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Journalism as a Strategic Action Field: How to Study Contestations and Power Dynamics between Professional Journalism and Its Challengers

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues the benefits of approaching the ongoing contentions and power dynamics in journalism as a strategic action field (JSAF). This meso-level, actor-centered analytical framework offers insights into how contestations in journalism are decided by the social skills of key stakeholders. JSAF distinguishes between three types of social actors (incumbents, governance units, and challengers), enables comprehension of their position and power, and explains why some actors succeed and others do not in different political and cultural contexts. It expands the traditional focus of incumbents in journalism studies by underlining the social skills of often-neglected back players in journalism (e.g., governance units such as associations, centers, and professional networks) and by foregrounding the social skills of challengers. This enables us to study challengers as strategic actors, investigating their motives, ambitions, interactions, and communicative skills to mobilize support and alliances to improve insights into who and what is contesting journalism today. The need for a JSAF approach comes from the increased contentions and conflicts between professional journalism and various peripheral actors, exemplified by the power dynamics between professional actors and alternative media.

KEYWORDS

Digital journalism;
strategic action field;
alternative media;
contentions; boundary;
power; peripheral actors;
field theory

Introduction

The present paper offers a meso-level, actor-centered analytical framework for studying power dynamics and contentions in journalism within the context of professional journalism and its challengers. Scholars have addressed how the journalistic field increasingly has had to react and adjust to peripheral actors that produce content that is similar to journalism, including bloggers, influencers, citizens, content marketers, and alternative media (Carlson 2017; Eldridge II 2018; Ihlebæk and Figenschou 2022; Maares and Hanusch 2022b). The relations between established and new actors are useful to study because it epitomizes where power is situated and illuminates forces of stability and change in journalism. We propose that it is valuable to study the

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interactions and dynamics by approaching journalism as a strategic action field (SAF) (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). The essence of this framework is to enhance knowledge about how journalism results from continuous positioning between social actors, including those that protect the field and those that challenge it. Although the power dynamics of social fields are most apparent with severe disruptions or immediate crises, the struggle for positioning also occurs during stable periods. Our approach offers an analytical framework to assess why actors succeed in their aim to protect and renew their power positions in the field, or challenge, disrupt, or even replace the power of others. We will exemplify the framework through the lens of professional–alternative relations. Alternative media represent an illustrative, intriguing case because they aim to be a “self-perceived corrective” (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019, 862) to the established news media, challenging its power (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019).

Three tendencies motivate our work. First, the digital transformation has led to increased competition and financial crisis in the media industry in the last decades. Importantly, this has impacted journalism differently across the world, and institutional forces have managed to keep the journalistic field remarkably stable in many countries, despite tumultuous decades (Ryfe 2006, 2019a). Second, and interrelated, digitalization has opened up increased competition from semi-professionals, amateurs, and profiteers producing “news” and views, blurring the boundaries between journalism and other content (Carlson 2015, 2017; Carlson et al. 2018; Eldridge II 2018; Waisbord 2013) and challenging the close relationship between news and the journalistic institution (Ekman and Widholm 2022). These challengers to journalism not only compete for attention from audiences and advertisers; sometimes they seek access to the resources of the journalistic institution (Ihlebak and Figenschou 2022). Consequently, the boundaries of journalism become increasingly contested, negotiated, and protected in the contemporary news landscape (Carlson 2015; Eldridge II 2018, 2019; Maares and Hanusch 2022b). Third, journalism as an institution is under attack (Cheruiyot 2022). This can be illustrated most explicitly by the rise of antagonistic alternative media that actively try to diminish journalistic authority by criticizing journalism as being biased and untruthful, while they at the same time compete for attention, credibility, and trust (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Carlson 2017; Holt 2019; Strömbäck et al. 2020). Scholars have warned that such attacks, sometimes carried out in joint venture with political actors, threaten journalism as an institution, and that journalism could be in danger of collapse (Reese 2021; Zelizer, Boczkowski, and Anderson 2021).

A rich theoretical and empirical strand of research concerned with forces of stability, change, and power in journalism already exists. Important contributions have identified core aspects of journalism by approaching it as an institution (Cook 2006; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Reese 2021; Ryfe 2006, 2009, 2019a, 2019b), an ideology (Deuze 2005; Deuze and Witschge 2018), a field (Benson 1999, 2006; Benson and Neveu 2005; Carlson et al. 2018; Maares and Hanusch 2022a, 2022b; Eldridge II 2018, 2019), a form of labor (Örnebring 2010), a profession (Donsbach 2014; Waisbord 2013), or through its boundaries (Carlson 2015, 2017; Singer 2015). A key insight is that journalism can be characterized as being both stable and unstable, or as Eldridge II describes, “something that is constantly becoming” (2022, 2). Approaching journalism as an SAF builds on these traditions, and it is inspired by Bourdieu’s field theory (1993); however an

SAF directs the attention conceptually and analytically more closely to collective action and mobilization in a field—in other words, how groups compete but also cooperate and interact (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 23–26). It pays consideration to how collective action can be studied through the “social skills” of specific actors, meaning their resources and communicative ability to create shared meanings and collective frames in a field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 200–204). It emphasizes that successful actors depend on understanding the positions and dynamics of the field and the opportunities positions offer (the structural dimensions), but also the skill to mobilize others in a way that resonates with other actors’ emotions and rationality (their agency). In essence, we argue that analyzing journalism as an SAF illuminates how the social skills of key stakeholders decide the outcome of ongoing contestations and negotiations in journalism—namely, their ability to gain support from other actors in the field and from interrelated fields concerning journalism’s purpose, function, and position in society, or to convince others of alternative visions.

We argue that this analytical approach has several benefits. First, the actor-centered approach distinguishes between key social actors, enables understandings of their position and power in the field (their social skills and resources), and explains why some succeed and others do not in different political and cultural contexts. In other words, it acknowledges the importance of both structure and agency for collective social action. Second, it expands the traditional focus on incumbents in journalism studies. To a greater extent, it acknowledges the social skills of governance units (i.e., institutional back players such as unions, associations, funding authorities, or professional networks) that are often overlooked in journalism studies and arguably play an increasingly important role during times of crisis and instability. Third, to improve insights into ongoing power dynamics, it encompasses the social skills of challengers (e.g., alternative media actors) and enables us to study them as strategic actors, investigating their aims, interactions, resources, and communicative skills to mobilize support and build alliances. Fourth, the approach facilitates comparative analysis, as the composition and relative strength of key actors varies between different media systems and national political contexts. By identifying where contestations occur and what is at stake, the approach can offer insights into where power is concentrated in different systems.

We will first outline the core elements of SAF theory and then elaborate on how to understand journalism through this theoretical lens to assess the main social actors and their social skills. To conclude, we synthesize the approach in a model and seek to concretize the analytical steps for future studies.

The Strategic Action Field Approach: Social Skills and Social Actors

Fligstein and McAdam’s (2011, 2012) and Fligstein’s (2001) theoretical ambition has been to create a framework that better captures stability *and* change in social fields, and how positions and power dynamics depend on actors’ abilities to mobilize support and collective action. Inspired by institutional theories and field approaches, they argue that an SAF should be understood as “a meso-level social order where actors (who can be individual or collective) interact with knowledge of one another under

a set of common understandings about the purpose of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field's rules" (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 3).

In essence, fields are always in some sort of "flux," so the struggle for position and influence is always present. Therefore, a core value of an SAF is that it puts less emphasis on a consensual "taken-for-grantedness" (2011, 5) than institutional theories (March and Olsen 2011) and allows for a more flexible take on how actors continuously mobilize for positions (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). In this regard, it extends Bourdieu's (1993) theory of fields by emphasizing the importance not only of the individual level (individual's habitus and capital), but on the collective dynamics and coordinated actions of people and groups in a field and in between fields. Analytically, this implies that more attention is given to how groups compete but also cooperate, and how specific actors manage to convince others about a shared identity, distribution of resources, and collective problems and solutions. Furthermore, an SAF approach emphasizes in greater depth how actors have the potential to alter existing fields, and how new fields can emerge. When fields collapse, the rules and frames that have been the field's glue lose their shared meaning, and actors must form new coalitions, alliances, and relations. Finally, an SAF is more concerned with how fields are interconnected and how the proximity between fields impacts forces of stability and change (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 23–26).

Successful strategic acts are dependent on actors' "social skills" (Fligstein 2001; Fligstein and McAdam 2011). Socially skilled actors have knowledge of how the field works and of the field's vulnerabilities and possibilities and understand their own position and the positions of others. They use this knowledge to mobilize support for the rules and structures of the field through communicative means; to resonate with other actors, their identities, interests, emotions, and rationality. Thus, social skills depend on the positions actors have in the field, their ambition for control and influence, and their resources and ability to convince others of certain logics (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 7). Socially skilled actors get others to acknowledge and agree on the terms of the discussion, and they have insights into "what is possible and impossible" (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 51). When shared understandings around common frames are achieved, it impacts the structures and opportunities in the field. Being on the inside can have both symbolic and material consequences; it gives a sense of belonging, safety, and meaning; it can provide legitimacy, trust, and power; and it provides access to immaterial and material goods such as knowledge, networks, and money (2012, 46).

An SAF consists of three types of actors: incumbents, governance units, and challengers (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). *Incumbent actors* are influential players in the field, as institutional rules are often in their favor and collective frames are used to support their privileged position and access to resources. Traditionally, skilled incumbent actors are successful in preserving the status quo through the persuasion and naturalization of specific collective frames. *Governance units*, Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012) argue, are internal units that oversee compliance with the rules and the general functioning of the system. Most governance units are closely interlinked with incumbents, as they often share core values, move staff between them, and have a joint public position. Governance units most often reinforce the influence of

incumbent actors, acting as “referees,” “insider experts,” or “judges” of the field, but their interests can also diverge from those of incumbents and between governance units. Their job is often to ensure stability and order within the field and vis-à-vis other fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 77). *Challengers* are understood as “less privileged niches in a field” that simultaneously recognize the dominant logic, the position of incumbent actors, and institutional rules. They express an “alternative vision” of the field and its rules, as well as their role in it (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 6). Overall, challengers have fewer resources and are most often constrained by institutions, but under certain circumstances they can use existing rules in new, unintended ways to create new institutions or change existing ones from within.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that fields always exist in a broader environment, and that socially skilled actors also mobilize support from other fields. The dynamics between social fields depend on the proximity of each other, denoting a vertical and horizontal hierarchical relationship and state/non-state structure. The state can impact a field through formal authority and sanctions, thereby contributing to the field’s conflict or stability. However, according to Fligstein and McAdam (2011), the state often helps to stabilize and support existing structures through laws, regulations, and subsidies.

A key element in understanding how SAFs work is to consider why ruptures and unsettlements take place and how they are played out. Such contestations are characterized by moments of uncertainty or crisis where previously shared rules that govern the field lose their impact and support, and where incumbents and challengers have to maneuver and mobilize to gain or maintain control (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 9). Typically, contentions do not always pose a fundamental threat to a field, as social actors with powerful positions in the field tend to be in a good position to survive. Challengers might cause uncertainty not only by mobilizing supporters and instigating ruptures and changes but also by strengthening their position as significant outsiders that represent a potential disturbance. Institutional settlements occur when new or restored understandings of a field’s rules and frames are in place and order returns (Fligstein and McAdam 2012).

Studying Journalism as an SAF (JSAF)

We now turn our attention to how professional alternative relations can be approached and understood as a journalistic strategic action field (JSAF). We do so in the context of increased contentions between journalism and its challengers. Tensions have always played an important part in journalism, challenging what journalism is or should be, who is excluded and included. Journalism scholars have argued that contention forces stakeholders to question, negotiate, and reaffirm journalism’s boundaries (Carlson 2015; Eldridge II 2018; Zelizer 1993, 2009).

Approaching journalism as a field means acknowledging the relational dimensions within and between fields (Benson 1999, 2006; Eldridge II 2018, 2019). Theoretical insights from both field theory and institutional theory are that journalism is shaped and structured through shared “rules” or “frames” centered around the ideals and purpose of journalism, as well as how it should be practiced. These rules are

performed over and over by journalists, creating a distinct form of labor and giving journalism a specific function, identity, and status in society (Carlson et al. 2018; Deuze 2005; Eldridge II 2018, 2019; Ryfe 2006, 2009, 2019a). A strong common understanding is that journalism is a prerequisite for a well-functioning democracy; journalism must provide trustworthy information, facilitate public debate, and function as a watchdog (Christians et al. 2009; Dahlgren 2009). Another strong collective frame in the field is that professional journalism strongly relates to principles of ethics, which in essence ensures its authority, legitimacy, and trustworthiness, and which separates it from other kinds of content production (Hafez 2002; Ward 2015, 2016, 2019). While ethical standards might differ across national and journalistic cultures, Ward (2019, 6) underlines the general commitment that professional journalism adheres to “factual truth-telling in an objective manner.” Ethics is particularly important as a common reference point for journalism when the rules of the institution are challenged and disputed (Ryfe 2006). In stable fields, these collective frames are not only shared by insiders but also supported by other powerful fields in society (for instance the state, advertising, civil society, academia, and education).

Scholars have been concerned with how digital media initiatives have made distinctions between the core of the field and its periphery more complex and contentions more intense (Eldridge II 2018; Maares and Hanusch 2022a; Reese 2021; Ryfe 2019b). Scholars have also questioned the assumption of “the core” as something homogenous and point to heterogeneity within journalism itself (Deuze and Witschge 2018). While this is certainly the case, we agree with Eldridge II (2018) and Ryfe (2019b) in that it is necessary to both explore boundaries’ preservative and dynamic sides (i.e., the stabilizing and the destabilizing factors). Eldridge II argues that a way to incorporate both forces is to view journalism as a “space of relations” (2019, 13) by investigating the taken-for-grantedness in journalism (doxa), the socialization into the field (habitus), and the mutual understanding of the field’s function and boundaries (nomos) (see also Benson 2006; Maares and Hanusch 2022a). Extending these insights, we underline the need to better understand contentions in journalism and how different types of social actors mobilize and continuously maneuver for position.

The room for maneuver and the outcome of contentions are related to resources in the field and the resources social actors hold. On the one hand, the social actors’ material (i.e., money, hardware, and software), immaterial (i.e., professional knowledge, networks, and time), and symbolic resources (i.e., journalistic authority, legitimacy, sense of belonging, etc.) strengthen or weaken their ability to succeed. On the other hand, gaining insider status entails access to a set of resources controlled by the journalistic institution (e.g., access, accreditation, membership, funding, and professional support). In the next sections, we will outline how the social skills of incumbents, governance units, and challengers can be studied in a journalistic context.

Incumbent Actors

Viewing journalism as an JSAF, incumbents have played an important part in developing the journalistic field through the discursive constitution of professional norms, roles, and practices (Carlson 2017; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Robinson 2007; Zelizer

1993). In journalism studies, incumbents are often referred to as established, traditional, or legacy news organizations that are hierarchically driven, well-known brands with long traditions in journalism (Shoemaker and Reese 2014; Shoemaker and Vos 2009). While they vary in terms of size, funding model (i.e., private or public), organizational structures, editorial strategies, beats, and professional status (i.e., tabloid vs. quality news, lifestyle vs. political affairs), they have played a key role in terms of how journalism has evolved as a field. Traditionally, incumbents have had a privileged position due to stable material resources (advertising and strong owners), immaterial resources (authoritative practices, knowledge, and networks) and symbolic resources (trust and professional authority). In essence, incumbents' position in the journalistic field has been dependent on their ability to mobilize support around collective frames foregrounding journalism's societal roles, their agenda-setting and gatekeeping power, and the extent to which their practices live up to institutional rules, normative expectations, and audience demands (Christians et al. 2009). The social skill of incumbents, then, indicates how successful media organizations are competing for agenda-setting power, audience shares, and revenues, but at the same time to what extent they manage to collaborate with each other through collective action in reproducing a shared understanding and support for the rules (ideals and practices) of professional journalism. In highly fragmented societies and politicized media environments, the journalistic field may be weak as incumbents attack each other, often in alliances with political actors, for not adhering to the rules (while often agreeing on the ideals of journalism), risking ruptures in the field. However, in many countries, incumbents have strengthened the field through close relations with higher education, academia, civil society, and the state (Ihlebaek and Sundet 2021; Olsen 2020). While independence is a crucial principle for journalism's autonomy, the state has, in many countries, provided beneficial structures (resources) through specific forms of regulation and support (Sundet, Ihlebaek, and Steen-Johnsen 2020; Sjøvaag 2019). However, the proximity between journalism and the state differs greatly between media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004), and it can also be characterized by suspicion or hostility in authoritarian regimes and polarized media systems.

Journalism studies have been concerned with exploring how decades of digital transformation has weakened the position of incumbents and impacted their resources. The financial model of incumbents has been severely weakened by global platforms, raising questions of platform dependency and increased competition for advertising (Nielsen and Ganter 2022). Digitalization has increased competition from semi-professionals, amateurs, and profiteers, weakening incumbents' authoritative position and professional expertise (immaterial resources) (Carlson 2017; Ekström, Lewis, and Westlund 2020). In response, incumbents have increased the mobilization around collective frames about journalism's role in democracy and engaged in boundary work (sanctioning insiders that break the rules, accepting or rejecting newcomers and novel practices) to defend their position as trustworthy news providers (Carlson 2015; Eldridge II 2019). To illustrate, incumbents have tried to distance themselves from alternative media by referring to it as something else than journalism, such as "blogs," "fake news," or "hate sites" (Krämer and Langmann 2020; Nygaard 2020, 2021), refraining from using alternative media as sources, or pinpointing instances of ethical misconduct (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2022). However, professional-alternative relations

are not always openly conflictual; this depends on the position, strategy, and actions of both incumbents and challengers, which we will explore further.

Governance Units

One of the key insights from SAF theory is its emphasis on the stabilizing role governance units can play in a social field, often in close collaboration with incumbents. These potentially powerful institutional back-players are often overlooked in journalism studies, even though their role in framing, communicating, and promoting collective action in the field is increasingly important given the current disruptions in journalism (Sherrill et al. 2022). Identifying governance units and assessing their position and social skills is key to understanding how strong the professional journalistic field is in times of ruptures and crises. Generally, governance units in journalism are professional or industry associations, journalism unions, press ombudsmen, or press councils, as well as various funding bodies and centers or institutes of journalism. The manifestations of what is deemed valuable in journalism are often integrated in their statutes—related to democracy, free speech, and diversity—and inform decisions about what kind of actors are eligible for inclusion (related to professionalism) and support (related to quality). Furthermore, acceptance and inclusion by governance units often relates to access to specific resources (material, immaterial, or symbolic), which can strengthen the position of incumbents or challengers. It should be noted that the positions and relative strengths of various governance units vary significantly between media systems, and governance units can come under pressure and be influenced by external fields (e.g., cultural production, science, or politics). The power dynamics between incumbents and governance units may also vary within and between systems. Some systems, such as the Nordic media system, have comparatively strong and unifying governance units (Brüggemann et al. 2014; Hallin and Mancini 2004). In other systems, such as the market-based liberal US system, governance units are weaker, more fragmented, and thus struggle to unite a polarized media landscape around particular interpretations of journalism (Reese 2021). Overall, governance units' social skills and relative strength depend on how successfully they build internal legitimacy among their members and the journalistic field. Furthermore, it depends on their impact on government media policies and their ability to secure support for their manifestation of what is considered valuable in journalism (and what is not). In the following section, we will elaborate on key governance units and their social skills in the field of journalism.

Professional associations and unions often increase stability in the field by defining, defending, and reproducing collective frames of professional journalism. Professional associations often exist within larger networks of organizations, such as an employer or a business organization, journalist unions, or umbrella organizations (Lowrey, Sherrill, and Broussard 2019; Sherrill et al. 2022). Professional membership organizations have particularly close relations with incumbents, and often consist of the same people serving different roles. They have multiple functions, and their legitimacy and organizational survival depends on their impact and members' support (Brandl and Lehr 2019; Nordqvist, Picard, and Pesämaa 2010). Professional associations seek to provide

professional education and training, improve product quality, aid members' professional networks and careers, define and reaffirm normative principles, lobby media and cultural politics, mediate vis-à-vis external stakeholders, and promote innovation and diversity (Sherrill et al. 2022, 8–9). In essence, associations can provide professional arenas beyond the news organization level, such as conferences, workshops, online forums, and professional publications (Sherrill et al. 2022). Thus, professional associations serve as sites where journalists can come together outside of their workplace to exchange and reaffirm immaterial and symbolic resources of journalism such as cultural identities, normative foundations, and assessments of quality and professionalism (Jenkins and Volz 2018). In media systems with low organization levels or systems where professional associations have weaker positions or represent partisan interests, other governance units, such as journalism centers or journalism institutes (often associated with foundations, think-tanks, or university journalism programs), can supplement and serve many of the same stabilizing support functions (Benson 2018; Lowrey et al. 2019; Olsen 2020).

Press councils or press ombudsmen are governance units that have a mandate to ensure that journalistic actors respect and follow the codes of ethics (Eberwein 2019). Press ethics constitute a fundamental part of journalism's collective frames and synthesize the rules of the journalistic field. Consequently, press councils or ombudsmen represent an authoritative body for the protection and reproduction of accountable journalism, serving as gatekeepers to symbolic resources such as legitimacy and professionalism (Fengler et al. 2015). Press councils function as independent, non-state, self-regulatory units, where members of the field identify and sanction malpractice and set the standard for which practices are deemed unprofessional or harmful and which are considered professional and responsible (Brurås 2016, 2021; Eberwein 2019; Harder and Knapen 2019; Rampal 1981). In many self-regulatory systems, it is the professional associations of journalism that organize and regulate the press codes and press councils. The demarcation of who should be included in this arrangement has become increasingly difficult to draw in the current hybrid media landscape and differs between media systems and political contexts. How accountability systems are organized is an empirical question that comprises how stringent the inclusion criteria are and how these criteria are interpreted, and defines the position, legitimacy, and support that press councils have within the field (Harder and Knapen 2019).

Funding bodies and foundations represent a specific form of governance unit, located between journalism and other interrelated fields (the state and civil society) that supports journalism through material resources and decides which actors are eligible for financial support. In recent years, the failures of commercial business models in journalism have increased the importance of funding from external actors such as public authorities and foundations (see Benson 2018; Neff and Pickard 2021; Olsen 2020). The support can take the form of subsidies, value-added tax (VAT) exemption, innovation and start-up support, but also donations, scholarships, or similar measures. Funding bodies of various kinds evaluate and effectuate which players are eligible for financial support based on mandates, instructions, and regulations from donors. These principles center around collective frames of the field (such as supporting free speech, democracy, diversity, and quality), and around more instrumental measures, such as the business model, readership level, and publication frequency (Sundet,

Ihlebaek, and Steen-Johnsen 2020). All this demonstrates that funding authorities represent a powerful social actor that predominantly favors the incumbent's position in the field as they have the resources needed to fulfil funding criteria, but donors can also favor new initiatives to strengthen diversity and innovation.

In relation to challengers (e.g., antagonistic alternative media), governance units can act as efficient institutional gatekeepers and thus face the dilemma of whether to include challengers in the professional community or keep challengers on the outside. If invited into these institutional arrangements, challengers might be disciplined, trained, and professionalized, but their inclusion might also weaken the credibility of professional journalism (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2022). In the current hybrid and more chaotic media landscape in which eligible media have become harder to define, the need for visible professional rules, common codes of ethics, and stable funding structures has become a pressing concern.

Challengers

How challengers position themselves in relation to the journalistic field and if and how they mobilize support for their projects are key questions to investigate from an SAF approach. We argue that too little emphasis in journalism studies has been given to the role of challengers when analyzing power dynamics or boundary struggles (see Eldridge II 2018, 2019; Holt 2018, 2019; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Maeres and Hanusch 2022b; Mayerhöffer 2021). Challengers are actors that are in a less privileged position and that represent an alternative understanding of the field and its rules (Fligstein and McAdam 2011). Their aim toward the field may be manifold; whereas some want to actively revolt and disrupt the field, others acknowledge and adjust to the prevailing order, waiting for beneficial opportunities to improve their position (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 13).

In the context of journalism, its history is filled with struggles and contentions concerning what constitutes the core and periphery of the field (Eldridge II 2018). The rise of new actors such as bloggers, influencers, content market producers, fake news sites, or robots that produce content similar to journalism may compete with incumbents' positions and resources. To understand contentions that arise between professionals and challengers, we must study what specific challengers represent in contemporary journalism, what they aim to achieve and why, their resources, and how they are met by incumbents and governance units in the JSAF. Unravelling their social skills and relation to other stakeholders will not only inform who they are and how they operate, but also illuminate deeper power struggles. Importantly, what types of challengers emerge and what they mobilize against varies according to the political context and media system in which they exist. In the following, we will discuss challengers in the context of alternative media. Alternative media aim to be a corrective to the established news media (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019, 862), representing different degrees of radicalism and anti-systemness (Eldridge II 2019; Ihlebaek and Nygaard 2021; Kenix 2011; McDowell-Naylor, Cushion, and Thomas 2023; Rae 2021; von Nordheim and Kleinen-von Königslöw 2021), as well as various levels of professionalism (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Ihlebaek et al. 2022).

A key insight from previous research on alternative media is how they compete for attention and authority by producing news and views and how they seek to counter or correct the established news media (the incumbents) from a variety of ideological positions (e.g., anti-capitalist, far-right, anti-vaccine, Islamist, animal rights, or climate activist positions), manifested in alternative sources, topics, style, and frames (Ihlebaek et al. 2022; Cushion, McDowell-Naylor, and Thomas 2021; Heft et al. 2020). They often criticize and undermine professional journalistic practices and news content, which may be an indirect strategy to increase their own professional authority. The challenger position can be expressed implicitly or explicitly, moderately or aggressively, randomly or systematically, depending on what they want to achieve (Cushion 2022; Haanshuus and Ihlebaek 2021; Holt 2019; Ihlebaek et al. 2022; Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). The alternative media's success is contingent on the ability for collective action as a result of the shortcomings in existing journalistic practices, support for alternative interpretations of journalism, and their ability to provide viable alternatives to existing professional fields through competition or collaboration.

Importantly, not all alternative media actors want the same thing, and the motivations need to be investigated empirically. Previous research has shown how some take an active outsider position, while others seek toward the journalistic field (Eldridge II 2019; Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2022; Mayerhöffer 2021). Key motivations for seeking insider status can include gaining access to journalism's symbolic resources (e.g., journalistic authority, legitimacy), immaterial resources (e.g., professional knowledge and networks), and/or material resources (e.g., press subsidies, accreditation to press conferences, access to press lounges in public institutions, access to official sources). Such moves may be interpreted like a paradox due to the counter-position of alternative media, and governance units and incumbents often react with suspicion to mainstreaming moves (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2022; von Nordheim and Kleinen-von KönigsLöw 2021). Contentions or provocations, however, are often valuable to challengers, independent of the outcome, in gaining publicity and visibility and (potentially) mobilizing public and political support (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2022). Antagonistic alternative media, however, often aim to sabotage or destroy the professional field, seeking to undermine or obstruct institutional processes and unity rather than interacting with incumbents or governance units (Reese 2021).

To succeed as challengers depends on how and to what extent alternative media mobilize professional and public support inside and outside of the journalistic field. Alternative media can seek to mobilize the public, pressure groups, and popular movements, and oppositional, radical, and/or populist politicians with their critiques of the political and media establishment (Brems 2023). This can be done by positioning themselves as the voice of the people (anti-elitism), to capitalize on public discontent with journalistic production processes, and by positioning themselves as guardians of free speech (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2022). Furthermore, alternative media mobilization depends on the ability to provide arenas for diverging perspectives and public discontent, providing interpretive communities of resistance (Ihlebaek and Holter 2021; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2022; Rauch 2020). Through their bottom-up

organization, interactivity, frequent interactions with their audiences, and affective subjective style, alternative media can seek to build trust and investment among small but highly engaged audience groups.

Moreover, the power and position of alternative media also depend on how and to what extent they utilize alternative arenas for visibility and distribution (e.g., social media platforms). In recent years, alternative media have been comparatively successful in taking advantage of the affordances of social media platforms to build user engagement and networks (Mayerhöffer and Heft 2022; Xu, Sang, and Kim 2020). Such networked mobilization is crucial to build support for their editorial agendas, to create alternative information eco-systems in which alternative media are the nodes, facilitators and gatekeepers, bringing together actors of various degrees of anti-systemness and extremism (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Sandberg and Ihlebæk 2019). At the same time, the most extreme and anti-systemic alternative media face a higher risk of being sanctioned (flagged or muted) and deplatformed by social media companies (Van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021).

In sum, the success of alternative media as challengers to journalism depend on how well their criticism of incumbent practices and governance unit authority resonates with the broader field, the public, and other social actors in particular media systems and political contexts. These social skills are connected to the alternative media's ideological position, degree of radicalness and anti-systemness, but also to their material, immaterial, and symbolic resources.

Concluding Discussion: How to Study Contentions in Professional–Alternative Relations?

In this paper, we propose a meso-level analytical framework for studying ongoing power dynamics in journalism, within the context of professional journalism and its challengers. We build our model on Fligstein and McAdam's framework for strategic action fields (SAFs) (2011, 2012). Approaching journalism as a strategic action field (JSAF) enables us to identify how key actors in journalism mobilize behind collective frames, providing insights into the continuous positioning for power, cooperation, and alliances, but also resistance in a field, moving beyond the emphasis on individual media actors (Fligstein and McAdam 2012).

In this conclusion, we synthesize the theoretical insights presented and seek to concretize analytical dimensions for future research (Figure 1). As illustrated in the figure, JSAF represents an ample opportunity to illuminate power dynamics in a given media system through a critical and in-depth investigation of what resources are at stake, what actors are involved, their motivations to (collectively) act and react, and their social skills to mobilize support for positions and actions.

A useful starting point is to identify conflicts and disruptions within different media systems. Contentions in journalism can be played out openly or behind closed doors, they can receive massive public attention or be the subject of limited interest, and they can have varying impacts. Sometimes it is possible to identify disagreements through concrete clashes, public discourses, or controversies (e.g., public debates, media coverage), but other times, power dynamics take the

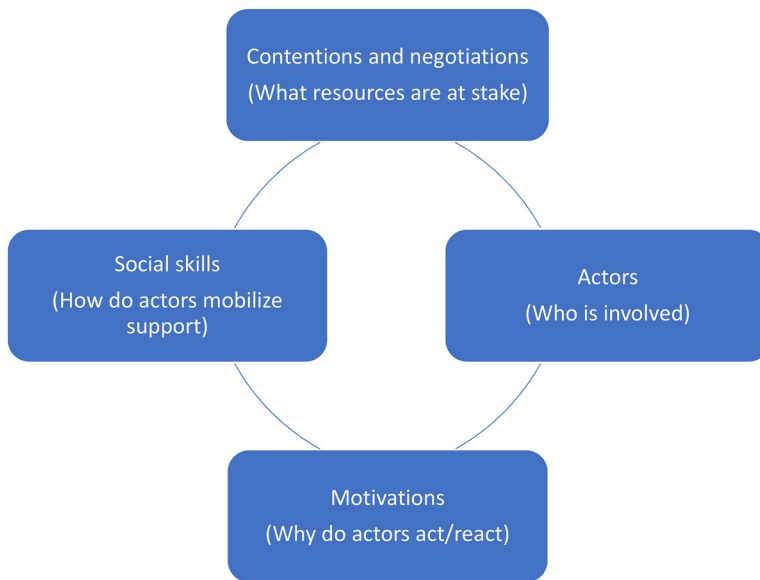


Figure 1. Analyzing contentions between professional and challengers.

form of slower, hidden negotiations that are primarily internal to the actors in the field (e.g., detected by interviewing actors in the field or by analyzing policy documents and mandates). Struggles can be related to symbolic resources, such as legitimacy, professionalism, trust, and authority. Other times, disputes occur over material (funding, memberships, or access) or immaterial resources (professional knowledge and networks). On what level contentions occur, therefore, indirectly reveals where the resources in the field are concentrated and which actors control them.

JSAF stresses the value of studying all social actors involved in contentions, particularly those that have received less scholarly attention (challenger and governance units), their positions of power, their control over resources, their relations to other actors inside the field, and the proximity to interrelated fields. This will help illuminate both the structural elements of a field and how it impacts power dynamics between actors, as well as the agency of both insiders and outsiders. Most importantly, JSAF stresses the importance of analyzing power through the lens of social skills: Socially skilled actors get others to acknowledge the terms of the negotiations, build coalitions and alliances, have insights into the limits and opportunities of the field, and communicate in ways that resonate with others and their interests (Fligstein 2001; Fligstein and McAdam 2011). We have elaborated how key social actors in journalism—incumbents, governance units, and challengers—have different room for maneuver due to their resources and field position. Furthermore, we have emphasized how the internal structures of JSAF, including the relations between social actors and their proximity to other fields, will differ across nations and can change over time. Future studies are invited to test the framework empirically to examine, refute, and substantiate claims of both “stability” and “crisis” in the field of journalism. By identifying where contestations occur and

what is at stake, the approach can offer insights into where power is contested and concentrated within different contexts.

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