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The Epistemologies of Breaking News

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ABSTRACT

The study analyses the epistemologies of online breaking news, focusing on the distinctive epistemic practices and challenges in the production of continuous news updates and online live broadcast. The analytical framework identifies three central aspects of news epistemology: the articulation of knowledge claims; how journalists know what they claim to know; and the justification of knowledge claims. The study draws on data from ethnographic research at a Swedish online first. Participant observations and interviews were carried out during spring and summer 2018. The study shows differences in the epistemic claims of news updates and live broadcast, how commitments to facts are carefully balanced in the enactment of discursive resources, and how justification is related to the calculation of epistemic efforts. The implications of different temporalities in news production are analyzed. The study identifies three forms of epistemic dissonance that ultimately jeopardize the authority of news media as a provider of valuable public information.

KEYWORDS

Breaking news; discourse; epistemology; epistemic claims; knowledge; justification; live broadcast; online news

Introduction

The production of breaking news has changed in the digital news media landscape. News organizations have reorganized to prioritize breaking news, understood as crucial in providing the fresh and exiting news feed that online news promise their audience. Digitalization facilitates forms of immediacy and live reporting, in line with a general ethos of being fast, first and present where the news happens (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski 2013; Usher 2018). Time and timeliness are fundamental aspects of most forms of news journalism. However, as Rom and Reich (2020) note, real-time coverage and hyper-quick publishing have developed in various forms and genres, such as live blogging, push notifications, news alerts and breaking news. Inspired by the genres of traditional television news, online news publishers utilize the affordances of audio-visual and mobile technologies to produce news live on air for diverse digital platforms. This study analyses the epistemologies embedded in the production of breaking news. Epistemology refers to how news journalism knows what is claimed to be known and how these knowledge claims are articulated and justified (Ekström and Westlund 2019a).

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Digital journalism studies are evolving as a cross-disciplinary research field (Eldridge et al. 2019), within which the epistemologies of digital journalism has emerged as a vital sub-field (Ekström, Lewis, and Westlund 2020; Ekström and Westlund 2019b; Steensen et al. 2019). The epistemic challenges arising from the high-speed processing of news, and the increased risk of incorrect information being published, are identified as critical issues (Hermida 2015; Karlsson, Clerwall, and Nord 2017; Rom and Reich 2020). This is further complicated online because of the diffusion of misinformation (Gray, Bounegru, and Venturini 2020; Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). Scholars have also analyzed the epistemological implications of changes in the circulation of news (Carlson 2020) and what has been described as the dislocation of news in the digital mediascape (Ekström and Westlund 2019b). Moreover, research has qualified our understanding of the diverse epistemologies in analyses of live blogging (Matheson and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020), participatory journalism (Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim 2020), data journalism (Lewis and Westlund 2015; Zamith 2019), structured journalism (Graves and Anderson 2020), news aggregation (Coddington 2018) and emerging forms of automated journalism (Carlson 2018; Lewis, Guzman, and Schmidt 2019).

This article aims to clarify further the distinctiveness of the epistemologies characterizing forms of digital journalism, focusing on the salient case of online breaking news. Epistemologies are analyzed with respect to the institutionalized practices of knowledge production (Ekström 2002; Matheson and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). More specifically, we suggest and apply an analytical framework that distinguishes the practices through which knowledge is (1) claimed, (2) acquired and (3) justified. We understand these practices—and the related norms and routines—as socially conditioned and variable, between not only news journalism and other forms of knowledge production in society, but also within digital news journalism.

The epistemology of breaking news is investigated in the context of a Metropolitan online first news publisher in Sweden. It represents an example of how breaking news, by strategic priorities, has become an everyday form of news reporting not restricted to major events and crises (Buhl, Gunther, and Quandt 2018; Lewis and Cushion 2009). We contend that this news publisher from the global north, discussed further in “the case”, has similar news practices and wrestles with similar challenges as metropolitan news publishers elsewhere in the developed world. Similarly to Ali et al. (2019), we argue that it is essential to study local- and regional news publishers.

This article studies the two interrelated yet distinct forms of news production that together make up breaking news: continuous news updates and online live broadcast. The continuous updates are news about recent events, the value of which is dependent on immediacy (Usher 2018). At the studied news publisher, this form of breaking news is a major responsibility of the newsroom unit called the live desk, also responsible for non-breaking forms of fresh content to the news site. Whenever possible and relevant, the newsroom develops the breaking news updates into a live broadcast. Journalists use a smartphone or connected video camera to report live from the scene.

Analytical Framework

We identify three central aspects of news epistemology: first, the claiming of knowledge, and how particular knowledge claims are implied and articulated in the news discourse

(text and talk); second, the acquiring of information, and how news journalists get to know what they know about the events they inform the audience about; third, justifying refers to how journalists apply and (re)create standards of what counts as justified knowledge.

Claiming

The authority of the news is dependent on the fulfillment of knowledge claims. Two aspects are critical: first, the claim of providing a particular form of valuable public knowledge. As Matheson and Wahl-Jorgensen (2020; 301) argue, sub-genres of news make distinctive claims to knowledge. A news genre constitutes a particular way of communicating and knowing about the world, assumed to be meaningful (for journalists, audiences and society at large). Breaking news promises fast, constantly updated and newsworthy information about public events (Usher 2018), radically different from the claims of knowing about the world implied in for example investigative journalism.

Second, news is associated with the truth claims of news discourse. News is a fact-based discourse. How news journalists position themselves vis-à-vis the truth (veracity and certainty) of the news texts, however, differs both within and between the sub-genres of news (Ekström and Westlund 2019a; Matheson and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). News workers possess a repertoire of discursive resources to indicate and balance the epistemic claims in particular contexts (Rom and Reich 2020). The analysis of epistemic claims thus points to the various practices through which news journalism promises to offer particular information about the world outside, and ultimately constructs a distinctive epistemic authority (Carlson 2017; Ekström 2002).

In studying a metropolitan newsroom, Usher (2018, 28) notes conflicting knowledge claims in breaking news production. When incremental online updates become the over-riding principle, stories are frequently published which, according to the journalists' own standards, have limited value as public information. Usher (2018, 29) shows how the strong priority of breaking news is motivated by "an obsessive quest for traffic" and "a fear of being irrelevant". Studying live broadcast news reporting, Guribye and Nyre (2017) correspondingly argue that there is a risk that news media over-exploit the possibilities of producing live broadcasts, and the thresholds for sending live will be too low, with negative consequences for the quality of news.

Acquiring

How journalists know what they know is central to the epistemology, not only because information is required in the processing of news, but also because the performed unique access to information is fundamental to the authority of the news media (Carlson 2017). News work is typically organized to maximize the efficiency of the inflow of information required in the production of the particular form of news. This includes the regular identification of news events via organized networks of sources and news services; the daily routine of checking news flow by competitors and in social media; and the contacts with various sources in practices of researching and interviewing. The epistemology of journalism differs from other institutionalized forms of knowledge production with respect to the organized procedures and practices applied

for the acquisition of information. These practices are also distinctive for different forms of news journalism (Ekström 2002; Ekström and Westlund 2019b; Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim 2020; Matheson and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). Characterizing the everyday publishing of breaking news, are the procedures developed to guarantee a constant influx and identifications of information that qualifies for breaking news. As will be shown in the analyses, a particular epistemic challenge in the live reporting is to acquire information under time pressure to be able to add something meaningful.

Justifying

Justifying essentially refers to the practices of achieving acceptable reasons to believe and claim knowledge. Journalists make their own considerations and discuss with colleagues. The justifications concern the publishing of a news story, the verification of information and sources, as well as particular wordings in headlines and news texts (Ettema and Glasser 1998; Godler and Reich 2017). Justifications are enacted in some contexts, while the information in other contexts is treated as self-evident or pre-justified. Based on previous research, we can expect the practices and standards of justification to differ significantly between genres of journalism (Ekström 2002; Ettema and Glasser 1998). Moreover, research shows that justifications involve the enactment of established routines and standards, as well as the creative achievement of reporters in interaction with colleagues in handling the challenges that arise in the processing of individual news reports (Ekström and Westlund 2019a).

Finally, to understand the epistemic practices of news journalism, the discursive dimensions of these practices should be taken into account. News is produced and communicated in genres of talk and text. Epistemic stance, facticity, degrees of certainty and the authority of different voices are constructed through linguistic resources and discursive practices (Montgomery 2007; Rom and Reich 2020; Van Dijk 2013).

The Case

The article builds on data collected at a metropolitan liberal news publisher organization in Sweden that transformed into an online first during the 2010s. We have studied one out of 28 local/regional titles run by MittMedia, one of the largest local news corporations in Sweden (and which in 2019 was purchased by Bonnier corporation). MittMedia focuses its efforts on developing their proprietary news sites, mobile applications, and associated technological infrastructures. MittMedia has strategically developed proprietary platforms and software for analytics and advertising sales in attempts to improve business and sustain the future of journalism. MittMedia explicitly claims to be a data-driven organization, using analytics and metrics to advance engagement and digital subscriptions. In 2020, INMA selected MittMedia as number one in the category “best use of data analytics or research”.

The news publisher generally prioritizes breaking news and organize the news production processes in two different ways. (1) At the main edifices, one finds the newsroom, a spacious open-office environment with the live desk placed in the center along two long rows of desks with large computer screens. The news publisher has organized the live desk to always have a handful of desk editors on duty that are responsible for monitoring

information flows and producing the continuous news updates. They literally produce all of these news materials from their desk, meaning that if they need to communicate with sources, they do so quickly with phone calls or diverse forms of computer-mediated communication. The organizing of the live broadcast (2) is more complex. When they decide to opt for a live broadcast, they typically send one reporter (MoJo) to the scene with a smartphone or video camera kit, and this reporter coordinates with the live desk editors and the news chief, and with one of the MittMedia live broadcasting teams on duty. These teams consist of one programme producer and one technician, operating from geographically diverse places, who have more specialized expertise when it comes to producing live broadcasts.

Data and Method

This study applies an ethnographic approach. The researchers spent three weeks collecting data in the newsroom and at one of the live broadcast studios. The extensive data collection combined observations of editorial meetings and everyday news work (inside and beyond the newsrooms) with a number of interviews with individual journalists and editors. As researchers, we were offered a working desk alongside the live desk. We used a method of situated interviewing, where the journalists were asked questions while doing news work. We were offered free access to the internal communication channel (Slack), making it possible to follow the coordination of the news production in detail.

In investigating the epistemologies of breaking news specifically, we have analyzed 16 concrete examples of initiated live broadcast news, of which 12 developed into live news, as well as material from live editors working with continuous news updates. The live broadcasting material comprises interviews, field notes and recordings from the newsroom when broadcasting is planned, in the TV studio and production studio and out in the field when reporters perform live. It also includes the broadcasted material. The same methods have been used to document in details the work of continuous news updates and the writing processes of individual editors. We have also obtained copies of source material and documented the development of the articles through screenshots.

Analyses

Epistemic Claim 1: Two Different Ways of Knowing About the World

The breaking news consists of two interrelated but distinct sub-genres of news reporting: continuous news updates and live broadcasting. They are distinct (although interrelated) with respect to the practices and organization of news production, as well as the way of knowing promised to the audience. The temporality of the news is central to these differences.

The continuous updating of breaking news promises important information with minimal delay. In the organization, this is a major responsibility of a group of live editors. They get their information primarily from agencies, community- and emergency services, via email subscriptions and search settings. The live editors decide what is relevant and doable to publish as breaking news. Doable is the news that can be produced

within a maximum of 15 min, which is the norm described by the editors. Breaking news is highly prioritized in the newsroom: “If alerts were to start coming in now, then we would just drop everything else” (Live editor). Typically, these stories are so-called emergency news; car accidents, fire in a building, etc. They are presented at the top of the site, accompanied by “Right now” or “Alert about”. Information in the first update is often rather limited, promising the reader further updates as soon as possible. The articles start with information about the time the emergency service received the emergency call, easy for the reader to compare with the time of the published article. The temporality of minimal delay is thus reflected in the articulated claims of immediacy and urgency, as well as the norms and practices of news production.

The studied corporation has developed an organization with teams prepared for live reporting as soon as a local news editor decides that they should go live on a breaking news story. This is highly prioritized and two conditions seem crucial when defining an event as a live broadcast: (1) the news value (deviation, amplitude, proximity and relevance to the readers); (2) the possibility of taking the viewer to a scene where the event is happening or has just happened. The announcements of the upcoming live broadcast in embedded links with text such as “Right now” or “Live: see the broadcast here”, indicate a particular way of knowing. What is produced is a live moment, a moment of “being there” in the event (Marriott 2001, 725). The being there involves two epistemic dimensions. First, news journalism promises to be on site when a news happens, as an ultimate source of information. The importance of demonstrating “being there” is emphasized in our interviews. Second, live television is assumed to provide an opportunity for the viewer to “be there” and experience the event live as it unfolds. This is what live television news can add to the constantly updated news flow.

The live broadcast can be seen as the ultimate form of immediacy. However, due to the production technology, it is a relatively slow form of news delivery compared to the continuous news updates, even though mobile technology has created new opportunities and the news organizations have developed routines to be on site to broadcast as quickly as possible. The temporality of the broadcast is based on liveness but not a hyper-quick publishing. As an experienced reporter says at a meeting to introduce new reporters to live broadcasting, “Even if the desk says it’s in a hurry, it’s never so urgent. ... We decide when we go live and the audience out there do not know when things have happened.” Speeding up the process is however crucial so that the event is not over when the reporter is in place and the organization is ready to broadcast. On the news site, a counter shows the time remaining before the original live broadcast starts. Meanwhile, the metrics show that audiences typically watch it afterwards.

Epistemic Claim 2: The Balancing of Truth Claims

Breaking news is a fact-based discourse and the journalists strive to maintain high standards of reliability. The commitment to truth must also be balanced. Using various discursive resources, journalists take up different positions vis-à-vis the information presented. Mitigations of knowledge claims are crucial to enable fast publishing with minimal risk of being responsible if the information turns out to be wrong (Hermida 2015; Sohlberg, Johansson, and Esaiasson 2020). This study shows how journalists regularly enact the

following discursive resources (a) modality choices; (b) epistemic disclaimers; (c) attributions; and (d) reduction of knowledge claims.

Modality refers to the ways of indicating a particular mode of knowing (Montgomery 2007). The breaking news studied typically includes a straight description of what has happened, indicating an unproblematic relationship to factuality. However, journalists also enact a more cautious mode of knowing in formulations such as “what we know at the moment is that ...” or “it could be that ...”.

Epistemic disclaimers—i.e., statements that restrict the responsibility for knowing through, for example, explicit announcements of uncertainty—are also repeatedly inserted in the news texts. For example, the live editors perceive it as crucial to be correct in information on street addresses, since it really matters to the readers and could easily be checked by them. This makes them insert, for example, “Please note, the location specified is based on preliminary information”.

Knowledge claims are attributed to sources in quotes and references (Ekström, Kroon, and Nylund 2006; Haapanen 2017). In the fast processing of breaking news, the attribution of knowledge to someone else is an important resource in handling uncertainty and balancing commitment to truth. In one of our interviews, a live editor describes the problem of uncertainty in the information from the emergency services and the police: “Then we try to write ‘according to the police’: you know, we never assess anything, it is the agency who does, or witnesses on site, or something”.

Finally, journalists reduce what they claim to know about. In one of our interviews, a live editor explains: “Probably, something has happened. That is why I write ‘alert about’ vegetation on fire: I do not claim that it is a fire, I say ‘alert about’ ... I simply totally cover myself here. We do not know what happened”. Reporting about the alert and not, for example, the actual fire is a practice that reduces the responsibility for accurate information and at the same time helps to indicate speed and actuality. To deliver news about an alert clearly has a news value in itself: one cannot be more immediate in informing the audience. The authority of the news is dependent on the epistemic status of the “alert about”, assuming that only authoritative sources (SOS emergency services, the police etc.) are qualified to “alert about”. The live editors are well aware that these sources not only lack comprehensive information, but are sometimes wrong; yet routinely they use the potentially incorrect information in quickly publishing the first version of the breaking news.

Epistemic Claim 3: The Articulation of Epistemic Claims in Live News Broadcasting

In recent years, the corporation has developed an organization with teams prepared for live reporting as soon as a local news editor decides that they should go live on breaking news. The live broadcast is created mainly through three forms of media talk: (1) the news presenter’s information about the news event; (2) the live two-way (a conversation between presenter and reporter on location); and (3) the on-site interview (reporter interviewing people with knowledge about the event). The three forms of media talk contribute to the epistemic claim of live news with different practices of truth telling.

The discursive role of the presenter is central to broadcast news (Montgomery 2007, 34). In addition to reading the news, the presenter holds the broadcast together with openings, closings and transitions to live reports, and conducts interviews with reporters

from the location (the live two-way). The presenter's reading of the news is typically rather brief (two or three sentences) information about the event, claiming high commitment to factuality. The temporal relationship to the event is indicated by describing what is going on now, what has recently happened, and informing about the time when the emergency services received the alarm. The presentation serves as an introduction to the reporter on location, wherein the being there as the event unfolds is demonstrated: "... and our reporter Anders Karlsson has gone there. Anders, what can you tell us?" After the live two-way, the presenter's brief summary of the event usually follows. The news value is indicated by lexical choices that mark the scope and seriousness of the event. The distinctive knowledge claims are expressed by the presenter in referring to ongoing information gathering and promises of continuous updates: "You can follow the event here on the site"; "We will try to find out more all the time, so keep updated here".

The live two-way often constitutes a major part of the broadcast studied. This is a sub-genre of broadcast talk that integrates the studio-based news presentation and the hear-and-now of the news event (Montgomery 2007). Previous research shows how an authoritative position of the journalist, reporting on location, is created through the conversation and the reporter's performance of the specific communicative qualities of spontaneity, liveliness and "doing being interesting" (Montgomery 2006, 2007; Smith and Higgins 2012). Research also shows how the affordances of the live two-way are used across news areas (election campaign reporting, foreign news, war journalism etc.) to produce authoritative interpretations, evaluations or speculations that reproduce ideological and moral frameworks and jeopardizes the impartiality of journalism (Cushion 2018; Smith and Higgins 2012).

In the breaking news we have studied, the live two-way is central to the construction of a being there at the time of a dramatic event. Setting up these interactions for the audience, the news publisher promises authentic direct observations of what is happening on site. The reporter's relative unique position of knowing is enacted in questions from the presenter ("Joel, what is happening around you now?") and performed in the reporter's newsworthy observations. By reporting on site, the reporter embodies unique access to information. As will be shown in the section on epistemic dissonance below, this is, however, a challenging role and a problematic claim to fulfill.

The on-site interview is an important resource in the production of the live moment. The interviews are typically with officials rather than citizens, in line with online sourcing more generally (Van Leuven et al. 2018). They help to achieve epistemic claims in three different ways. First, they enrich the collaborative performance of the live moment and the production of authoritative news, making it easier to keep the live event going. The participant role of the reporter shifts from observer to interviewer. The responsibility to provide authoritative knowledge is redistributed. Typical questions about what has happened and what is happening now are asked to the interviewee. Second, the actors interviewed are typically entitled to provide pre-justified first-hand knowledge in their role of being involved in the event. The reporters do not have to check the validity of information or the credibility of the source. Third, the on-site interview is a resource to expand the discourse beyond what it is possible for the reporter to claim knowledge about. This includes first-hand experiences, details about the activities at the scene, assessments and future actions. Stories from people who have participated in dramatic events have the potential to increase the news value.

The Acquisition of Knowledge

The acquisition of knowledge for the continuous updating of breaking news is highly dependent on institutionalized routines and digital services. The news is typically produced without the journalists leaving their desk. The main method consists of reviewing, assessing and processing incoming information. Emails from emergency services are received through a subscription. When an emergency service gets an emergency call from the public, the live editor is notified. The live editors receive news tips via various media and software services. They follow issues and topics on social media by participating in Facebook groups, and follow relevant actors on Twitter.

The activity of identifying news stories is central for the live editors. The working procedure is described as almost self-evident and easy to handle; as a live editor said when asked about potential difficulties, “No, we are so trained in this.” However, the journalists also describe the work as qualified in terms of knowing what to pick as news from the around 800 emails incoming per day. The live editors are responsible for the live desk email account, and sort the information into various tagged inboxes for relevant staff to take care of. A main task is to distinguish (1) newsworthy and not newsworthy information, and (2) newsworthy information that qualifies as breaking news and immediate publication, and information that should be forwarded as it is not urgent or needs to be worked with more thoroughly than the roughly 15 min that the live editor has at her disposal. Classification activities are central to knowledge-producing institutions in general, and the specific classifications shape the distinctive epistemologies of news (Ekström 2002).

The production of breaking news is organized in relation to the overall rationale of immediacy and continuous updates. In the first short article, instantly published after minimal research, they often include notes saying, for example, “more information to come” or “the text will be updated as soon as we know more”. This practice is directly related to the routine of calling the emergency services. As soon as the first short article about a car accident in the city is published, the live editor waits a suitable amount of time before calling (they even calculate how long it will take emergency staff to get there). Since this task is so routinized, it makes sense for them to write in the first update that more information will come. Telephone interviews are used for additional information and quick fact checking. However, news dependent on elaborate interviews with sources is passed on as suggestions for the reporters in the newsroom working in a more flexible time frame.

When the editor decides to move breaking news into a live broadcast, various preparatory activities are initiated. The activities are coordinated via the non-proprietary communication platform Slack. In this online service, potential breaking news is communicated, editorial decisions to start preparing for a live broadcast are announced, the live team is involved, and they set up a specific thread for the collaborative process of searching for information, discussing headlines and sorting out various practical matters. A reporter is sent to the scene. This is in a hurry. The conversations on Slack show the constant struggle of not being too late, so that everything is over when the reporter arrives.

Research is intensified and organized to support the performance of the news presenter and the reporter on site. The news text is continuously updated and corrected. At this stage, a primary function of the research activity is to acquire something to inform about

in the live moment. This is often a challenge. At a meeting, one of the reporters shared his experiences with a new colleague: “my biggest fear at the beginning was to have nothing to say, but there is always something to say ... you can always extend the talk on the information you have”. This challenge is also indicated in the preparatory talks between the presenter and the reporter. An example:

News presenter:

Of course I will ask the usual question, how it looks at the site, so describe everything, even if it seems to be boring ... Is there anything else you think I should ask about?

Reporter:

No, we know nothing more.

Even when they have very limited information, they decide to broadcast live. This is motivated by the claims of being there; as a presenter says, “it is enough that we show that we are there”. The demanding activity of providing reliable and newsworthy observations live from the site is further discussed in the section below on epistemic dissonance.

Entering the site, the reporter tries to get hold of people to interview. This has high priority, alongside taking pictures of the ongoing event to document what might disappear and send these to the editors to publish on the news site. The interviewees are people involved in the event, such as rescue personnel. Characterizing the acquisition of knowledge in the live broadcast is thus a mix of backstage research activities and the performance of live observations and interviews.

The investigated production of breaking news did not include participation from the public in the form of, for example, submitted pictures or testimonials. The regular production of breaking news is highly dependent on institutionalized practices controlled by the news organization. The situation may be different in more unique news events, where journalists have reason and opportunity to request contributions from witnesses.

Justification and the Calculation of Epistemic Efforts

The live editors responsible for the continuous updates of breaking news rely on limited and uncertain information. Publishing is justified in relation to the importance of immediacy and by balancing the truth claims, for example indicating that the information may prove to be incorrect: “Then we have to be very clear about how the information is preliminary, or how it stems from a tip” (Live editor). The breaking news often refers to information that something serious might have happened, without the journalists claiming to know that the information is correct. This is not to suggest that the live editors immediately publish without any reflection or effort to check the accuracy of information. Information may be worth checking and double-checking if, for example, the imagined dissatisfaction of the reader is too high if it turns out to be wrong.

We propose the concept *epistemic efforts* to account for the reflections on concrete circumstances shaping practices of justification. A critical concern in news work is the following: Is it worth the efforts required to be able to claim reliable knowledge regarding a particular news story? Tuchman (1972, 662) argues that the “processing of news leaves no time for reflexive epistemological examination”. News journalists apply working

notions of objectivity to minimize the risks of failure and reprimand. Tuchman points to something central. Claiming knowledge is related to risk, and news work is conditioned by limited time for examination. The fast processing of breaking news is dependent on routines and pre-justified sources. However, epistemic practices are still reflexive. In deciding on the news, journalists consider the efforts required to know what they have to know, and meet the standards of justifications. Resources to reduce uncertainty may be considered, but the conclusion as to whether or not the efforts are motivated varies.

Epistemic efforts are conditioned by the particular form and organization of news production, and include both routinized activities and reflexive considerations. Based on assumed epistemic efforts, the live editors decide how to handle potential news. As a live editor in the newsroom said when the researcher asked “What do you do when it is hard to know if the information you have is true or not?”, “Well, we try to find out, but often when it comes to these kind of bigger issues, it’s not us who ... then a reporter takes care of it and starts digging into it. You know, we will only write those short, fast 15-minute things”. The live editors seem to share an understanding of news events that need epistemic efforts beyond the conditions of breaking news.

Epistemic efforts are considered and sometimes discussed between colleagues. The following examples illustrate how efforts are calculated with respect to the inaccuracies assumed to be acceptable by the readers (example 1) and the possible news value the efforts could generate (example 2).

Example 1: The live editor is working on breaking news about a car accident. She has called the emergency services and got the address from the subscribed email corrected. However, after the call, she hesitates about the street address and decides also to double-check the information from the emergency services: “Fuck, now I get a bit unsecure. I think I will check this up on a map so I don’t write ... if there is something that irritates people, it is if we write the wrong location”. The live editor checks a map to find that the street the emergency services reported does not exist. She concludes that it must be the street first written. Calculations of epistemic efforts are thus related to an understanding of what information it is important to be exact about and why. Interesting to contrast is how the same live editor responds to the question of whether it is hard to remember quotations from a phone interview when inserting them into the article: “You know, I make notes while I talk to her, I have ... I write short main points, kind of. Plus, it is right after that we write this, so we have it fairly memorized”. Thus, being precise in the wording when quoting sources is not considered so important.

Example 2: News value is another aspect the live editors take into account when considering the epistemic efforts. In the following extract, a live editor elaborates upon his decision not to write about an incoming tip about what was referred to as a stolen motorcycle. He decided to call the police to check if a notification had come in about a stolen motorcycle, as he was not sure about the person’s motives for bringing in the tip. Since the police officer informed that there was no such report, he decided not to write a news article. When the researcher asked why he did not contact the person who sent in the tip, the live editor explained: “Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t. But I didn’t find this to be very big, you know. A stolen motorcycle, yeah. But if someone contacted us with a tip about how there were tools worth hundreds of thousands Swedish crowns stolen from a construction site, then of course I would call that person”.

The Problems of Epistemic Dissonance

Breaking news are associated with a significant risk of producing *epistemic dissonance*, what we hereby refer to as the various ways in which the news fails to fulfill the indicated

epistemic claims. In continuous updates, the initial publication typically constructs the news as something important to follow. Yet, in many cases, journalists' follow-up on the news event results in a downgrade of the news value. The live editor who has loaded the first article with all the news value possible in the alert information may find the continuation of the story to be lacking in such value. For example, the alert about a fire in a hotel was in fact someone smoking on the balcony.

The temporality of fast publishing is an overriding principle in relation to which claims of importance are compromised. The live editors frequently publish the first information as news even if they are not certain about the news value. For example, a live editor is writing another article about a fire, despite assuming that it may not be dramatic at all:

Due to my 26 years in the business, I can assure you this will not be the forest fire in Västmanland [a tremendous forest fire in Sweden in 2014]. I guess it is a trash bin or something that someone has set on fire. It is rather dry now, so even a cigarette butt thrown on the ground can cause this. (Live editor)

In Slack the live editor reports to the newsroom: "We just got a small alert about a bush on fire at a playground on Björknäsvägen [a street address]. It doesn't seem to be something exciting, but I will let you know if this is something". Yet he is still transforming this information into a news story.

Live broadcasting is associated with particular challenges and risks of producing epistemic dissonance. In this case, the actual performances of the reporter on site does not fulfill the epistemic claims assumed and promoted. Previous studies on the interaction between news presenters and in-house journalists (commentators or correspondents) show how the knowledgeability and expert identity of the journalist is collaboratively constructed in the design of questions and answers (Ekström and Kroon 2011; Montgomery 2007). This is possible through careful preparation of the questions and answers, delivered in what appears to be spontaneous and non-scripted interaction. The situation in the online live broadcasting of breaking news is different, not so much because they have limited time to prepare questions and answers, but because the reporter's access to the expected knowledge is limited.

The reporter's role as a situated observer is demanding. We illustrate three aspects of epistemic dissonance related to (1) temporality, (2) newsworthiness and (3) knowledgeability, which ultimately risk creating a general dissonance between knowledge claims and the performance of the reporter.

Epistemic Dissonance 1: Immediacy and the Moment in Time

The live two-way is oriented to the construction of immediacy and "being there" in a dramatic event. In the presenter's questions, the reporter is typically asked to talk about what is happening now from the assumed unique position—for example: "Can you describe what it looks like on the site right now?" The question assumes that something of news value is currently happening on the site. Note that the question enacts the reporter's position as an observer. However, the challenge for the reporter is that there is not much to tell because it has already happened and what is happening now, where they are standing, is of little news value. A solution for the reporter is to shift from what they can see to what they know (from sources) has happened before, thus shifting temporality

and the form of knowing. In this example from a news report about a suspected arson, the fire and extinguishing are already completed.

News presenter:

We now have our reporter Eva Svensson with us. Eva, what does it look like where you are standing?

Reporter:

Yeah, it looks like—eh, it's a barn here behind me—a barn behind me that belongs to Gärdesbruk has burned down—eh, it is right next to the road to Fellingsbro which passes by here.

(3.0)

It was at night about two o'clock and, eh, a neighbour saw the smoke here and, eh, the emergency services and the fire department were alerted to the site.

Epistemic Dissonance 2: The Construction of Newsworthiness

To produce newsworthy observations is a challenging task for the reporter. In a study of live TV news reporting, Fitzgerald and Evans (2019) show how newsworthy observations are made when categories are applied in journalists' observations and reasoning around objects on the site. In the live two-ways we have studied, the reporters clearly orient to an understanding of what is newsworthy in the observations made for the audience. However, what happens at the scene often provides limited material for such observations. In our next example, the reporter has been sent to an accident with a truck on fire. In her answer to the question from the presenter, the reporter relates to the potentially serious and alarming nature of the event by describing the cab as completely destroyed. She also notes that it is a quiet road without much traffic. What the audience can see is that she is standing on a small dirt road in the forest with the truck in the background and no traffic at all. For the reporter, there is not much more to say about what she can see. Although she invokes newsworthy categories in her observations, the report tends to be in contrast to the announcement of the live breaking news indicating that something serious has happened.

News presenter:

Can you describe how it looks at the site right now?

Reporter:

Yeah, it is a pretty quiet road, so there are not so many cars here luckily. But you can see that this cab is completely destroyed, it is completely burnt out.

The risk of epistemic dissonance between the intended news values and what is actually communicated to the audience is related to the way in which the news event is discursively constructed in the different genres of communication that together constitute the news event. This includes the relationship between the live event advertised on the web and the event that the audience experiences when they click on the link. The discourse of advertising live broadcast typically emphasizes the dramatic and the present. In the news about the truck on fire (example above), the link was announced as: "TV: Here the burned-out truck is being carried. Salvage personnel are

currently working feverishly to remove the fire-damaged gravel car that is blocking ... ". However, for the reporter on site, it was not possible to deliver observations of any "feverish" work or blocking of traffic. The news value of the assumed dramatic event was difficult to achieve in the live two-way.

Epistemic Dissonance 3: Knowing and Not Knowing

In the live two-way, the reporter is positioned as knowledgeable and expected to have unique access to information by being on site. The presenter also indicates knowledge in, for example, invoking assumptions about the event in the framing of questions. In the example below, from news about a drowning accident, the presenter refers back to what the reporter has said and suggests that many people "may have been shocked" (upgrading the news value). Note how the presenter balances the knowledge claims using a modal verb "may" to communicate some uncertainty in her mode of knowing. The reporter does not confirm (or question) the presenter's assumption, but can inform about the presence of people.

News presenter:

Eh, as you say, it is a nice summer day and there were a lot of people present also during the actual rescue operation, many who may have been shocked to see this event; eh, how does it look considering this right now. Are there any people left there?

Reporter:

Right now it is actually very empty here. I think the vast majority have gone; eh, there were a lot of young people who were here to follow the rescue work for a long time (...)

In another example, a news report about a suspected murder, the reporter's limited knowledge from the position at the site becomes evident. The advertising of the live broadcast says: "TV: The woman was found by witnesses—died after the police arrived: 'Damage to the body'". In the broadcast, we see the reporter standing in a field outside the barriers where a person has been found dead. The reporter can inform about the barriers and how the traffic is affected. When the presenter asks what is known about the murder, the reporter answers: "At the moment, there is not much information to tell" and he repeats what the news presenter has already informed the audience. Assuming significant news value, they decided to produce several live reports from the scene. It was a challenge for the reporter who had to retell the same limited information. In the example below, the presenter asks a question indicating that the reporter might have information from his unique position that adds to what is already known. The interaction displays an epistemic dissonance, not primarily about the reporter not being able to provide the information asked for, but the strange assumption that it would be possible for him to see the police work alluded to from the position where he is standing in a field outside the barriers.

News presenter:

We just got to know there is also a door knocking going on. Do you see this, or is it just these technicians on site?

Reporter:

Now it is the technicians at the site. There is no door knocking right now that I can see.

In the live reporting we have studied, it happens that the reporter has to respond to several questions from the presenter, keeping the conversation and the live event going, without having much to inform about. They handle the challenges by rewording what they have already said or providing more detailed observations from the site.

A fundamental aspect of broadcast talk is the way in which the broadcasters manage to relate to the audience in a cooperative way by following principles of everyday casual conversations (Hutchby 2006, 11). Being cooperative includes following the maxims of conversation, and, for example, not being more informative than is required for the recipient in a particular context. Repeated and redundant information—talk about details of limited information value and what the viewer can simply see in the visuals—is not treating the audience in a cooperative way. The epistemic authority of the reporter (and the entire live report) is thus both collaboratively achieved and endangered in the live two-way. As Montgomery (2006, 248) argues, in the live two-way the reporter is assumed to add interesting information to “a facticity already established”, by the news presenter. This is a particular challenge for the reporters we have studied. This seems to be partly caused by the production conditions, the fact that reporters without much preparation and information are sent to report on events where not much happens. It also reflects the immature status of the live broadcast at the time of our study, and perhaps an underestimation of the communicative competences required to produce a live two-way. As Smith and Higgins (2012) note, this sub-genre of live talk and the related performative skills have developed over time and represent a specific professionalism in journalism.

Conclusions

The overall aim of this study was to explore the distinctive epistemologies of online breaking news—continuous news updates and online live broadcast. We have argued for a theoretical approach focusing on *knowledge claims*, how journalists *acquire information* and how claims are *justified*. In general, news journalism claims to provide true (accurate) and valuable (meaningful) public information about current events. More specifically, continuous news updates promise the immediate dissemination of information, while the online live broadcast invites the audience to a live moment. Thus, how journalists know what they claim to know also differs. Continuous news updates rely on an organized inflow of information from SOS emergency services, the police and other sources. The information is valued and categorized with regard to its assumed news value and the epistemic efforts associated with the production of a particular news story. To achieve acceptable reasons to believe (justify) what they claim to know, journalists sometimes double-check the information received, but they mainly rely on sources offering pre-justified information. The production of online live broadcasting is dependent on high-speed research, but the assumed exclusive knowledge is essentially achieved through the practices of on-site observations and interviews.

In focusing on distinct practices and discursive resources, we have explored how journalists handle epistemic challenges in their news work. We have proposed the concept of *epistemic efforts* to understand the centrality of calculations on what is required to fulfill epistemic claims in a particular news story and what is doable within a restricted time frame and with the resources available. These calculations, sometimes discussed between colleagues, are absolutely crucial to achieve the regular production of reliable

breaking news, to maintain the distinctive temporality, and to minimize the risk of non-justifiable news being published. In writing the news, journalists enact a range of discursive resources in carefully articulating and *balancing epistemic claims*, mitigating their commitment to facts, and thereby reducing their responsibility for possible inaccuracies in the high-speed processing of news. The challenges with uncertain information are obvious, and it bothers the journalist who wants to be correct. In live broadcasting, the reporter repeatedly faces the challenge of providing newsworthy observations live from the scene when the dramatic event is already over or happening in another non-observable location. However, the forms of epistemic dissonance identified in this study indicate that the organization categorizes events as live broadcast (as this should be prioritized) also in situations where they certainly can take the viewer to a scene but where they also underestimate the challenges, especially for the reporter, in the production of a live moment.

This study has contributed knowledge on two critical epistemological issues discussed in current research. *First*, how is it possible to fulfill claims of accuracy under the extreme time pressure of breaking news reporting (Hermida 2015; Lewis and Cushion 2009; Rom and Reich 2020)? The study confirms the importance of routines, the reliance on authoritative and pre-justified sources emphasized in extensive research dating back to the 70s (Ekström and Westlund 2019a). The study also confirms Lewis' and Cushion (2009, 312) conclusion that the immediate transmission of news is dependent on the "ability to process information with as little thought and discernment as possible". However, this is not to suggest that the journalists ignore problems of accuracy. On the contrary, what we have described as the *calculation of epistemic efforts* refers to the professional judgments basically aimed at avoiding the publishing of information that cannot be properly verified. Disclaimers have been identified as an important resource in news journalism, allowing the publishing of uncertain information (Hermida 2015; Rom and Reich 2020; Sohlberg, Johansson, and Esaiasson 2020). In this study, we have distinguished four different discursive resources enacted to carefully balance the articulation of truth claims in breaking news reporting. For journalism, this balancing is crucial to enable fast publishing and avoid possible criticism. For the audience's evaluation they may have less significance. Based on a large experiment, Sohlberg, Johansson, and Esaiasson (2020) conclude that disclaimers have a very limited effect on how audiences evaluate the reliability of news stories.

Second, previous research has analyzed the consequences on the quality of news journalism when online news are increasingly oriented towards high-speed publishing and breaking news. This study indicates that the most significant epistemic challenges in breaking news reporting lie not in the uncertainty and inaccuracies in the information being processed (cf. Karlsson, Clerwall, and Nord 2017), but the risk of journalism not being able to provide valuable public information. As Lewis and Cushion (2009, 316f) argue, the priority of breaking news comes at the expense of independent and well-informed journalism. In the organization we have studied, news are sometimes handed over from the desk responsible for breaking news to a reporter for a more in-depth reporting. The overall trend (and the editorial policy) is however an increased focus on breaking news. The news publisher regularly produce reliable breaking news. However, the study shows how forms of *epistemic dissonance* ultimately jeopardize the authority of the news media and the implied contract with the audience. The study confirms Usher's (2018)

conclusions about the conflicting knowledge claims in breaking news production. Guided by the impetus of fast processing of breaking news, journalists have to compromise the news value and frequently publish news that may turn out to be less important and interesting than initially promised. In the frequent production of live broadcasting, the news publisher demonstrates a “being there” in the news event, but it also means compromising on the quality of the live moment promised to the audience.

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