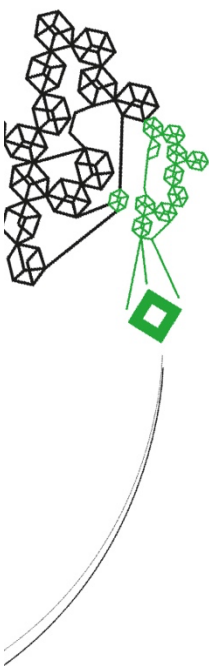
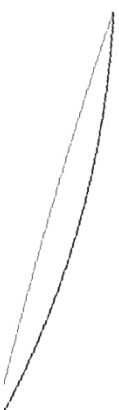
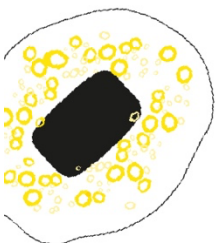


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**Rethinking Real Journalism:**

**Occupational Identity, Technological Reconfigurations and Dutch Journalists' Quest  
for Truth in the Digitized World**

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## Abstract

**Objective** - The field of journalism is under pressure and changing rapidly. Under the influence of further digitalization in society, the rise of new media, and the increasing number of non-journalists on the playing field, a radical transformation is taking place in the journalistic landscape. These changes offer both opportunities and challenges for the profession of journalists, but above all put into question who journalists are and what they do. Studies on journalists' identities and associated roles have been scarce. Therefore, this study aims to give insight into how journalists view their work, the changes their work is subject to and the potential consequences of these changes.

**Method** - This study was conducted by interviewing journalists from two newspapers in the Netherlands (n=21). Topics discussed during the interviews included: who journalists are and what they do, what changes affect the profession and what consequences these developments have on journalism and its professionals now and in the future.

**Findings** - The results of this study show that journalists are well aware of the opportunities and challenges for their profession. By identifying the changing journalistic landscape, this study demonstrates that when journalists' occupational identity - who they are and what they do - is under pressure, a sense of 'we-ness' or a shared collective identity is reinforced. This is reflected in an increasingly strong attachment of journalists to long-established traditional journalistic roles, sacred journalistic values (objective, independent, integer, empathic) and codes of conduct (listening to both sides of a story, checking information, basing news on facts, looking at a topic from multiple angles).

**Conclusion** - This study enhances the understanding how journalists cope with tensions in their identity due to societal and field-specific factors like technological reconfigurations, e.g., audience data and metrics and robot journalism. This article contributes to the existing literature by focusing on what journalists do and how they try to distinguish themselves from non-journalists to preserve their identity.

*Keywords:* occupational identity, journalism, journalistic role conception, technological change, audience metrics, robot journalism

## **Rethinking Real Journalism: Occupational Identity, Technological Reconfigurations and Dutch Journalists' Quest for Truth in the Digitized World**

Journalism is under pressure and changing rapidly. Under the influence of further digitalization in society, the rise of new media, and declining advertising revenues a radical transformation is taking place in the journalistic landscape. It is expected that the first Dutch paper newspaper will disappear in 2024 and by 2035 there will be no paper newspaper left (Villamedia, 2017). The influence of social media on the work of journalists has become ever greater, with the result that online content is exploding and the line between journalists, non-journalists and users is increasingly blurred. Technological reconfigurations such as audience data and metrics give journalists insights into their public like never before. Furthermore, robot journalism is becoming more and more influential and will increasingly change the field, bringing new ethical dilemmas (Fanta, 2017). These radical changes offer both opportunities and challenges for the profession, but above all put into question who journalists are and what they do, or in other words, they put into question what their occupational identity is (Grubenmann & Meckel, 2015).

Journalism is a unique and difficult-to-define profession. The field of journalism is seen as a moving object and a dynamic set of practices and expectations or as 'a profession in a permanent process of becoming' (Deuze & Witschge, 2017) Moreover, journalism is also a free profession, meaning everyone can consider themselves journalists (NVJ, 2023). Add to this the ongoing transformation in the media sector from print to online, described in the literature as one of the greatest challenges in the 21st century (Bakker, 2014), and one can imagine that journalists' occupational identity is more fluid than ever before.

What has connected professional journalists for years are shared norms and values, such as autonomy, objectivity, credibility, and immediacy (Deuze, 2005). These core values, also referred to as journalistic ideology, formed 'the social cement of the professional group of journalists', but are now under pressure because of the evolutionary digital transition in the media sector (Deuze, 2005). Moreover, this digital transition puts growing pressure on an already unclear occupational identity. As a result, no one is certain of what the future will hold for journalism and its professionals. At the same time, the work of journalists is seen as crucial to the functioning of democracies; journalists are regarded as essential contributors to public opinion and political life (Raemy, 2021). Thus, journalism as the cornerstone of democracy. Understanding journalists' identities is important for three reasons. First, because of the controlling and informative role journalists play in democracies all over the world (Raemy,

2021). Second, because the norms and values that have bound journalists for so long as professionals are under pressure and it is not clear what impact this may have on the profession. Third, because occupational identity gives individuals' careers purpose and direction by encouraging them to look for work that matches their skills, interests, preferences, and ambitions. Consequently, threats to occupational identity can greatly damage individuals' identities (Yang, 2021).

A considerable amount of research has been devoted to occupational identity in different contexts; how this identity is constructed but also how it is constantly changing (see, e.g., Barley & Kunda, 2001; Nelson & Irwin, 2014; Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). Since digital technologies are being integrated into workplaces more and more, there is also growing interest among scholars in the effects of these innovations on individuals' occupational identities (see, e.g., Stein et al. 2013; Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021; Whitley et al. 2014). Despite ample empirical evidence for the importance of a clear occupational identity in times of significant change for a profession, the literature offers little insight into journalists' occupational identity (Raemy, 2021). With this in mind, the present study makes three contributions to both theory and practice.

First, research on journalists' identities and associated roles have been scarce. Existing research calls for further study into journalists' occupational identity building and potential variables influencing this identity (Grubenmann & Meckel, 2015; Hanitzsch & Vos 2017; Raemy, 2021). Second, despite the numerous empirical studies on the consequences of identity threats, they have provided little guidance on how individuals actually respond to occupational identity threats in the workplace (Yang, 2020). Third, to date, little attention has been paid to the introduction of new technologies on the newsroom floor and how journalists interact with them (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021; Wu, 2023). This is striking because research also shows that digital technologies and journalism are nowadays inextricably linked (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021). To provide a greater understanding of the changes in the journalistic field, further research should be done on the extent to which technologies are altering news production processes, for example through interviews with journalists (Wu, 2022). Therefore, this study examines the following research questions: (1) How do journalists perform their work when social and professional influences change existing norms and values in journalism? (2) What are the consequences of such influences on journalists' occupational identity?

In the resulting study, twenty-one journalists from two Dutch newspapers were interviewed. By investigating how journalists perceive their work, the changes that may affect it, and the potential consequences of such changes, this study broadens and enriches the

research on occupational identity in times of significant change for a profession. Moreover, this study not only addresses who journalists are and what they do but also what they need to do to be who they want to be. This study focuses on helping journalists and news organizations define their sense of self and work in a time of significant change. By drawing together insights not only from research on journalism but also from research related to occupational identity and technological reconfigurations, this study opens the door to a deeper examination of journalists' occupational identity and aims to contribute to the existing literature by focusing on what journalists do and how they try to distinguish themselves from non-journalists to preserve their identity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This theoretical framework highlights how occupational identity is defined and constructed, how it relates to journalism's identity and why it is so important. First, occupational identity is examined in more detail, followed by the different aspects of journalism's identity (core values, roles and role perceptions). Then the tensions and threats to occupational identity are addressed, including the influence of technological reconfigurations. This chapter concludes with the lessons that can be drawn from the literature.

### **Occupational Identity**

Occupational identity, also known as vocational identity, work identity, professional identity, or career identity, is essential for people to make sense of their work and provide meaning to what they do, their careers, and their connections with others (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). Scholars frequently refer to Kielhofner's broad description of occupational identity as 'a composite sense of who one is and wishes to become as an occupational being generated from one's history of occupational participation' (Kielhofner, 2008, p.106). In more narrow descriptions, occupational identity is often described as the overlap between who we are and what we do (Nelson & Irwin, 2014), or as the conscious awareness of oneself as a professional (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Occupational identity is seen as part of someone's overall sense of identity. This explains why, for example, many people often describe themselves in terms of their occupation (Ashfort et al., 2008; Kroger, 2007; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007). Even more so, many people find that their professional and/or organizational identities are more pervasive and significant than identities based on gender, age, ethnicity, race, or nationality (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Because of this, occupational identity is an essential cognitive mechanism that influences professionals' attitudes, behaviors, performance, status, and self-esteem (Ahuja, 2022). In sum,

the organization and/or occupation to which a person belongs plays an important role in forming one's identity.

Scholars have extensively investigated the formation process of an individual's occupational identity. Various studies reveal that this process is influenced by important key relationships and broader social factors such as social norms and expectations, as well as economic and technological progress (Schwartz et al., 2010). Professionals' definitions of what they do and who they are can be stable for a period of time, but usually shifts throughout time as contexts change. As a result, someone's occupational identity is never fixed. According to Schwartz et al. (2010), occupational identity formation can be challenging and stressful in today's society, but is at the same time of great importance, because it contributes to an individual's success in the workplace, social adaptation and psychological well-being (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Although occupational identity is about both 'who we are' and 'what we do', Barley and Kunda discuss that previous scholarship has paid far too little attention to the 'what we do' aspect of a profession. This is contrary to reality, for it is precisely the activities of people that determine how organizations become structured and, thus how occupations are defined and assigned (Barley & Kunda, 2001). 'What we do' describes the apparent activities of an occupation; it is about skills, knowledge, and practices. For the context of this study, this means that with a better understanding of what journalists actually do, it is easier to describe their occupational identity. However, also for journalism, most studies focus on who journalists are, and less attention has been paid to what journalists actually do. Scholars have shown that the work practices of journalists are driven by assumptions and expectations about the journalistic roles they are expected to play and all the obligations and values that come with them (Hanitzsch, 2006). Therefore, the following section addresses journalistic roles and identity.

### **Aspects of Journalism's Identity**

In the context of this study, occupational identity is a complex concept because journalism is a unique and difficult to define profession. The field of journalism is seen as a moving object and a dynamic set of practices and expectations or as 'a profession in a permanent process of becoming' (Deuze & Witschge, 2017, p.177.) Thus, it is very different from, for example, professions like doctors, lawyers and architects, where a strong occupational identity is developed through long periods of education, training and socialization (Ahuja, 2022). Moreover, journalism is also a free profession, meaning everyone can consider themselves journalists (NVJ, 2023). This puts journalism in a quandary. The independence and

freedom of journalism, on the one hand, and the lack of a monopoly on expertise that other professions have, on the other, are both a strength and a weakness for the profession (Sjøvaag, 2010). Add to this the ongoing transformation in the media sector from print to digital, described in the literature as one of the greatest challenges in the 21st century (Bakker, 2014), and one can imagine that journalism's identity is more fluid than ever before.

However, some researchers do attempt to define journalism as a profession. For example, Ward describes professional journalism as “the organized, socially recognized activity of communicating to the public for the public, from the impartial perspective of the public good” (Ward, 2005, p. 55). And according to Hanitzsch and Vos, journalism’s identity is frequently regarded as an aggregate of journalists’ role perceptions. Journalism’s identity and journalist roles are considered ‘discursively constructed ontological objects’, where roles indicate what is appropriate or accepted in a given context. At the discursive level, journalists’ identity can be understood as a framework that enables the selective activation of journalistic roles (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

### ***Core Values***

Journalists have also identified themselves in terms of their profession and its associated values, which is referred to as journalism’s ideology or professional self-definition (Deuze, 2005). Multiple studies confirm the value of this ideology. Because journalists do not have a monopoly on a particular expertise, as many other professions do, journalists compensate for this lack of ‘professional exclusivity’ through their professional ideology (Sjøvaag, 2010). According to various scholars, this ideology consists of five values, which are described in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*An Overview of the Five Journalistic Core Values*

<b>Value</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Public service	“Journalists provide a public service (as watchdogs or ‘news-hounds’, active collectors and disseminators of information.”
Objectivity	“Journalists are impartial, neutral, objective, fair and (thus) credible.”

<b>Value</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Autonomy	“Autonomy: journalists must be autonomous, free and independent in their work.”
Immediacy	“Immediacy: journalists have a sense of immediacy, actuality and speed (inherent in the concept of ‘news’).”
Ethics	“Ethics: journalists have a sense of ethics, validity and legitimacy.”

*Note.* Deuze (2005) based this overview of values on the work of colleagues Golding and Elliott (1979), Merritt (1995), and Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001).

According to Deuze, these shared values give journalists legitimacy and credibility in what they do. Moreover, in times of change, this ideology serves as ‘the social cement of the professional group of journalists’ (Deuze, 2005). Therefore, these values can also be translated as the core values of journalism’s identity. However, those values are under pressure as times are changing. For example, journalists are far from being the only collectors of information, which affects their value of public service. By extension, through the increasing use of technologies in the journalistic landscape it is no longer the professional journalist who determines what the public sees, hears, and reads about (Deuze, 2017).

### ***Roles and Role Perceptions***

Several scholars stress the importance of studying roles and role perceptions of journalists to gain a deeper understanding of journalism’s identity and its place in society (Donsbach, 2012; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). Roles are defined as “sets of behavioral expectations associated with given positions in the social structure” (Ebaugh, 1988, p.18). Since people are usually hired into organizations to fill and perform specific tasks, identities frequently center on these roles (Ashfort, 2008). This is in line with the Identity Theory (1966) that explains that the meanings people ascribe to the many roles they play constitute the components of one’s identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000). One’s identity consists of a variety of roles that one can play based on the context, e.g., subordinate or supervisor. Moreover, what someone does, or the roles they play, not only connects to who someone is but also with whom one feels a sense of belonging (Hansson et al., 2021). Or as Flum noted: “To work is to relate”



(Flum, 2001, p.262). Journalists' role perceptions are defined as: expectations that journalists believe are prevalent in society and which they interpret as being normatively acceptable (Donsbach, 2012). These expectations affect the way journalists perform their work, e.g., selecting news topics.

Roles and identity cannot be considered separately in journalism: it is after all about the position of journalism in relation to society as a whole. Hanitzsch and Vos therefore define journalistic roles and identity as “structures of meaning that are discursively created, perpetuated and contested”, and “journalistic roles generally refer to a set of normative and cognitive beliefs and to journalists' actual and perceived practices that are situated and understood within the institutional framework of journalism” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 123). Hence, journalism is also described as a ‘belief system’ (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

Just as Deuze states that shared values give journalists meaning to their work, scholars explain the same is true for roles (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). These journalistic roles – or the ways journalists describe their relationship with society - are often characterized in the literature for their recognizability and stability and scholars devoted a great deal of effort to differentiating the various roles journalists can adopt. Klem et al. (2019) refer to different scholars and their role typifications in their study. For example, Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) distinguish four roles: interpreter, disseminator, adversarial and populist mobilizer. Hanitzsch (2011) speaks of professional milieus with shared values: detached watchdog, critical change agent, opportunist facilitator and populist disseminator. In their study, Klem et al. also mention Skovsgaard and colleagues' division of roles based on two dimensions: an active versus passive stance. On the one hand, journalists inform citizens about society; on the other hand, they can act as public mobilizers (Klem et al., 2019). By adopting a specific role, journalists consciously or unconsciously contribute to the formation of journalism's identity. Because people in general are always looking for consistency in their lives, journalists therefore often adopt roles that are already in line with the cognitive roles they embrace. However, adopting a role is also highly dependent on material and contextual conditions of journalism (Hanitzsch, 2011).

Like identity, journalistic roles are also not fixed. Or, as Hanitzsch and Vos state, they have no ‘true essence’. Those roles only exist because they are talked about, so that is how they are maintained. “The discourse of journalistic roles is the central arena where journalistic identity is reproduced and contested; it is the site where actors struggle over the preservation or transformation of journalism's identity” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 129).

## **Tensions and Threats Related to Occupational Identity**

Over time, as contexts change, identities fluctuate and develop. In this digitized world, digital technologies are playing an increasingly important role and have become part of how people define who they are and what they do at work (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). This implies that those whose professions are significantly impacted by digital technology must constantly define and redefine their occupational identities while acknowledging the opportunities and dangers these new technologies provide. In the case of journalists, technological reconfigurations have both facilitated and threatened the development of the profession. For example, the increasing use of social media has led, on the one hand, to the line between creator or journalist and user becoming increasingly blurred, which can be seen as a threat to professional journalists. On the other hand, the amount of content is exploding online and makes it possible for journalists to bring their story to the attention of a large audience (Grubenmann & Meckel, 2015).

### ***Technological Reconfigurations in Journalism***

Journalism is having one of the biggest challenges in the 21st century: the ongoing transformation in the media sector from print to digital. Consequently, professionals must constantly reskill, deskill, and upskill their practices and working routines. In this context, Bakker (2014) describes four developments which have drastically changed the industry over the past years. (1) Journalism has become more technical. (2) Journalists are more 'harvesters', 'managers', and 'curators' of information rather than news producers. (3) Journalists must gather information from citizens and social media and edit and moderate user contributions; they have become 'community managers'. (4) Many journalists are no longer employed but work as freelancers. In sum, the work journalists do, the knowledge they need, and their place in news organizations have changed significantly over the years. When such changes, e.g., citizen journalism and participatory journalism, enter a profession like journalism, it affects relationships in the journalistic arena and therefore requires professionals to renegotiate their identity (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

The digital transformation in journalism is accompanied by the emergence of new technologies, such as audience data and metrics and robot journalism (Fürst, 2020, Kim & Kim, 2018). Because technology influences both what we do and how we do it, scholars are growing interest in the interaction between such digital technologies and journalistic practice (Steensen, 2018). Literature already shows that changes in journalism are not determined by technology or by the social; journalism develops through “the mutual shaping of technological and social

change” (Boczkowski, 2004, p.10). Whether and how so-called technological reconfigurations affect journalists' occupational identity is still understudied in the literature. However, overall, many studies have found that technologies influence occupational identity by both enabling and threatening it (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). In other words, certain technologies provide new and unique types of information to certain professions, which in turn shape a profession's identity.

**Convergence and Generativity.** In their study, Vaast and Pinsonneault, identify two key aspects of digital technologies that create tensions for occupational identity: convergence and generativity. Convergence homogenizes occupations, which causes the tension of how similar or different one occupation is from other occupations (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). Thus, the identity of individuals in relation to digital technologies is about finding a balance between similarity and distinctiveness in occupational identity. Precisely because of this tension that professionals have to deal with, convergence is seen in the literature as an important aspect of digital technologies (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). With increasing reliance on digital technologies, the scholars state that it is increasingly difficult for people to adopt and maintain an occupational identity that is distinct from other professions.

Generativity, or the constant evolvement of technologies, results in the dilemma that an occupation both survives and is constantly under attack from digital technologies. Vaast and Pinsonneault explain that generativity is an ongoing process, which means that the practices of people affected by digital technologies are constantly changing (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). As in many other studies, the example of Nelson and Irwin and their research on librarians is cited here too. These scholars found that the rise of online search engines threatened the occupational identity of librarians. To prevent their profession from disappearing completely, librarians redefined their occupational identity. They became experts in online search technologies by redefining what they did and who they were (Nelson & Irwin, 2014). Another example given is that of tech bloggers. On the one hand, they used technologies that made their work available to define themselves. On the other hand, they struggled with the constant pressure of new digital technologies that became available. According to Vaast and Kaganer (2013), the result is that tech bloggers constantly have to redefine who they are because their work changes due to the influence of these new technologies, which could even make them redundant. These examples again show that occupational identity is not fixed.

New digital technologies are rapidly being adopted by organizations and their professionals and at the same time these innovations are fundamentally changing them (Yoo et

al., 2012). As can be deduced from the above, the two key aspects of digital technologies (convergence and generativity) are connected to two key tensions of occupational identity: the tension between how similar to and different from other occupations an occupation is and how an occupation continues to exist despite being continuously threatened by digital technologies. (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021).

In the literature, the similarity/distinctiveness tension is also described as ‘optimal distinctiveness’. This is about finding the right balance between being sufficiently similar so that you are recognized and accepted as a profession by others, but at the same time it is also about being sufficiently different so that you do stand out from other professions. According to Vaast and Pinsonneault, the concept of optimal distinctiveness is important because it provides insight into identity and transformation with new technologies (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). The second key tension of persistence/obsolescence tension also affects one’s occupational identity, as it deals with the impact of a new technology on the survival and extinction of an occupation. Both tensions, these scholars demonstrate, will play an increasing role as more and more new digital technologies are applied in society (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021).

Like occupational identity and identity in general, both tensions are also not fixed. First, digital technologies constantly evolve and affect occupations differently each time. Second, both tensions are closely intertwined: addressing similarity/distinctiveness, for example, can affect persistence/obsolescence and vice versa. According to Vaast and Pinsonneault the interaction between these two tensions of occupational identity needs further investigation. Furthermore, existing scholarship has not yet examined how people handle these tensions brought on by digital technology and how they affect occupational identity (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). By extension, prior research has also overlooked the difficulties of maintaining a strong occupational identity when facing identity threats (Ahuja, 2022). In order to understand and define identity at work in this digital age, it is important to look at how people handle the tensions that are related to occupational identity and new technologies.

### **What is Currently Known**

In sum, the ever-changing media landscape offers ample material for researchers. We know from the literature that the infinite, dynamic online landscape has many implications for the values, principles and practices that define journalism as a profession, both positive and negative (see, e.g., Bakker, 2014; Deuze, 2005; Deuze & Witschge, 2017; Van Der Haak et al., 2012). For example, a positive consequence of the digital transition is that with the explosion

of online content, people have an even greater need for analysis and interpretation of information and news, which means there are many opportunities for journalists and their profession to evolve (Van der Haak et al., 2012).

Although the studies reviewed provide valuable insights into journalism and its professionals, further study is needed to address how the 'new media world' actually affects journalists' working practices, apart from some new tools (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021). Understanding this is important not only for journalists but also for scholars and students because the use of technologies in society, and certainly also in journalism, will only increase in the future (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). Or as Holman states, adopting new technologies in journalism is not a choice but a necessity in order to continue to meet the expectations of and commitments to the public (Holman, 2022). Furthermore, the studies that are conducted within this context too often focus on the most resource-rich newsrooms and do not take enough notice of the vast majority of newsrooms that find integrating new digital innovations challenging (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021). A reason why there has been so little research on this topic can be found in the fact that the profession is so difficult to define and the perennial debate whether journalism is a profession at all or not (Raemy, 2021).

To conclude, what becomes clear from the literature is that journalism, like many other professions, is in the middle of a transformation process from print to digital and technological reconfigurations associated with such a transition will eventually affect individual's occupational identity. Furthermore, scholars have shown that significant, structural changes in journalism that seemed gradual and expected, e.g., declining advertising revenues, have taken the profession and its professionals by surprise (Williams, 2017). Whereas Nelson and Irwin's example regarding librarians shows just how important it is for a profession to have a clear occupational identity in times of significant change. Therefore, by conducting interviews, this study aims to explore which influential developments - technological or not - journalists observe in their profession and how these changes affect their occupational identity.

## **Method**

The ever-changing field of journalism provides ample material for researchers. However, the specific topic of occupational identity and associated tensions has attracted little research attention and asks for an open-ended inquiry. Because structured questionnaires give participants limited means to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, a qualitative approach was most appropriate. Semi-structured interviews were used to broaden

the understanding of this dynamic and complex profession. Furthermore, this approach made it possible to examine the changes that journalists say are influencing their work, how they deal with these developments and the implications for journalists' occupational identity. Journalists from two newspapers in the Netherlands were included to improve the diversity of the data and enhance the credibility of the findings. This study was approved by the BMS Ethics Committee of the University of Twente (application number: 230538).

## **Participants**

Journalists from two different Dutch newspapers were selected. These journalists follow both national and local politics. They conduct their own independent research, check different sources of information, go on the ground to observe events for themselves and conduct interviews in order to create an article. Their work results in publications, both in written and audiovisual form, for their newspaper and its website.

Although the number of freelance journalists in the Netherlands continues to increase, only salaried journalists were invited to participate. The choice to include journalists under contract at a media company ensured that the participants have the opportunity to use the technologies now available in journalism fully, e.g., audience data and metrics and robot journalism, and are therefore able to share their experiences and insights concerning the research questions of this study.

A total of twenty-one participants (sixteen men, five women) were selected using purposive sampling. Participants were recruited by using the professional network of the researcher, who worked at one of the newspapers at the time the research was conducted (n=19). Participants could also apply in response to a call in an internal newsletter that was spread by the newspapers (n=2). To ensure useful and insightful qualitative data, the participants had to meet three selection criteria. (1) To be able to share their insights and experiences regarding the topic of this study, participants needed to have a writing and/or managerial role. (2) Participants had to be permanent employees and work for at least one year as a journalist to understand the profession and its work practices. (3) The researcher strived for a spread in age and work experience and a balance between participants from newspapers X and Y. All participants met these criteria.

Participants were informed by e-mail about the topic and the goal of this study: gain insights into who journalists are and what journalists do and the potential impact of current developments on their work. The final sample consisted of twenty-one participants spread over two newspapers (n=11 for newspaper X, n=10 for newspaper Y). Regarding the sample size of

this study (n=21), interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation occurred (Glaser, 1999). This point was reached with 21 interviews. The journalists in question (sixteen men, five women) were aged between 22 and 62 years (mean = 45). The average work experience as a journalist was 20.5 years (ranging from 1 to 40 years). Of the twenty-one participants, there were journalists who also performed managerial duties (n=5). This means they not only write but also have a coordinating role in creating the newspaper and website. Tasks that come with that role include, for example, checking the work of colleagues, ensuring a good balance in types of stories, but also recognizing more significant themes at play that are of interest to the public. Participants were not compensated for their participation in this study. Table 2 below provides an overview of the interviewees' demographics.

**Table 2**

*An Overview of the Interviewees' Demographics*

	<b>Newspaper X</b>	<b>Newspaper Y</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Gender</b>			
Men	7	9	16
Woman	4	1	5
<b>Role in the organization</b>			
Coordinator/manager	3	2	5
Writer	8	8	16
<b>Years of experience as a journalist</b>			
Fewer than 5 years	1	4	5
5 to 15 years	3	1	4
More than 15 years	7	5	12

### **Interview Guide**

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Of the twenty-one interviews, nineteen took place face-to-face at four different newsrooms in the Netherlands and two via Google Teams. All interviews were audiotaped after permission and typically lasted 45 min. In order to gain a thorough understanding of journalists' occupational identity, the focus during the interviews was on what journalists do. This was a conscious decision because previous research into occupational identity is primarily focused on 'who we are', while there is scarcely

any research focusing on ‘what we do’. This is problematic because the way organizations are structured, and consequently how jobs are defined and assigned, depends on the activities of people. It is precisely by examining what people actually do, what environment they are in and what the rituals and customs are that one can learn a lot about occupational identity (Barley & Kunda, 2001).

A complete interview guide can be found in Appendix A. Table 3 below lists the key themes with an illustrative question to provide an idea of the questions asked during the interviews. The questions were prompted by the literature review findings and intended, above all, to generate answers to the research questions of this study: (1) How do journalists perform their work when social and professional influences change existing norms and values in journalism? (2) What are the consequences of such influences on journalists’ occupational identity?

**Table 3**

*The Interview Guide in a Nutshell*

<b>Key themes</b>	<b>Illustrative question</b>
Background	“Why did you become a journalist?”
Occupational Identity - what journalists do	“Can you describe a typical workday for me? What do you do, how do you do it and why do you do it?”
Occupational Identity - who journalists are	“How do you know if someone is a journalist or not?”
Developments	“What trends and developments do you think there are in journalism?”
Extra questions - robot journalism	“What are the pros and cons of using robot journalism?”
Future perspective	“What are opportunities and threats for you as a journalist? How does this make you feel?”

The researcher started each interview by asking the participants to describe their job and their motivation for choosing this profession. Participants were then asked in multiple sub-questions to describe what it is they do and who journalists are (occupational identity). After



this part of the interview, respondents were asked through partly open-ended and partly guided questions to give their views on trends and developments in the profession and what possible impact this might have on their work. For example, participants were asked about general developments in journalism, but also specifically about audience data and metrics and robot journalism (technological reconfigurations). Since the use of robot journalism in newsrooms came under increased scrutiny at the time the interviews were conducted, additional questions about this specific digital technology were added to the previously prepared interview guide, see Appendix A. Furthermore, the participants were also asked about the future perspective of journalists, including opportunities and threats, and how participants felt about that. The interviews were concluded by asking if respondents had any information to add.

### **Analysis**

Since insider research offers both pros (knowledge, interaction, access) and cons (too subjective, biased), the researcher took several steps to minimize possible ethical implications, avoid potential bias, and improve the credibility of the gathered data (Greene, 2014). First, member checking was used to ensure validity and enhance the credibility of this qualitative study (Candela, 2019). All twenty-one participants received the full transcription by email after the interview. They were given the opportunity to check the data for accuracy and completeness. This resulted in two modifications in the transcripts and five additions and or modifications in the interviewees' demographics. Second, the researcher worked with peer debriefing, whereby the findings and elements of this study were shared at different times with a supervisor, which allowed the researcher to think critically about the study. Lastly, to prevent participants from formulating socially desirable answers during the interviews, it was recapitulated by email and before the start of each interview that the participant's privacy would be protected. Only the interviewer had the names of the participants. These and other identifying information were anonymized during the transcriptions.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, with the exception of names and areas of operation. During the process of transcribing, the researcher substituted useful codes for them, e.g., journalist 1, newspaper X and municipality. The data were then imported in ATLAS.ti software for code creation. The data analysis consisted of three phases: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Boeije, 2010). The coding scheme used in this study can be found in Appendix B.

During the open coding phase, the transcribed interviews were reread line by line by the researcher and segmented into relevant fragments consisting of single or multiple sentences.

Both in vivo codes and theoretical concepts were then assigned to the fragments in order to distinguish different themes for categorization and to ensure no critical information was missing (Williams & Moser, 2019; Boeije, 2009). This resulted in a long list of codes and categories (e.g., ‘Online Perpetual Impact’, ‘Confidence in own Expertise’, ‘Journalistic Transparency’).

After that the researcher applied axial coding and wrote memos with core messages of the interviews regarding occupational identity and current developments. These memos were compared with each other to discover connections between categories. This led to several subcategories within the first group of broad categories. To reflect the meaning expressed by each group of comments, these subcategories were given codes (e.g., ‘Better Journalist Thanks to Data’ as a subcategory of ‘Measurable Journalism’). Sub-categories that were represented by a single participant's comment were not included since the researcher was looking for common themes and patterns in the data.

As a last step, selective coding was applied. In this phase, the researcher looked for connections between the categories to find core themes in the dataset. The categories that turned up repeatedly, such as digital first, journalists’ ideal-typical roles and the entrance of the robot journalist, turned out to be related to the following three core categories. As a first core category, societal influences were distinguished. This category consists of statements in which participants describe indirect external influences on journalism over which they thought they had no control (e.g., “These days, and I have noticed this myself, we journalists are treated with increasing disrespect”). There were also influences that could be linked to the profession and directly affect the work practices of the participants. These were therefore categorized as field-specific influences (e.g., “If you ask ChatGPT for a headline of a story, sometimes you get better results than you could have imagined yourself”). The third core category identified was occupational identity and included statements from journalists describing who they are as professionals, what they do and who they want to be (e.g., “I still believe in journalism as a craft”). These core themes were formulated to gain insight into what is happening in the journalistic arena and served as the basis for the following findings chapter. A preliminary remark: the translation from Dutch to English of the participant quotes used in this chapter was done as accurately as possible.

## Findings

Analyzing the interviews, several themes related to journalists' occupational identity emerged. The participants in this study came up with various societal and field-specific influences in the journalistic arena. These influences are analyzed below. Subsequently, it is discussed in more detail how these influences affect journalists' occupational identity and how this results in a strengthening of their shared collective identity and creates a collective sense of we-ness.

Everything stays the same while everything changes. A telling paradox in the context of journalism. Although the participants varied in their reactions, the common denominator in most of them was that, at its core, the work of journalists has not changed much. Journalism is still about asking questions and making stories. " [...] *But you do that in other ways than just on that dead paper. That is the big difference*" (journalist 8, newspaper Y). However, participants noticed that the playing field in which the profession is practiced, the journalistic arena, has undergone an unprecedented transformation.

The ivory tower, where the journalist could almost exclusively determine what the public sees, reads, and hears, has made way for an infinite, public and competitive online playing field. As a result, there is a magnifying glass on everything journalists do. Journalists are more in touch with society than ever, and their journalistic work is measurable in all respects. As a result, almost all participants place an even greater value on a shared collective identity. Journalistic values such as hearing both sides of a story, basing news on facts, asking critical questions, not imposing an opinion, and looking at a topic from multiple angles, are considered even more important.

### **Influences on Journalists' Occupational Identity**

From the interviews conducted with the participants, themes emerged that were clearly distinguishable. First, there were indirect external influences over which the participants thought they had no control. These are therefore categorized in this chapter as Societal Influences (everything is content and everyone is a creator, distrust in journalism, quality journalism under pressure). Second, there were also clearly discernable influences that could be linked to the profession and directly affect the work practices of the participants. These are therefore categorized as Field-specific Influences (digital first, measurable journalism and entrance of the robot journalist), see Table 2 below.

**Table 4***Influences on Journalists' Identity*

<b>Influence</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Societal influences	Indirect external influences over which journalists have no control.
1. <i>Everything is content, everyone a creator</i>	The increased role and influence of non-journalists in society.
2. <i>Quality journalism under pressure</i>	The widespread concern about the quality of journalism.
3. <i>Distrust in journalism</i>	The growing sense of distrust in society against journalists.
Field-specific influences	Influences linked to the profession and directly affecting journalists' work practices.
1. <i>Digital first</i>	The shift in the media sector from print to online.
2. <i>Measurable journalism</i>	Almost everything journalists do and how readers read is measurable.
3. <i>Entrance of the robot journalist</i>	The use of artificial intelligence in the newsroom.

***Societal Influences***

**Everything is Content, Everyone is a Creator.** The development that everything today is content, and everyone a creator, presents both opportunities (social media as an inexhaustible source of information) and challenges (bloggers, influencers and citizens as competitors, rise of alternative media and fake news) for the work of journalists, according to participants. A prominent theme in the interviews was non-journalists' increasing role and influence in society. For years, the journalistic playing field was clear, the participants outlined. There was only print media, television, and radio. The entry of digital media is therefore seen as an important turning point: journalists lost their monopoly on news.

*"At the opening of a Primark, for example, more influencers than journalists are invited. These are our competitors, and they have gotten the importance of listening to both sides of a story much less. [...] Then maybe it is up to us journalists to balance that."*

*Journalist 2, newspaper X*

Almost all participants perceive a big difference between journalists on the one hand and citizens, bloggers and influencers on the other. According to most participants, that difference manifests itself in two crucial unwritten journalistic codes of conduct: journalists ask critical questions and thus retrieve information and can leave their own opinion out of it. While non-journalists, according to the majority of participants, often have their own agenda, want to steer public opinion and impose their own opinion via digital media. Almost all participants have a critical attitude towards the work of non-journalists. *'Dredging websites'*, *'gossip'* and *'dabblers'* are words some journalists use in this context. In doing so, the participants created an us versus them feeling and reinforced a collective sense of we-ness, emphasizing shared code of conducts of professional journalists (Zhang, 2009). At the opposite of foregoing, however, some participants also indicate that there are now so many ways to bring a story, such as via podcast or video, that journalists should also be open to learning from bloggers and influencers.

*"A lot of people think they are journalists, but they are really just selling their own ideas and their own views. [...] Those consider journalism to be a personal blog. But they do not ask those questions to others, so they do not take in information."*

*Journalist 4, newspaper X*

What emerges in the interviews is that all participants clearly know what distinguishes them from non-journalists. It is explained as the aim to be impartial, listen to both sides of the story, and operate neutrally, but also, for example, get to the bottom of news and connect people. According to some participants, making that distinction known to the general public is very important at this time but still a huge challenge. *"Social media puts a lot of pressure on your work and journalism in general. Because those social media are also taking over from us a bit. [...] I think it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish yourself from whatever media"* (journalist 20, newspaper Y).

A few participants also mentioned the rise of alternative media and fake news in this context. According to the participants, these developments are related to increasing societal polarization. Both, the rise of alternative media and fake news, are therefore predominantly seen as a negative development for society and a threat to journalism in general.

*"I do not hope, [...], that that kind of media is going to play a defining role. That so much fake news can create social friction. That things are just assumed to be true. I hope we do not go in that direction."*

*Journalist 16, newspaper Y*

Yet, the development that everyone is a creator and everything is content also has a positive implication according to most participants. Precisely because social media has taken on an increasing role in society, it also strongly influences newsgathering. For example, most participants indicate that the ideas for their stories are often prompted by posts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. *“I look on TikTok or Instagram, then I just type in [municipality], and quite a lot comes up. It is really not always interesting, but I can regularly get things from there” (journalist 9, newspaper X).*

Where you used to need print media, television or radio to publish a story, now just everyone can reach an audience of millions with the click of a mouse, which makes it, according to some participants, harder to distinguish yourself as a professional journalist. This is in line with what Vaast and Pinsonneault call the convergence of a technology; in this case digital media homogenizes journalism. The interviews reveal that some participants struggle with this and scholars expect that increasing reliance on technology will only make it more difficult to stand out from other professions in the future (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021).

**Quality Journalism Under Pressure.** According to Van der Haak et al. (2012), there is widespread concern about journalism quality. This is now also confirmed by the participants in this study. Following on from the foregoing findings, participants noticed three threats to quality journalism. First, participants said they expect the digital transition in the media sector to continue and that the end of the paper newspaper as it exists today is fast approaching. *“We are betting more and more on online, but then how long will it take before the paper newspaper is no longer there? The newspaper is in second place, I think that development will continue” (journalist 14, newspaper X).* Moreover, there is a resignation there among most participants. *“We have had to accept that the group of people who have a newspaper subscription is a dwindling group and that that group is growing online. I would not lose sleep over it if the newspaper disappears at some point” (journalist 12, newspaper X).*

A second development mentioned by several participants is that as a consequence, many cutbacks have been made in journalism in recent years in the Netherlands, and everywhere the same work has to be done with fewer people. The shift from paid subscriptions for the paper newspaper to online is in full swing. However, not everyone is willing to pay for news online yet, which leads to great frustration for some participants. *“What do people think these days? That we all do this as a hobby all day? It is hard work” (journalist 4, newspaper X).* During the interviews, a minority of the participants mentioned a high workload due to the cutbacks in journalism.

*“The paper newspaper has been in a downward spiral for decades. We said of this twenty years ago: it will no longer exist in twenty years. [...] However, now, for the first time, I am convinced that the paper newspaper is finite.”*

*Journalist 1, newspaper X*

A third threat to quality journalism is also an annoyance among the participants, frequently recurring during the interviews: the overall hyped view of news, as several participants put it. *“Everyone is always so behind the herd”* (journalist 17, newspaper Y), and *“The ‘gasp’ is a trend prompted by the transition to online, but which, if we are talking about the newspaper profession, does threaten the position and reliability of a medium”* (journalist 21, newspaper Y). *“You have to be fast, fast, fast”* (journalist 20, newspaper Y). And be a reliable source at the same time. According to some participants this leads to a tension field between speed and reliability. *“If it is speedy, you must work even more precisely”* (journalist 5, newspaper Y), and *“I sincerely hope more attention will be paid to this ‘panting’. That you take a break. You cannot keep going faster and faster forever”* (journalist 21, newspaper Y).

**Distrust in Journalism.** At a societal level, distrust in journalism was a core theme in the interviews, and, according to most participants, it dramatically impacts the journalistic profession. Some participants felt the corona pandemic was an important turning point. *“For many people, we are part of the left-woke culture. Especially during corona. The outside world has long since stopped being convinced of our neutrality and objectivity”* (journalist 1, newspaper X). Several participants stated they occasionally have been falsely accused of spreading fake news. *“Especially during corona. You are increasingly accused of not being independent and a mouthpiece of the government. [...]”* (journalist 4, newspaper X), and *“More and more people really believe that and I personally find that becoming very troublesome”* (journalist 16, newspaper Y).

Several participants explained that these accusations create a feeling of an unsafe working atmosphere. *“The threats that journalists get these days. I think that is really ridiculous. Soon we will all need security in ten years. That would be super weird, wouldn't it?”* (journalist 9, newspaper X). Some participants also mentioned examples where they were hindered in their work by such threats. One participant said she recently received a threat via WhatsApp in response to a story she had written. *“We will be looking for you!, they sent”* (journalist 9, newspaper X). All participants label threats, aggression and intimidation towards journalists as a worrisome societal development.

*"A colleague of ours got slapped during one of those Corona protests. Then I think: is it going this way? Is this ever going to normalize? I very much hope that this polarization does not continue. Because I do think that is death to journalism."*

*Journalist 2, newspaper X*

As a result, several participants noted that gaining people's trust as a journalist is becoming increasingly important, but at the same time challenging.

*"You notice that people are getting reluctant to talk to the press. You already notice that when you are making a simple fox pop. Or at a peasant protests, where you are just short of being harshly dismissed. So, you notice that that hardens. That winning people's trust becomes difficult"*

*Journalist 16, newspaper Y*

Many participants insist on the significance of searching for and stating the truth as a requirement for gaining the public's trust. For example, as a journalist, you should not be out to want to 'score a quote', and you should always make yourself known as a journalist. Integrity was therefore mentioned by almost all participants as one of the essential values of a journalist.

*"I think - and maybe this is also motivated by hope - that real journalism, that search for the truth, will become more important than ever. With all the sources out there, with all the fake news. People continue to look for a place they can trust."*

*Journalist 11, newspaper X*

### ***Field-specific Influences***

**Digital First.** All participants characterized the shift from print to online as the most significant change in the last few years. This shift not only impacts the way news is consumed but also the way news is made. *"You used to type an article, and then you were done, but now you also have to be able to do all kinds of other things as well as a journalist"* (journalist 4, newspaper X), and *"A different platform requires a different way of working"* (journalist 8, newspaper Y). Whereas before, participants were also concerned with the content and design of the newspaper, i.e., which story goes on which page and in which form in which place, the focus is now mainly on making stories and presenting them online. This change is illustrated by a participant in the quote below.

*"Before, you were very much working on that newspaper. What article goes in which column? Now that we work mostly online, a workday for me is really a workday. [...] Of course, there are deadlines, but that is no longer so anchored in all kinds of shapes"*



*and boxes."*

*Journalist 12, newspaper X*

That digital transition is accompanied by many more opportunities to bring a story to the public's attention and today's toolbox available to journalists is more filled than ever. As a result, journalists have not only more, but also different tasks on their plates. Participants often mentioned making videos, photos and podcasts as examples. The participants had conflicting views on this. There were positive but also less positive reactions. *"Our profession is constantly evolving. [...] But I like that because it means that you always have to move with the times"* (journalist 14, newspaper X), and *"It does not matter to me whether I record something with a video or with a notebook. [...] At the core, it remains the same. That is that you tell a story."* The less positive responses related mainly to the fact that the participants did not choose these tasks and felt they had insufficient knowledge of it.

*"Making podcasts, filming ... I do not like that because that is not my strong point. I find it difficult that as a journalist you are supposed to be able to add all that these days, while in my view these are very different skills [...] That could be a reason for me, if I still had to start now, not to want to go into journalism at all."*

*Journalist 4, newspaper X*

Today's journalist is a jack of all trades. And that, according to the participants, also requires a different way of thinking. With the focus increasingly on online and less on the paper newspaper, journalists are expected to think and work multimedia.

*"Now I notice that you have to think about everything as a reporter. So not just text. I go to a helicopter for a job, and then I think: the reader wants to see that thing. The reader wants to hear how much noise that helicopter makes. You think about that before you even start creating the story"*

*Journalist 5, newspaper Y*

By extension, what many participants see as a major advantage is that online offers many more opportunities to bring attention to a story than that 'dead paper' and that the work has become much more enjoyable as a result.

*"The biggest trend is that you no longer work one-dimensionally as a journalist. [...] If you have a story, think: what is the best way to write this story on paper? What is the best way to tell this on the radio? In video? Online? And it does not have to be the same thing."*

*Journalist 18, newspaper X*

However, according to a few participants, this multimedia way of working also brings challenges. *"It all has to be faster. Because we work online, you hardly have a deadline. Or rather, you have a continuous deadline"* (journalist 15, newspaper X). That ever-present time pressure prompted by online was perceived as annoying by some journalists. *"You are on 24/7. I find that tough sometimes too. Turning off the switch becomes more difficult"* (journalist 20, newspaper Y). In this context some participants also noticed that it is challenging to properly divide their time and attention between the paper newspaper and its website.

*"[...] It is becoming increasingly difficult to operate a newspaper and a website simultaneously. As a result, the newspaper is under pressure and becoming less current. That process is going on, and at the same time, you have a website that cries out for constant actuality. You have to offer something new there constantly, and colleagues can only spend their time once. That causes friction, and sometimes I find it difficult. We have not yet found the answer to that in journalism."*

*Journalist 11, newspaper X*

Almost all participants noted that the impact of their work has become many times greater because of online. *"I would say the impact has become almost perpetual. The fish used to go in the newspaper at the end of the day, and it was forgotten. [...] Online the impact is huge"* (journalist 1, newspaper X). This can also be interpreted as new affordances of news websites that allow journalists' work to remain visible forever (Orlikowski, 2008). According to the participants, this development of perpetual impact results in a decline in people's willingness to participate in a story, just as we saw before with distrust in journalism. *"A story lingers online. When I talk to someone, I notice that people are less eager to appear in the media with their name. That it takes more effort to persuade people"* (journalist 8, newspaper Y).

**Measurable Journalism.** As the focus is increasingly shifting from paper newspapers to online, much more data is available in journalism than just a few years ago. Almost all participants brought up the subject of audience data and metrics, saying that as journalists today, they can see exactly how people read their stories, how long they are read and when people drop out. *"In the last decade, the awareness of what our information does has increased enormously. Everything has a purpose; everything is scrutinized. You are much more tightly focused on everything now"* (journalist 6, newspaper Y).

Most participants see the use of audience metrics as a profound change in journalism. *"Where a few years ago we were just floating on our own craftsmanship, now we are also very well informed by our readers. Because we know what they read and how long they read stories"*

(journalist 11, newspaper X). Furthermore, participants perceive that audience metrics significantly impact their daily work, both positive and negative. The core of the reactions is that audience metrics provide valuable insights to participants.

*“It is very nice that we have all this information. Why should we create stories that are not or hardly read? Of course, that does not make any sense” (journalist 10, newspaper X) and, “ [...] I think that development is good, because that way you also know what your audience wants”*

*Journalist 16, newspaper Y*

When it comes to the use of audience metrics, almost all participants name two positive developments. First, data is mainly seen as a useful tool for improving stories. *“It definitely helps. You can see very well where people drop out in your story. Then you can test headlines, change the intro or adjust the picture. [...] It has a proven effect in my eyes. It is not like you are shooting blanks” (journalist 12, newspaper X).* A second positive development outlined by many participants is that journalists’ writing style has changed due to the use of data. ‘Smoother’, ‘more light-hearted’ and ‘accessible’ are words used by several participants. *“When I look at the council reports we used to write, I realize now that that was probably almost unreadable for most people. It was boring and hard written. There is much more attention to that now, also because of the data” (journalist 4, newspaper X).* However, some participants also indicate they are ‘data-weary’ and get restless from that continuous stream of audience information. *“I find it incredibly fascinating and have immersed myself in it. [...] But at a certain point, I let data lead me too much. [...] I then drew tremendously on reading figures. [...] It is difficult to balance that” (journalist 7, newspaper Y).* This is also related to the hyped view of news, as described above. According to almost all participants, the risk to watch out for when using data in journalism is that you let yourself be led too much by numbers. *“The pitfall is that you start looking only at the reading figures and no longer at the quality of the story” (journalist 4, newspaper X).*

Data as a measure of success: some participants see it as an elusive development in journalism. One participant used the word ‘scoreboard journalism’. *“Just because you see which stories are doing well does not mean that you should then focus only on those kinds of topics. [...] We have an important function as journalists: the watchdog of democracy. We must take that seriously” (journalist 13, newspaper X), and “You must not become a slave to data” (journalist 8, newspaper Y).*

All the interviews clearly show that the participants emphasize that numbers in their work are far from saying everything – audience data and metrics as an effective and useful tool,

but no more than that. For example, a distinction is made between the number of clicks and the average reading time of a story. The latter weighs most heavily for all participants. *“Because if an article is read for a very long time, then the appreciation for your story is much higher”* (journalist 19, newspaper Y). Moreover, the participants explain that a story can also generate many clicks because it concerns a remarkable topic. *“If something gets a good read or goes viral, that does not necessarily mean you did something good as a journalist”* (journalist 19, newspaper Y).

Nevertheless, multiple participants also said, *“I would be lying if I said I do not like it very much when a story is read a lot”* (journalist 17, newspaper Y). Some participants indicate that using data in journalism promotes competitiveness, but for many participants it also motivates them.

**Entrance of the Robot Journalist.** Participants diverged in their reactions to the recent entrance of artificial intelligence, specifically the robot journalist, on the newsroom floor. With robot journalism, it is no longer the journalist but the software that automatically creates stories. Almost all participants felt such a robot could help produce simple, factual topics. Short news items based on figures and statistics were mentioned as an example. *“[...] We do things now, like creating a good post for social media or a good headline. Apparently, a robot can do that as well and maybe even better”* (journalist 3, newspaper X). Many participants also think that a robot could help them prepare to create a story: ChatGPT, as the new Google search engine. *“That robotic software could assist in sorting through huge mountains of files. Though still controlled by a human. But I think there are still big gains to be made there”* (journalist 7, newspaper Y).

Some participants expect that the number of stories will increase with robot journalism entering the media sector. After all, a robot is faster than a human, is the thought. However, that point has not yet been reached. Although robot journalism is still in its infancy and the possibilities are minimal at this point, the participants are convinced that a robot cannot replace the work of a journalist and that their work remains of value and importance. No robot can surpass humans with all their senses and social skills. *“You have to speak to people, you have to smell, see, taste, hear... A robot does not do all that. That is autopilot. [...] As an addition? Yes. As a threat? No”* (journalist 15, newspaper X). All participants therefore do not yet - with an emphasis on not yet - see any reason to reskill, deskill or upskill their practices in response to this new technology (Bakker, 2014).

At the same time many participants have difficulty estimating how big AI will impact journalism. *“To my mind, it is still a bit of a distant concept”* (journalist 20, newspaper Y), and

*“On the one hand, it can be a fantastic tool to tell stories and deepen stories. On the other hand, it is also a huge danger”* (journalist 8, newspaper Y). According to some participants, that danger lies mainly in the reliability of stories and the control you may or may not have as the creator of a story. Just as participants do not want to become slaves to audience data and metrics, they certainly do not want to become slaves to a robot.

*“We do have to make sure that we as editors remain in charge of our productions and that our values and the editorial statute that states what our pieces must meet, that our pieces continue to meet them. And then it should not be that a robot chooses a sensation headline just because it scores so nicely. We must remain able to direct that so that that robot does not take control.”*

*Journalist 11, newspaper X*

The constant evolvement of technologies, or generativity, results for journalists in the dilemma that their occupation both survives and is constantly under attack from digital technologies (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). As a result, there is much uncertainty among the participants about what AI, and specifically the robot journalist, will bring them in the future and they have many questions. *“How can this help us as journalists, and how pure will it remain?”* (journalist 5, newspaper Y), and *“Will we then perhaps be redundant in twenty or thirty years?”* (journalist 9, newspaper X). However, all participants also see it as an irreversible process. *“In my opinion, we should not be afraid either; these developments will just continue”* (journalist 13, newspaper X), and *“These kinds of techniques are bigger than [newspaper X]. So have no illusions that we can stop it”* (journalist 11, newspaper X).

### **Journalists’ Identity Formation**

The aforementioned societal influences (everything is content and everyone is a creator, quality journalism under pressure, distrust in journalism) and field-specific influences (digital first, measurable journalism, the entrance of the robot journalist) offer both opportunities and challenges for journalism and have impact on the participants and their occupational identity formation. For example, the public distrust of journalism, the speed of the internet and the emergence of new technologies such as audience metrics and robot journalism all put pressure on journalism. These influences not only affect how participants perceive their role in society but also have the consequence that almost all participants become closely attached to a shared collective identity and place a greater value on it. The shared norms and values Deuze identifies in his frequently cited research (e.g., autonomy, objectivity, credibility and directness) are also

mentioned by all participants in this study, confirming the idea that these norms and values serve as “the social cement of the profession of journalists” (Deuze, 2005, p.455).

As noted by Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) and Donsbach (2012), role perception, roles and occupational identity cannot be considered in separation in this context, as it concerns the position of journalism in relation to society as a whole. And because journalism’s identity is often regarded as an aggregate of journalists’ role perceptions (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017), below the implications of the influences as mentioned above for journalists’ ideal-typical roles will be discussed first, followed by the implications for journalists’ occupational identity as a whole (who they are and what they do).

### ***Ideal-typical Roles: Who Journalists Want to Be***

During the interviews, participants often reflected on their ideal-typical roles, professional ideology, and what distinguishes them from non-journalists. According to many participants, at its core, the work of journalists has not changed much. And so have the ideal-typical roles. What is striking is that during the interviews, the participants referred back to traditional journalistic roles. This is in line with the findings of Hanitzsch and Vos that those roles - or the ways journalists describe their relationship with society - are often characterized by their recognizability and stability (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). For example, in line with previous work on journalistic roles (Deuze, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2012; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996), participants often referred to the journalist as a watchdog of democracy.

Despite the many societal and field-specific changes described above, the participants did not ascribe new roles to themselves. They believe they can continue to stand out in the infinite, public and competitive online playing field by, among others, holding on to those roles. So, with the future of journalism being so uncertain and therefore unclear what will be expected of participants, reverting to familiar roles is their coping mechanism to give meaning to their work and shape and maintain their identity. The following four ideal-typical journalist roles can be distinguished from the dozens of practical examples and work descriptions the participants gave during the interviews.

**The Journalist as a Public Watchdog.** Many participants see themselves as watchdogs of democracy. They see it as their social responsibility to expose wrongdoing and control those in power. In other words: *“Keeping society on its toes. And then especially keeping the organizations on their toes”* (journalist 6, newspaper Y). Several participants talked about unravelling issues that would otherwise remain hidden from the general public and that, in doing so, they would prefer to bring about change as well. The job of journalists is

to inform the public about everything that is socially relevant and thus expose these issues. And by doing this, according to many participants, journalists make a valuable contribution to society. *“The most wonderful thing is when you can change politics. That people start using your stories to change policy” (journalist 18, newspaper Y).*

**The Journalist as a Critical News Hunter.** According to almost all participants, what distinguishes journalists from non-journalists is the ability to ask critical questions. The journalist as a critical news hunter is a role that emerges clearly from the participants' job descriptions. *“If I want to explain my job very simply, it is asking questions. That is basically what you do all day. Asking questions and writing” (journalist 19, newspaper Y).* According to the participants, this includes the journalist's role as a reliable source of information. Moreover, as a journalist, you need to have an antenna for what people want to know. In other words: you need to have a nose for news. *“Journalists question everything. Are distrustful in a good way. And are looking for the real story. What is going on? And then they want the answer to that question” (journalist 7, newspaper Y).* By extension, many participants aim to make complicated topics understandable and give people more information so they can form their own informed opinion about something.

**The Journalist as a Connector.** What emerged in almost all the practical examples in the interviews is that the participants feel they have an important connecting role in society. This role is expressed by literally connecting people, e.g., someone is looking for a donor, and after publishing an article about it, that donor is found. Furthermore, this connecting role is also about informing the audience about important societal issues and making the invisible visible, thus giving people insight into the lives of others and getting people out of their own bubble. Moreover, this social role gives participants a sense of social relevance. *“I also want to show parts of society that are less visible to many people. Poverty, homelessness... Those are relevant topics for me” (journalist 7, newspaper Y).* Only one participant mentioned the theme of inclusive journalism by naming ‘white editorships’ in this context. This participant explained that if journalism in general claims to want to serve society than they should also reflect society as an organization. This is not yet the case in many news organizations. *“Fortunately, there is an increasing focus in journalism on the fact that that has to change. I can well imagine that there are societies or groups in this country that think: we will never be heard by the media anyway. I totally understand that” (journalist 16, krant Y).* Furthermore, in this context participants often mentioned making the invisible visible, effecting change and making an impact.

*“I like it best when a story means something directly personal to someone. Then you create a story with someone who is seriously ill, and they are looking for a donor. Because of your story, many people signed up, and that man or woman survived that disease.”*

*Journalist 15, newspaper X*

**The Journalist as an Entertainer.** Besides informing people, most participants stated they also want to entertain people with their stories in whatever way they can. A story should be pleasant to read, making readers think and giving new information. *“Of course, light-heartedness is also needed more in a tougher world. So, we as an industry must also have an eye for show and human-interest stories again. That is also part of journalism”* (journalist 6, newspaper Y).

What is notable is that the way the participants described their roles did not differ much from the descriptions given by scholars such as Deuze (2005), Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) and Weaver and Wilhoit (1996). However, the journalistic roles may not have changed, but the value participants place on them has. Because journalists have lost their monopoly position on the news and many more non-journalists are active in the journalistic arena, most participants are more aware of what society expects of them (role perception) and as a consequence they feel a strengthening of their ideal-typical roles. They try to stand out in the infinite, public and competitive online playing field by focusing on to those traditional roles.

### ***Who Journalists Are***

Because journalism is a free profession, many participants say there is no ready-made answer to the question of who journalists are. *“It is a free profession, so anyone can call themselves that. So actually, we are nothing at all. Everyone calls themselves that. You get a couple of business cards printed, and you are a journalist”* (journalist 1, krant X). In answering the question of who journalists are, all participants referred to traditional journalistic core values that are also related to the roles mentioned above. For example, to be a watchdog of democracy, a journalist must be independent. ‘Let nothing or nobody control you’, several participants said. And anyone who wants to be a connector as a journalist must have empathy. Table 4 below shows the shared values that were mentioned most often by the participants, the four sacred journalistic values.



**Table 5***The four sacred journalistic values*

<b>Value</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Illustrative quote</b>
Objectivity	A journalist strives to be objective as possible	“Objectivity, whether that exists one hundred per cent, I do not know, but you can strive for it.” (journalist 12, newspaper X)
Independence	A journalist can freely do his or her job	“You have to independently define what is happening somewhere” (journalist 5, newspaper Y)
Integrity	A journalist is honest and has strong moral principles	“So, I think it's more important than ever to be very sure, at least for yourself, that you act with integrity” (journalist 4, newspaper X)
Empathy	A journalist can empathize with the feelings and thoughts of others	“Sometimes you also have to be a bit careful how you word something. Apply nuances. Having empathy is therefore another important trait in my opinion” (journalist 19, newspaper Y)

Objectivity was one of the prominent topics during the interviews. It was mainly about being impartial and, as described above, being able to put aside your own opinions as a journalist.

*“Of course, we are never 100 percent objective; there is no such thing. [...] However, we must be able to go somewhere with an open mind. Even to someone who does not agree with us or who I do not agree with. You must also take those people seriously and give them a serious role in your story.”*

*Journalist 11, newspaper X*

The interviews made it clear that almost all participants want to contribute meaningfully to society through their work. One could therefore say they see themselves, and thus professional journalists, as social cement. In this context, some participants also talked about how being a journalist is a ‘way of life’ and that you are always on. *“It never really stops” (journalist 6, newspaper Y).*

### ***What Journalists Do***

As indicated previously, many participants believe that at its core, their work has not changed much. The profession is still about retrieving information and creating stories. Which is striking because, according to previous research, journalists' working practices are driven by assumptions and expectations about the journalistic roles they are expected to play and these assumptions and expectations are not fixed but change with time (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017). Moreover, it is noted that the ongoing transformation in the media sector from print to digital means that professionals must constantly reskill, deskill and upskill their work practices and work routines (Deuze, 2005). What is remarkable in the interviews with the participants in this study is that they distinguish between their own work practices and the journalistic arena in which they carry out their work practices. Some tools and tasks may have been added, e.g., podcast and video, but the work has not changed much at its core. However, the playing field has changed all the more. In that constantly changing playing field, participants mention various codes of conduct by which they feel they distinguish themselves from non-journalists, especially now - at a time when there is so much competition in the journalistic arena and distrust of journalists. This involves, as Hanitzsch and Vos describe, "a cultural consensus as to how we do journalism" (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017, p. 119).

*"I would almost say, I just look. Yes, I try to look around me. In this city. Why is that road being changed? Then you start calling and finding out. And then you go and see if the road surface is also that bad in other places."*

*Journalist 1, newspaper X*

The following codes of conduct, or the four sacred journalistic codes of conduct, were mentioned most often in this regard.

**Table 6**

*The four sacred codes of conduct*

<b>Code of conduct</b>	<b>Illustrative quote</b>
Listening to both sides of a story	"[...] Listening to both sides of a story. You just have to do that, because otherwise you are some kind of juice channel" (journalist 19, newspaper Y)
Checking information	"[...] Keeping society on its toes. And then especially keeping organizations on their toes, someone has to stay on top of these things, checking them" (journalist 5, newspaper Y)

Code of conduct	Illustrative quote
Basing news on facts	“I am dealing with facts and I do not care what anyone thinks about it and or tries to keep me away from it. I am doing that because it is true” (journalist 6, newspaper Y)
Looking at a topic from multiple angles	“A story should highlight a topic from several angles, so that you, the reader, at least get all the ingredients to form an opinion” (journalist 8, newspaper Y)

When it comes to journalistic codes of conduct, listening to both sides of a story was mentioned by most participants. Highlighting a topic from multiple sides was another prominent topic. *“So that as a reader you at least get all the ingredients to form an opinion. Without that opinion being imposed on you by a line in a story” (journalist 8, newspaper Y).* In addition, it can be seen from the interviews that the values mentioned above are closely connected to these codes of conduct, or in other words, what journalists do is closely related to who they are. For example, to play a connecting role in society as a journalist, one needs to be empathetic as a person.

According to many participants, the codes of conduct are seen in a new light partly due to the arrival of the internet. For example, tension arises in their work between the speed of the internet and the reliability of their stories. To cope with this tension, all participants underline the importance of thoroughness. *“Very cliché, but check, check, double check” (journalist 5, newspaper Y).* This thoroughness is ensured mainly by maintaining close contact with colleagues during, for example, daily editorial meetings.

What emerged clearly during the interviews is that most participants have a critical attitude towards the work of non-journalists and rely on their own experience and professionalism in this rapidly changing context. Thus, the participants were able to articulate well what sets them apart from non-journalists today and which journalistic standards and norms and values are sacred to them in this regard. Moreover, according to several participants the aforementioned codes of conduct in journalism must be guarded. *“As a journalist, you adhere to certain codes. Those are not written so hard, but for example, hearsay. You just have to do that because otherwise, you are a juice channel, like you see a lot of that now” (journalist 19, newspaper Y).*

### ***What Journalists Must Do to Be Who They Want to Be***

Although participants mostly referred back to traditional roles, norms, values, and codes of conduct in journalism during the interviews, two relatively new responsibilities were also discussed: *journalistic transparency* and what can be described as *slow down to speed up*. These additional values mentioned by some participants fit the picture of occupational identities as outlined by several scholars. Professionals' definitions of what they do and who they are may be stable for some time but usually change over time as contexts change (Schwartz et al., 2010). Because of this changing context - fueled by the societal and field-specific influences described above - some participants defined relatively new values.

In line with previous research (Chadha and Koliska, 2014; Craft and Heim, 2008; Curry and Stroud, 2019) some participants mentioned journalistic transparency as one of the solutions to combat rising public distrust.

*"[...] I believe that our work will also change in terms of content. In the sense that we will increasingly explain how we do our work. We already do that in certain sections now. That you make it transparent may be necessary to guard that trust."*

*Journalist 11, newspaper X*

To increase accountability and hence legitimacy with the public, more and more news organizations are giving the public a look behind the scenes. It is even claimed that in this digital age transparency is the new objectivity. According to scholars, this transparency mainly manifests itself in posting online corrections, linking to documents cited in stories and providing staff bios, emails and pictures. In this context, the participants in this study mainly talked about being accountable to your audience for the choices you make as a journalist, i.e., explaining why you do or do not do something. Transparency is believed to have significant consequences for the credibility of professional journalism (Chadha & Koliska, 2014).

*"[...] Explaining well why we make certain choices. We are doing that more and more. Show that you are transparent, but whether you are always believed is the second thing. We are doing everything we can to be transparent. We show what we do, how we do it, and why we make certain choices"*

*Journalist 3, newspaper X*

Furthermore, data suggest that participants hope that journalists - despite all the aforementioned societal and field - specific influences - remain capable of taking a step back. The need to slow down to speed up is also the response formulated by many participants to the hyped view of the news. The general idea is that journalists can distinguish themselves by creating solid, well-selected stories. Stories one does not find on every other news site.

Research takes time, and several participants hope that, as is the case now, they will be allowed that time later.

*“I do feel [...] that we as journalists are looking more often at why we do things. And that maybe because of that we also change our tone, [...] and get off that overdrive of how we bring things”*

*Journalist 17, newspaper Y.*

Journalistic transparency and the need to slow down are values that participants consider necessary to guard the distinctive role journalists have in democracies all over the world; tasks necessary to maintain their role now and in the future. *“I hope we can make it clear to readers and users how important independent journalism is”* (journalist 13, newspaper X).

## **Key findings**

In sum, this study's findings show that participants do not bury their heads in the sand in times of significant change. Instead, they are well aware of the changes in the journalistic arena and far beyond. As scholars have shown, such awareness and willingness to move with the times are essential conditions for the survival of a profession (Nelson & Irwin, 2014; Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). In this, no difference was noted between the participants of the two different newspapers.

In the literature framework, we could already see that roles, role perceptions and occupational identity in journalism are inextricably connected. The results of this study confirm this. Depending on the role participants adopted, specific journalistic values and codes of conduct emerged more than others. For example, one of the participants referred to himself as a researcher. In doing so, the participant adopted the role of a critical news hunter and particularly stressed the importance of objectivity, independence and integrity (journalistic values), checking information and basing news on facts (codes of conduct). Whereas, participants who took on a connecting role spoke much more about empathy and the importance of listening to people (journalistic value) and looking at a topic from multiple angles so everyone feels heard (code of conduct). Thus, this study's findings confirm and show the relatedness of roles and identity in journalism.

Regarding the developments discussed, the general attitude of participants from both newspapers towards their work was critical yet positive. The changes in the sector are sometimes perceived as exciting and uncertain, but all participants indicated that their work is the best thing there is. This remarkably optimistic attitude in a rather turbulent time can be

explained by the fact that journalism is always on the move, and dealing with change is inherent to being a journalist. Rock-solid confidence in their craftsmanship is how participants deal with these changes.

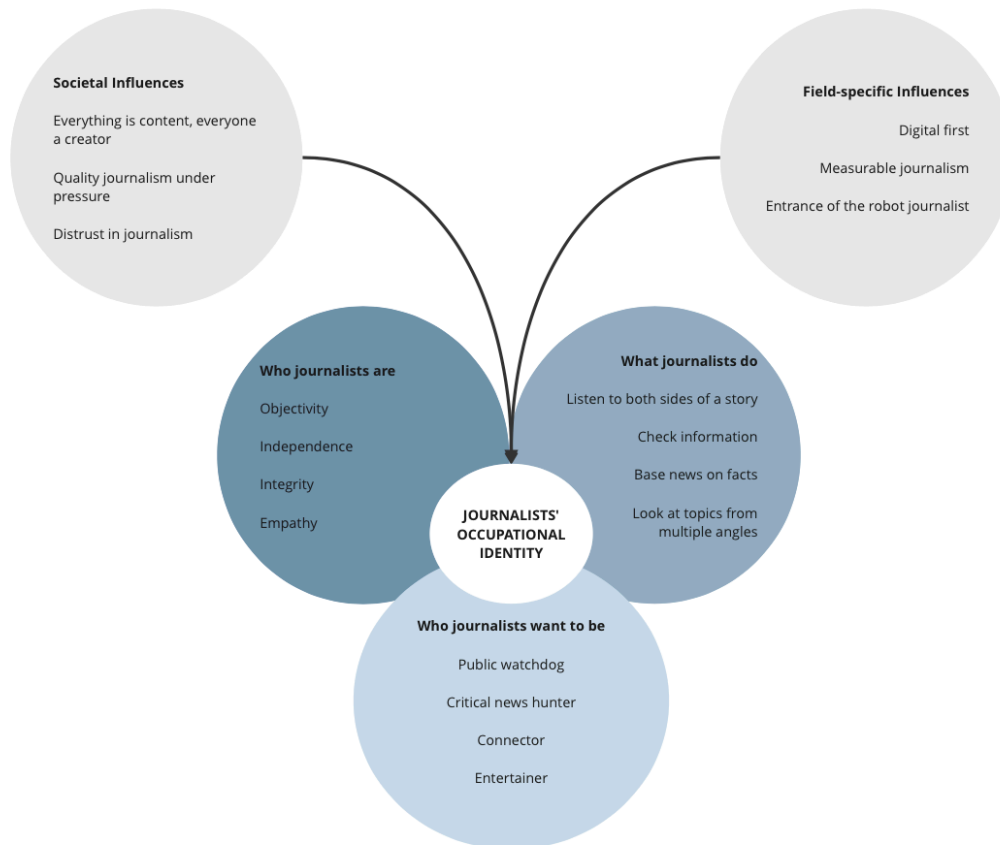
### **Discussion**

This study aimed to provide insight into how journalists perceive developments affecting their work and the impact this has on their identity. The researcher brought together scholarship on occupational identity, journalism and technological reconfigurations to show how journalists deal with the opportunities and challenges they face as professionals in the digital transition from print to online. The findings of this qualitative study above show that when journalists' occupational identity - who they are and what they do - comes under pressure, a sense of 'we-ness' or a shared collective identity is reinforced.

Influenced by societal influences (everything is content and everyone is a creator, distrust in journalism and quality journalism under pressure) and field-specific influences (digital first, measurable journalism and the rise of the robot journalist), participants re-perceived their own journalistic role. In other words, they wondered again: what expectations does society have of us, and how can we meet them? (Donsbach, 2012). Summarized in Figure 1 below, the results of this qualitative study reveal that in times of significant change, journalists become closely attached to long-established traditional journalistic roles while placing more value on specific sacred journalistic values and codes of conduct. In doing so, professional journalists try to distinguish themselves from non-journalists, which can be seen as an attempt to brand the profession distinctively.

**Figure 1**

*Model Illustrating the Relatedness between Journalists' Occupational Identity, Ideal-typical Roles (who journalist want to be) and Societal and Field-specific Influences.*



Data from the interviews enrich our understanding of how journalists handle identity tensions caused by technological reconfigurations, e.g., audience data and metrics, and the societal and field-specific influences described above. In line with the literature on occupational identity, the findings of this study show that journalists' occupational identity is never fixed and that its formation is driven by societal factors such as norms and expectations and by economic and technological changes (Schwartz et al., 2010), e.g., the rise of alternative media but also the demise of the paper newspaper as an institution.

Precisely because previous scholarship has paid far too little attention to the 'what we do' aspect of a profession (Barley & Kunda, 2001), that is what this study has focused on. In line with the findings of Hanitzsch and Vos (2017), what journalists do is motivated by expectations and assumptions about the journalistic roles they are expected to play. For

example, because there is so much distrust in journalism (societal influence), journalists perceive that they are expected to be critical news hunters (journalistic role) and thus to be objective (sacred journalistic value) and base news on facts (sacred code of conduct). Thus, journalistic roles, role perceptions and occupational identity are inextricably connected.

Regarding technological reconfigurations, an important finding was that new technologies, such as audience data and metrics and robot journalism, enable the work of journalists but were not seen as a threat. As noted by Fürst (2020), journalists noted that the use of new technologies poses risks to the quality of journalism. For example, the use of robot journalism raises questions about the reliability of journalistic stories. However, despite the risks associated with introducing technologies such as robot journalism, journalists did not see this as a threat to the survival of their profession. This is in line with the findings of Ferrucci and Perrault (2021), who argue that digital innovations cause journalists to take on an extra task but that innovations further have little practical impact on journalists' work practices.

However, the results of the current study do not entirely fit with the theory of Vaast and Pinsonneault that technologies influence occupational identity by both enabling and threatening it (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). The two aspects of technology - convergence and generativity - which cause the tension of how similar or different one occupation is from others did emerge in the data. The internet, for instance, caused journalists to lose their monopoly on news. And because of social media now everything is content, and everyone is a creator. Furthermore, it is even possible for a robot to create stories. Despite these tensions driven by technological reconfigurations that clearly exist in the journalistic arena and were recognized as such by journalists, journalists did not feel threatened in who they are or what they do. In this, they relied heavily on their own discernment. A possible explanation for this could be that journalism is a unique and hard-to-define profession, or as indicated earlier, 'a profession in a permanent process of becoming' (Deuze & Witschge, 2017, p.177.). Journalists have never had a defined, protected and delineated profession. Thus, they are not used to anything else. Dealing with constant change is inherent in being a journalist. However, what also became clear from the data is that the future is uncertain for many journalists and the impact of new technological developments is unforeseeable.

While journalists did not feel threatened by the entry of new technologies, this is different for social influences in particular: everything is content and everyone is a creator, quality journalism under pressure, and distrust in journalism. Influences that journalists themselves cannot directly control. "If the meanings and values represented by an occupation are not acknowledged by others, individuals will experience occupational identity threat"



(Yang, 2021, p. 464). The findings of this study, like other studies (Ahuja, 2022; Yang, 2021), suggest that journalists use different coping mechanisms to deal with threats to occupational identity. One way journalists in this study responded to identity threats was by emphasizing identity distinction. Participants did this by characterizing themselves as public watchdogs, critical news hunters, connectors and entertainers. This is in line with the findings of Yang who states there are two possible individual responses to identity threats: highlighting identity distinctions and adjusting identity and practices. In this specific study there was no actual adaptation of identity and practices here, as values and codes of conduct were emphasized but not adapted. This result is consistent with what Ahuja describes in his research as esteem-enhancing self-definitions. By focusing on existing journalistic roles and on what distinguishes them as professional journalists from non-journalists, participants tried to eliminate threats and identity tensions. However, Ahuja stresses that this can actually fuel fears about maintaining a strong professional identity (Ahuja, 2022).

By extension, Yung identifies another effective coping mechanism for occupational identity threat: feedback seeking behavior. “By seeking feedback, individuals can reappraise the occupational identity threat and strengthen self-verification (Yung, 2005). This is in line with the picture journalists in this study painted when discussing audience data and metrics. How many people read a story and how long people read a story: for many journalists, audience data and metrics were not only a measure of success but unintentionally a form of feedback as well. Audience data and metrics as a way for journalists to check whether their work meets society’s expectations (Yung, 2005).

## **Implications**

### ***Theoretical implications***

This study has several implications for scholars studying occupational identity in journalism. (1) Previous work has noted the importance of occupational identity for individuals to make sense of their work and give meaning to what they do, but mainly focused on ‘who we are’, and less attention has been paid to ‘what we do’ (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). The results of this study show and confirm that multiple variables need to be considered when studying occupational identity. It is not only about who journalists are but equally about what journalists do, their environment, what rituals and customs are common as well as economic and technological progress (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Schwartz et al., 2010). Precisely because journalists’ occupational identity is closely related to role perceptions and journalistic roles, and these concepts, in turn, depend on society's expectations, it is important

to look beyond just who journalists are and what they do (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). In the interviews, journalists also did not see these concepts in isolation. For example, now that everything is content and everyone is a creator, journalists value their role as public watchdog and their independence to research and base a story on news facts even more. Therefore, the researcher encourages scholars to further include the social and professional factors in their work on occupational identity.

(2) More research needs to be done on how journalists deal with tensions and threats to their occupational identity (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). Moreover, the lack of research on this topic is striking precisely because journalism faces one of the greatest challenges in the 21st century: the ongoing transformation in the media sector from print to digital. Building on previous research on identity threats in general, this study revealed how journalists perceive and deal with these tensions. For example, in line with the work of Ahuja (2022), journalists explained what distinguishes them from non-journalists, using esteem-enhancing self-definitions. Because of the rapidly changing journalistic arena and the role journalists play in society, how journalists view these changes and deal with the associated tensions deserves more research attention.

(3) This study contributes to what is already known about the influence of technological reconfigurations on occupational identity. Whereas Vaast and Pinsonneault (2021) discuss the convergence and generativity of a new technology in this context, most journalists in this study highlight the opportunities created by using new technologies. For example, by using audience data and metrics, they have gained a better understanding of what the public wants, which usually leads to improving their stories. What should be noted here is that the impact of new technologies, e.g., robot journalism, cannot always be overseen by many journalists. And although robot journalism is increasingly being discussed, only a few studies on the topic have included journalists' perceptions. This makes it more challenging to consider the impact of robot journalism (Kim & Kim, 2018). While the example of librarians studied by Nelson and Irwin shows just how important it is to reflect on adopting new technologies. In their research on occupational identity and new technologies, Nelson and Irwin state that occupational identity is 'an ongoing rhetorical endeavour' that professions constantly define who they are and who they are not (Nelson & Irwin, 2014; Ashcraft, 2007). Therefore, future research should further examine specific tensions related to new technologies to understand and define journalistic identity in this digital age (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021).

### ***Practical implications***

This study also has implications for practice because it offers insight into the profession's current developments and its professionals' identities in the rapidly changing journalistic arena. First, professionals must reflect on who they are and what they do and keep asking themselves what distinguishes them from other professionals on the playing field, furthermore, whether the current journalistic roles are still adequate for that purpose. This is confirmed by research from Vaast and Pinsonneault, who demonstrate that professionals whose work is heavily influenced by digital technologies need to analyze and adjust their occupational identity constantly, recognizing the tensions and threats and, above all, not avoiding them (Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2021). The fact that journalists in this study do not feel threatened by the entry of new technologies now does not mean that this need not be the case in the future. Consider the famous example of librarians who were confronted with the entry of online search engines. To prevent their profession from disappearing completely, librarians redefined their occupational identity and were thus able to avoid becoming redundant (Nelson & Irwin, 2014).

Second, this study offers practical implications for news organizations. The digital transition is in full swing, and many changes are yet to come. For example, journalists expect AI to play a much greater role shortly in society and journalism. Furthermore, the paper newspaper is expected to reduce circulation or disappear altogether. These significant changes could affect the occupational identity and, thus, the well-being of journalists. It is, therefore, crucial to keep the conversation going in news organizations about who journalists are and why they do things the way they do them. This is confirmed by the journalists who placed a high value on the importance of transparency towards the public and saw this as a solution to the growing problem of distrust in society. By extension, journalists in this context also stressed the importance of a joint morning or afternoon meeting with colleagues to reflect on the choices being made and how work is done to safeguard sacred values and codes of conduct.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Several limitations of the current study should be noted. First, related to the methodology utilized, participants were asked to reflect on their work and share experiences, providing insight into journalists' role perceptions, roles and identity. It is important to note that journalistic roles can be distinguished on two levels: role orientations (normative and cognitive roles) and role performance (practiced and narrated roles). "These categories of journalistic roles correspond to conceptually distinct ideas: what journalists think they ought to do, what journalists want to do, what journalists really do in practice, and what they say they

do” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 124). By explicitly asking journalists about the topics of this study, they are encouraged to turn to normative and cognitive roles and address what they think they ought to do (norms) and what they want to do (values). It is certainly not said that the behavioral dimensions of journalists’ roles are also captured by doing so. Therefore, one should also understand practiced and narrated roles to paint a complete picture of journalistic roles and journalists’ occupational identity. “[...] Because what journalists do and what they say they do are not necessarily the same things” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 124). Therefore, future research on this topic would benefit from using observation and content analysis to understand the similarities and differences between journalists’ role orientation and role performance.

It is also worth noting that the findings of this study may only apply to some organizational or national cultures. The qualitative interviews were conducted in the Netherlands and were limited to newspaper journalists. However, how journalists perceive their role depends on several factors. For instance, the collective influence of a country’s professional culture and the individual influence of other journalists play a critical role (Donsbach, 2012). Therefore, more studies are needed to investigate possible cultural differences and their influence on journalists’ occupational identity (Raemy, 2021).

Furthermore, it is important to note that the participants of this study are all permanently employed by a news organization. While at the same time, the number of freelance journalists in the Netherlands continues to grow, and thus journalism is increasingly being worked individually (Villamedia, 2023). In this context, Josephi and O’Donell refer to ‘outdated constraints in the traditional scholarly notion of who is a journalist’ (Josephi & O’Donell, 2022, p. 153). In sum, further studies should not only include journalists from other media than newspapers but should undoubtedly include freelance journalists as well.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined how journalists view their work, the changes their work is subject to and the potential consequences of these changes. This study reveals that in times of great change, journalists are not burying their heads in the sand but are instead well aware of significant societal and field-specific influences at play in the journalistic arena. The findings of this qualitative study show that when journalists’ occupational identity - who they are and what they do - is under pressure, a sense of ‘we-ness’ or a shared collective identity is reinforced. Furthermore, based on the analysis conveyed, this study helps improve the understanding how journalists cope with tensions in their identity due to current technological reconfigurations,

such as audience data and metrics and robot journalism. In this increasingly digitized world, there are many more professions whose identities are under pressure, but this study demonstrates all the more that journalists are different from others. Unlike doctors, advocates or accountants, journalism and its professionals have been working with an uncertain and fluid identity since its existence. The only thing in journalism that does not change is that everything changes. Referring back to its title, this article is an attempt to rethink real journalism. However, what is real? Journalists themselves describe real journalism as the ultimate quest for truth. The truth and nothing but the truth. As simple as it may seem: this article illustrates that the journalistic profession is anything but simple.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

The interview guide used in this study is presented below. As usual in this type of qualitative research, depending on the participants and the course of the interview, the questions asked may vary slightly.

#### Introduction to the interview

- Thank the respondent for participating in this study;
- State the reason for this research;
- Explain how this interview will be conducted;
- Emphasise that participation in this study is anonymous and ask permission to record the interview;
- Explain that pseudonyms will be used in the development of the interviews;
- State that no right or wrong answers are possible and that the participant will be sent the transcript for checking;
- Ask if there are any questions.

#### Background

- Can you tell me something about yourself?
  - *Background + what do you do at newspaper X/Y?*
- How did you get into this position?
  - *How long have you worked at this newspaper*
  - *Why did you become a journalist?*

#### Occupational Identity – what journalists do

- What would you describe as your main goal as a journalist?
  - *What are your main responsibilities and tasks? Can you give me some examples?*
- Can you describe a typical workday for me?
  - *What do you do, how do you do that, and why do you do that?*
- How do you come up with topics for your stories?
  - *How do you decide to write about a topic or not? Can you give me some examples?*
- What competences and skills are important to have as a journalist?
- Are there any tasks you perform that you feel are not part of your job as a journalist at all? Can you give me some examples?
- How do you know if you are doing your job well? When are you successful? Can you give me some examples?

#### Occupational identity - who journalists are

- How would you define who journalists are?
- Something that seems to strike me is the difficulty in determining whether someone is a journalist or not. How do you know if someone is a journalist or not?
  - *Why do you consider yourself a journalist? What are your qualities?*

- What are important norms and values for you in this work? And have these changed in recent years? Can you give me some examples?
  - *Focus on both personal and prevailing norms and values in the profession*

#### Developments

- What trends and developments do you think there are in journalism?
  - *Per trend/development, the implications for:*
    - ➔ *The profession and how the work is done*
    - ➔ *Competences and skills*
    - ➔ *Role of journalists*
    - ➔ *What do you think about this? How do you deal with this? Can you give me an example?*

#### Additional questions concerning robot journalism

- Do you use robot journalism in your work?
  - *YES: When and how do you use robot journalism? Can you give me some examples?*
  - *NEE: Why not?*
  - *Advantages and disadvantages? Can you give me some examples?*
- What do you think of the use of robot journalism?
  - *Can it be helpful in your work? Can you give me some examples?*

#### Future perspective

- How do you think journalism will evolve in the coming years?
- With that, what are the opportunities and threats for you as a journalist? How do you feel about this?

#### Concluding the interview

- Do you have any information to add?;
- Are there any questions?;
- Thank you very much for participating in this study.

## Appendix B

### Coding Scheme

**Table B.1**

*Coding Scheme*

Category	Subcategory	Sub-subcategory	Illustrative quote
Societal Influences	Everything is Content, Everyone a Creator	Citizens, influencers and bloggers	“A lot of people think they are journalists, but they are really just selling their own ideas and their own views.”
		Fake news	“With all the sources out there, with all the fake news. People continue to look for a place they can trust.”
		Rise of alternative media	“I do not hope, [...], that that kind of media is going to play a defining role.”
		Social media: inexhaustible source of information	“I look on TikTok or Instagram, then I just type in [municipality], and quite a lot comes up.”
	Distrust in Journalism	COVID-19 as turning point	“Especially during corona. You are increasingly accused of not being independent and a mouthpiece of the government.”
		Polarization: death to journalism	“I very much hope that this polarization does not continue.”

Category	Subcategory	Sub-subcategory	Illustrative quote
		Threats, aggression and intimidation	“The threats that journalists get these days. I think that is really ridiculous.”
		Winning people’s trust	“You notice that people are getting reluctant to talk to the press.”
	Quality Journalism under Pressure	End of paper newspaper	“We have had to accept that the group of people who have a newspaper subscription is a dwindling group and that that group is growing online.”
		Hyped view of news	“The 'gasp' is a trend prompted by the transition to online, but which, if we are talking about the newspaper profession, does threaten the position and reliability of a medium.”
		Speed versus reliability	“If it is speedy, you must work even more precisely.”
		Same work, with fewer people	“What do people think these days? That we all do this as a hobby all day? It is hard work.”
Field-specific Influences	Digital First	Online perpetual impact	“The fish used to go in the newspaper at the end of the day, and it was forgotten. [...] Online the impact is huge.”
		Online many more opportunities	“I like that because it means that you always have to move with the times.”
		More tasks on journalists’ plate	“It does not matter to me whether I record something with a video or with a notebook.”



Category	Subcategory	Sub-subcategory	Illustrative quote
		Multimedia thinking and working	“The biggest trend is that you no longer work one-dimensionally as a journalist.”
	Measurable Journalism	Better journalist with help from data	“You can see very well where people drop out in your story. Then you can test headlines, change the intro or adjust the picture.”
		Numbers do not say everything	“If something gets a good read or goes viral, that does not necessarily mean you did something good as a journalist.”
		Perfect story, perfect moment, perfect place	“For example, a story may perform three times better with a different headline above it.”
		Data as a measure of success	“I would be lying if I said I do not like it very much when a story is read a lot.”
	Entrance of the Robot Journalist	The robot as a useful tool	“That robotic software could assist in sorting through huge mountains of files.”
		The robot cannot replace a journalist	“You have to speak to people, you have to smell, see, taste, hear... A robot does not do all that.”
		Robot journalism: the great unknown	“To my mind, it is still a bit of a distant concept.”
Occupational Identity	Who Journalists Are	Sacred journalistic values	“You have to independently define what is happening somewhere.”
		A way of life	“It never really stops.”

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Category	Subcategory	Sub-subcategory	Illustrative quote
	What Journalists Do	Sacred journalistic codes of conduct	“A story should highlight a topic from several angles, so that you, the reader, at least get all the ingredients to form an opinion.”
		At its core the same work	“At the core, it remains the same. That is that you tell a story.”
	Who Journalists want to be	Public watchdog	“Keeping society on its toes. And then especially keeping organizations on their toes, someone has to stay on top of these things, checking them.”
		Critical news hunter	“Journalists question everything. Is distrustful in a good way. And are looking for the real story.”
		Connector	“I also want to show parts of society that are less visible to many people. Poverty, homelessness...”
		Entertainer	“Of course, light-heartedness is also needed more in a tougher world. So, we as an industry must also have an eye for show and human-interest stories again.”

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