019), state that “transparency isn’t just a desire, it’s an expectation” (2020), which causes the “rise of radical newsroom transparency” (2021). Without transparent measures, “our readers have not been privy to the process in a way that helps them understand” (2018) but “people want to know what goes into news production” (2020). News articles should standardly reveal their recipe, i.e., “here’s what we learned, here’s how we confirmed it” (2017). Hence, journalists become “media literacy teachers” (2020) who will make the audience understand journalism better and eventually enable to regain audience trust. Transparency can thus become “the antidote to fake news” (2018). Therefore, journalists are requested to become conscious of “all of the subtle biases we have, how they affect our work, and how we can be more transparent about them” (2019). Transparency can lastly counter Trump’s allegations:

- (2) Transparency finally takes off: Having been called enemies of the people by our highest-ranking public official, reporters are starting to recognize the importance of not just a knee-jerk defense of their work, but one that shows exactly how they work to uncover wrongdoing and check facts. (2018)

The projections consider procedural transparency as a measure to regain trust in journalism’s epistemic competence. While transparency and bias detection addresses routines and therefore competence trust, they are related to fairness and honesty of processes. Yet, this transparency discourse represents a strategic reinforcement of journalism’s epistemic authority. The predictions construct a glass barrier through transparency for audiences to observe journalistic conduct without interfering with journalism, as argued by Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau (2021). Comparatively rarely, transparency is viewed as a way to build audience relationships to regain trust as requested by Broersma (2019). One exception is an invitation of the audience behind the glass wall:

- (3) Give the audience a seat at the table: A transparent and more inclusive process, especially when combined with a more equitable distribution of power, is one of the best ways to build relationships that are based on mutual respect and, most importantly, trust. (2019)

Beyond transparency, *audience relationship building* promises to regain trust. First, understanding audiences to establishing a connection to audiences, “to

bring them closer to our work, to learn more about them” (2017) and building audience communities are viewed as helpful. Therefore, “journalism has to stop conceiving audiences in its own image” (2021). Secondly, focusing on service journalism is considered useful to regain pragmatic and moral legitimacy. That is, providing service for readers is expected to increase audiences’ utility of news and intentional trust. Predictions focus on the impact of journalism on local communities and “real people” (2018) by “hold[ing] people and institutions accountable” (2017), “empower[ing] citizens” (2020). That is, discussions describe the power dynamics between newsrooms, audiences, and “those we seek to hold accountable” (2019) referring to the watchdog role of journalism, providing a public stage for citizens. Achieving social impact with news represents an increasingly important role for journalism (Wagemans, Witschge, and Harbers 2019). A “[h]uman centered” and “empathetic” journalism can be “much more essential to their [users] lives,” “helping your readers” or “solves a problem our readers have” (2021). Trust may be regained even from “our fiercest critics by giving them the information they need to navigate daily life” (2021). Once journalism has made these efforts, a “return to trust” (2018) will be achieved because “we will convince the public that there’s nothing fake about the reporting coming from our organizations” (2018). Ultimately, journalism will “flourish in the third decade of the 21st century” (2021). This optimistic forecast narrative rationalizes measures to be taken.

4.3 Survival

Survival narratives reassure journalism’s authority and construct a post-Trump era for journalism with the potential to learn from the lessons fighting the “seemingly indestructible monster” (2019).

Regarding survival, the predictions discursively restore journalism’s agency by mythopoetic referrals to *authority legacy*. Trump’s fake news accusations imply that pragmatic legitimacy, i.e., practical exchange legitimacy (Suchman 1995), of “liberal” news organizations has become void. That is, spending attention to news should not provide utility for news audiences but is constructed to be a waste of time according to Trump. At least, parts of the audience still “do believe us: Where are the people getting their negative impressions of their new leader? They are getting them from the same press they say they do not trust” (2017). Nurturing from this source of legitimacy, predictions suggest remembering one’s authority in journalists’ roles of gatekeepers, experts, and in the ideal example of being “arbiters of truth” (2017). These references to authority have a self-celebratory feel asking, “don’t be in such a hurry to give up on your agency” (2020), “reifying our faith in a shared reality” (2017) because “you still get to decide what’s news”

(2020). Hence, journalism reminds itself of its worthiness of intentional and competence trust, which serve as basis for restoring epistemological authority in a self-celebratory way. These themes largely refer to journalism's legacy and thus represent legitimacy narratives from the past in the sense of Landau, Drori, and Terjesen (2014).

The construction of the *post-Trump era* starts in the 2020 predictions and serves as central survival narrative theme. The predictions assume that journalism can shape its future proactively, latest after the 2020 elections:

- (4) The work of reconnecting starts November 4: The aftermath of the election will represent an opportunity for the news media. In this period where the legitimacy of the media (and democracy itself) will be questioned, newsrooms can help the public process what has happened. (2020)

Using prospective examples, journalism will be able to make an effective connection to the audience and function as analyst for the public. The 2020 elections will have withdrawn public consent from Trump, which indicates a lack of his political legitimacy.

In the 2021 predictions, the Trump era is retrospectively described as toxic and exhausting. Journalism needs a "rehab" of "the boozy hit of reporting Trump's latest tweets" in order to "recover." Another prediction depicts the Trump era as traumatic, which requires amnesia: "All of the misinformation disseminated by elected leaders and alt-right news organizations will need to be purged from our consciousness" (2021). A "constant rush of adrenaline" (2021) has led to exhaustion. Hence, the Trump era is regarded as a destructive exception that journalists want to put behind themselves.

Predictions are insecure regarding the consequences of Trump's presidency for journalism. Predictions assume that "Trumpism will persist in some form" (2021, in essay text) suggesting that journalism cannot close the Trump chapter. Yet there is the evocation of epistemological authority as journalism will "reestablish itself as the Fourth Estate" (2021, in essay text). One 2021 prediction concludes that journalism has changed under Trump and doubtfully wonders, "will it keep changing under Biden?"

While "the last five years have taught journalists" a lesson in form of a cautionary tale, it may provide two implications for journalism. One 2021 prediction presumes that journalism may either conclude that its performance was successful because "the Republic didn't collapse." On the other hand, the radical lesson includes to always opposing political elites also in the future. Referring to the Washington Post's mythopoetic slogan "Democracy Dies in Darkness" that has been introduced in 2017, one prediction resumes, "[n]o, democracy didn't die in darkness, but has sunlight really saved it?" (2021). This prediction similarly constructs

a liberal success for society while criticizing a lack of fourth-estate manner of journalism. The prediction implies that journalistic performance was not sufficient during the Trump era despite its investigative effort. It assumes that the Trump era may be regarded as an “aberration” in retrospective and learnings will not sustain but a return to the previous “normal” news making may set in.

A third set of predictions contains calls to action to draw from the lessons learned. One prediction requires “wehrhafte [defensive] journalism” that is able “to contribute to democracy’s fortification and to defend it when necessary” (2021). That is, in case of another aberration, journalism may turn into defense mode and oppose those in power. To prevent going back to normal, another prediction suggests to create a “democracy beat” that will not work along party lines but work “through the lens of honesty, fairness, and transparency” (2021). Similarly, another prediction proposes to cover “[l]ess on politics, more on how government works (or doesn’t)” (2021). Hence, the predictions include occasional suggestions for changes for journalism on the level of reporting, which may be able to improve trust in journalism’s competence.

While some predictions suggest a “normal” state to return to, other predictions assume that a novel commercial lean period awaits post-Trump journalism. The increase of readership due to Trump has already declined. Hence, “[t]he question now is: How many of those readers will remain loyal and enter their credit card info again once the sense of alarm that moved them in the first place dissipates?” (2021). The readership decline is regarded as constructive (“it’ll be ok”, 2021) since it provides journalism with an opportunity to reflect. This 2021 prediction regards audience relationship building as crucial: “We will need to relearn how to engage with readers in a meaningful way, reevaluating our priorities, diversifying our editorial offering beyond politics and hard news and providing value to our audiences (plural).” Engaging readers refers to the pragmatic legitimacy dimension and reevaluating priorities to moral legitimacy according to Suchman (1995).

The post-Trump era lowers the likeliness of attacking journalism’s moral legitimacy and good intentions for society. The 2021 predictions largely strive to restore competence trust with references to product quality, utility, and benefits and morally evaluate the role of journalism for public interest.

5. Discussion

This study explores the legitimacy discourse in projectory reflections about journalism during and following Donald Trump’s presidency. Field-level projectories construct a shared vision that potentially guides decisions throughout the field

of journalism. The analysis focuses on narratives that are constructed around the questioning of journalism's legitimacy and discursive legitimacy strategies. The legitimacy narratives are embedded in the institutional history of journalism as a fourth estate when journalism had epistemological authority and agency. The predictions recognize the contested situation of journalism and pave the way for changes. This way, the projective legitimacy narratives are a way to restore journalism's sacred legacy. This study therefore contributes to the understanding about the role of discursive legitimacy repair of an institutional field under external legitimacy attack combatting disinformation attacks in a social media age

The study distinguishes three legitimacy narrative categories that serves a systematic discursive strategy (see Table 1). The projections confront journalism with its weak legitimacy situation, propose restoration possibilities, and propose cautiously to excessively optimistic lookouts for the future. These elements follow Landau, Drori, and Terjesen's (2014) distinction of confrontational narratives and survival narratives. First, regarding journalism's legitimacy situation, the predictions construct a severe external legitimacy threat, self-reproach causing vulnerability of threat, and journalism's powerlessness because of epistemological authority loss. Using normalization and moral mythopoesis, journalism constructs a severe legitimacy situation in an opportunistically post-truth era following a confrontational narrative. That is, the projections suggest a wide-ranging loss of intentional trust for journalism. In so doing, journalism ascribes responsibility to the intentional trust erosion to journalism's focus on commercialization. Accelerated commercialization in a "clickbait media" environment (Munger 2020) have prepared the ground for Trump's fake news allegations. This confrontational narrative seeks to secure consent for solutions, representing the second legitimacy narrative category.

Table 1. Legitimacy narratives and their discursive functions in projections of journalism

Narrative	Confrontational narratives	Solution narratives	Survival narratives
Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Threat note – Self-reproach – Epistemological authority loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Transparency measures – Audience relationship building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Legacy of authority – Agency in the post-Trump era
Discursive function	<i>Securing consent for suggested solutions</i>	<i>Trustification through renewal</i>	<i>Securing consent for suggested solutions; Regaining agency</i>

Solution narratives suggest substantive legitimacy restoration measures focusing on regaining trust. While process improvement is a measure to restore competency trust and pragmatic legitimacy, transparency and improving audience relations address intentional trust. Similarly, in previous research on the NiemanLab predictions, an open culture and a focus on audience needs is found (Ruotsalainen 2018). Hence, journalism strives to reveal its good intentions and substantially refine working processes. This confirms the usage of trustification as a legitimation strategy (Korkeamäki and Kohtamäki 2020) in journalism. Trustification refers to benevolence and honesty as values that guide journalism, established through transparency measures and relationship building. The solution narratives are accompanied by survival constructions that also help securing consent for renewal.

Third, survival narratives reassure journalism's authority and construct a cautiously thriving post-Trump era for journalism. While journalism fights a seemingly "indestructible monster" (2019), the field constructs its future authority as a gatekeeper and arbiter of truth in optimistic recall of its pragmatic and moral legitimacy for society. These confident legitimacy projections serve as a survival narrative for making journalism's future and to project agency for journalism.

Regarding limitations, it remains outside the scope of this study to assess in what way predictions serve as a guiding precursor. Legitimacy issues may be constantly discussed as suggested by discursive identity struggle in journalism (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017), which indicates a collective discursive entourage nonetheless. Further, the predictions are produced in a context of a greater discourse involving the civic public defending journalism's legitimacy as shown in Whipple and Shermak's (2020) tweet analysis. In their analysis of audience discourse, indicators for trustification and reassurances of journalism's legitimacy exist and interesting inter-textual parallels could be drawn. The material at hand does not allow a construction of intertextuality for social groups outside of journalism. Lastly, while the study refers to the field of journalism in general, the material predominantly represents voices from journalists with a professional background in the U.S. With the rise of right-wing populism (Wodak, Khosravinik, and Mral 2013), journalism in other countries similarly has been facing fake news accusations (Waisbord and Amado 2017; Egelhofer et al. 2020). Since Trump's fake news accusations may inspire political agents in other countries, it remains for future research to compare legitimacy strategies across journalism in further regions.

6. Conclusion

The collective construction of journalism's future in times of social conflict is vivid within the field of journalism, acknowledging problems as well as suggesting trust-restoring solutions. Trump's fake news accusations indicate that journalism lacks good intentions, which represents a lack of intentional trustworthiness according to Korkeamäki and Kohtamäki (2020). The projectory discourse, activated by these delegitimization attempts, reconstructs journalism's moral role to overcome contemporary socio-political challenges. While Trump's legitimacy attacks indicate an erosion of intentional trust, his attacks may have accelerated searching solutions within journalism to restore trust, as argued in Koliska, Chadha, and Burns (2020).

The fake news attacks do not inhibit a critical reflection of professional practice as suggested by Shin, C. Kim, and Joo (2020) but initiate a discussion of how legitimacy can be claimed based on normative principles and their translation into journalism as requested by Broersma (2019). The projectory legitimacy narratives reveal meaningful shared visions for journalism that request and suggest field-wide change. Eventually, legitimacy narratives in collective projectories can pave the way for renewal in an organizational field.

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