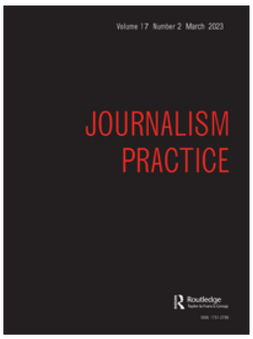

Journal of Journalism Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjop20

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To cite this article: Craig T. Robertson (2023) Defining News from an Audience Perspective at a Time of Crisis in the United States, Journalism Practice, 17:2, 374-390, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2021.1919178

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1919178

Published online: 03 May 2021.

JOURNALISM PRACTICE
2023, VOL. 17, NO. 2, 374–390
https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1919178

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Defining News from an Audience Perspective at a Time of Crisis in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Given prevailing questions about the definition of news in a contemporary US media environment, the present study analyzes audience views on news, exploring through in-depth interviews how 65 (largely moderate and liberal-leaning) individuals define it. These views are captured at a unique time: during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic and George Floyd protests. Employing Media Dependency as a theoretical lens, it is argued that a time of crisis may crystallize audience views as people turn toward the media. In this context, findings indicate that audiences define news in very fundamental terms. But, reflecting individual differences and the nature of the contemporary media landscape, "news" is often divorced from journalists/institutions, indicating a broadening of the concept for younger and less frequent/traditional news consumers. Older and more frequent/traditional news consumers view news in more institutional terms. The influences of the US media context, as well as the coronavirus pandemic and George Floyd protests, on views of news-ness are also discussed.

KEYWORDS

Defining news; news-ness; media dependency; coronavirus; semistructured interviews

Introduction

This study focuses on the definition of news in the contemporary US media environment. Specifically, its focus is on how audiences define news and their perceptions of what is more/less news-like. Public views on what news is are foundational to news audience research, and to journalism studies more generally, and the US presents an interesting case for such an analysis given the size and diversity of its media landscape. Here, the boundaries of news and journalism are increasingly blurred, leaving news as an ill-defined concept.

Against the backdrop of the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States, the killing of George Floyd, and subsequent nationwide protests, it is posited that this time of crisis provides an apt opportunity to examine the definition of news as US audiences orient themselves toward it. Findings from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 65 (largely moderate and liberal-leaning) people across the US show

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how views are shaped by the context in which they are expressed, with the US media system, as well as pandemic and protests, playing a role in individuals' definitions of news and news-ness.

Literature Review

Defining News from an Audience Perspective: A Media Dependency Approach

Much journalism literature has focused on defining news from academic and practitioner perspectives, yet, despite this work, news is a difficult concept to characterize (Zelizer 2004). Considering news as a media and information *genre* (Edgerly and Vraga 2020a), Bogart (1981) observes it is difficult to distinguish news from other genres of information just by pointing to elements of timeliness, novelty, and noteworthiness. For this reason, it has been noted as helpful to speak of *news-ness* (Edgerly and Vraga 2020a). In this view, news is not a singular, fixed concept but a variable one with degrees and dimensions. Such dimensions have often been described in terms of 'news values' (Harcup and O'Neill 2017) which guide what events or occurrences are focused on, thereby playing a role in defining news (Shoemaker and Vos 2009; Zelizer 2004). Stories can have dimensions/degrees of drama, conflict, negativity, and unusualness which make them "news" (Bogart 1981).

Beyond news as media and information genre, news can also be defined from an *institutional* perspective. Here, news is understood as the product of a set of practices tied to individuals who are associated, either in real terms or conceptually, with an institution (e.g., the "news media") which operates in relation to other societal institutions (Cook 2006; Zelizer 2004). Connected to this view, particularly in the US context, is the perception that news should be factual and objective, relayed by professional people who are worth considering as legitimate (Schudson 2001; Bogart 1981). Here, news is also connected to particular *norms* and *practices*.

Little work, however, focuses on the definition of news from a strictly audience perspective (Edgerly and Vraga 2020a). But prior work *has* examined perceptions of news in relation to other media genres (e.g., Edgerly 2017; Edgerly and Vraga 2019, 2020b), and the meaning or utility of news in people's lives (e.g., Nielsen 2016). Indeed, one way to define news from an audience perspective is by looking at its role in people's lives, specifically by looking at its *unique* features and functions (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976). Through the lens of Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976), the function of news can be understood in terms of the dependency that audiences often have on it for the satisfaction of particular needs or goals. Dependency is understood as "a relationship in which the satisfaction of needs or the attainment of goals by one party is contingent upon the resources of another party" (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976, 6) and the unique functionality of the news media here can be understood as its utility or effectiveness in satisfying needs or goals with the informational resources it has (Ball-Rokeach 1985).

While arguably many unique features and functionalities of the news media have been eroded by developments in technology and the media landscape (e.g., social media, citizen journalists), what is important here is how the unique functionality of the news media may be crystallized at times of crisis where there is a heightened need for "media information resources" (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976, 7) which the news

media may *alone* or *primarily* be in possession of. In a crisis context, heightened threats (Lowrey 2004) or ambiguities in the social environment create needs for, for example, "raw information and "expert" interpretation that interpersonal networks cannot provide" (Ball-Rokeach 1985, 500).

In such contexts, people seek out information from the news media which they may not obtain elsewhere or which they feel might best be accessible through or provided by the news media. Prior research has shown how audiences orient strongly toward information from the news media in response to crises such as public health emergencies, war, and terrorist attacks, and how the need for information and understanding is a key motivation for news use during these times (Kozman and Melki 2018; Lowrey 2004; Jang and Baek 2019). Indeed, survey data show how the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States and protests following the killing of George Floyd strongly oriented public attention toward the news media (e.g., Mitchell et al. 2020).

From a Media Dependency perspective, this time of heightened change, conflict, and crisis provides an apt opportunity to examine the definition of news. Theoretically, the unique functionality or meaning of the news media, vis-à-vis other media and information sources, may be revealed at this time as individuals seek out what they need from journalists and which they *may* not get elsewhere, thereby helping to clarify the definition of news.

What is important to note, however, is news is not monolithic or one-dimensional. A useful concept here is "news-ness", which Edgerly and Vraga (2020a, 420) define as "the extent to which audiences characterize a specific piece of media as news." In this view, whether a piece of media is news is not necessarily a yes/no question but instead comes down to perceptions of what is more or less "news-like". Both journalists and scholars, for instance, can be said to have an implicit hierarchy of news-ness embodied in notions such as "hard" and "soft" news or in divisions between straight news and commentary/opinion (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013; Gans 1980).

When it comes to audiences, while it may be assumed they view degrees of news-ness in a similar hierarchical fashion – research has shown that US audiences rank breaking news higher in news-ness than opinion (Edgerly and Vraga 2020b) and view traditional-style news as most news-like (Edgerly and Vraga 2019) – audiences have also viewed comedy shows as news (Edgerly and Vraga 2020a). Thus, there are prevailing questions about what audiences see as higher/lower in news-ness. In the context of this study, crises may again crystallize perceptions, revealing how audiences differentiate between types or *degrees* of news. In light of all this, the following research questions are asked:

RQ1: How do US audiences define news?

RQ2: What are US audiences' perceptions of news-ness?

Method

This study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews (average 1hr) conducted with 65 people across the US from April 21–June 5, 2020. The US context, and this time period, present an interesting case for an analysis of views on what constitutes news for several reasons: the higher relevance of news to people during the coronavirus pandemic,

the absence of specific regulations on news content (in contrast to markets such as the UK), and the size and diversity of the US media landscape. Moreover, in contrast to some national media markets where news audiences can be more concentrated (e.g., the UK, where the BBC is highly popular), in the US a broader range of local and national media outlets, both online and offline, are popular with audiences (Newman et al. 2020). Thus, it is possible that views on what constitutes news may be broader here than in other markets.

Given the focus on audience perceptions of what defines/constitutes news (in a crisis/dependency context), a sampling approach was adopted which sought individuals of varying ages, frequencies, and modes of news consumption (where they get their news), since there have been differences in views on what constitutes news noted across these dimensions (e.g., Edgerly 2017; Edgerly and Vraga 2020a). Emergency IRB rules introduced during the pandemic meant individuals had to be recruited online and interviewed with informed consent by phone or Zoom. The recruitment strategy employed was three-pronged: 1) use of an existing community research participant pool (which includes students and a diverse range of non-students in the community) run by a large Midwestern university, 2) purposive snowball sampling (Lindlof and Taylor 2011) from these interviewees, seeking individuals who were older and had different media diets to their own, and 3) recruitment of interviewees who were older and had diverse media diets via a large US-based Facebook group as part of further purposive and theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2014).

Demographics were collected from voluntary disclosures by participants. Interviewees aged 18–81 (average=30), 37 were female (and male=27, non-binary=1), 38 identified as White (and Black=4, Asian=11, Hispanic=1, Native American=1, with remaining participants mixed-race or non-identified), and 31 were in college (and Associate's=3, Bachelor's=12, Master's=10, PhD=1, with remaining participants high school graduates or non-identified). Interviewees came from professions including education, social work, IT, healthcare, food service, and marketing/PR, and the following states: California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, and Oregon. Of participants who stated their ideological stance, 28 identified as liberal, six as expressly moderate/mixed, and three as expressly conservative. While views on the news media in the US often diverge along ideological lines (e.g., trust), the focus of this study is on definitions of news, so the primary points of variance explored were along the lines of age and frequency/mode of consumption. The lack of stated conservatives in the sample, however, remains a limitation when it comes to possible ideological differences in ratings of news-ness (see Edgerly and Vraga 2020a).

Crucially, interviews were conducted during the peak of the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in the US, a time when the public was paying most attention to the news media (Mitchell et al. 2020), when the US reached 100,000 coronavirus deaths, and when unemployment claims reached 40 million.[1] Many states remained under lockdown or "stay at home" orders. George Floyd was also killed by police during this time (May 25, 2020). Following his death, protests erupted across the United States, reaching every US state by the time interviews were completed and becoming some of the largest protests in US history.[2]

Coding of interviews followed a sequence of initial, focused, axial and selective, and, finally, theoretical coding (Charmaz 2014; Lindlof and Taylor 2011). The first step identified

major themes and analytical categories; the second involved the assessment of initial codes, comparisons between them, and reorganization; and the third involved assessing the relationship of categories to subcategories and developing the properties of categories. Variations within/between categories, and along particular continuums and dimensions, were noted, and saturated definitions were created. Finally, categories were organized and integrated into a structure to account for the overall narrative. Names in the manuscript have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Findings

Changes in News Consumption: Increased Dependency on News and Media Technologies

Within a media dependency framework, reflecting a higher need for information and dependency on the news media, most interviewees reported consuming more news at the time interviews were being conducted. Given the pandemic affected them all, there was a need to stay up-to-date with important coronavirus developments – such as rules around moving between states (Caleb (19/M) needed to move for work, so wondered, "is it safe to go back to Boston? How am I going to get back?"), and rules about masks (as Elena (21/F) worries, "I don't wanna go out in public without a mask and you're supposed to have it").

In the US context, many states were under lockdown or stay-at-home orders at the time of interviews. This contextual factor, along with rapidly rising coronavirus case numbers, influenced people's behavior, prompting them to more deliberately seek out the "informational resources" possessed by the news media and other official sources. Rhea (27/F), who lives in New York and pre-pandemic primarily got news incidentally from social media, says she started watching daily press briefings from Governor Cuomo, saying "things are changing every day, so you've got to keep up with that." June (24/F) also observed that "before COVID-19 I didn't spend a lot of time reading news … but right now I just need to know what is happening in the world," adding that she had increased the use of her Apple News app and started seeking information directly from the CDC website.

However, individuals also reported consuming more news simply because they were home, unable to work or go to class. Here, the pandemic and disruptions in people's daily routines created a dual dependency: a need for information from the media and increased reliance on media/communication technologies. Alice (56/F), already a regular TV news watcher, says, "I'm working from home now … So the TV comes off and on all day," and Lucy, who primarily got news from Facebook, says her mode of news consumption shifted completely because of the impact of coronavirus on her life and higher access to TV. Caleb (19/M) also noted: "When I'm at school, I don't have access to television. I'm really busy. I'm a student athlete, I'm taking a lot of courses. I just don't necessarily have the time to keep up with the news as much as I'd like. But during the pandemic, I've been much more up to date with the news."

Moreover, increased news use and changed modes of consumption were also reflected in interviews conducted after the death of George Floyd. Here, however, this occurred in a different way, with people turning to, for instance, social media livestreams to satisfy their

need to know what was happening with the nationwide protests. Jason (34/M) says he wanted to know more about what was happening – "to get more of a first-hand perspective of what's going on" – but was unable to get enough information from traditional media, which led him to Facebook: "people were livestreaming them on Facebook before I read anything in the news about them." Similarly, Jordan (43/M), who says he is typically an avid watcher of news on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News, says, "during this time, I'm relying mostly on livestreams on Facebook and on Twitch and YouTube. I'm looking at those feeds more than I'm watching one of the major news outlets." For both Jason and Jordan, this turn to social media livestreams came from a strong desire to know what was happening but a lack of information in the mainstream media, hence a turn to and dependency on social media for the informational resources located there. Ordinary people on social media provided them better, and more unique, informational resources and on-the-ground perspectives to satisfy their needs.

Among the handful of interviewees who noted their news consumption behavior had not changed during this time, most were older and already frequent news consumers, though some also noted their mode of consumption had changed. Vincent (40/M) says he was a frequent listener of NPR radio in the car, but with less driving during the pandemic notes, "I've changed a little bit in where I'm getting it from, but my consumption is still high." He adds: "being home and having kids, I don't have much opportunity here to have a radio playing in the background … So it's just basically now all online, or I have turned on the network news a little bit more being home 'cause I don't have my half-hour commute." This context of higher use of and dependency on news serves as the backdrop for individuals' views in this study.

Defining News from an Audience Perspective: The Relativity of "News" in a US Context

In the US context, when asking people what news is, it is apparent that the concept is not simple. There is recognition that the meaning of the term has become somewhat blurred, particularly among younger interviewees and those with less traditional news diets (in the sense that they primarily get news via apps or social media). Lauren (19/F), someone who gets news almost exclusively online, citing BuzzFeed and videos on Facebook, says that "guess kind of in today's age, I think anything could be news." She notes these digital spaces and new forms of media have blurred the line between what is news and what is not.

Here, younger interviewees note changes in technology and production mean the scope of news (and its sources) has broadened. Rose (30/F), who is varied in her consumption, mixing online with local television news, says: "I think you could have tried to define it 50 years ago a little bit differently. But I think now, with social media and instant communication, the definition's changed as to what's news and what's not … Now it's anything from politics to somebody's dog … Like crazy videos that blow up and it ends up on news outlets." Similarly, Levi (18/M), a heavy Twitter news user, observes:

> "It's not really clear anymore [what news is]. News in the past was just informing the people of what occurred in, I guess, an objective way. But as time has gone on, and I think [with] the shift to 24-hour news stations and with the internet especially, you have instant access to

> all this … People are gonna have their own opinions and anyone can share this news now where it's not going to be as clear cut what is considered news."

These views on the scope of what news *is* – and where news *comes from* – are in contrast to older interviewees who do not get news online or from social media, instead having more traditional diets (in the sense that they get news primarily from TV or radio). Frank (81/M), who gets his news almost exclusively on TV, particularly from Fox News, discusses news only in terms of important national and international stories ("economy, world situations [like] North Korea") from mainstream media, while Ruth (50/F), an NPR listener and CNN watcher, also speaks more concretely of news as "[important] happenings locally, nationally, and globally," excluding celebrity gossip and "even [coverage of] Meghan – I love Meghan Markle, I Google her all the time, but that's not news, that's entertainment."

Nevertheless, due to the widening breadth of content creators and systems of delivery, interviewees agree that "news" as a concept has become relative and its sources more difficult to pin down. These factors also interact with the coronavirus and George Floyd stories. In the context of the protests, this diversification sees new delivery methods like social media livestreams (noted above) being considered sources of news. And in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the need for information sees individuals turning to the CDC website and live press conferences from governors (also noted above) as extra sources of news.

Moreover, the United States' politicized/polarized media landscape is often cited by interviewees as a reason it is difficult to distinguish news from non-news, because news and opinion become mixed in interviewees' eyes: "there's such a blurred definition for both of them," says Levi (18/M). Indeed, Carl (57/M), who mixes his Fox News viewership with consumption of podcasts and commentary from conservative YouTubers, notes an increasing "[lack of] distinction between just pure news and opinions," pointing to the polarized media landscape of the US and the negative influence of social media. He adds, in this context, that *he* is able to distinguish between news and commentary, but "it's very difficult for the normal person or the common person to be able to distinguish what's news and what's opinion."

A Core Definition of News

It is against this backdrop, given complications around the meaning/scope of news, that, when asked, most interviewees tend toward adopting a simple dictionary-like definition of news. This elemental view of news sees it defined as: 1) information about the real world, 2) that is new, and 3) outside of one's immediate purview. These elements of what news is are discussed in turn, as well as the ways in which news, as seen through this lens, is both narrowed and broadened as a concept. Moreover, the complicating/sharpening influences of the coronavirus and George Floyd protests, in the context of increased media dependency, are discussed.

First, when it comes to news as information about the real world, interviewees variously observe that it is "updates on what's happening in the world" (Emma, 19/F), "anything that is about current world happenings" (Noah, 20/M), and "a recap of daily events, it's a stream of information, a list of going-ons, things happening in the world and in your

society" (Jordan, 43/M). These views stress news as a genre of real-world information about events and occurrences, distinguishing it from the genre of fiction. As Caleb (19/M) observes, "You wouldn't call a movie news, like a fiction movie, because it's not fact-based." Thus, individuals' view of what constitutes news is narrowed to information which is "about reality, about what has happened" (Jason, 34/M),

Notably, however, I find the view of news that interviewees offer here, in many ways, divorce it from its ties to journalism or the news media, with journalists de-centered and news being seen more as a genre than being tied to an institution. This, in turn, expands the purview of what news *is*, allowing the concept to travel across contexts. It isreflective of the broadening of sources and distribution channels discussed above. Interviewees expressing this genre view of news tend to be younger and less frequent or traditional news consumers. Elijah (20/M) notes that someone saying "My wife just had a baby" is a form of news, adding that "news can be telling a friend 'did you hear what happened this weekend at church?' or something like that. News doesn't have to be like CNN or Fox." Elijah is a frequent consumer and tries to be "holistic" in his news consumption, seeking information from Fox News as well as CNN, the BBC, and NPR podcasts. But Sophie (21/F), who says she primarily gets news from her friends in group chats on Snapchat and GroupMe, equally notes: "my mom seeing something and then calling me and telling me about it [is news]." And in the words of Ivy (21/F), who says she typically only gets news from the news app on her phone and "word of mouth" from her friends ("I don't really watch the news on TV"): "News is the sharing of information. The end." Here, news is seen as personally-relevant updates which can come from ordinary people.

However, older and more frequent or traditional news consumers take a more institutional view. Alice (32/F), who gets TV news from Fox and ABC, says, "I feel like if it's my friend stating something to me it's not news, than if I see it on TV or if I catch it in the paper or something like that," and Hayley (42/F; who gets a range of news from Google News, the NPR app, Yahoo!, and local TV), when asked whether information relayed by friends is considered news, says, "I prefer a journalist … we need more Walter Cronkites." Here, Vincent (40/M), as a frequent and diverse news consumer (seeking news from Google News, MSN, Twitter, NPR radio, and network TV), explicitly takes an institutional view of news: "News is really an institution of bringing forth a variety of current events that a particular organization has decided are important and need to have a story told."

But at the same time, some of these same individuals acknowledge news can now come from non-professional and non-institutional sources, reflecting the changing nature of the media landscape and the influence of context. Here, Jordan (43/M), and avid TV news watcher, describes live stream video of George Floyd protests on social media being filmed by members of the public as "like pure, raw news coverage" and he recognizes the unique value of this source of information at a time when he felt TV news was not offering him the information he wanted or needed. Kelly (41/F; an NPR listener and frequent user of Facebook and apps for news), however, takes a nuanced view on these livestreams, stating: "Professionally, no, they're not from a news channel, it's just people livestreaming. But that's probably gonna be the new way of journalism."

Second, with regard to the newness or timeliness of this information, interviewees remark that news is "new information about events occurring" (Audrey, 22/F), "new information that you're not aware of" (Sam, 27/M), and "information on contemporary events that you don't already have" (Connor, 40/M). This view of news narrows the concept and distinguishes it from information-related concepts such as "history." As Ivy (21/F) says, "The History Channel, is that news? No, I think it has to be new information." Here, the quality of news is its *newness*, reflecting the etymological roots of the term. However, the context of the George Floyd protests, for some interviewees, does draw into focus how historical information becomes relevant to understanding the present. As Megan (31/F) says: "Right now, what we've got is a lot of, "There's a riot." People are mad and the National Guard is coming in, completely skipping over the whole … I mean, how many White people know nothing about the Tulsa Oklahoma bombings? And all the times that Black leaders have been just outright murdered and their homes lit on fire? … What's happening now is not in a vacuum, it's on a continuum of events."

Interestingly, reflecting differences noted above, interviewees who are younger in age and less frequent or traditional news consumers are more likely to see information as news when it is new *to them* (the individual level). As Jen (21/F), a less frequent consumer who gets most of her news from her News Break and Apple News apps, Hollywood Unlocked, and "word of mouth" on social media, notes, "basically anything I read about that I haven't heard about or it's kinda new to me, I'll consider news." On the other hand, older interviewees who tie news more closely to journalists and institutions, tend to more often stress newness for a wider audience (community or societal level). As Robert (54/M), a frequent consumer of a range of national and international news sources both online and offline, says: "My main focus when I consume news is politics and society and current events of significance."

Third, with regard to the location of this new information, interviewees say it is beyond their immediate firsthand observation; that it is "any information that's going on in the world outside of your direct circle" (Rose, 30/F), "something which happened that I didn't know at the current time … the people who are in that situation or close to that situation find those things and report it to me" (June, 24/F), and "any information sharing that I did not personally witness or, even if I did personally witness, it's any information that I didn't witness from my point of view" (Sophie, 21/F). This element of the definition of news again casts a wide net, allowing a range of different types of stories to be considered news. But, here, an event which an individual witnessed oneself is distinguished from news because it is personal experience. In this sense, news has the quality of being transmitted and testimonial/communicative in nature. As Elijah (20/M) says, "it's a way of getting information to mass audiences in a way, explaining things that happen for people that couldn't be there."

Overall, however, this stripped-down view of news must also be seen in the context of media dependency during the coronavirus pandemic. Individuals strongly express that what they want and need is information, and this sees them narrow their conception of news. As Caleb (19/M) says, "I don't really need to know what the Kardashians are up to today, but what I do need to know is how far away is a vaccine for coronavirus." And in a strikingly similar vein, Emery (44/F) says, "I think it's important for us to know what's going on [with COVID] … people who are interested in Kim Kardashian can always find something about her like on TMZ or on BuzzFeed or whatever. The major outlets don't

need to cover that. It's totally extraneous." These influences of context are discussed more specifically below when it comes to degrees of news-ness.

Audience Perceptions of News-ness: Variations Around a Core Definition

Around the core definition of news described above are variations in perceived news-ness. Among interviewees, the primary factors distinguishing degrees of news-ness are the information's 1) scope or relevance, 2) social importance or utility, 3) source, 4) facticity, and 5) impartiality. Variations along these dimensions create hierarchies among types or forms of news and further work to distinguish news from other media and information-related concepts. Views here are more consistent across interviewees, with smaller age and frequency/mode of consumption differences.

The first and primary aspects of news-ness noted by interviewees relate to the scope or social relevance of information and its perceived social importance. As Ruby (21/F) says, "I think [news is] relevant and current findings that impact a large number of people." These factors intertwine, with social importance often being seen through the lens of what is of relevance/utility for *society*, rather than what is of relevance/utility for *individuals* or *small groups*. But the two can work in tandem, as Rhea (27/F) says: "[news is] anything that is very important, anything that I have to know about, anything that is affecting me directly or affecting people around, anything that is affecting the world."

These points of relevance and social importance generally represent two ends of scale of news-ness where the former (societal level) is seen as most news-like and the latter less news-worthy (individual level). Here, differences between individuals (along the dimensions of age and frequency/mode of consumption) are somewhat narrower: there is generally agreement that socially important stories are more newsworthy. However, reflecting some continued difference in views on the scope of what news *is*, Ivy (21/F), an infrequent and digital-only news consumer, says: "I think it can be small and it can be big. Like, it's news to me that my neighbor now likes to go for runs, but it's also news to me that the Prime Minister in England … Do you know what I mean? I think it can be a big world and small world." Thea (20/F), who primarily gets her news from Twitter and Apple News alerts, also provides a hierarchical view of news-ness which retains the "small world" as part of the scope of news. She says:

> I think you have different levels of news. You have hardcore reported news. It talks about the political, it talks about government. You obviously have some softer news. It may be car accidents. And then you have what Kim Kardashian is doing today. I think that's news, but just not on the same level … You need to know the governor just put out a new [coronavirus] "stay at home" order. You need to know what the symptoms are of coronavirus. You need to know these things that can help you with your daily life … I think you might want to know if you have coronavirus before you know about Kim Kardashian's glasses.

But Emery (44/F), an older and frequent news consumer who combines watching ABC and NBC with news from Twitter and Instagram, excludes the "small world" from the scope of news. Yet, she observes in a similar fashion to Thea:

> The Kardashians changing their faces every day, to me, isn't news … Feuds between Taylor Swift and Kanye West, I don't think that's news … I don't think it belongs in the same context as, you know, [George Floyd] protests in Minneapolis.

It is here that Thea and Emery's views, and those of other interviewees, become influenced by the context of the pandemic and George Floyd protests. Despite differences in views on what the scope of news *can* be, views converge when it comes to the question of what news *should* be. Here, dependency on the news media for vital information about coronavirus, as well as the desire to know about largescale protests across the US, crystallize and sharpen individuals' views of news-ness, with socially consequential stories being seen as much more news-like. In contrast, in this context, the most commonly cited form of news which is low in news-ness, across all interviewees and by a large margin, is celebrity content (because of limited utility, social importance, and wider social relevance).

Notably, here information of lower social importance is also considered lower in news-ness because people say it can be covered elsewhere by non-journalists on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. Interestingly, this is noted by several younger non-traditional (but frequent) news consumers. Isaac (23/M), a frequent YouTube news consumer himself, discussing a TV news segment he saw about how to do a Zoom call, says: "I feel like that's talk show stuff or something." Kay (23/F), meanwhile, who is also a frequent YouTube news consumer, points out that news about UFO videos released by the Pentagon can be covered elsewhere: "I would rather let it be on a stupid YouTube channel than actually have it on media channels." Thus, despite the fact these types of content can be considered forms of news – particularly by younger news consumers – it is recognized that such information is lower in news-ness and can be provided by non-journalists in other forums. Yet, this also further illustrates the expanding of the scope of potential sources of news content.

Second, and relatedly, news-ness varies as a function of the source. Again, differences between individuals are somewhat narrower than those described above, with the common sentiment being that information is higher in news-ness when it comes from professional (often brand-recognizable, institutional) sources because interviewees note it is likely to be higher in quality. As Liam (27/M), who gets his news from a range of offline and online sources, says, "I just have a very hard time trusting sources if it's coming from my peers and not established authority … Established organizations like The Washington Post, Fox News, or The New York Times, they have been through the vetting process through the American public."

Here, degrees of news-ness are defined by whether information is seen as having gone through an institutional or professional mediation process. As Lauren (19/F), who gets news almost exclusively online, says: "It really depends on which news thing you're talking about, like New York Times versus Fox News versus The National Enquirer. It's all very different for each because you can tell some of them don't do a good job of checking their facts and going back and checking to see if anything is wrong." This dimension of news-ness involves individuals distinguishing between information which comes from recognized news brands and unrecognized "sketchy sites" (Thea, 20/F).

However, there are some differences, from a media literacy perspective, between older/young and frequent/infrequent news consumers in terms of discerning between sources. Charles (38/M), a local news subscriber and frequent Google News user, says he turns to "sources that I think are more reputable like Reuters," relying on his frequent experience with the source. And Connor (40/M), a diverse online/offline news consumer, draws on his experience, observing how "people say The New York Times is more liberal and The Wall Street Journal is more conservative, but you can pretty well trust anything

from either of those sources has gone through a rigorous process." In contrast, younger and less engaged news consumers are somewhat less discerning. Emma (19/F), who says she is an infrequent news user ("I'm not very updated with reading articles or watching the news"), trusts NBC because "it's just what my parents watch" and the New York Times because "it's a well-known newspaper." Olive (20/F), meanwhile, who gets her news in an incidental fashion from LinkedIn and Twitter, says: "If they're posting on social media, I trust verified accounts. But specific news channels, I don't know if there's one I could say that I trust."

Views here do generally point, however, to a more institutional view on news-ness, with interviewees pointing to large, recognizable brands. Notably, this focus on recognizable and established sources of news is particularly heightened in the context of dependency and the pandemic, with many interviewees (as noted above) turning to major mainstream news outlets for information – sometimes for the first time – out of a strong need to stay updated. As Lucy says, "to be honest, I don't even think I knew what channel Fox News or CNN was before coronavirus." Priya (30/F), meanwhile, says to stay informed she "did start subscribing to [The New York Times] during the pandemic." However, as noted, in the context of what is perceived as a vacuum of relevant information about the George Floyd protests, some interviewees such as Jason (34/M) and Jordan (43/M) note a turn to non-institutional sources of information like livestreams from ordinary individuals on social media.

Thirdly, what participants across the board stress is that the information being relayed to them should be factual. Here, information is viewed as higher in news-ness if it can be shown to be reliable and accurate by virtue of, for instance, the provision of pictures, video, documents, and research which backs up the claims being made. In the words of Connor (40/M), "it should be from a verifiable source, not just word of mouth," and Harper (20/F) says it should be "completely observational and factual." Here, distinctions, in terms of news-ness, are drawn between reports which are demonstrably reliable, backed up with evidence, and reports which rely on unverified gossip or chatter.

The emphasis on factuality means many people label celebrity gossip as low in news-ness. Again, there is agreement here across interviewees of all ages and modes of news consumption. As Alexander (20/M), primarily a user of Apple and Google News, says of celebrity content, rating it low in news-ness: "a lot of times it's not based on factual things." And as Ruth (50/F), an NPR listener and CNN watcher, notes, regarding celebrity news, "if it's not verifiable or if it's something just, you know, speculation, that's not news." In this vein, unconfirmed crime reports are also viewed as being lower in news-ness. As Ruby (21/F), whose news consumption is "90% from CNN, just like the website," explains: "If there's a crime charge and there's a suspect, but there isn't really much evidence yet, I don't think that should be made news yet or made public." And misinformation is explicitly excluded from the scope of news because it lacks accuracy and facticity: "I also wouldn't consider news where it's just someone giving very false information, like fake news," says Caleb (19/M).

Of note, the context of dependency and the pandemic particularly heightens this emphasis on facticity as a key aspect of news-ness. The way the coronavirus is discussed by interviewees is in terms of case numbers, data, statistics, infection rates, and scientific advice. As Noah (20/M) expresses it: "I try to look more at the scientific developments made with it rather than the political developments made with it." But, in this discourse,

there is also a pertinent sense of uncertainty about the virus. As Samuel (33/M) notes, "You've got different people saying different things. You got a lot of people that are like, 'I don't know who to believe.' The narrative changed from, 'Don't worry about wearing masks to protect yourself,' to, 'Okay, now we absolutely have to start wearing masks to protect other people.'" The feeling of an uncertain and developing situation manifests in an increased dependence on the media, as people seek the details they want and need, as well as a strong emphasis on facts. Emery (44/F), expressing uncertainty and a desire for more information, says "it's a journalist's job to inform people."

In a similar fashion, because of the fluidity of the situation, interviewees express a sense of epistemic uncertainty about the George Floyd protests. As Jordan (43/M) notes, referencing an unconfirmed story, "so apparently there are stacks of bricks showing up in spots where there's going to be protesting. I don't know if it's just coincidence. See, that's the thing, I don't know." And Charles (38/M), expressing uncertainty around who is protesting, says, "It's very hard to know what truth is right now … There are bad actors showing up in military gear, largely white folks … The media is trying to touch on this, but they don't really have any answers." Yet here, in circumstances of a lack of information from mainstream news, both Jordan and Charles, out of a desire to know, said they depended on social media to satisfy their needs, drawing on members of the public. The lack of reliable information from the mainstream media in this context diminished the emphasis on institutional facts.

Moreover, in this context, individuals express an openness to opinions and perspectives. The protests are discussed by interviewees in terms of a desire for relative perspectives, not just facts, because the nature of the story is seen as somewhat different. This is best captured by Jordan (43/M), who articulates a desire for facts around the coronavirus but expresses an openness to opinions and interpretations when it comes to the protests:

> [For] the coronavirus … I would like to know the textbook version of it. But when it comes to something with a little more emotion behind it, like the riots and stuff, I want to hear what CNN and MSNBC have to say about it … When it comes to something like coronavirus, you need the facts because it's medical and medicine is facts … When it comes to something like the riots, that's a little bit more emotionally charged. When it comes to those, it's anger, it's frustration, it's feeling like a lesser person … And you already know the facts, you wanna know what people are feeling and what they're thinking.

These views on the role of facts and opinions in news link to the final element of news-ness brought up by interviewees. It is here where some difference between individuals on the left and right emerges but, in general, content seen as highest in news-ness is that which is relayed impartially, with journalists excluding their subjective opinions.

Among individuals across the political spectrum there is a view that news-ness is diminished when journalists' opinions are included in stories and, in many cases, opinion is excluded from the scope of what news is. And as Frank (81/M), a strong conservative, puts it: "Opinions are like noses. Everybody has one. When it comes to the media, just tell me what's going on. I don't really care what you think." And as Levi (18/M), a liberal student, says, "I don't like the lumping of opinion pieces with news because I do think those are two very different things … Calling it a news station at that point feels wrong to me because at that point you're not presenting information, you're giving your feelings on it."

But, as was noted above, there is a feeling it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between facts and opinions in the US media. This problem is felt particularly in a context of higher media dependency during coronavirus, as opinions are seen to dilute the utility of news. As Logan (37/M), a conservative who frequently gets news from a range of outlets across the political spectrum, from The Drudge Report and The Blaze to MSNBC, says: "They [MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News] dilute down the news by interjecting opinions and bias and different things into these stories. They get further away from news and more and more into just opinion-based reporting."

However, as Jordan (43/M) notes above, there is a feeling among some left-leaning interviewees that opinions can be relevant to news if the topic is more interpretive or emotional in nature (as in the case of the protests). River (41) who identifies strongly on the left, says, "I think the editorializing things has its purpose," adding that "I think [the media's] purpose should be to inform people about facts and also to give a deeper insight to people about the background behind the things that they're reporting on." But what is emphasized is that these should be demarcated. As River says, "I think it's fine for individuals to state their opinions on things, as long as they're very clear that these are their opinions." Carl (57/M), a conservative and consumer of Fox News and conservative commentators online, agrees with this latter point: "You've got to make a distinction between a news outlet and an opinion outlet … I don't think they make as good a job as officially making a distinction between just pure news and opinions on both sides."

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to understand how US audiences define news in a context of crisis and media dependency. Audience views on news are important insofar as they both shape the ways people respond to news and form the basis of expectations people have of journalism. Against the backdrop of the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic and George Floyd protests, media dependency was employed as a lens through which to understand how crises might crystallize the public's view of journalism. Evidence for this crystallization is reflected in some of the very elemental views on news noted. The emphasis on and need for facts in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, which saw most interviewees increase their news consumption and turn to major outlets, reflecting a dependency on the news media, was noted to influence views.

However, I also find that views on the scope of what news is (or what it can be) differ, showing how an elemental definition both narrows and expands the scope of news. Variations along the dimensions of age and frequency/mode of news consumption were found, reflecting prior research (e.g., Edgerly 2017; Edgerly and Vraga 2020a). The broader definition of "news as genre" adopted by younger and less frequent or traditional news consumers often divorces the term from its associations to the institutional media and the role of journalists is also somewhat decentralized. This allows the notion of "news" to travel across different media and contexts, encompassing information from a wider range of sources. This is in contrast to older and more frequent or traditional news consumers who define news in more institutional terms.

This genre view of news may be product of the US media landscape; specifically, the lack of specific news regulations in the US, the abundance of new online journalism ventures, and the popularity of digital modes of (disaggregated) news consumption. These

factors, while not unique to the US, allow for a de-centering of major/traditional news outlets, particularly for younger and less frequent/more digital consumers. Meanwhile, the institutional views of older individuals may be a product of their more frequent news use and stronger connections to traditional media. Notably, views on news are also influenced by background events, showing how context can both complicate and sharpen perspectives. Interviewees mentioned livestreams on Facebook as a source of news about the George Floyd protests, reflecting how a need for information led them to formats which they came to see as news (in contrast to the coronavirus, which influenced institutional information-seeking). Of interest for future research is how differences in views may be associated with different levels of news media literacy (linked to variations in news use and modes of consumption).

Despite journalists/institutional sources being somewhat decentralized, more "professional" sources are still seen as more news-like – though there are differences in people's ability to discern professionalism. When it comes to news-ness (Edgerly and Vraga 2020a), there is greater consensus, with perceptions linked to (professional and traditional) journalistic norms and practices. Degrees of news-ness vary by the practices employed: whether news is produced in a fashion which emphasizes key "news values" like magnitude and relevance (Harcup and O'Neill 2017), is properly fact-checked and reported with supporting evidence, and is relayed without commentary/opinion. Here, news-ness is viewed in terms of norms and practices which have been part of historical discourse in professional US journalism (Schudson 2001) and there are questions for future studies regarding how audiences see them being enacted by institutional/non-institutional news sources, and the implications for trust/credibility (particularly when media literacy is also considered).

Notably, the context of the coronavirus pandemic – with higher media dependency stemming from the impact felt in the lives of all interviewees – shapes views on news and the role of journalism. Here, COVID-19, seen largely as a less interpretive scientific and fact-based story, drives a strong need for up-to-date information and, thus, there is particular emphasis on the role of the institutional media in presenting straightforward factual updates (and setting aside more trivial topics). The US media and political environment, particularly its politicization/polarization, also influences views on practices: there is a blurring between facts and partizan opinions that is perceived (which is seen as somewhat difficult to navigate) and a stronger demarcation between the two is called for. However, in contrast, when it comes to protests following the death of George Floyd, some interviewees express a desire for more opinions and perspectives on what is seen as a more interpretive issue. Some also looked beyond institutional news media for the information they wanted about this story. Thus, findings reflect story-level topical and contextual differences in views (and behavior).

The findings here underscore how researchers must pay attention to the influences of context on news definitions. While I find people express one view here, future research should examine whether there are shifts in conceptions of news (perhaps among the same individuals) over time in response to external events, or whether views are stable. This study provides a snapshot of perspectives which limits speculation on how views could be different (or hold the same) in other circumstances. Further limitations include the sample: there were far fewer conservatives in the sample than liberals, which may have limited the insights into possible ideological differences in perceptions

of news-ness (see Edgerly and Vraga 2020a). Future research should more explicitly incorporate possible ideological differences. And, finally, while interviewees were drawn from nine states, their views are naturally non-representative and limited to the US context. Despite limitations, what this study provides is a unique view of how individuals define news at an important time in history.

Notes

1. Villarreal (2020).
2. McDermid (2020).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author acknowledges funding support from the College of Communication Arts and Sciences at Michigan State University.

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