Digital Collectives
Shifting Social Boundaries in an Emerging Digitalised Newsroom

Gudrun Rudningen

Abstract

For decades, digitalisation in the news industry has altered boundaries for journalism: Not only the boundaries towards the public, but also the social boundaries between news workers in editorial offices. Based on nearly a year of fieldwork and ten years of ethnographic work in a Norwegian newsroom, this study explores how digital collectives are continuously negotiated and enacted through trust relations in the interplay between digital technology and sociality. By unpacking how digital technology and digital data contributes to reestablish, reshape, and rearrange boundaries of journalism in the era of digital transition, this article shows a shift from altered digital collectives in the newsroom to digital collectives including the public through trust in digital data. Since digital ways of performing journalism hold potential for maintenance and alteration of what is private and shared, negotiation of social boundaries is important for mediating and upholding trust, harmony, and professional autonomy in news work.

Keywords

autonomy, digital technology, individualism, journalism, private/public, social boundaries

This article is available open access under a CC BY NC ND 4.0 license as part of Berghahn Open Anthro, a subscribe-to-open model for APC-free open access made possible by the journal's subscribers.

'When are you finished? Could you save, so I can see your cards?' (Referring to card games and the strength of the cards in one's hand). 'What are you going for?' The editor had walked a few metres towards, but not too close to, the journalist's desk while asking. The journalist answered, 'The numbers.' The editor continued, 'Has there been an increase? Can you please save so I can see it?' The journalist replied, 'Yes, I'll save, but I assume that nobody touches my text before I finish. I only have the lead-in and captions left.'

The journalist turned her focus to the screen again, signalling that she needed to be undisturbed to get the story done. It was getting close to the journalists' deadline at 2:00 p.m. and she was about to finish. Fingers tapping the keyboard and the familiar sound 'tap-tap-tap' in a flow sometimes pausing filled the space around her. The two

Anthropological Journal of European Cultures Volume 33, No. 2 (2024): 108-126 © The Author(s)
doi: 10.3167/ajec.2024.330207 ISSN 1755-2923 (Print) 1755-2931 (Online)

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 108 1/7/2025 5:03:05 PM

editors responsible started with the front page with the same story and their loud dialogue mixed in with the sound from the journalist, attesting to two parallel processes going on simultaneously, in the same production system with the same purpose – a front-page story to be published in the next day's newspaper.

This vignette taps into how digital ways of working alters social boundaries between news workers as a new shared software allowed everyone in the newsroom to see and change all work conducted in the newsroom in 'real time'. It points to how the introduction of digital technology, for instance, shared platforms and software applications can alter social boundaries in a workplace setting. This article explores negotiations of social boundaries first between different collective 'we's' in the newspaper production for the print edition and second how these negotiations largely become a matter of the individual 'me' towards digital data in the digital news production. The aim of this article is understanding how digital collectives are shaped and enacted in everyday boundary work through the continuous interplay between digital technology and sociality.

In this article, the distinction between private and public is referred to with the terms 'we' and 'me'. These are universal terms for human beings signifying the collective and the individual, but also signifying boundaries related to inclusion and exclusion (Eriksen 2015). Boundaries are found to play an important role in identity formation through continuous negotiation; boundaries are not necessarily dependent on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are rather manifested in social encounters (Barth 1969). In organisational studies, it is acknowledged that to preserve control and fulfil missions, all occupations engage in some kind of boundary work (Abbott 1988; Gieryn 1983; Langley et al. 2019). Boundary work thus denotes attention to the practices that go into negotiating and continuously (re)defining the boundaries in organisations. It is the practice in which distinctions are made that are especially interesting to look into – as there might not be clearly defined binaries, but rather a state of continuous flux (Goodman 1992). I show in this article how these distinctions both between different forms of collectives and between collectives and individuals are dependent on context and situations in which digital technology plays a central part. First, I make a division between the 'invasive we' and 'protective we' to display different experiences of the collectives in producing a printed newspaper when the aim was 'to fill the newspaper together' before deadline. The 'invasive we' I understand through the lens of a Foucauldian panopticon ([1975] 1977) and

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 109 1/7/2025 5:03:05 PM

the 'protective we' through a harmony model in Marianne Gullestad's notion of 'equality of sameness' (1984, 1989). Second, I show the move to an individualisation of work in digital publishing in which the distinction to the collective 'we' takes shape through metrics generated from the public, the readers of the newspaper on digital platforms. The aim in digital publishing is to 'just get it out' to generate digital traffic in form of, for instance, clicks, reader time, and sales conversion, and the collective harmony and internal trust turns into trust in the figure and numbers generated from the public.

I take a non-digital-centric approach to understanding digital technology as I find that digital materiality is best studied as emergent, in the process, not as a finished object, a state, or an end-product (Pink et al. 2016: 10–11). The term 'digital collectives' that I use in this article thus adheres to an understanding that the sociality is not pregiven, but always becoming in the interplay and processes between the social and digital. The attention to this interplay in a figure-ground reversal approach is used in this article as they shift being in the foreground and background of the study (Wagner [1987] 2012). In a time when all work entails digital aspects to a greater or lesser extent and the interplays between technology and humans are not always obvious, it seems necessary to unpack these relations and the way digital technology plays part in how work is perceived and performed, and more importantly, how professional identity and social life in an organisation are both affected by and affect digital technology.

Theory: Boundary Work in Digitalised News Work

This article explores how symbolic and social boundaries that are digitally mediated in a Norwegian newsroom. The theory is thus inspired by anthropological studies of Norwegian social life and working life, and studies of digital technology and digital data, to unpack the practices of ongoing boundary work in a highly digitalised work environment.

Boundary work is to a high degree related to trust, power relations, autonomy, and individualism in a Norwegian workplace. Trust is considered to be the most important moral quality for fulfilling tasks together, the greatest motivator for performing tasks (over strong leadership or governance), as well as the social fabric or social glue in Norwegian organisations (Sørhaug 1996), aligning with a general high trust in government, public authorities as well as the media compared

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 110 1/7/2025 5:03:05 PM

to other countries. However, managing trust involves ongoing and subtle activities, and seems crucial in boundary work that is altered and influenced by digital technology. Marianne Gullestad's notion of 'peace and quiet' can yield insight into a strategy of harmony and self-control that merges with the way power is played out – through subtle articulations of trust instead of direct control (1989). Inherent in the notions is a harmony model that is found in the expressions of 'peace and quiet' used to explain, justify, and legitimate withdrawal from social relations, in other words when social boundaries indirectly are more tightly drawn. Maintaining symbolic fences relates to the notion of (in)accessibility: An important part of being independent and being in control is to be able to establish symbolic fences between oneself and other people, to control one's accessibility. Accessibility is therefore a mutual confirmation of social interaction – that of 'equality of sameness' describing the perception that in Norwegian social life one has to experience sameness with others in order to feel equal (Gullestad 1984). Accordingly, there is a mutual confirmation of sameness and a downplaying of differences that constitute people's preoccupation with fitting together as equals: Not necessarily actual sameness, but ways of under-communicating differences during social encounters. In other words, there is distinction between being equal and having the *will* to be equal. The latter is, according to Gullestad, what characterises Norwegian social life. Even though the concept of 'equality of sameness' has been debated (Abram 2018; Bruun et al. 2011; Vike 2013) and derives from a pre-digital time, the concept has still a solid standing in anthropological studies from Norway and Scandinavia.

With the introduction of digital technology, the mechanism of boundary work is altered. The classic Foucauldian panopticon can be regarded as contrasting with a trust-oriented work life, and a concept that can yield insight into the processes of negotiation of digitally mediated boundary work. Panopticon refers to the constant awareness of the possibility of being watched (Foucault [1975] 1977) and is increasingly becoming part of everyday work though surveillance technology and algorithmic management as nothing escapes the 'data gaze' (Beer 2018). Digital data is both world-making as much as a world-framing – it taps into both how we understand the world and how we relate to the world (Knox 2021); it can alter sociality as '[d]ata is formed through relations that extend beyond 'data' itself; … what counts as data is a social process with political overtones' (Boellstorff and Maurer 2015). But, the increasing sociocultural phenomenon of 'trust in data' and quantification often simplifies and reduces social

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 111 1/7/2025 5:03:05 PM

life (Merry 2021) since the digital data sometimes leaves you feeling that your data know you better than you know yourself (Douglas Jones 2021). Digital technology and digital data must be understood in the way they are used, interpretated, and given value in the social relations they play part in. In studies of boundary work it is valuable and increasingly important to integrate digital mediations, as they merge with social life in ways that are not always visible (Broch et al. 2024).

Method and Background

This article is based on ten months of full-time fieldwork conducted in 2017 in a Norwegian newspaper organisation, along with interviews and frequent visits from 2013 to 2023 (interviews in 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2022). Hence, my fieldwork was subject to multiple-temporal ethnography (Dalsgaard and Nielsen 2013) and a longitude ethnographic work. The newspaper organisation is in central Oslo and has approximately thirty employees who produce a daily nationwide newspaper with around 15,000 subscribers. The fieldwork was carried out within the news workers' working hours in an editorial office space characterised by hastiness and repetition, yet an insecure environment with few informal gatherings or even chats beyond work. Doing fieldwork in a busy environment, I followed what the news workers would occupy their day with: sitting stationary in front of the screen, except for meetings, where I participated mostly as 'a fly on the wall'. Acknowledging that people can best account for their work in their actual work situation (Lave and Wenger 1991) I also sat beside the news workers while they were working and telling me what they were doing. In addition, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with all organisational members, as well as following digital communication such as e-mails in addition to document studies such as strategic plans. I have throughout the research process followed the guidelines for research ethics and anonymisation (NESH 2021).

In the last decades, the news organisation has been in a continuous re-organisational mode towards a 'digital first' focus, with an extensive shift towards digital publishing and digital ways of working. The year of my fieldwork, 2017, marked a digital shift where they switched from a print-based news production to publishing digitally first after years of trying out different approaches to this shift. Since print journalism has had massive loss in revenues in the last decades due to global competition, new forms of distribution (e.g., through

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 112 1/7/2025 5:03:05 PM

social media), new user habits, and new media actors, the digital platforms were 'forcing themselves' upon the news workers. Worldwide, the structures within which journalists operate have undergone fundamental changes during the last decades, and Norway is not an exception. However, Norwegian newspapers are market reliant yet publicly funded, operating in a well-established media system with institutionalised self-regulation, strong protection of press freedom, and a tech-savvy, news-reading population. The Nordic model of welfare politics is generally understood as a contributing factor to stabilisation in the media landscape in Norway (Syvertsen et al. 2014). At the same time, all newspapers are engaged in profit making, pushing forth a digital transformation through technology-driven development.

Print and digital publishing are fundamentally different. In print production, the story is done when published and would need to be correct within the deadline, whereas the digital story is never done; it is a continuous and never-ending production. Whereas print is a finished product, the digital is fundamentally everlasting; there is the possibility of correcting, manipulating, and changing stories continuously – the online format invites immediate action and correction. The overall mission in print was to 'fill the newspaper' and to fulfil the requirement that every column of the fixed format of the newspaper had to be filled with content. In the digital, there is no fixed format to fill – the space is fundamentally unlimited. Rather than 'filling the pages', there is a different imperative: 'just get it out' – continuously and preferably as soon as possible.

News work has traditionally been a cooperation between many professions: journalists, typographers, graphics, photographers, proofreaders, and editors. It has been highly hierarchical, even in a Norwegian egalitarian work environment because of clear boundaries between occupations and rank. Journalism is at the same time found to be a profession that fosters individualism. With digital publishing becoming more and more at the centre of attention in the last decades, greater individualism is promoted due to metrics highlighting individual efforts and more individual responsibility for publishing. Many of the traditional occupations had been cast off as part of the downsizing, and, as a consequence, the individual journalists have to be flexible and trusted to deliver finished stories, hence multiskilled. The portrayal of the multiskilled digital journalist has contributed to the expendability of journalists and employees expressed a fear of losing their jobs, of 'being outdated' and 'left behind'. With the introduction of digital publishing, the 'digital traffic' in terms of

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 113 1/7/2025 5:03:05 PM

clicks, bounce rate, time on page, or sales rate is increasingly used to decide what and how news stories should be produced, how it should be written and when they should be published. In the following I show the boundary work that characterises the different modes of working and how the social boundaries in the newsroom are affected by the introduction of new digital technology and new ways of working.

Print News Production: Collective 'We's' in Filling the Newspaper

The office space in this newsroom was mainly one large room where all employees had their workstations. The paper desk was in the heart of the newsroom, indicating its position as the centre of power in the traditional newspaper production. At this island of desks, the editor responsible for production and the desk workers responsible for the layout of the newspaper had their workstations, and their dialogue filled the entire office landscape.

In the row by the window, the journalists had their desks. There was nothing separating the journalists' workstations physically from the rest of the room, but the journalists' space was clearly defined and referred to by some as *Skrivestua* meaning 'the place for writing'. *Skrive* means 'to write' in Norwegian and *stua* literally means 'the living room'. The two words combined give connotations of a cosy

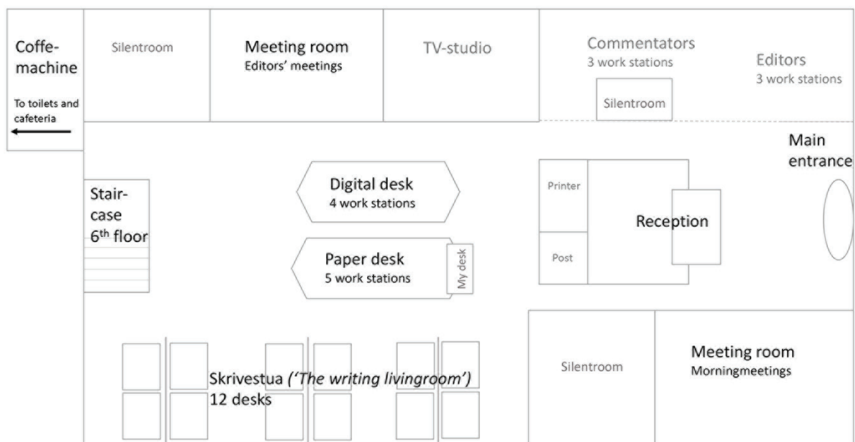

Figure 1: Map of the physical layout of the office space. Figure by the author.

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 114 1/7/2025 5:03:05 PM

place, yet also a place for concentration. To enter the space, one had to have a good reason. Editors and desk workers would not enter unnecessarily even though it was located only metres away from their workstations. The journalists were focused while writing, some wearing noise-reducing headsets, steadily looking into the screen while tapping at the keyboard. The space felt inaccessible. *Skrivestua* was a silent space for journalists only. *Skrivestua* with its clear boundaries for people's movements, who was allowed to enter and what sort of activities could be carried out in that space established clear symbolic boundaries around the journalists' physical space in the open office landscape. In contrast, in the new shared software, the whole newsroom had access to their collective digital space in which everyone could see everyone's else work in real time.

'The Invasive We': Transparency and Surveillance

The vignette at the beginning displayed two parallel processes made possible by the transparency in the new shared software application:

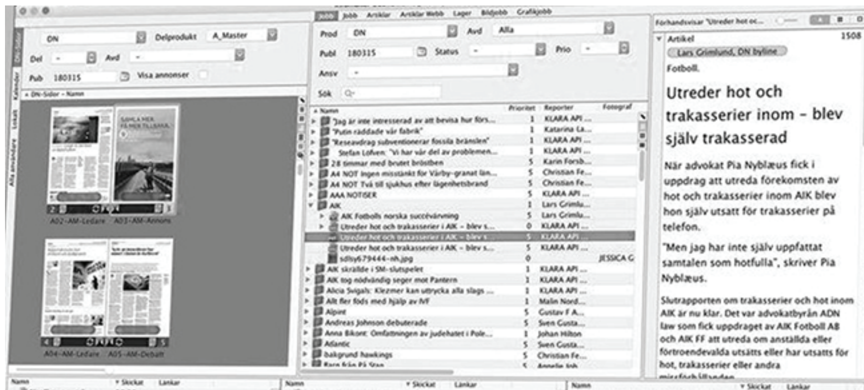

Figure 2: Display of the production platform. The column to the right shows a textual preview where the journalist could write their text according to the template given in the newspaper with built-in codes, so the journalists did not have to code the articles to be published according to the design of the newspaper. On the left is a preview of the coming edition in print where the news articles are displayed as they will appear in the newspaper. The middle shows a list of all the articles in the selected edition where you could enter all the newsroom's work in real time. Photo by Infomaker.

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 115 1/7/2025 5:03:05 PM

The journalist could write her/his stories, and the editors could start working with the same story for the front page. With the intention that all journalists, desk workers, and editors could come up with ideas for each other's work, the production platform was shared and transparent – all stories saved were visible for anyone else logged in to see and work on.

Some journalists expressed that the transparency created a feeling of being under surveillance and found their work intruded upon as the journalist implies in the introduction by saying 'I assume nobody touches my text'. Some of the journalists resisted the demand of writing directly in the production system because of concerns of surveillance and alteration of their texts. However, the official explanation given for not writing directly into the platform was for protection of sources and to save the research for the story for later occasions. Only the text that was published in the newspaper was saved in the software and only for three months. One journalist pointed out: 'The rest is lost forever; we don't know where it ends up'. Normally, saving work continually is preferred to avoid losing any of it, but in the platform, saving also represented a boundary between the journalists' text in progress and the text visible for the others in the newsroom. Microsoft Word was therefore preferred for continuously saving the text while working, to avoid someone looking over their shoulders and to maintain elbow room to conduct the work – a way of protecting their personal digital writing space. The privacy of writing in 'peace and quiet' was seen by the journalists as necessary to finalise the text in time for publication. Normally, after finishing writing the news story in Word, the journalists would cut and paste the text to the platform and adjust the text for the template for everyone to see.

Traditionally, the paper desk would take charge of the text after the journalist finished. But due to an earlier deadline and lack of staff, some processes had to run parallel in the newsroom. The editors used the transparency to see how far a journalist was from finishing and, for instance, start making the front page with its title, lead-in, and images. To be done in time for the deadline, the editors had to enter the journalists' digital writing space in which they wrote the news stories. In the parallel process between editors and journalists, the text was still an individual endeavour in the hands of the journalist. The parallel practices altered the boundaries as editors would start with their task before the journalist finished. Also, because the editorial control after the journalists delivered the text was limited due to an earlier deadline, simultaneous quality control was temporally relocated and moved forward in time.

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 116 1/7/2025 5:03:05 PM

Echoing Michel Foucault's panopticon for social control, encompassing self-discipline under the eyes of the authority, the transparency in software gave an awareness of the possibility of being watched. The younger journalists (under forty years old) seemed more inclined to write directly into the system without worrying about whether the text could be read by others while working. Many of the senior journalists would deliberately call it surveillance. A senior journalist told me: 'I don't care about the other journalists looking at my text, but when the editors use it to control my work, I get angry. But of course, it also has positive effects – sometimes the story gets better, and it is more efficient'. As the journalist points out in this quote, it is the authority that creates the feeling of surveillance rather than the digital transparency. Therefore, the digital transparency cannot be understood to be decoupled from the affective dimensions of the transparency and the authority in the social life in the newsroom. 'I get angry' is an indication that surveillance is influencing the emotions at work. The journalists would also express that the production platform would 'drive them nuts'. This had mainly to do with the many scripts in the platform that served to remind and teach the journalists to adapt to the technology. For instance, by reminding them to stop writing when they had exceeded the templates' character limit. Then the text turned red for them to make sure to delete text to adjust to the template. The digital editor referred to these embedded scripts in the software as 'technological bullshit' as it was perceived as 'noise' that interfered with the efficacy of the work. The journalists admitted that they did not want to write more stories than they were assigned because of all the technological hassle. Hence, the technology interfered with the journalists' mission and integrity as professionals since it seemed to create an obstacle that prevented them from fulfilling their tasks as they would have preferred.

Traditionally, journalists are used to being overruled by the desk workers and editors. The desk and editors not only were allowed to change stories but were expected to, especially for the front page. They were the heart of the newsroom with the final word as they pushed the publication to print. However, traditionally, editors took over after the journalists had finished their work. Journalists would tell the paper desk if they overheard misinterpretations of the text but would most of the time leave the work to the editors. With the shared software, the journalist could just as easily look at the editor's work. It can be argued that in theory, surveillance went both ways as the panopticon was also reversed and turned towards the editors; everyone logged into the system could see each other's work.

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 117 1/7/2025 5:03:05 PM

In the case of the story mentioned at the beginning of this article, after the editors had taken it over, the journalist stood up from her desk and walked over to the editors. Her body language signalled availability and that she wanted to start a conversation. After a while the editors turned to her, and she said: 'I'm sceptical about taking those numbers out of the story and highlighting them for the front page.' The editor answered, 'I think it's good because it shows the biggest difference. It's important to play out the biggest differences.' Journalist replied, 'It does not do justice to the story as a whole'. The journalist walked back to her desk. The next day the numbers were displayed on the front page.

Even though the clear boundaries between occupations and rank were blurred due to the digital transparency, the hierarchy was still maintained. The editors still had the last word, even though the transparency established the newsroom as a collective that could potentially challenge an editor's decisions. The 'invasive we' thus included everyone in the newsroom, but the experience of invasiveness was tied to the authority and control over one's work in what used to be a space of privacy. The openness, transparency, accessibility, and visibility in the physical open office landscape extended into the newsroom's digital landscape of their shared production platform. There were no walls in the office landscape and the tools were not 'walled off' either, but the journalists protected both the physical and digital spaces by cultivating invisible fences around their craft in both spaces.

The Protective 'We': Harmony and Consensus

When the newspaper was still the main focus in the newsroom, every workday started with the morning meeting at eight o'clock in which the journalists presented potential ideas for stories for tomorrow's newspaper, taking turns. Ideas for stories were mainly individual ideas the journalists had come up with themselves. The editor would give his approval, and they would work with the story throughout the day. Each journalist was given a 'box' in the production platform with a specific template for them to write their story into.

At the end of the morning meeting, they evaluated yesterday's newspaper production. Then, the stories were largely viewed as divorced from any person; they were seen as the product of a collective 'we' instead of as the result of individual endeavours. Inevitably, a journalist's name would be mentioned on occasion, but the stories

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 118 1/7/2025 5:03:05 PM

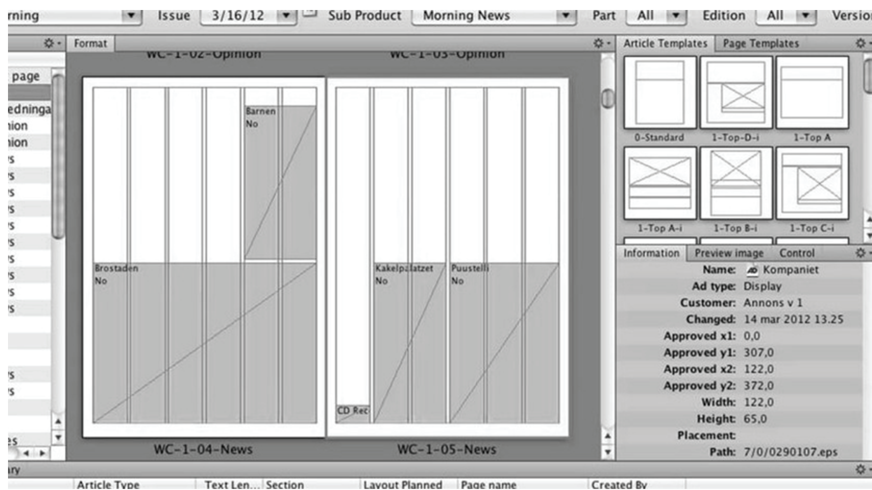

Figure 3: The ‘boxes’ in the software for the printed newspaper. Photo by Infomaker.

commented on in the morning meeting were either referred to as the story on a specific page (for instance, ‘the story on page five’) or by the story’s name or content (for instance, ‘the timber story’). Additionally, when relating to the content of a story, the phrase ‘we write …’ would be uttered even though a single journalist had written it (for instance, ‘on page five we write that …’). Once a story reached the newspaper product, it had become part of the collective product. At the end of the morning meeting, the editor often stated, ‘we should be satisfied’ implying that the newspaper associated with the collective ‘we’ and that the importance of this collective endeavour overall was ‘good’ – continuously establishing the newsroom as a collective through the newspaper product. Nobody was excluded from the category ‘we’; rather, it referred to the organisational identity manifested in ‘we’ as a social group of professionals.

The collective was also continuously established through common phrasing in the newsroom starting with ‘*we* could have …’. It was regularly used when generating ideas as well as when work was being evaluated. Everyone had a say both when airing ideas and evaluating work as these were collective practices. It would, for instance, relate to going somewhere, interviewing more people, following complex stories or just a suggesting a title – these possibilities were seemingly free from judgement because they all served the same vision – making a newspaper together as a group. In the context of Norwegian working

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 119 1/7/2025 5:03:06 PM

life, following Gullestad, the collective 'we' can be analysed as a way of establishing harmony and consensus tied to 'equality of sameness' for avoiding deliberate conflicts; by giving responsibility to the collective, one avoids direct criticism to an unspoken 'you'. To propose an idea implies the acknowledgement of being judged and by saying 'we could have' reduced the risk attached to the suggestion. It points to a mutual confirmation of sameness and a downplaying of differences constituting people's preoccupation of fitting together as equals allowing everyone in the newsroom to interact and communicate without giving up loyalty to their occupation or rank. This is what I call the 'protective we' as mainly found in the many phrases using 'we' in collective practices – promoting a harmony model in the newsroom.

With the introduction of digital publishing, the interplay between different constitutions of collectives, the 'invasive we' and 'protective we', dispersed into a digital sociality of individuals in relations to digital data generated by the readers.

Digital Publishing: Individualised through a Digital Data Sociality

Aligned with the 'digital first' strategy, stories were published online first decreasing the priority of the production of the printed newspaper towards a deadline at the end of the day. Rather than 'filling the newspaper together' the aim was to 'just get it out' to generate digital traffic (e.g., clicks, reader time, sale conversion, etc.). Due to the complex user interface in the shared software dedicated for writing in the shared software, the news organisation introduced another software application for the journalists. The new software had a simpler interface, 'just like a blank sheet of paper' for the journalists to focus on what was deemed most important: to write good journalistic stories.

There was no need to get all stories done simultaneously for the printed version of the newspaper. Accordingly, the 'invasive we' in the digital space was not as insistent in comparison to the pressure put on the multiskilled journalists to perform with the knowledge that metrics would 'evaluate' their work. The paper desk, traditionally the heart in the newsroom, was replaced by the digital desk with journalists making sure to meet digital traffic goals. The protective 'we' was thus replaced by individual journalists working side by side in a common software; an individualism that promoted journalists' autonomy yet again differently. Whereas in the previous shared software, all

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 120 1/7/2025 5:03:06 PM

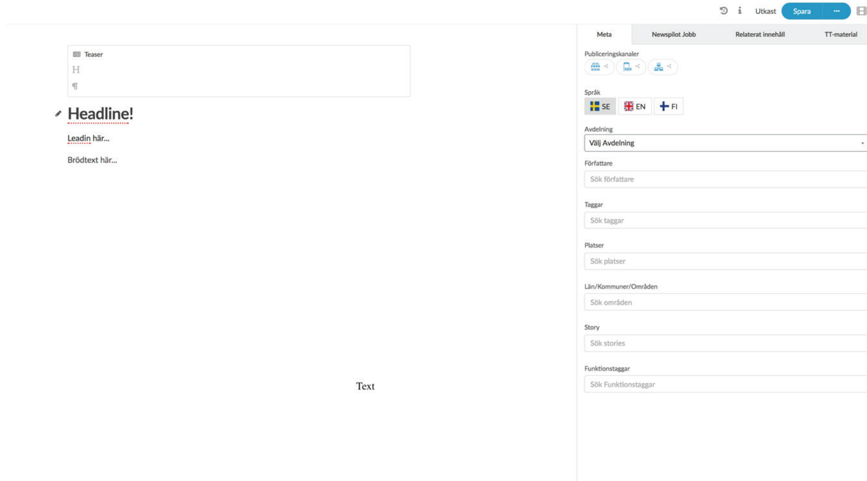

Figure 4: The new software application 'The Writer' for the journalists. Photo by Infomaker.

news workers could see the totality of the shared newspaper product taking form towards the daily deadline, the new software disconnected the news production and moved it towards an individual publication continuously during the day. Rather than collective practices in which the collective 'we' in the newsroom was maintained as a guaranty for and protection for the individuals from criticism and responsibility – the individual journalist got 'direct' feed-back from the audience, the public, through metrics and data in real time. Hence, the transition to digital publishing and a disconnection of individual journalistic work from the totality in the newspaper product through a 'blank sheet' interface promoted individualism and downsized the collective endeavour as a work collective.

Digital Collectives' Boundaries in Flux

The aim of this article is understanding how digital collectives are shaped and enacted in everyday boundary work through the continuous interplay between digital technology and sociality. The questions of how digital collectives are formed and (re)established in the practices of the digitalised newsroom is to a high degree a question of negotiation between what is shared and private, trust relations, and autonomy. The empirical examples presented in this article differ in how the interplay between digital technology and sociality affects

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 121 1/7/2025 5:03:06 PM

these boundaries yet holds similar mechanisms for promoting harmony and trust.

Traditionally in the print news production, the move from the individual work of 'you' to the collective 'we' happened daily as the story moved from the journalists' desk to the paper desk where the story was made ready for publication. With the new software in which everyone could see each other's work in real time, the collective 'we' was moved forward in time into the journalists' writing process. The collective expression of 'we write' got a new meaning as the collective potentially could write stories together in real time. Additionally, it could legitimise the transparency in the software; because if 'we write', and not the individual journalists, 'we' should be conducting the work together in a transparent room.

Journalists' digital work in a transparent software can thus be seen as a hindrance to their traditional professionalism where the individual journalists were in control of their writing process. Consequently, digital journalism can be seen as a form of 'controlled professionalism' in which the autonomous and self-regulative performance of professionalism is hindered or disrupted. But, as we have seen in this article, these effects are resisted, and harmony and responsibility were established through the collective protective 'we'. It might seem like a paradox, but points to the possibilities in the collective 'we' that increase journalistic autonomy rather than hinder it. In a Norwegian workplace setting, the form of individualised autonomy and community can be applied due to subtle forms of social contracting enacted through trust. Employees were free to perform tasks as they saw fit, but there was a 'social contract' that provided governance through commitment and acknowledgement of trust rather than control. Gullestad writes: 'In order to establish and develop a social contract, it is important to be able to see what goes on from the other participants' perspective and in this way understand the expectations that are not expressed directly' (1992: 189). Social contracting is therefore vague and ongoing, constituted in social interaction based on trust as embedded in everyone's competence. Establishing trust was a normally implicit and subtle activity since trust is always paradoxical: 'Asking for trust is always a precarious proposition as it gives rise to the possibility that it does not exist and therefore cannot be granted' (Sørhaug 1996: 23, my translation). Consequently, one must have it to gain it; if one does have it in the first place, one cannot gain it. The digital space's transparency allowed for a different sociality and way

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 122 1/7/2025 5:03:06 PM

of working together and the editors had to ask for trust by saying: ‘Can you please save’ to maintain control of the newsroom’s work. Trust was therefore made explicit, and harmony constantly had to be reestablished between workers.

Social contracting can also be seen as a way of negotiating complex identity demands individuals face by deploying different strategies for boundary maintenance. The journalists protected themselves from the never-ending workload by, for instance, not announcing a new idea because they knew they would have to write and finalise the story with all the technological specifics themselves. The journalists did what was expected of them and what they had promised, in other words what had been ‘contracted’ by being given a ‘box’ in the production platform to fill. By fulfilling the daily contract as best they could, they gained trust. In an unsecure digitalised work environment, this was important for the journalists to prove that they still were worthy their position in the newspaper and ‘not outdated’.

With the introduction of online publishing, metrics or data generated from reader behaviour on digital platforms are increasingly becoming part of the journalists’ everyday work. From a sound scepticism when first introduced to the newsroom’s routines a few decades ago, these data not only are no longer questioned but are given high epistemic value. Hence, the trust negotiated between ‘me’ and ‘we’ is to a large extent replaced by trust in the figures and numbers generated from reader behaviour on digital platforms and the multiskilled journalist to finalise the stories autonomously. Rather than being collective, practices in digital publishing are individualised as the pressure is placed on a single journalist to perform in the knowledge that metrics follow their actions. Even though work was individualised, digital data is not private but visible to all workers and editors. The possibility for performance management through digital data created a more competitive work environment where the single journalist was responsible without a consensual collective for support. It could thus be seen as mitigating the mechanisms of ‘equality as sameness’, but harmony and mutual trust in between journalist and editors were reestablished through discussions and interpretations of digital data and how to respond to them for increasing the digital traffic on their platforms. At the same time, there was a stronger social contract with the public, the audience, and choosing, writing, and publishing stories according to the interpretation of what the readers wanted in order to gain trust among the public.

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 123 1/7/2025 5:03:06 PM

Digital publishing calls upon engagement from the audience, and their responses to those actions are immediately reflected through metrics. Hence, followed by journalists, the direct response to stories can yield immediate rewards and a stronger connection to 'real time'. Rather than being controlled by the editors and supported by the collective, in publishing for digital platforms the journalists are governed by the metrics and trust is negotiated through what these numbers tell them. The digital collectives on digital platforms are thus enlarged to include the public and the social contract with the audience through digital data sociality.

Conclusion

This study has shown how digital technology is eminent in rearranging, reestablishing, and reshaping social boundaries between what is shared and what is private by its alteration of trust relations. From negotiations of what is private and shared between different collectives in the newsroom in print news production, in digital publishing the digital collective includes the public, the readers, as news production becomes datafied and individualised. Digital collectives in the newsroom are formed in ongoing processes of interplay between digitality and sociality for maintenance of trust, harmony, and autonomy. Digital collectives are thus not preset and stable entities, but emergent and enacted in the process of negotiation between collectives and individuals in their everyday engagement with the digital technology and digital data.

Gudrun Rudningen is a senior researcher at the Work Research Institute, OsloMet and holds a PhD in social anthropology from University of Oslo on digitalisation of journalistic work. She has broad expertise doing research with large knowledge-intensive organisations on topics such as collective creativity and innovation practices, organisational development, and digitisation. She is co-leading the interdisciplinary research group Media Practice at OsloMet and has publications in several journals as well as in edited books. E-mail: rugu@oslomet.no | ORCID: 0000-0002-7398-4819

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 124 1/7/2025 5:03:06 PM

References

Abbott, A. (1988), *The System of Professions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
Abram, S. (2018), 'Likhet Is Not Equality: Discussing Norway in English and Norwegian', in S. Bendixsen, M. B. Bringslid, and H. Vike (eds), *Egalitarianism in Scandinavia: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Cham: Springer), 87–108.
Barth, F. (1969), *Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget).
Beer, D. (2018), *The Data Gaze: Capitalism, Power and Perception* (London: Sage).
Boellstorff, T., and B. Maurer (2015), *Data, Now Bigger and Better* (Cambridge: Prickly Paradigm Press).
Broch, T. B., T. Bratrud, M. Lien, and C. G. Salinas (2024), 'New Forms of Home Blindness: Rethinking Fieldwork Methods in Digitalized Environments'. *Ethnography,* https://doi.org/10.1177/14661381241266924.
Bruun, M. H., Jakobsen, G. S., and Krøijer, S. (2011), 'Introduction: The Concern for Sociality: Practicing Equality and Hierarchy in Denmark', *Social Analysis* 55, no. 2: 1–19, https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2011.550201.
Dalsgaard, S., and M. Nielsen (2013), 'Introduction: Time and the Field', *Social Analysis* 57, no. 1: 1–19, https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2013.570101.
Douglas Jones, R. (2021), 'Bodies of Data: Doubles, Composites, and Aggregates', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27, no. S1: 159–170.
Eriksen, T. H. (2015), 'The Meaning of "We"', in A. Dauber and P. Markin (eds), *The Challenge of Minority Integration: Politics and Policies in the Nordic Nations* (Berlin: De Gruyter Open), 2–21.
Foucault, M. [1975] (1977), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans.) A. Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books).
Gieryn, T. F. (1983), 'Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists', *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6: 781–795, https://doi.org/10.2307/2095325.
Goodman, D. (1992), 'Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime', *History and Theory* 31, no. 1: 1–20.
Gullestad, M. (1984), *Kitchen-Table Society: A Case Study of the Family Life and Friendships of Young Working-Class Mothers in Urban Norway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
Gullestad, M. (1989), *Kultur og hverdagsliv: på sporet av det moderne Norge [Culture and everyday life: on the trail of modern Norway]* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget).
Gullestad, M. (1992), *The Art of Social Relations: Essays on Culture, Social Action and Everyday Life in Modern Norway* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget).
Knox, H. (2021), 'Hacking Anthropology'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27, no. S1: 108–126.
Langley, A., K. Lindberg, B. E. Mørk, D. Nicolini, E. Raviola, and L. Walter (2019), 'Boundary Work among Groups, Occupations, and Organizations: from Cartography to Process', *Academy of Management Annals* 13, no. 2: 704–736, https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2017.0089.
Lave, J., and E. Wenger (1991), *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
Merry, S. E. (2021), *The Seductions of Quantification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 125 1/7/2025 5:03:06 PM

NESH (2021), 'Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities', *National Research Ethics Committees,* 26 May, https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/guidelines/social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/.

Pink, S., E. Ardèvol, and D. Lanzeni (2016), *Digital Materialities: Design and Anthropology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing).

Sørhaug, T. (1996), *Om ledelse: makt og tillit i moderne organisering* [About leadership: Power and trust in modern organization] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget).

Syvertsen, T., G. S. Enli, O. J. Mjøs, and H. Moe (2014), *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).

Vike, H. (2013), 'Egalitarianisme og byråkratisk individualisme' [Egalitarianism and bureaucratic individualism], *Norsk antropologisk tidsskrift* [Norwegian anthropological journal] 24, no. 03–04: 181–193.

Wagner, R. [1987] (2012), 'Figure-Ground Reversal among the Barok', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 1: 535–542.

AJEC 33-2 Winter 2024.indb 126 1/7/2025 5:03:06 PM