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The playful newsroom: Iterating and reiterating the news and its publics

by Maxwell Foxman

Abstract

The crisis in the journalism industry, intensified with the popularization of the World Wide Web, warrants radical rethinking of the professional identity of journalists and their role in society. This paper first suggests replacing the Habermasian public sphere with Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's magic circle of play to describe the relationship between the press and its audience. Within this new model, the writer configures the rules and boundaries in which the reader is free to respond and subvert, an interplay that increasingly shapes both current news production and expectations of the public. This paper then explores play and playful attitudes in newsroom practices and output through semi-structured interviews with journalists, game designers and educators. The "Game Team" at the news and entertainment Web site BuzzFeed acts as a primary case study of a group of journalists who make a variety of playful products — from full-fledged games to interactives — which they iterate and improve over time, in response to readers' feedback.

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Introduction

When the *New York Times* posted its most read articles of 2013, it generated a flurry of commentary (Graff, 2014; Meyer, 2014; Taibi, 2014) that equally bemused and bewildered the journalistic community. While serious pieces like the Boston Marathon bombings made the list, bubbling to the top was not an article, but a game. Eleven days before the end of the year, an intern published a news quiz (Meyer, 2014) that predicted with eerie accuracy a reader's origin based on a few questions about dialect. Writers quickly pointed out the irony that the fluff of sites like BuzzFeed became a widely-shared overnight sensation (Meyer, 2014). For his part, the app's creator knew the reason for its success: "At the end of the day it's fun" (Graff, 2014).

Leading journalistic outlets turning to fun and games is increasingly common in an industry challenged by a "riptide" (Huey, *et al.*, 2013) of change in the technology, economy and consumption of news over the past 20 years. The popularization of the World Wide Web and related digital media has resulted in, among other things, serious investigative reporting being produced alongside playful interactives, upending the eighteenth century Habermasian conception of the public sphere. In this model, the press informs the citizenry, which in turn uses that information to create a more critical and rational democracy. Such a dynamic has shaped newsmakers' "occupational ideology," (Deuze, 2005) or beliefs the press shares about the purpose and practice of its profession. Technological upheaval, however, has transformed the public sphere to a space that does not strictly foster deliberate critical discourse, and for which journalists have to reimagine their role. The "magic circle" of play, described by historian Johan Huizinga and adopted as a theoretical model by game designers, provides a potent metaphor for understanding the expanding relationship between news producers and their readership — users actively engaged with their news consumption while following the "rules" dictated by the systems through which they choose to receive information.

Given this new dynamic, how are digital journalists adjusting their activities? This paper provides empirical research conducted through interviews with an array of professionals concerning play in both newsroom culture and products. Through their responses, media company BuzzFeed and its "Game Team" — particularly their procedures, apps, articles and

outlook — emerged as an archetype of the press at play and became a primary case study. The research also finds play manifested for a subset of mainstream digital journalists: First through the creation of a variety of playful formats that are iterated for some, but not all, news content; and additionally, as a playful attitude, typified by the expectation to experiment, fail and toy with content creation. Such a mindset reflects a changing professional identity, which does not adhere to the traditional "occupational ideology" (Deuze, 2005) of newsmakers, and in which audience preferences, understood through metrics, have increasing influence on journalistic output.

A playful mindset redefines the practices and assumptions of the press, which designs the rules that constitute the public, while simultaneously relying on its feedback. This paper will subsequently discuss this evolving "recursive" (Kelty, 2008) relationship, where journalists iterate upon their output based on its effectiveness with their audience, reconfiguring their profession, the readership they serve and even the essence of news itself. Ultimately, toying with the news requires a conceptual framework such as the magic circle for understanding the symbiotic relationship between the press and the public at large.

Stakes of the game: Understanding journalistic change in a playful context

Previous assertions about digital journalism in the United States have dwelled on the increasing conflicts between old and new forms of reporting (Dahlgren, 1996; MacGregor, 2007) that were expected to ultimately precipitate the "demise of journalism as it was known during the better part of the twentieth century" [1]. Scholars investigated how novel digital tools (Boczkowski, 2004; Deuze, 2005; Garrison, 2001) and convergence media (Deuze, 2005; Doudaki and Spyridou, 2015; Lowrey and Woo, 2010; Quandt and Singer, 2009; Vobič, *et al.*, 2014) influenced journalistic practices (Boczkowski, 2004; García-Avilés, 2014), routines (Agarwal and Barthel, 2015; Domingo, 2008; Ryfe, 2009) and roles (Singer, 2003; Tandoc, 2014). Authors recognized the expanding definition of the news producer, including Web sites like Salon [2] and BuzzFeed (Agarwal and Barthel, 2015), and "soft news" (Reinemann, *et al.*, 2012). Even users, as prosumers, pro-ams and produsers (Bruns, 2007) contributed content to stories. Anderson (2011) best characterized the paradoxical view journalists held of their readers as both a "'productive and generative' entity," and a "quantifiable, rationalizable, largely consumptive aggregate" [3].

Such reappraisals of audience reflect larger shifts in journalistic identity itself. Crucial to the profession is an "occupational ideology" (Deuze, 2005) formed less by licensing or certification than by daily practices. Deuze (2005) noted newsmakers' work is built around the core values of public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics [4]. These principles reflect the traditional rational and critical viewpoint of the profession. However, with tools, practices, products and readership shifting, the everyday work, and consequently, the press' occupational ideology, no longer correspond to the emergent online news environment.

The crisis of the public sphere

It is hardly unprecedented for the press to inspire ferment and appeals for change. In fact the growing commercialization of twentieth century journalism provoked Habermas to conceive of the "public sphere" as an aspirational and ideal portrayal of bourgeois citizenry and its discourse [5]. The concerns Habermas initially expressed about a rational public in crisis have intensified in the context of modern media: Driven by market conditions, media outlets have degraded the quality of discourse, while simultaneously being tasked with representing an ever expanding populace. Furthermore, current and particularly Web-based platforms have left a profound impact on the key attributes of the sphere as a model, rendering it an inadequate description of contemporary civic activity.

Habermas conceptualized his sphere as foundational to a democratic society, one that could only be fashioned through rational discourse (Boeder, 2005). Dahlberg (2001) described this type of communication as autonomous, critical, reflexive, respectful of others, inclusive and sincere, all of which are consistent with newsmakers' occupational ideology. Journalism as a "public organ" [6] aided political debate by providing information and submitting "issues to critical discussion" [7]. The combination of the press and spaces where socio-political conversation prevailed — from literary salons to parliaments (Kellner, 2013) — formed the public, capable of expression independent of state power.

This optimistic representation of a physical public sphere supported by a critical press was short-lived. By the 1960s, Habermas (1991a) specifically acknowledged that, paradoxically, "newspapers, periodicals, radio and television" [8] had become the main conduits of a populace too large to interact face-to-face, triggering the commercialization [9] and commodification of democratic society through, among other factors, a less critical press [10]. Habermas warned that commercial values had spread to every corner of popular culture (Papacharissi, 2002), which reduced the citizen "to the status of the spectator, and expert opinion has taken the place of 'true' public opinion" [11].

Aside from his own reservations, Habermas' conception has also been criticized for its limited demographics — historically, propertied men [12], with the exclusion of women and lower social and income classes [13] — which severely curtailed who could provide input. Despite amending his views over the past decades to account for the influence of other social forces [14], Habermas' revisions are unconvincing and, according to Benson (2009), continue to under-theorize the close and pro-active relationship between media, political systems and the public [15].

The Web's popularity has only exacerbated debates over the public sphere as a prototype for civil society. Diverse content and activity online gives credence to the notion of a multiplicity of public spheres and sub-spheres (Boeder, 2005; Kellner, 2013). Papacharissi (2002) described the Web as fragmented and dominated by only a few actors, asserting it was "a public space, not a public sphere" [16], whose discourse did not guarantee more informed and politically active citizens [17].

Even the most successful and aspirational examples of online public spaces look radically different from Habermas' model. For instance, Dahlberg's (2001) analysis of the Minnesota E-Democracy discussion list reveals a variety of disparate players including corporations, government officials and individuals who exchanged e-mail messages for both personal and civic motives. However, arbitrary guidelines issued by moderators in consultation with list members "steered" conversation. When debates inevitably strayed off topic, resulting in occasional insults and "flaming," moderators of the newsletter, keenly attuned to the forum's conversational direction, rapidly adjusted the tone of the relatively freeform exchange of ideas. This dynamic interplay constrained by formal rules diverges from the open spaces espoused by Habermas.

Subsequent research has confirmed a variety of actors outside of the bourgeoisie expressing differing opinions [18] and a high level of curation in online spaces [19]. At the same time, such spheres encourage free and spontaneous activity [20] and require flexibility, variability (Schudson, 2009) and adaptability to a multitude of publics. These aspects reinforce Papacharissi's (2002) call for a drastic rethinking of the sphere altogether: "... the Internet may actually enhance the public sphere, but it does so in a way that is not comparable to our past experiences of public discourse. Perhaps the Internet will not become the new public sphere, but something radically different" [21]. From these perspectives, it is clear that Habermas' concept must be reformed as it becomes increasingly irrelevant to online environments and does not resolve the dynamic relationship developing between media makers and the citizenry.

The idea of the press as the sole purveyor of information appears increasingly simplistic, and the traditional journalistic ethos antiquated, within current trends in digital culture. Theorizing through the lens of Habermas' sphere neither fully captures newsmakers' messy, fragmented and ever-changing occupation with their audience, nor does it acknowledge the interplay between them.

The magic circle versus the public sphere

As an alternative to the public sphere of rational discourse, I suggest that journalists are entering into an increasingly playful relationship with their audience that is better represented by the concept of the magic circle of play.

Playful public activity has a rich history. According to Huizinga (1950), the magic circle "preceded" [22] current culture itself, and, as a consequence, underpinned many aspects of the state, such as legal conflicts, war, and even electioneering [23]. Further, Fuchs's (2014) "ludoarchaeological" reading of Huizinga firmly defines his conception of play as a mode of forming social groups, and therefore well within the ambit of civic life.

Huizinga (1950) described the magic circle as delimiting a space and time for play, providing a sense of order, or "limited perfection" [24] to free the player from the restrictions of normal social behaviors. Take the example of a boxer: bound by the rules established in and around the ring, he/she can commit an act that would be completely inappropriate in everyday life. Salen and Zimmerman (2003) further refined the concept of the magic circle, although they used it primarily as a metaphor, not an actual space for game systems [25]. They noted the artificiality of the circle, a designed yet permeable "frame" [26] that bounded playful activity [27]. Players might spontaneously act according to its rules or not, depending on their playful or "lusory" attitude [28]. Once involved, play acted as a "kind of social contract" [29], which molded the perspective of the player in response to designers' ends. Salen and Zimmerman (2003) also contended that the process of designing the circle itself was playful: assembled through experimentation and iteration, or "a cyclic process that alternates between prototyping, playtesting, evaluation, and refinement" [30].

However, as Fuchs (2014) pointed out, Huizinga did not regard the magic circle in purely rosy terms; the order provided by the space (and its rules) both emancipated *and* constrained players. Huizinga attributed such rulemaking as promoting "the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world ..." [31]. Thus, the guidelines within the magic circle can exclude as much as they include. Only through deliberate and consistent exchange between designers and audiences can such restrictions be avoided.

The magic circle shares some commonalities with the public sphere, namely that both are guided by normative assumptions of what activities can occur within the space, while at the same time imparting a sense of liberty to the individual within each model. However, the magic circle allows a novel means of understanding the relationship between content creators (including journalists) — those providing information to players — and the audience/public that engages in gameplay. It reconfigures the relationship from one primarily based on dissemination, in which content is decided by the press and broadcast *en masse*, to one based on reciprocity between content creators and receivers. The product's value is a measure of audience feedback, which can respond to and subvert play within the circle, depending on the rules; player engagement ultimately gives it meaning.

The tenor of newsrooms has morphed in part due to recent dependencies on more fragmented readership, whose clicks and comments keep media outlets viable. This requires flexibility in shaping news output, newsrooms and newsmakers' roles, including the integration of journalists' occupational ideology with consumer feedback, without which public discourse cannot be supported. The magic circle provides a useful framework for dealing with these emergent concerns. Adhering to the circle produces novel challenges to the press, such as balancing the inclination by newsmakers to be too bound to their audience while still working for the public good.

Applied to the context of prevailing information production and consumption, the magic circle encompasses both the positive and negative forces of the evolving news environment. This design-oriented model accepts and embraces the online public and further conjoins it to journalists. The press must iterate on old practices and products to accommodate their current audience, as the crisis in news culture over the past two decades has demonstrated.

Games and play as an object of journalistic study

If the magic circle sustains a more playful and animated public, in what ways can journalists accommodate their newsrooms, practices and products to this new reality?

Rather than reflecting on this question of adaptation to changes in media infrastructures, contemporary practical scholarship has mostly been devoted to exploring how the press might best employ digital games with other news media; their potential educational value — particularly as a training device for journalists (Aayeshah, 2012; Cameron, 2001; Hatfield and Shaffer, 2006) — and their ability to attract new audiences through innovative presentations.

Research during the early years of the twenty-first century lauded "Newsgames," or "games that utilize the medium with the intention of participating in the public debate" [32]. As a novel, but complicated instrument in the reporter's toolbox, games were at once seen as a new means of serious storytelling, which created empathetic, immersive experiences, engaged players (Burton, 2005; Ferrer Conill and Karlsson, 2015) and replicated models and existing systems (Trippenbach, 2009). At the same time, doubts linger about the ability to constrain games to the routines and tenets of journalism (Ferrer Conill and Karlsson, 2015; Nolan, 2003; Sicart, 2008).

Although scholars noted the playful or game-like quality of online news consumption (Jacobson, 2012; Wilson, *et al.*, 2003), there is little recognition of journalists and audiences "playing" with the making of newsgames; play is only referred to obliquely with allusions to the "spontaneous" quality of game design [33] or the importance of engagement in "gamification" (Ferrer Conill and Karlsson, 2015). Far less examined is the magic circle's relationship to news and the public sphere. Authors also looked at how activities within the magic circle could be used as a political tool to challenge commonly held conventions in public spaces (Stenros, *et al.*, 2007; Silva and Hjorth, 2009). At the same time the popular press appears to appreciate playful news; Charlie Brooker rated social media Web site and news source, Twitter as the number one game in history (Stuart, 2013). If public discourses are beginning to more resemble a "magic circle," how are journalists adjusting to this new environment?

Methods

To determine the application and perception of games and play in digital journalistic practice, I endeavored to describe and gain a "thick understanding" [34] of their use. I wanted to empirically assess how journalists play with the news, or "persistently [toy] with news products and production, primarily in response to user reaction" [35]. Following the work of Bogost, *et al.* (2010), an analysis of play and games is not limited to an assessment of "video games," but can represent quizzes, infographics and other forms of media that incite playful behavior.

In conjunction with research and a report produced by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University (Foxman, 2015), I undertook an investigation in 2014 that consisted of 38 interviews with journalists, game designers and educators throughout the United States, and, in one case, internationally. Journalists were found through a snowball sampling process that included recruitment of personal contacts, third parties, and "cold calling." See Table 1 for professional and demographic details of the participants.

Table 1: Professional and demographic information of participants.

Professions	**Percentage of participants**
Journalists. Current or former reporters, editors, directors, designers and developers for news institutions.	36.8%
Professors and administrators. Teach or design courses involving games and play in university journalism departments.	2.6%
Journalist/professors. Faculty and administration with a professional background or currently working in journalism.	13.2%
Professors/game designers. Adjunct or full-time faculty and administration in the development of games, serious games and newsgames.	21.1%
Journalist/game designers. Journalists with a background, or currently producing, analog and digital games.	10.5%
Professional researchers. Work for research institutions.	2.6%
Other. Professionals in entertainment and information-based organizations.	13.2%
Gender	
Male	60.5%
Female	39.5%
Total participants	38

Selection criteria for participants included their interest (positive or negative), investment in, and involvement with the creation, dissemination or critique of play in journalistic production, garnered through the snowball sampling process. In all cases, participants had used games and play in journalism as part of their professional work, either developing or writing about playful content and games for online news outlets, in the case of journalists and game designers, or teaching and researching the subject, in the case of professors. Because current and former journalists and game designers work as instructors (adjunct or full-time) many of these professional categories overlap. Journalists might teach while employed by news outlets, or take on a full-time position after leaving the field. Furthermore, no game designer interviewed worked exclusively at the position, but was either an employee within a news organization, or, more often, a part or full-time educator.

The journalists interviewed worked for local and national legacy and new media news agencies, and hailed from multiple departments including development, design, editorial, and business, exemplified by (but not necessarily including) companies such as ProPublica, NPR, the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. Participants' institutional affiliations will not be disclosed to preserve participant confidentiality. Educators included those teaching general courses on games, from journalism departments at colleges and large research institutions. The game designers who were selected either taught at a university or conceived newsgames for journalistic outlets and worked more on independent rather than mainstream "AAA" games. Finally, researchers of games and journalism, as well as professionals working in social media, "infotainment" and other information outlets, were recruited.

Once participants provided informed consent, semi-structured interviews, lasting between 20 and 90 minutes, were conducted in person — in New York City — by phone, or via online video and call services. When necessary and as requested, interviews occurred in groups of two or three. In two long distance cases, based on the request of the

participants, I performed an e-mail interview [36]. Interview questions revolved around conceptions, uses, examples and perceptions of games and play in news environments and practices.

Before conducting each interview, I explained the project's goals and indicated the potential venues in which I planned to publish the findings of this project. An audio recording was made of each conversation with the understanding that names and details about the participants would be kept anonymous. As a consequence, respondents have not been identified in this article without their prior consent.

Transcripts were distilled from the recordings. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1999), "a research process that moves from limited theorizing to the collection of data to theorizing once again" [37] was taken as an approach. Consequently, I maintained no preconceptions about the subject of games and play in newsrooms, how they might be used, and their relationship to the magic circle of play. Instead, after each interview, I reassessed and theorized how play emerged in journalism. This led me, for instance, to rethink the term "play" itself. Newsmakers did not adhere to a single label, such as "gamification" to describe their playful work, but instead used "fun," "games," "play," "toys" and even "models," to describe their activities.

Furthermore, the Web site BuzzFeed frequently came up as the go-to model for playful products and behaviors, with its content both positively and negatively referenced and its quizzes studied and copied by other newsmakers. Given their prevalence in my conversations and after conducting interviews with members of the organization, I began to see BuzzFeed, and specifically the "Game Team" of game designers and staff it supported to make playful content, as a unique case study. The group not only depicted more general themes about the use and limitations of play in content creation and journalistic procedures, but also illustrated how digital news practices exist within the context of the magic circle.

Journalistic play: Findings

In my interviews, participants viewed their playful activities as satisfying a range of particular purposes. For some, play was meant to reward loyal customers. For others, it fulfilled the more traditional ideals of newsgames — creating an empathetic and immersive experience or mimicking a real-world system. Even as these perceptions differed across participants on the question of purpose, the focus of each participant remained centered on the objects of play and their practices of producing them.

I will now highlight the themes that emerged from my interviews concerning games and play in journalism. I will first describe the types of products that qualified as "playful" to newsmakers. These encompassed a spectrum of output from gamified elements to newsgames. The content was iterated and improved over time, supporting lighter, more sustained news fare, rather than breaking news. From there, I will describe playful practices, actions and attitudes, defined by a commitment to experimentation, an acceptance of failure and a flexible journalistic identity, and finally, I will discuss newsmakers' growing awareness of their audiences in their daily work, primarily represented through metrics. In each case, I will present illustrative quotes from my respondents within each sub-section.

Products

Playful formats: Spectrums of playful products

From quizzes to more extensive features, play manifested in a variety of interactive products, with no specific format preferred over another.

> One of the things that we saw up until the 2000s was a transition from very expensive, time-intensive highly specialized tools for making games to the opposite — very accessible, easy-to-use and easy-to-generate ... template-ized game production. What that affords newsgames is a sort of faster production process ... [A] lot of the interesting games in the newsgames section aren't these things that have been developed over three years because a fundamental problem there is that it's old news by the time the game is done ... (Professor/game designer A).

This designer expresses a dilemma inherent to the current creation of playful journalism. Given the speed of the news cycle, both game makers and journalists must wrestle between opting for a uniquely developed product, or a templated/pre-made format to facilitate timely publication.

Detailed interactive "features" [38], such as those described by Jacobson (2012) in her study of games and multimedia journalism at the *New York Times*, often concentrated on original content and demanded significant effort, skills and funds. By contrast, "stock formats" [39], including quizzes and calculators, generated relatively easy modes of storytelling that journalists could use repeatedly and access with the growth of affordable design tools; they also required minimal time and effort from the news audience.

Features and formats occupied two poles on a spectrum of playful products made by newsmakers. For instance, the "gamification" techniques of adding points, badges and leaderboards (Ferrer Conill and Karlsson, 2015) exemplify simplistic formats: easy to manufacture and replicate, with little regard to content. News quizzes relied more heavily on formats, while multimedia "packages" [40] contained uniquely designed playful features along with other original material.

Playful content: Appropriate topics for playful treatment

While game elements could potentially be applied to almost any news occurrence, journalists and institutions carefully considered how and when to handle content playfully, with the result that longer, run-of-the-mill media coverage and soft news became the primary subjects of most playful products, shying away from investigative and hard news.

> ... I think some of the best [journalistic] games out there are the ones that allow the user ... to enter their energy use and then see how that affects a broader picture, that allows the user to sort of mess with levers and numbers ... There are a lot of stories that aren't fun ... when you're talking about a topic that involves human lives, whether it be dying or struggling ... games start to cross the line ... "How can I take this narrative seriously when the subject matter is so trivialized?" (Journalist/professor A).

This journalist/professor's feeling that hard news stories, and particularly issues surrounding danger and death, were inappropriate subjects for games was shared by most journalists interviewed. Instead, obvious candidates for playful treatment included lengthy events like the U.S. national elections and soccer's World Cup because they received extensive and diverse reporting. A few participants maintained their belief in games' special ability to depict real life systems, which could not be adequately conveyed through traditional reporting [41].

Opinions diverged among participants regarding who should produce this playful material. Game creation was one of many tools journalists could employ. They also worked with outside developers for more complex projects, and even pointed to games independent of traditional news institutions as having journalistic value. For their part, game designers stressed their training as an asset to the press.

The case of BuzzFeed exemplified the focus on softer news by in-house game designers in news organizations. Producing lighter content was a daily routine of the BuzzFeed Game Team. The group of designers primarily focused on soft news and mostly worked within "Buzz," the popular culture and gossip section of the Web site. A major task for the group involved developing "formats" for repeated use over diverse subject matter, ranging from popular television shows (La Rosa, 2014) to brand-oriented promotions (Ringerud, *et al.*, 2014) and topics intended to reinforce and reflect personal information about the reader (Shepherd, 2014). While the team remained independent within the newsroom, proposing ideas to or working with specific editors and writers, they did not collaborate with the site's harder news sections.

Iteration: The best means to test playful formats and concepts

As a result of the proliferation of formats and other templates, journalists were iterating upon their output. Such rapid prototyping not only aligns with notions of game design, but also was implemented in reaction to audience feedback.

> I want everything perfect-ish ... but it's something that I've let go because I also realized that on the other side you can actually innovate and you can learn from real-time feedback and experience ... Because oftentimes, designers make assumptions. (Journalist/game designer A).

While news articles might be understood as finished products, published playful work fueled a process of iteration and improvement over time. This was particularly evident at BuzzFeed. Employees expected most posts to be iterated upon and improved, fitting a more general tendency among participants to not simply publish an article, but to modify future work based on audience feedback. Formats like quizzes and calculators were not simply made and circulated, but refined after their initial release. The team also commented on the constant iteration and improvement of their formats over time. As an example, one member showed how a randomizer format, upon its first release, only displayed text (Perpetua, 2014), then pictures (Fitzgerald and Shafrir, 2014) and eventually animation (Games and shaunpendy, 2014).

Iteration didn't occur with all products, and unsuccessful formats could be shelved. In fact, BuzzFeed did not widely publish its famous quizzes initially, although the company conceived of them early in its history. Instead they tweaked the format within the organization before broader public distribution.

Generally, news developers drew on their previous work and expertise, as well as copying the achievements of others, even when designing unique "features" around specific subjects. Improving and iterating "in-house" was one of many playful hallmarks of both the Game Team and other newsrooms discussed by participants in my research. The Game Team reviewed formats internally and received feedback from employees before public exposure. Game Team members openly hoped to tackle more serious subjects in the future and took it as a given that existing formats would not remain static, adopting a flexible attitude toward both form and content.

A playful attitude

Experimentation: Flexibility and openness to testing characterize a playful perspective

Along with the development of products, a playful, if not outright lusory, attitude persisted, defined by a willingness to experiment with how the news is presented and the utilization of a variety of tools, including game design elements, to improve content.

> Novelty is only occasionally useful, but if a great story requires a novel thing, let's try it out and measure it and see if that thing works ... You start with the idea and you figure out how to test that idea. Then figure out how to build something that's testable. Experimenting and trying crazy shit is awesome, but if you're doing it without any feedback, you're just wasting your time. (Journalist A).

This journalist's comment affirms a positive and even opportunistic rhetoric about play, as long as it ultimately serves the needs of both newsmakers and their audience. Journalists spoke about the potential business models that could result from incorporating games and entertainment into their products. Journalist B suggested that fun approaches provided less "eat-your-spinach kind of journalism," and instead became "more engaging and [gave] the reader a chance to interact with ... stuff." Rather than thinking of their output and practices as static, participants were receptive to experimentation within their professional work.

According to participants, play could also add zest and energy to newsmaking. Professor/administrator A praised the "fiero," or "primal emotional rush" [42] of play, pointing to its rarity in typical news production. He/she also insisted that journalism should find "the people who need to know the information and then [understand] how to present that information in a way that makes their day whether they realize it or not ... ." Even wasting time provided an excuse for tinkering and experimentation — one developer occupied his boredom between projects by building a playful Web crawler [43]. Play acted as an outlet for excess energy for newsmakers, as well as potential consumers.

Willingness to experiment, change and improve earmarked playful practice. Traditional frameworks of news delivery, such as articles, joined a larger collection of storytelling devices, which included game design, allowing flexibility with subject and format. As Journalist C put it, "often we'll think about whether or not a game is the right way to present something. It's just one of the possibilities we might have for a particular way of presenting a project."

The metaphor of games as one arrow in a quiver was used several times by participants. Some journalists produced multiple formats of the same story for the sake of experimentation, and many tried new methods of production in combination with traditional techniques.

Journalists also emphasized the importance of considering how best to represent their reporting. For instance, in discussing the decision to make a quiz from a particular dataset, Journalist D said that the audience "learned a lot more" from it than they would have if it had been a standard "research article," adding "we're often, in my department, trying to push for ... new and surprising ways of looking at things" and, "... I think that's where a lot of the playfulness in our work comes from ... trying to surprise people."

While enthusiasm to experiment on its own might not comprise a playful attitude, the practices of BuzzFeed writers outside the Game Team reflect a particularly playful bent. An editor within the Buzz department devised a number of different competitive game tactics to manage the relative freedom of journalists at the company, where the autonomy of contributors was described as expansive. He encouraged brainstorming and other group activities to stimulate a wide variety of content and direct his staff's creative process. He fostered one type of game-like exercise called "sprints" [44], in which he and other editors fabricated as many stories as possible around a specific format, resulting in a profusion of articles. He further promoted testing different combinations of "frames," which are perspectives with which to see content, and "formats" [45], to engineer the most shareable article.

Failure: Playing means losing occasionally

When experimenting, failure freed from punishment became the norm for my participants. Just as game designers expect to fail early and often in order to make a more playable product (Graft, 2014), digital journalists do not expect every article to be a success.

> It's really more about empowering people to take risks and to be cognizant of what's happening in the modern cultural landscape and to learn from that and to have the ability to experiment and to try things; and when things don't work for that to be okay, and to say we tried that and it didn't work. We learned from it. We'll either do it differently next time or we won't do it next [time] because we learned this is not the best way to engage an audience on the subject (Other A).

As this executive stated, although some ideas and article types simply may not work within a news environment or attract an audience, digital news producers are not deterred from experimenting with and learning from features and formats they release. An editor best captured this playful attitude when he stated, "[F]ear of failure is a terrible thing and we try to not have it" [46]. The aforementioned BuzzFeed editor shared this outlook. He did not expect all articles to succeed. He encouraged writers to produce articles that would fall somewhere in "the Venn diagram of 'It's Good,' 'I Liked It or It Was Meaningful To Me,' and 'It Was a Hit,'" and "as long as you hit one of those three circles, you're [doing] a good thing and if you keep making things that hit one of those, you're often going to hit the center" [47].

This acceptance of failure as part of daily workflow closely correlates to practices of iteration in game design. Some participants indicated how subsequent versions and activities had evolved in direct response to previous experiments. Improvements on formats, changes in story packages and even relationships in the newsroom advanced over time. This also meant releasing admittedly imperfect output for consumption, commentary and eventual enhancement.

Flexible identity: Playful newsmakers embrace a broader media environment

Another emergent theme revolved around occupational identity. Some participants neither considered their work, nor that of their company as exclusively journalistic, and expressed a range of different opinions about the overall purpose of their profession.

> And I think that [in digital journalism], a lot of the cool stuff that we've been doing that seems innovative and helpful is also because we're trying to tell stories in new ways and so you can really hit on effects that people have never seen before ... to really sort of entertain people on a guttural, instinctive, emotional level, to sort of tell your story and use it as a way to get people interested ... (Journalist E).

While a definition of journalists' work often entails calls for objectivity, public service and the other tenets espoused by Deuze (2005), this news producer defines it in distinctly emotional and narrative terms, which are typically not perceived as the hallmarks of good reporting. His/her viewpoint is consonant with the literature on convergence media [48], highlighting the fluid boundaries between journalistic and other media output in digital content. Participants at BuzzFeed similarly represented their company as multifaceted and primarily for "entertainment." News is understood to belong alongside games and other content. Such an outlook fits the organization's public image of having "the most shareable breaking news, original reporting, entertainment, and video across the social Web" (BuzzFeed, n.d.) and justifies the origin of the Game Team itself, which was formed in 2014 as a result of the company's success with online quizzes and other interactive features. Tasked to work with the editorial team "to pursue cool ideas" (Ha, 2014), Vice President of Product, Chris Johansen, was unsure of what the group would look like in the distant future.

These observations suggest the variety of ways in which journalist identities and the very meaning of the newsroom are changing within the emergent context of media infrastructure.

Understanding the audience

Audience engagement: A check and balance on journalistic practice

Just as players are the key components to any good game, the audience and their engagement with news has assumed vital importance to journalists.

> How do we engage the public? ... What does the media ecosystem look like when journalists and the public are truly intermixed ... How do you get expertise from the community and the public themselves ... What are ways they can bring their authentic voice into the stories and to get purviews of their needs across the communities? (Journalist/professor B).

This journalist/professor's questions indicate the regard digital journalists hold for public input, an uncommon perspective in historical analyses of the press [49]. Participants tested their designs on the wider public. Product iteration incorporated audience feedback, adhering to the dictum that a game is only successful if it is played. The adjustments and experimentation that occurred in newsrooms specifically responded to perceived user interest [50].

The quote also contrasts with reported feelings of frustration or apathy regarding public response and participation [51]. In my interviews, journalists considered their audience as beneficial participants in news development. They established interest and feedback either by the number of people who took part in quizzes, infographics, etc., or shared news within their social networks. Playful products were designed to further ingratiate and reward loyal readers of the publication, or attract new viewers — expanding an outlet's potential market. However, audience engagement balanced against journalists' visceral instincts [52]. Although producers expressed interest in reader metrics, they worked without *directly* soliciting their readership in conversation.

Iterative practices and experimentation took place inside the newsroom and between members of development and editorial teams. Participants' interview responses reflected a different status of the audience within the production of news, but not a complete shift of news practices.

Metrics: The primary mode of understanding audience engagement

While public participation was a valuable asset for journalists, the primary means of measuring audience engagement was through quantifiable metrics.

> We track analytics ... [a]nd we pay attention to traffic, kind of on a more weekly basis. We're able to see which videos are doing well; which articles are doing particularly well. When you see something that you had a hand in took one of the top spots in the last week, that feels pretty good. If not, start over and try again. (Journalist F).

This writer tracked and appreciated analytics as both motivation and a measure of successful content. The relevance of reader data was only magnified at BuzzFeed, where journalists described themselves as being "hardwired" [53] to look at metrics. Since the company's primary target was the "shareability" of its content, BuzzFeed measured effectiveness of seeding and social traffic (Rowan, 2014) to weigh the success of an article. Good articles produced a high and sustained social-share ratio, indicating wide and quick sharing along online social networks. If the social-share rate remained low, a format might be dropped or iterated in order to see if it would track better next time. In addition, the Game Team collected more refined metrics, including length of play, etc. These practices signal the value of user metrics, independent of qualitative feedback, to digital journalists.

Discussion: Magic relationships and new publics

The analysis of participants' interviews not only exposes the development and refinement of a variety of playful products by a segment of journalists and institutions, but also a playful attitude that is driven by experimenting and cultivating journalistic content based on audience response and (more specifically) metrics. What appears to be most playful is the exchange between digital newsmakers and their audience. It is this relationship, rather than a specific product, that is evident in many newsrooms.

This research reveals emergent dimensions of the interconnection between journalists and consumers. Rules are being shaped by newsmakers as to what can and cannot be used for news content, but like games, such guidelines are relevant only if they are adopted by the players they design for: their audience. Of course, both game designers and news producers realize that such content is consumed in ways that often deviate from what was intended. As such, this interdependency seems to conform to some components of the magic circle. Figure 1 displays the commonalities in the process of play and design within the magic circle and emergent practices in newsrooms.

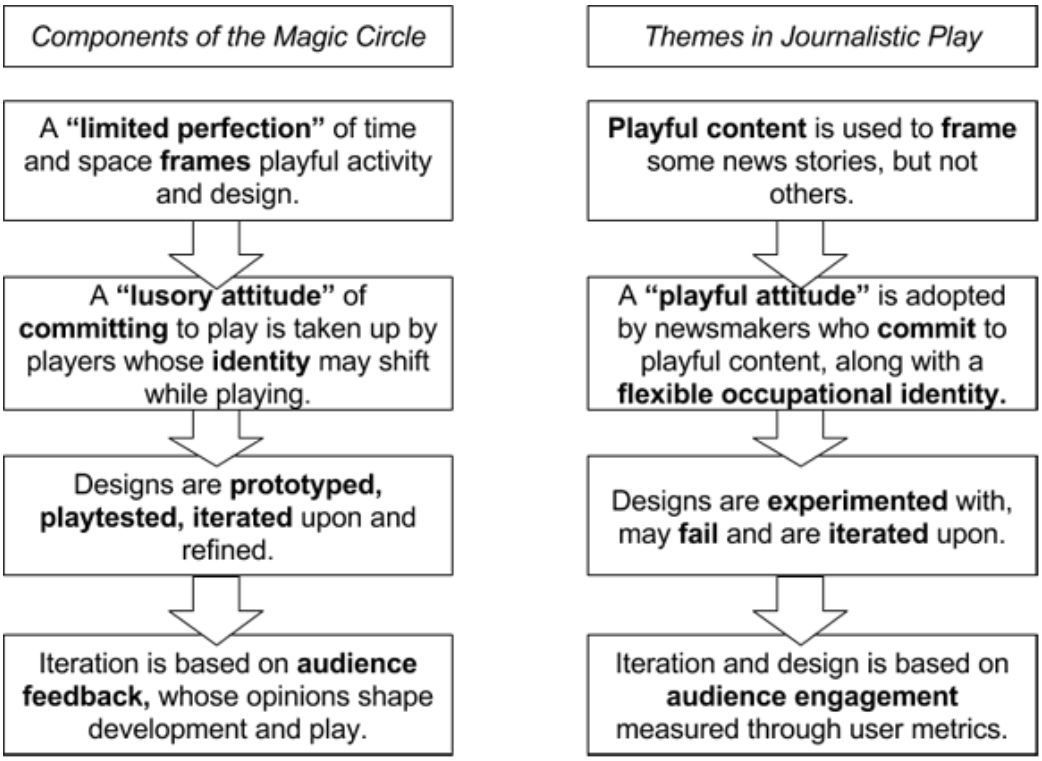

Figure 1: A comparison between the basic processes of design and play within the magic circle and the findings concerning journalistic play, an activity both progressive and interrelated as indicated by the arrows.

Journalists and their audiences are simultaneously co-constructing not only the roles and content of news, but also reporters' occupational ideology. Rather than strictly acting as opinion leaders or gatekeepers, news organizations interact within a co-created public space in which the criteria for what counts as news and play is mutually understood and enforced. As noted by critics in the context of the magic circle (Taylor, 2006; Juul, 2008), this is a fluid arrangement, with boundaries of professional identity, entertainment and expertise constantly shifting. The magic circle illustrates this porous relationship between newsmakers and their readership.

While the magic circle describes the emerging "space" between the public and news producers, it does not address what would constitute a distinctive and independent public within this playful arena. However, the impression of the news audience that emerges from my research approaches Kelty's (2008) "recursive public," another "social imaginary" [54] that he envisioned as inherent to geek culture on the Web. Unlike the traditional public sphere, a recursive public maintains itself through a multilayered technical infrastructure held together by collectively established rules; he describes the glue that binds it together as "shared moral and technical understandings of order" [55]. As its name implies, Kelty's public "recurses" through this socio-technical world, reiterating, reaffirming and redefining itself and how it should be ordered, which necessitates reciprocity with media producers.

Incorporation of Kelty's (2008) idea of the "recursive public" makes the magic circle a compelling metaphor for describing the relationship between journalists and their readers in the age of networked media infrastructures. Newsmakers act as the framers of norms and the architects of spaces rather than one-way instigators of rational critical discourse, while at the same time, in their new roles as designers, the press must acutely consider the desires of their audience. This appears to be the emerging situation according to my study: journalists are adhering to their own instincts while also being beholden to the public which they measure through a technical infrastructure — namely, quantified consumer metrics.

There are both negative and positive implications to consider in regards to a playful and recursive public. It should be understood not as a separate entity, but as one entwined between journalists and their readership within the magic circle. Public feedback, within this context, assumes a critical function, as does the need to engage and assess the audience. In a utopian conception of this relationship, newsrooms constantly reform, tweak and iterate their practices to satisfy users, who in turn think more critically, and playfully, through news consumption.

At the same time, the recursive public may suffer from isolation and standardization, adversities attributed to the magic circle itself. Kelty (2008), whose work only focuses on a subset of "geek" culture rather than the general populace, noted that standardization occurs while users propose, implement, refine, reproduce and rebuild [56] their products over time. As a consequence, newsrooms may quickly exclude alternative modes of communication or audiences based on their initial designs, even as they reiterate and refine their products. Furthermore, the metrics widely used to gauge readership may promote a limited and uniform image of consumers that homogenizes the ways in which news producers tailor their output.

Limitations to play as a metaphor

Subsequent events suggest the limits of play as a metaphor and as a model for contemporary journalism. While BuzzFeed's Game Team worked well with the "Buzz" section, they had not partnered with the more conventional "News" section of the site at the time of this research, from May to December of 2014. Much of the team's daily work was generated ad hoc and

there was no evidence nor specific mandate that games would be adopted by News, although the department used playful formats such as quizzes, which were already built into the company's content management system.

After this study, the Game Team disbanded. As a journalist covering the dissolution put it, "the relationship between game designers and the rest of the editorial team is still in flux" (Eveleth, 2016). However, developers still work on both playful and serious products. Their assimilation into the wider organization may actually affirm a tacit acceptance of playful design at BuzzFeed, where it has become an established part of the general workflow.

Games and play were found to be relatively siloed within the other newsrooms I studied. While developers and programmers found toying with news to be somewhat normal and agreeable within their personal work habits, other staff addressed the practice more skeptically. One journalist compared the reluctance of integrating games and play with the slow but steady adoption of online news departments at legacy publications over a decade earlier.

Such isolation fits some of the broad critiques concerning the magic circle of play. Beyond Huizinga's misgivings that the rules of play may foster the formation of secret groups (Fuchs, 2014), the isolation of playful journalists may stem from "social borders" (Stenros, 2012) attributed to the concept of playfulness in newsrooms. Stenros notes an implicit and explicit social construction of what play is, and highlights that its borders are negotiated and not necessarily dependent on the psychological state of the individual [57]. Stenros' suggestion that a "psychological bubble" of play is separate from the social contract of play seems valid in the context of journalists, whose playful actions may be at odds with the profession's ethical imperative to provide "serious" information in service of the public [58].

Perhaps one of the reasons that BuzzFeed initially chose to create a Game Team is that fun and games are not perceived to diminish its brand, which isn't tied to legacy print or video products or to a traditional journalistic ideology. BuzzFeed, in fact, has been extremely adaptable in how it positions itself both in terms of technology and content. Starting primarily as an entertainment company, it hired and supported a news staff after its initial success (Sonderman, 2012). It continues to alter its image, separating editorial sections into different divisions (Griswold, 2014). Participants at Buzzfeed alluded to these departmental shifts and how mobile media had become the primary platform to access content.

These structural iterations, along with the redistribution of the Game Team, reflect the brand's flexibility, and suggest that experiments with games and journalism are still evolving within news media organizations [59]. By contrast, legacy media organizations advocating a more traditional occupational ideology of journalistic practice may struggle with accepting games and play even if they may exist within these companies, under pseudonyms, such as "fun" or "tools." On the other hand, legacy newsrooms with a self-defined "eccentric" approach to content creation more easily adopted playful formats and practices into their digital production and workflow. A company's difficulty in accepting play and games seems to emanate not from any particular association, but from the rhetoric of play in wider culture, an attitude changing generationally (Lenhart, *et al.*, 2008).

Future research directions

The analysis of participant interviews in this research suggests that journalists are already grappling with issues of play in newsrooms. While these findings are drawn from data produced from a small sample of professionals working in the digital news industry, it begins to support the argument that games and play exist in a multitude of news-producing institutions, embraced by an assortment of actors using a variety of formats. Future work should explore the capricious and playful relationships between journalists and their audiences, as well as measuring how play and experimentation occur within the industry and specific media outlets. Broader research on the use of play beyond a snowball sampling would greatly bolster my findings. Furthermore, longitudinal research on the co-constructed relationship between journalists, the products they make (and iterate upon) and user analytics would begin to provide a holistic picture of the magic circle's presence in newsrooms. Also, considering the vital role of the audience in the construction of news, a study of its playful activity in news consumption is clearly warranted.

Conclusion

The field of journalism is in transition, characterized by the incorporation of new innovations, revisions to daily practices and an increasingly complicated relationship with audiences. These shifts call for a reimagination of the role and products of journalists in political and public discourse. My research shows that some producers are clearly willing to "toy" with the news and use a variety of tools to engage with their readers. More than ever before, they also try to discern what their public seeks in order to develop compelling and interesting content. This trend has led to an abundance of news-related playful output, and a steady acceptance of the audience as engaged "players" in the reporting of world events.

At the same time, experimentation remains siloed within newsrooms where traditional occupational ideologies hold sway. Even when playful products are deployed, audience reception is only intuited or evaluated by abstract metrics, which shape organizational attitudes towards innovations more than direct links with users. Playful modes of news production can separate or stress differences [60] between newsmakers and their readers even as they provide a means to connect.

Based on this study, the magic circle of play, with some caveats, has been shown to provide a useful framework for understanding the press' position in an alternative conception of the modern public sphere, and constitutes a necessary stepping stone for beginning to understand its engagement with the public in the present age of new media infrastructures. Journalists in the magic circle are designers armed with a variety of objects, tools and technology to fashion a game — a set of rules to achieve particular ends — within which the audience "plays." In turn, feedback is a dynamic process allowing designers to reconfigure format and content over time, and empowering the reader to respond to and even subvert the dictates established by newsmakers.

Thus, the magic circle ultimately depicts an evolving relationship between a public and media makers. However, it does not identify an independent public similar to that described by Habermas in his conception of the public sphere. Instead, the public within this context has become "recursive," feeding into and reacting to journalists in a playful and dynamic relationship. In other words, the public is merely a component of a magic circle of play that exists between journalists and the citizenry.

The magic circle may portray socio-political relationships between the populace and other entities — be it education, government, etc. — in online spaces, a possibility that requires further research. The model highlights the absence of a clear division between newsmakers and the public, who together are co-creating journalism's occupational ideology and form a symbiotic relationship which is shaping societal roles. Instead, it suggests sets of convergent magic circles, comprised of

institutions and citizens that, especially in the context of networked media infrastructures, must iterate, improve and play upon one another, rather than remain static and separate, to sustain viable public discourse and information dissemination.

About the author

Maxwell Foxman is a Ph.D. candidate in communications at Columbia University, where he studies the playful experience of early adopters of digital communications technology with a focus on virtual reality developers. Foxman's previous work has primarily surrounded the use of games and play in non-game environments, including politics, social media and most recently the news. Before beginning his Ph.D., Foxman spent five years in secondary school education, where he founded an independent study program.
E-mail: mhf2012 [at] columbia [dot] edu

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Notes

1. Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009, p. 570. Popular media also asserted that "[i]n an age of 24-hour online news driven by ad sales and pageviews, responsible journalism seems to be hard to find" (Kumar, 2015).

2. Singer, 2003, p. 147.

3. Anderson, 2011, p. 551.

4. Deuze, 2005, p. 447.

5. The public sphere has been described as "stylized" (Kellner, 2013) and "normative" (Schudson, 2009), an ideal rather than an accurate representation.

6. Habermas, 1991b, p. 2.

7. Habermas, 1991b, p. 169.

8. Habermas, 1991a, p. 398.

9. Boeder, 2005; Dahlberg, 2001; Habermas, 1991b, p. 181.

10. Benson, 2009, p. 177.

11. Ubayasiri, 2006, p. 6.

12. Benson, 2009, p. 176.

13. Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11.

14. Habermas' originally conceived of the public sphere as an "ideal-type" (Benson, 2009, p. 176) historical reconstruction of the eighteenth century democratic authority, independent of the feudal system. This interpretation appeared in both his seminal work *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1991b) and a corresponding essay (Habermas, 1991a). However, after much criticism, Habermas (1992) amended his view of the public sphere where he notably conceded to the importance of a plurality of publics. Habermas further acknowledged the complexity of the public sphere in an effort to build a more "empirical model" (Benson, 2009, p. 182) in *Between facts and norms* (1996). By 2006, Habermas had moved away from his ideal-type in many ways, and consequently included self-regulating media as a necessary tool for the creation of a deliberative democracy (Habermas, 2006). See Benson (2009) for a detailed history of Habermas' evolution in thought.

15. Benson, 2009, pp. 182–187.

16. Papacharissi, 2002, p. 13.

17. Papacharissi, 2002, p. 15.

18. Kellner, 2013; Papacharissi, 2002, p. 13; Shirky, 2011.

19. Papacharissi, 2002, p. 21.

20. Sen, 2012, p. 493.

21. Papacharissi, 2002, p. 18.

22. Huizinga, 1950, p. 47.

23. Huizinga, 1950, p. 207.

24. Huizinga, 1950, p. 10.

25. Zimmerman (2012) squarely situated the magic circle in the realm of game design, stating that it should only be used for solving problems. He, however, ultimately defined it as a "context for meaning creation." Zimmerman's remarks highlight

that both the magic circle and the public sphere have both been criticized and amended.

26. Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, loc. 1476.

27. See also Gitlin, 2003; Goffman, 1974; Juul, 2008.

28. Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, loc. 1546.

29. Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, loc. 1571.

30. Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, loc. 249.

31. Fuchs, 2014, p. 531.

32. Sicart, 2008, p. 27.

33. Vobič, *et al.*, 2014, p. 133.

34. Agarwal and Barthel, 2015, p. 380.

35. Foxman, 2015, p. 2.

36. One participant was located on another continent and could not find an ideal time to converse given the difference in time zones. The other conducted the interview over e-mail due to preference and being located beyond an easily reachable distance.

37. Anderson, 2011, p. 552.

38. Foxman, 2015, p. 13.

39. Foxman, 2015, p. 14.

40. Foxman, 2015, p. 17.

41. By contrast, educators and game designers provided examples of games containing more serious subject matter. Those who did aspire to make such games tended to also support the development of traditional serious games and newsgames.

42. McGonigal, 2011, loc. 583.

43. Foxman, 2015, p. 30.

44. Foxman, 2015, p. 28.

45. Foxman, 2015, p. 26.

46. Foxman, 2015, p. 48.

47. Foxman, 2015, p. 28.

48. Domingo, 2008, p. 681; Reinemann, *et al.*, 2012; Vobič, *et al.*, 2014, p. 128.

49. For a historical example, see Gans (2004) who found a distinct disinterest in the audience by newsmakers in both television news and traditional publications.

50. Foxman, 2015, p. 29.

51. Agarwal and Barthel, 2015, p. 384; Anderson, 2011; MacGregor, 2007, p. 292.

52. Anderson, 2011, p. 562.

53. Foxman, 2015, p. 29.

54. Kelty, 2008, p. 39.

55. Kelty, 2008, p. 61.

56. Kelty, 2008, p. 61.

57. Stenros, 2012, p. 14. Stenros' concept is meant as a response to criticism of a too rigid separation between the magic circle and the social world implied in Huizinga's work. Critics (Juul, 2008; Lammes, 2006; Malaby, 2007; Taylor, 2006) have generally judged these boundaries as being at once simplistic and impractical given the porous nature of play more generally.

58. However, the porous relationship can also be problematic in the more dystopian visions of the magic circle. For instance, in his analysis of World of Warcraft and play, Galloway (2006) forewarns that the labor of play, which seems outside of traditional modes of work may actually be a way of repeating and reinforcing labor practices. At the very least, in the context of journalism, this playful attitude and toying with news may at once incur more work for journalists who must endeavor to shape news to fulfill their audience's needs, but, at the same time, this extra labor may appear at odds with general daily practices of journalistic entities and institutions.

59. As of this publication, BuzzFeed has once again reshuffled its departments with a move toward digital video, according to media coverage (Fox, 2016).

60. Fuchs, 2014, p. 530.

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