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Horrific and Beatific Scenarios in Swedish Journalism in the Light of the Post-Truth Era

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ABSTRACT

This paper problematises ideological assumptions about journalism's epistemic authority among Swedish media professionals in relation to notions of post-truth. The study is based on qualitative interviews with journalists who are active in the Swedish news industry. The concept of discursive logics is applied to showcase how journalism is understood and experienced by journalists themselves during an alleged truth crisis. This paper analyses how journalistic practices and ideals are perceived to be disrupted by an ongoing truth crisis and how such practices are envisioned in the future. This paper identifies two major discursive logics in which these disruptions are manifested. The journalists conceived of new techno-political infrastructures in the media as a horrific fantasy threatening their work practices. The second logic is the beatific fantasy of truth-seeking journalism in current times. Post-truth represents a threat against journalism in a double-edged way: first by creating mistrust in established media, and second because, when attempting to counteract fake news through fact checking, the journalist is instead positioned as an activist or a debater.

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Post-truth; journalism; discursive logics; ideology; fact-checking; epistemic authority

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to problematise crisis scenarios among Swedish journalists in relation to notions of post-truth. Post-truth has commonly been linked to phenomena such as fake news, misinformation, social media, populism and a general mistrust of society's knowledge-producing institutions. In academia, post-truth and related terms, such as "the postfact society" (Harsin 2015), "the disinformation order" (Bennett and Livingston 2018) and "post-truth worlds" (Farkas and Schou 2020), have been said to represent a global "breakdown of trust in democratic institutions", including legacy media (Bennett and Livingston 2018, 127). Post-truth has become a controversial topic that many, if not all, journalists have to deal with in one way or another. However, in this paper, we do not try to establish or define what post-truth *is*; rather, we are interested

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in how journalists themselves make sense of their everyday work against a backdrop of imaginaries of a post-truth crisis.

The current public debate around media mistrust, often sparked by right-wing populist movements and autocratic governments and political leaders, has accused traditional news journalism of elitism, of producing biased or even fake news and of not reporting on supposedly uncomfortable issues. As is widely known, such accusations come not only from marginalised groups but also from charismatic leaders at the highest political level, who often use social media as platforms. In recent years, during the Covid-19 pandemic, concerns about the emergence of post-truth have accelerated with the arrival of various conspiracy theories, labelled an “infodemic” by the WHO (www.who.int). Additionally, propaganda has become a worrying concern due to the negative development of state-controlled media (such as the ongoing, day-to-day “information war” coupled with Putin’s violent invasion of Ukraine in February 2022).

A focal point for this paper is the clash between contemporary “post-truth narratives” (Harsin 2018) and a so-called “journalism ideology” (Deuze 2005). Journalism ideology, as Deuze puts it, can be described as an ideology that “continuously refine[s] and reproduce[s] a consensus about who was a ‘real’ journalist, and what (parts of) news media at any time would be considered examples of ‘real’ journalism” (Deuze 2005, 444). Deuze lists a few core values that are significant to journalism ideology based on a thorough review of previous research: *public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy* and *ethics* (2005, 447). While many news outlets in elected democracies (such as Sweden) are striving to legitimise their role as one of the cornerstones of democracy, and their status as watchdogs of power concentrations, the authority of journalism as a mediator of truth is being challenged in many ways. Although digital technology is assumed to be able to promote democracy, a plurality of voices and new ways of informing the publics, as well as providing economic benefits for the media industry, digitalisation is simultaneously imagined as a major threat by many news outlets, as will be showcased in this paper (see also Creech 2020; Chambers 2021; Ferrari 2020). One concern in the “post-truth worlds” (Farkas and Schou 2020) of today is not only media users who risk getting stuck in more or less isolated “echo chambers” (Bright 2016), where disinformation and distorted or restricted worldviews are easily spread, but also that post-truth narratives might trigger the spread of falsehoods, mistrust and aggression outside of mediatisation. One example of a myriad is the 2021 Capitol attacks by a violent mob of Trump supporters.

In Sweden, as well as globally, efforts have been made to deal with post-truth problems; one example being joint fact-checking initiatives conducted by Swedish news organisations during the parliamentary election in 2018, with the launch of the website www.faktiskt.se. Fact-checking and debunking have become an industry in its right, and is also growing rapidly outside of established newsrooms (Harsin 2018). High-tech companies such as Meta Platforms, Inc. (Facebook) and Google, as well as many non-profit foundations, such as the international fact-checking network *Poynter* and in a Swedish context *Faktajouren* led by *Medieinstitutet*, have adapted to the fact-checking boom during recent years (Bell 2019).

The aim of this paper is to explore how Swedish journalists reflect upon their authority in relation to a backdrop of post-truth problems. We ask: How do journalists perceive that their authority is challenged in the post-truth era? How and why have they embraced or

negotiated objectivity and truth-telling in relation to post-truth? What alternative journalistic practices do journalists identify as important to reinforce their epistemic authority?

Previous Research: Journalism and the Post-Truth Crisis

The concept of post-truth can be seen as a “grand narrative” charged with many different and, at times, contradictory meanings. Post-truth, as a periodical concept, is sometimes understood as a period *after* or *beyond* truth (Harsin 2018, 2), which according to Harsin is misleading because it implies the idea of a previous “truth-era” that never really existed (see also Farkas and Schou 2020). Nonetheless, post-truth signifies a state or a condition in which society finds itself and is distinguished by an anxiety that popular movements and autocratic political leaders are not respecting the truth or journalistic facts. Such tensions and lack of trust have been perceived as more or less panic-stricken by journalism institutions but also other knowledge producers, such as scientific communities (Carlsson, Carbin, and Nilsson 2023).

The tensions and blurring of boundaries between popular knowledge and expert knowledge are not entirely new, but they have become intensified during the digital age (Cmiel and Durham Peters 2020). In the early 1970s, for example, scepticism of expertise emerged among activists, critical intellectuals and artists, who were suspicious about the truth claims of formal expert knowledge producers. This type of “civic scepticism” has for example involved public criticism of the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s (Schudson 2019).

While scepticism of expertise is not unique to the present time, some researchers are pointing out problems of post-truth related to contemporary journalism specifically. Fake news has been studied as a kind of “informational moral panic” (Carlson 2018, 375) that creates concern and anxiety among journalists and media professionals. According to Carlson journalism tend to construct post-truth problems as a threat that simultaneously positions journalism itself as being true and trustworthy. We see this kind of concern clearly among Swedish journalists. The interviewed journalists in this study understand post-truth as a threat to traditional journalistic ideals such as objectivity and autonomy (Deuze 2005). Other researchers argues that post-truth is “indicative of fluid conditions in public communication across the globe that has destabilised modern assumptions about news and truth” (Waisbord 2018, 1868). Waisbord states that the response to the post-truth crisis among many knowledge institutions, such as news media, has been to tackle the crisis by adopting “scientific realism” and “naïve realism” (focusing on facts) in order to better stand up for truth and fight deception (2018: 1869).

McNair (2017) also discusses the concept of journalistic objectivity in relation to post-truth. Objectivity, he argues, can be perceived as a signifier of “honesty and accuracy” in journalistic practice (McNair 2017, 1325), and functions not only as a way to improve the accuracy of media products but also as a “strategic ritual” to improve the brand of a media company. Others scholars have argued in a similar vein that, in an era of post-truth politics, journalists should function as “truth mediators in the public sphere” (Michailidou and Trenz 2021, 1341). Journalists must work to “establish a common epistemology of rationality and facticity” to be trusted by the public (Michailidou and Trenz 2021, 1341).

In line with Carlson (2023), we understand journalism’s truth claims as a part of an “epistemic contest”, that is, ongoing public positionings, conflicts and negotiations about truth and journalistic objectivity. Journalistic objectivity is, as Carlson argues, closely connected to

normative ideals manifested in journalistic practice (journalism should be free and without bias, for example), rather than just a question of philosophy of knowledge. This paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of how Swedish journalists reflect on the positionings, conflicts and negotiations surrounding the authority of journalism.

Furthermore, journalism scholars have focused on the impact of digital technology for journalistic practice in times of post-truth. Vos and Thomas (2018) argue that the emergence of a digital media ecology that paved the way for new forms of journalism, such as “bloggers” and “influencers”, is a challenge to the symbolic authority of the news industry in general. Also, Canella (2021) discusses how journalists construct “the truth” and notions of “objectivity” in their everyday work and how such practices are related to the digitalisation of society. One challenge is that digital environments tend to force journalists to embrace branding, and that they are pushed to be positioned as partisan or even activist, for example in regard to various social movements.

Creech (2020) shows how digital technology have come to connote the emerging post-truth crisis and how the digital infrastructure that ideally were supposed to promote democracy, now has become increasingly anti-democratic and threatening (see also Gillespie 2010). Other research has studied fake news in relation to the attention economy that characterises social media (Bakir and McStay, 2017). The problem, as they see it, is not only that media users risk being misinformed, but they also risk getting stuck in a closed algorithmic and cognitive system on social media where disinformation circulates more or less freely. Additionally, the development of journalism itself as a part of the attention economy has been seen by several scholars as an explanation for the emerging threat of post-truth. Rumours and misinformation have become a “normal” part of the news agenda in a more obvious way than before, which might fuel mistrust, according to some researchers (Fenton 2019).

Finally, trust and credibility have long been central research topics in journalism studies. An overview conducted by Strömbäck et al. (2020) describes how media trust has been conceptualised and how trust has been measured; for example, by means of various audience surveys. They argue that research distinguishes between the credibility of sources and the credibility of the medium. The issue of trust has also been related to the media’s brand, to individual journalists, to the type of media and to the media content itself (Strömbäck et al. 2020, 147). The most recent annual survey conducted by the Swedish Media Academy (Förtroendebaremetern 2024) indicates that the Swedish public places a considerable degree of trust in public service media. However, this level of trust is not observed among those who align with right-wing political ideologies, including supporters of the Sweden Democrats, the Conservatives, and the Christian Democrats.

Theory: Discursive Logics

Theoretically, we have been inspired by a discourse theoretical approach (Laclau 2007). This means that we conceptualise discourse as constitutive of society and social practices. Accordingly, the meaning of social practices (such as journalism) can never be fully set; rather, their meaning is the result of contestation between different discourses, and thus changes over time. In this paper, we argue that the meaning of journalistic practices has been disrupted by imaginaries of post-truth era, including phenomena such as fake news, propaganda and the alleged increasing mistrust of the public.

To investigate these imaginaries, we utilise the concept of discursive logics (Glynos 2008; Quennerstedt, McCuaig, and Mårdh 2021). As a form of organising principle for everyday work routines, discursive logics can help to characterise how media professionals think about certain journalistic practices as idealised, natural or preferable (social logics), for example objectivity and truth-telling in journalism. We also want to capture imaginaries of the context in which journalism as a practice emerged according to the experiences of the interviewees themselves. Our focus here is to take into account the conflicts (political logics) that are believed to have been (re)shaping journalism during the “post-truth era”. By political logics we do not mean politics in a traditional sense (party politics and the like) but rather we use this concept to analyse of how *conflicts* emerge and are negotiated, and thereby contribute to the formation of possibly new journalistic practices (see Glynos and Howard 2007).

And finally, we use the analytical concept of a *fantasmatic logic* to develop an understanding of why the media professionals take hold of their work, or as Glynos puts it: “how subjects are gripped by a practice” (2008: 278). He writes:

[...] fantasmatic logics are understood to be operative when a subject is over-invested in a fantasy, so that anything which destabilizes or hints at destabilizing a subject’s fantasmatic narrative, is experienced as a threat and provokes anxiety. (Glynos 2008, 289)

In this paper, it is thus central to the concept of fantasmatic logics to highlight certain imaginaries of journalism practices as preferable, but at the same time difficult to achieve due to various post-truth problems. In the introduction to this paper, we briefly described the concept of “journalism ideology” (Deuze 2005) in the sense that it can be understood as a discourse that shapes the meaning of what it means to be a “real” journalist, or “how journalists give meaning to their news work” (Deuze 2005, 444). We argue that it is fruitful to link the notion of journalism ideology to Glynos (2008) argument about fantasmatic logics as something that can be explained and captured at an ideological level. Analysing fantasmatic logics might help us to gain an “inside perspective” on why certain journalistic practices and core values are perceived as reasonable or, conversely, as impossible or threatened or even catastrophic. By considering fantasmatic logics, the goal is to capture both the idealised notion of journalistic practices (beatific fantasy) and the nightmare image of things that might undermine journalism (horrific fantasy) from the perspective of the practitioners themselves. While there are some similarities between discursive logics and the macro concept of (*social*) *media logics* (Van Dijck and Poell 2013), we use the concept of logics to better understand the *imaginaries* of journalistic work among media professionals rather than focusing on broader macro logics in the media ecology as a whole.

In this endeavour, we have also drawn from the analytical approach of Farkas and Shou who use discourse theory to showcase how post-truth is perceived as a major threat to fundamental values such as democracy (Farkas and Schou 2020). In their analysis, they also discuss how journalistic discourses represent journalism both as the victim and the villain in relation to issues of post-truth. That is, journalism is considered to be threatened by the new digital media landscape, while at the same time journalists are described as part of the problem in the sense that good old reliable journalistic practices have been abandoned today (Farkas and Schou 2020, 58).

Data Archive

This study is based on qualitative, in-depth interviews with media professionals active in the Swedish news industry (press, radio and television). The first author conducted nine interviews with journalists (five men and four women) in leading positions and with different roles (editors-in-chief, political editors, reporters, editors of science journalism departments and one journalist working with fact-checking education for journalists in Sweden). The majority of these interviewees are active in leading national Swedish news media and one is a representative of community media. The interviewees were chosen because they have been active in public debates about post-truth issues and fact-checking and they had senior positions and long work experience. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between about 30 minutes and just over an hour (total time 363 minutes). The interviews took place via an online video meeting tool and were recorded and then transcribed by the first author. All quotes used in the analysis section was translated from Swedish to English by the first author. The material was coded afterwards with the help of qualitative data analysis software (atlas.ti). The central codes are reflected in two analytical main themes: (1) *Horrific fantasies: social media and the political landscape threatening journalism* and (2) *Beatific fantasies: the importance of journalism in times of post-truth*.

Before we present the results of the study, we will say a few words about the questions that have guided our analysis. While we were coding and analysing the interviews, we focused on the discursive logics (as described in the previous section) that seem to shape journalism in times of post-truth problems. On an overall level, we were interested in what they considered the key threats, as well as practices and solutions to address these threats. As we were analysing the interviews, we looked for implicit rules, routines and norms (social logics) in journalistic work, and how these are affected by imaginaries about contemporary post-truth problems. We also took into consideration the political logics that shape journalistic work in times of post-truth. How did the interviewees describe or relate to conflicts and threats in the context in which they work? How do the interviews reflect assumptions about digital media, audience trust, economic challenges, etc.? And, finally, in what ways were fantasmatic logics expressed or hinted at when the interviewees described problems with post-truth? How did they envision the future of journalism? Why did they seem to cling onto certain norms about journalism (objectivity, autonomy, ethics, etc.)? And in what ways did post-truth posed a threat to these norms and routines, and what are (if any) the solutions?

Findings: Horrific and Beatific Fantasies Regarding the Status of Journalism

This section is structured in line with two main themes (divided into subthemes) illustrating the horrific and beatific fantasies circulating among media professionals regarding the status of journalism in current times of post-truth.

Horrific Fantasies: Social Media and the Political Landscape Threatening Journalism

One of the central topics in the interviews was the current state of journalism and several horrific fantasies were revealed. One such horrific fantasy was how the rise of techno-

political infrastructures in the media sector had disrupted the condition and status of legacy news media. These disturbances were not described as favourable to journalism but as a serious disadvantage for journalists. Previous research about post-truth emphasises digital technologies and the rise of an omnipresent attention economy as critical aspects of the post-truth era (see Harsin 2018). The affordances of digital technology, steered by algorithms, bots and software design, has been articulated to post-truth problems due to the ways in which data is produced, circulated, used and received, and fake news have been described as “an algorithmic disease” (Farkas and Schou 2020, 55). This notion of digital technology a threat was significant in the collected data.

Social Media Made It Explode

The virality and ecology of social media platforms were by several of the interviewees understood as one of the reasons for the proliferation of propaganda and misinformation in recent years. A senior journalist at one of the major newspapers in Sweden, explained that:

The structure of media consumption and the fact that there were many who had an interest in spreading propaganda and misinformation, both states and political actors, made it explode. [...] We saw that prior to the 2016 election in the United States, how great fake news achieved much more impact than great true journalistic news. That was because they had a system where the ad market was built on the kind of virality that fake news and disinformation often drives. (Interview 2)

In this quote, an imaginary of social media emerges that encompasses ideas about both the audience’s media habits and how fake news is disseminated on digital platforms. Ferrari (2020) argue that the relation between digital technology and fake news can be seen as not only material but also discursive, even political. According to Ferrari, “technology imaginaries” are embedded in all technologies (e.g., the platforms on which disinformation is disseminated) that influence how the technology is used and perceived, and what implications it has in society. One such dominant notion is how digital technology has been imagined as being free, democratic and underpinning user autonomy (Ferrari 2020). This notion has also created the impression that technology is a solution to society’s various problems (e.g., during the so-called Arab Spring, social media was represented as a kind of solution because technology was portrayed as a weapon against the dictatorship in the Middle East, see Carlsson 2012). The interviews show the opposite; technology is not seen as a solution but as a major cause to post-truth problems.

This imaginary of a social media as a root for the current situation was manifested in several ways. A key aspect was how audiences to a larger extent take part in news content, which was seen as a problem for the established news organisations:

In the past, the way you got hold of news was either by watching TV or listening to the radio. It was often the same type of stories with similar news values, and journalistic approaches. But now it might well be, especially with young people, that you get news via Instagram. [...] There, too, the news values will be very different. There will be other types of voices and, above all, other types of messages that have emerged. Each new form of social media has its own logic. For example, TikTok, which is very popular now, is very bad for following news. That flow isn’t chronological in any way. That flow is completely detached from the chronological reality. (Interview 8)

The rise of social media as news aggregators clashes with old ways of producing and consuming news. This notion is based on the horrific scenario where social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram operate as automatic, self-perpetuating processes that fundamentally alter how news content is produced and consumed, bypassing the control of journalistic institutions: “That flow is completely detached from the chronological reality”. The interviewees felt as if the development of digital media technologies, along with new patterns of media use among audiences, have altered the previously sedimented social logics (Glynos 2008) of how journalism has traditionally been produced and consumed. These changes represented a major threat to the authority of journalism.

This horrific narrative was also linked to the economic and political driving forces behind digitalisation, and how social media have come to occupy people’s daily lives. Although digital technologies have simultaneously been described in public debates as though digital infrastructures promote participation, democracy and the dissemination of information and knowledge, these technologies are not primarily designed for that, but for consumption and entertainment (e.g., attention capitalism) (Harsin 2018, 12). Perhaps this is why the threat of disinformation on social media was perceived by several of the interviewees as even more problematic? What was once promoted as a tool for democracy and participation (Gillespie 2010) is now considered to fuel the dissemination of fake news and disinformation.

As a result, the spread of propaganda had “exploded”, as one of the interviewees put it (interview 2). Journalism as an institution needs to find new ways to “take back the initiative” (interview 2) from those who publish propaganda and misinformation, to reach out with true information. In this way, fake news, which is driven by the logics of the attention economy of digital media, emerges as a horrific fantasy (Glynos 2008) that poses a danger to real journalism because it is imagined to have a much greater impact than “great true journalistic news” (interview 2).

A similar perspective on the role of social media as something that potentially underpins disinformation was put forward by a representative of public service radio:

It’s very clear that there are these networks, or bubbles. A current example right now is people who oppose vaccines. But it could be anything, electricity allergies or whatever. It’s much easier for everyone who is passionate about the same issue to build communities now. They mobilise their group very quickly when there’s something they think is wrong or something. We notice that very clearly. (Interview 5)

The infrastructural conditions of technology (“networks or bubbles”) were highlighted as an explanation, together with the practices of various actors who publish fake news and propaganda. The potential for practising “real journalism” (Deuze 2005) was thus conceived as being constrained by the prevailing techno-political circumstances.

Online News Flows and the Destruction of Journalism

In another interview, the relationship between new technology, place and time was depicted as problematic because real journalism cannot be conducted when so many journalists only sit in the newsrooms and passively follow the news flow online:

There’s a completely different pace in the news flow today than there was in the early 2000s. It’s really hard to imagine. [...] It’s a completely different flow today and it also takes quite a lot of the editorial staff’s resources. [...] There are many journalists who work with this news

flow, that is, people who work by sitting and following this news flow and who actually never leave the editorial office, but who are part of this constantly updating aspect of journalism. (Interview 5)

Previous working methods that characterised journalism (e.g., fieldwork) are contrasted with a “new” form of journalism, equated with following and updating a constantly moving flow of online news from inside the newsrooms (“It’s really hard to imagine”). A conflict between the “new” and “old” ways of producing news is painted, in which the rise of digital infrastructures prevents journalism from achieving its full potential. Consequently, the advent of social media has significantly transformed the traditional role of the journalist:

It’s a new professional role. For many journalists, this [social media] is extremely uncomfortable. They don’t want opinions on things. They want to do their thing and then leave. But I note that even those in social media are drawn into discussions about their texts, and may come with answers and opinions and such. Neutrality is difficult to retreat into. Even if you have it as a starting point, people pull at you from different directions. So, you have to be very tough if you want to be able to hold onto that. (Interview 3)

Social media makes the professional role “extremely uncomfortable” and, according to this interviewee, it seems almost impossible to embrace the long-established norm of journalism as *neutral* because, as a journalist, you will receive comments and opinions on your work on social media, and by that new platforms were believed to pull the journalist away from neutrality (see also Canella 2021). The advent of new digital platforms has introduced a new dimension to the profession, with journalists facing the dual challenge of navigating the comments and opinions on their work on social media while striving to maintain their professional impartiality. This phenomenon can be observed when journalists engage in direct, personal responses on social media platforms, subsequently becoming involved in a discourse characterised by a multitude of opposing viewpoints. Social media has the potential to compel journalists to adopt a particular stance or position on a given issue, a phenomenon that has been termed “positionality” by Carlson (2023).

The interviews revealed a similar perception of social media as a primary factor contributing to the challenging circumstances faced by journalists. In the following example, social media is depicted as a destructive force in the field of news journalism:

I believe Twitter is destroying journalism. Journalists, and above all editors, are afraid of being criticised on social media and therefore they try to include all perspectives to try to satisfy everyone, and in the end it goes wrong. I think that’s why journalists become anxious. Journalists and editors have become anxious because they’re afraid of these hordes on social media. (Interview 8)

This horrific fantasy of technology and its users (“I believe Twitter is destroying journalism”) as being very destructive is here envisioned as the source of the feeling of anxiety experienced by many journalists—“they’re afraid of the hordes on social media”. However, it was not only the fear of the developments on social media that was discussed but also other horrific examples of the social effects of technology itself.

We’ve seen what it [fake news on social media] can escalate to in the American elections and on January 6, that this is dangerous, not only that it undermines democratic processes but that this leads to everything from the persecution of people such as the Rohingya to

murderous attacks and violence. This is an extremely serious issue and it's absolutely central to us in the news industry. (Interview 2)

The emergence of social media was thus understood as a form of disruption threatening traditional journalism, as well as being a life-and-death situation for real people outside of the journalistic sphere. According to a political logic, social media has changed the very conditions under which news journalism works and the role that it plays, not least when it comes to spreading fake news and hatred against journalists, or even violence and death outside of mediatisation.

The Political Climate as a Horrific Fantasy

The interviewees did not only articulate the problems of journalism to the rise of a new media ecology but also to how journalism is affected by the contemporary political climate. In some of the interviews, the fear of post-truth politics was explicitly expressed, as though such politics fundamentally challenges journalism as an institution:

I'm the political editor-in-chief at [national news media company] and my co-workers and I are on the front lines for the whole complex of fake news and post-truth. We have, as it were, since these concepts began to come into the language in 2016, always had to relate to them in some way precisely because, as a political writer, you know that, as soon as the truth becomes unclear, then the power moves upwards. And that's something we're seeing very clearly: when there's no truth to hold onto, then those in power can do as they please, which is also why they lie all the time. (Interview 3)

In this example, the threat of the post-truth condition is expressed by means of war metaphors—journalists are standing on the “front lines” in the battle for truth. The post-truth complex is imagined as the great enemy in journalists' struggle to uncover the truth. And when it cannot be revealed, truth is exploited through the lies and self-interest of those in power. However, interestingly we found arguments about journalism as being part of the post-truth complex:

You would like to think that journalism is so independent and perfect all the time, but journalism arises and is produced within a contemporary world that also influences it. [...] Around 2015, there were big headlines when refugees died in the Mediterranean. Just as many are dying today. But there's no one ... journalism has also shifted as the entire political landscape has collapsed across the board [the rise of right-wing populism] and reports on immigration with completely different overtones today compared to ten years ago. [...] These changes in journalism are happening dynamically as some kind of dance with society. (Interview 9)

The problem with journalism and its importance to society is not so much linked to its ability to tell the truth. Rather, the problem is understood here as an ideological challenge which is also mirrored in the practices of journalism itself—“These changes in journalism are happening dynamically as some kind of dance with society”. While Farkas and Schou (2020) point out that journalistic discourses construct journalism as either the victim or the villain of post-truth we have found yet another approach to the problem; some of the research participants had more nuanced picture of the relationship between journalism and the neoconservative society. Journalists are neither victims, villains or heroes, but simply a part of the same structures in a way that journalists cannot stand outside of the ideological shift towards conservatism.

In this initial phase of the analysis, we have examined the role of digital technologies and the prevailing political climate in giving rise to post-truth, and how journalists endeavour to address such challenges in their everyday professional practice. The following section will further examine the beatific fantasies of journalism and how the research participants envisioned the future of journalism in the context of the post-truth era.

Beatific Fantasies: The Importance of Journalism in Times of Post-truth

A recurring scenario found in the interviews was the importance of journalists as “truth-tellers” to society in these troubled times (see also Farkas and Schou 2020, 91). A beatific fantasy was painted of what journalism has been, what it is today and what it should be in the future. The realisations of these pure idealisations, however, were disrupted by various post-truth problems. The perception of journalism as vital to society arose from concerns about the potential erosion of fundamental values like democracy, truth and media trust.

Journalism Has Never Been More Important

The first beatific scenario of journalism was that it is crucial for societal debate. One of the interviewees, who works as a political editor at a regional newspaper, discusses the role and status of journalism during times of post-truth and puts it this way:

Journalism is [...] of course very important. It’s one of the remaining common points of reference and starting points for the societal debate, how people orient themselves and try to make sense of the world. [...] Journalism still has this important role. I think you realise that when crises arise. Even the debate that takes place on social media still revolves around what major news agencies write about. (Interview 1)

The beatific fantasy that emerged during the interviews was that journalism has a special status as a common hub—a node for societal debate—that was assumed to bind people together during times of crisis and that other types of media (social media) are also shaped by this hub. A similar imaginary about the role of journalism as a very important hub was expressed by a journalist engaged in public service television:

I’m sure it’s always been said that independent journalism has never been more important than now, but I wonder if that statement has ever been truer than now? It’s clear that independent journalism has a hugely important role to play in this era, which is influenced both by populism on the one hand, and a digital environment on the other, which allows people to produce their own news without fact-checking and without editorship. (Interview 9)

In accordance with the argument put forth by Glynos (2008) regarding political logics at play, the aforementioned line of reasoning can be interpreted as a defence of journalism against the ongoing crisis of truth. In this narrative, the threat of the post-truth condition (e.g., the force of populism and no fact-checking) is what makes journalistic work that serves the public more important than ever. This narrative represents a discourse on the function of the news media in democratic societies, where they are still regarded as a vital conduit for disseminating information and enlightening citizens. Consequently, the advent of the post-truth era carries the potential risk to challenge the long-held ideal that journalism serves as a vital node for democracy and societal debate (Chambers 2021; Deuze 2005).

The interviewees reflected upon how everyday journalistic work, such as collecting and evaluating information and sources, was connected to the self-understanding of journalism in the context of post-truth:

I think journalism is becoming more and more important in some ways because our job is to search for and evaluate information and knowledge and sources. We do it every day. And also provide that understanding and analysis to our audience. It's extremely important today when there's information coming from so many different directions and where, in a way, everyone is the recipient of it, but not everyone has it as their profession. Nor the time or knowledge to be able to evaluate information and weigh different sources against each other, for example. And, of course, we do. (Interview 5)

The everyday professionalism of journalism was identified by several media professionals as a key factor in ensuring the uncovering of accurate information, free from the influence of special interests. Such an idealised vision can be described as part of the beatific fantasy (Glynos 2008) of journalistic work; that is, the taken-for-granted professional routines and norms that have long shaped the practice (Deuze 2005; Carlson 2023). They were described by all interviewees as “extremely important” ideals of the profession.

How to Re-establish Trust from the Publics

Trust in journalism was a key theme in the interviews. During the interviews, the topic of mistrust and critique from their audiences was discussed, especially from groups and individuals who were positioned as though they doubt or resist scientific explanations and facts. One journalist, who holds a leading position in science journalism on public-service radio, reflected upon how to respond to such scepticism:

We're self-critical all the time and want to do the right thing, and twist and turn to make it ... right, what we say. But we have to think about the broader public, it's for them we make radio. It's for them that we sort things out. But I think there are ... well, they [those who are sceptical] are actually even more important. I think those who are more or less just questioning us, those who're quite crazy, they spur us on. They're important in the way that we sharpen ourselves. When they ask these questions, which in some respects can be important, they make us sharpen our focus. (Interview 6)

The contemporary context, characterised by a post-truth environment, has compelled journalism to re-examine its relationship with its audience. Journalism was by some imagined as being strengthened by the criticism from antagonists and sceptics. Metaphorically speaking, journalists braced themselves against the sceptics of the post-truth era in order to force journalism to be sharper. The notion of the significance of journalism was brought to the fore in the context of a prevailing atmosphere of distrust and scepticism from “those who are quite crazy”, and from the notion of a journalistic responsibility to inform the majority of the public—to “sort things out” and to “be right”.

These beatific fantasies of trustworthy journalism were further developed in a discussion about so-called *false equivalence* or *bothsideism*, a journalistic practice that was articulated as being common yet very dangerous because it might lead to increased misinformation.

It's become very complex because the natural journalistic practice has always been: now someone says this and now someone says that. But now we have a phenomenon where

someone says the earth is round and someone else says the earth is flat. And I think that journalism has pretty much said that politicians disagree about the shape of the earth. I think the task of journalism is not to say that, but to check whether the earth is flat or round. Then say that one is telling the truth and the other is lying. (Interview 3)

The task for real journalism should (ideally) be to convey who is telling the truth and who is lying, and thus function as “truth mediators” (Michailidou and Trenz 2021), instead of contributing to the normalisation of bothsideism. As one of the interviewees put it: “No one is defending false equivalence” (Interview 9), yet it occurs commonly in everyday journalistic work.

An additional method for addressing trustworthiness was the utilisation of fact-checking. It was perceived as a counter-strategy or remedy to disinformation, with the objective of regaining the trust of the media audience. Even though that practice was not fully implemented in everyday working routines, it was envisioned by some as a truth fantasy and journalistic strategy with great possibilities for fighting deception. In this next example, the interviewee, who is a former journalist currently engaged in continuing education within news media organisations, discusses the absence of effective fact-checking initiatives in the Swedish media context.

If we had more journalists and media houses in Sweden who were engaged in fact-checking and a little more participation in the international environment, which is very innovative and at the forefront technically and so on, many pitfalls for Swedish journalism could be avoided. [...] You don't have to be surprised when something strange comes up about 5G in Swedish groups because you've already seen that there's been a discussion in the international fact-checking community. [...] I mean, *Reuters* has fact-checking, the *BBC* has fact-checking. The *New York Times* has fact-checking. *Le Monde* has fact-checking, all major media houses have their own large fact-checking editorial offices. And there's a reason for that. That's because it does a lot for journalism. (Interview 4)

The interviewee expresses the opinion that Swedish journalism would have benefited from a greater degree of adaptation to the international environment of fact-checking. Fact-checking therefore appears to be a solution to the “communication chaos” (Waisbord 2018) that is said to characterise the mediated world of today (such as global conspiracy theories about 5G and the Covid-19 pandemic). The excerpt articulates a beatific fantasy (Glynos 2008) of how journalism *should* work (i.e., adopting the innovative techniques of fact-checking) and, at the same time, a more catastrophic fantasy of how things *might* develop if Swedish journalism does not adopt the fact-checking practices of large news companies such as *Le Monde* and the *New York Times*.

Furthermore, we explored the methods and reasoning behind journalists' integration of fact-checking into their professional practices. One of them who works with science journalism at one of the major newspapers in Sweden reflected on the problems of fact-checking in everyday work:

That's what my job is all about, checking the facts. But it's not always that simple. In connection with the last election, we had people in the editorial office who did fact-checking of statements from politicians. [...] It's extremely difficult to say whether this is true or not. [...] It is needed and it needs to permeate the work. [...] It's something I try to do myself all the time. [...] Fact-checking is needed and I see it as a very large part of my job, but there are many difficulties in practice. Because it isn't always easy to say what's true and what isn't. [...] There are many shades of what's true and false. (Interview 7)

Fact-checking was understood as very important but nevertheless difficult, even impossible, to fully achieve. The role of the journalist is to be gripped by the journalistic force of truth-seeking (“that’s what my job is all about”), but truths and facts tend to slip away and remain only as a fantasy of a journalistic ideal. In a way, one could say that truth and facts becomes journalistic “god-terms”, positively charged but rather vague in its meaning, to use the words of Zelizer (2006).

There were also those who problematised the very idea that facts by themselves might be a solution to public mistrust of legacy media. In this next excerpt, the head of a national newsroom argues that journalism not only needs to provide the correct facts, but emphasises the need for journalistic fieldwork:

You probably don’t build trust by peppering people with well-founded facts. But it’s something else as well. Of course, we shouldn’t be wrong because then we’re screwed, it’s really important, it’s a hygiene factor, that you’re right [about details]. And that you make wise judgements and wise selections and so on. [...] I think there’s a problem with a large proportion of the newsrooms working inside the newsrooms. If we’re out doing journalism in the field, it’s something else, and it’s also trust-building in a different way. (Interview 5)

“Facts” and being “right” are put forward as important elements of journalism—truth-seeking is a “hygiene factor”, and could be understood as a signifier of the honesty and accuracy of the media product, as McNair (2017) puts it. But the audience’s trust was not believed to be won by only sticking to the truth-seeking principles of news work, they also need to get out of the office and leave the newsrooms to conduct journalistic fieldwork. The concept of trust was thus articulated by establishing a connection between journalism and the locations where audiences are situated. It was thus journalists’ ignorance of certain places (symbolically or geographically) that emerged as an explanation for why people may distrust journalism (see also Wahl-Jorgensen 2022; Usher 2019). Placing themselves outside of the newsroom bubble was how “real journalism” should be carried out. The beatific fantasy of traditional fieldwork was thus normatively understood by some of the interviewees as a practice that could succeed in restoring the trustworthiness of journalists, rather than simply pointing out the facts.

One journalist, who occupied the role of fact-checking editor at a prominent national newspaper, expressed reservations about the efficacy of fact-checking as a means of addressing post-truth issues within the journalistic sphere:

The problem is that when there’s such polarisation at the same time in society as we have today, it makes it very difficult to keep up and fact-check in a good way. Because it becomes very common for you to be seen as a debater, and there’s also the problem that many things are very complicated and we journalists are often laymen on everything we write about. It makes it difficult to be knowledgeable to the extent that fact-checking becomes effective. [...] This has made me feel that I can’t take on this authority that is often required to fact-check political claims. (Interview 8)

Fact-checking was imagined not an opportunity, but rather a burden or a problem and was constructed as a component of an ongoing “epistemic contest” (Carlson 2023), driven by the prevailing societal polarisation. Such a practice makes news journalism appears as a non-neutral party contribution—a debater—rather than a provider of unbiased facts and information (Canella 2021). It is somewhat paradoxical that, in a sense, both the post-truth crisis and the proposed remedy (fact-checking) were viewed by the

interviewees as impediments to the realisation of the ideal journalist (as the neutral observer and provider of facts)—“I cannot take on this authority”.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed the horrific and beatific fantasies among Swedish journalists in relation to notions about post-truth, as well as how the research participants discuss how to establish epistemic authority in the face of mistrusting audiences. In a way, post-truth represents the threat of the collapse of the old news order (Waisbord 2018). The significance of techno-political complexes presents journalism with a dilemma, as our interviews reveal. Digital technologies (and their political driving forces) appear to be a nightmarish, horrific fantasy for journalism, with propaganda and misinformation flowing freely on social media.

How, then, can journalists maintain their professional authority? Our interviews show-case that, as the journalists are fighting post-truth problems, they are also doing so in order to strengthen their position and emphasise the importance of journalism as a democratic ideal, which represents a beatific fantasy of journalists as an important actors in the battle against lies. However, our examples have revealed a paradox whereby, on the one hand, the interviews convey imaginaries of producing facts and representing reality in accurate ways (according to a prevailing ideology of journalism, Deuze 2005), while on the other hand it seems impossible to fully realise such aspirations. Hence, the beatific fantasy of journalism as a democratic, pluralistic and truth-seeking institution is put at risk and rendered highly vulnerable, due to the post-truth situation.

Over study highlights that the problems of fake news and post-truth cannot be easily solved by trying harder to report more accurate and truer stories. Following Carlson, we would like to argue that journalistic epistemology in the present digital era is not homogeneous (Carlson 2023), as evidenced in the interviews. Some research participants discussed the dilemma of returning to the ideal of objectivity, noting that fact-checking may not be as effective or rational a solution as it seems. Establishing trust with the audience has become even more challenging, particularly as parts of that audience, including in Sweden, hold increasingly anti-democratic (right-wing populist) and authoritarian views (Förtroendebarmetern 2024). Consequently, as some research participants argue, it may not be enough to stick to objectivity and truth, or to train people to be critical of sources or to encourage them to be enlightened by the news industry. If so, the objectivity of journalism will become no more than something that strengthens the brand of the media outlet (see McNair 2017).

Is there a way out of this dilemma? While the ideal of searching for the truth and being a neutral observer remains highly cherished among many journalists, and has been a crucial part of journalism's ideology for many years (Deuze 2005), the post-truth crisis was articulated as a threat against this ideal in several ways and reveals an epistemic struggle over journalistic ways of knowing (Carlson 2023). The epistemic struggle is revealed in that some of the research participants discuss how the problem of fake news can be solved by employing fact-checking or other principles in an attempt to get closer to reality, and avoid misrepresentations, while others think that journalists might need to taking sides in politically polarised debates. Schudson (2019) points out that journalists may need to clarify and make visible that the news they create comes

about through a grid of journalistic ideals and values. However, such practices might also come to threaten the modern ideal of the good (liberal) journalist as an independent truth-teller and, in the long run, might potentially undermine the professional role of the journalist. Nevertheless, the research participants in our study expressed difficulties in how to navigate in the face of post-truth problems, and maybe there is no way out of the dilemma, but instead journalists have to invent new journalistic ideals in the light of the post-truth era?

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