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Comparing Risks to Journalism: Media Criticism in the Digital Hate

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ABSTRACT

This study examines digital media criticism—publicly shared evaluations and judgements of journalistic text and actors on various digital platforms—as a risk to journalism. It specifically interrogates how journalists negotiate the diverse nature of criticism in digital spaces and in a comparative context. Through qualitative interviews with practising journalists, the paper identifies the following four main journalistic responses to digital media criticism: consolidation (ringfencing journalistic discourse); filtering (cleaning up journalistic discourse); rationalisation (acknowledging criticism or non-responses) and counter-discourse (counteracting anti-media discourses). These responses, referred to as forms of *digital discursive resistance,* show that journalists are both defensive against and accommodating of risks to journalistic authority, but usually aim to reinforce and expand journalistic discourse in digital spaces.

KEYWORDS

Contextual comparative study; digital hate; digital media criticism; digital spaces; journalistic responses; metajournalistic discourse

Introduction

The rise of populism and digital hate has increased cynicism about journalism, disinformation, anti-press rhetoric and even personal attacks on journalists (Waisbord 2020a). Digital spaces are saturated with toxic discourses attacking the news media, marked by, among other practices, the instrumentalisation of labels such as "fake news," "*lügenpresse*,"[1] "*giraegi*"[2] or "*githeri*[3] media" (Beiler and Kiesler 2018; Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2018; Shin, Kim, and Joo 2021; Ugangu 2020). Such entrenched anti-media discourses in digital spaces have renewed scholarly interest in media criticism studies, especially because the critics involved include populist leaders and radical right-wing movements, whose rhetoric intensifies political polarisation and poses a threat to journalistic authority (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2018; Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2021).

Amid the changing nature of criticism of traditional journalism, it is thus most urgent to review how professional journalists cope in a turbulent digital discursive

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ecology—an expanded space for criticism of the profession. Therefore, the central aim of this article is to examine digital media criticism—generally defined here as popular or publicly mediated evaluations and judgements of journalism in digital spaces—as a risk to journalism. The specific focus is an interrogation of how journalists negotiate the varied nature of criticism in digital spaces and in a comparative journalistic cultural context.

What underlies the rise of digital media criticism today is digital publicity—an open invitation to the public to engage with journalists in digital spaces (Waisbord 2020b). Subsequently, in a variety of digital platforms, there are numerous kinds of critics and criticisms of journalism in the same space as journalists, along with the content of the news media. Furthermore, the discursive space of journalism in the digital age has grown exponentially. This space transcends national or media system boundaries (e.g., in cases where ardent critics of American news journalism emerge from Asia or Africa) (see, among others, Reese and Dai 2009; Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019). An intricate relationship between digital publicity and journalistic practice is giving rise to a new digital discursive ecology for journalism, the theoretical implications of which should be examined. As an emerging field, digital journalism studies have only just started to explore the consequent risks and challenges of these digital discourses.

Drawing from theoretical perspectives in media criticism and its discursive input to journalistic discourse (Carlson 2016; Wyatt 2007; Zelizer 1993), this study identifies the main theoretical riddle here as the unclear effects of digital publicity vis-à-vis the normative perspective of media criticism in journalism. I argue that digital media criticism illuminates how journalists negotiate the changing terrain of discourses, while at the same time grappling with the logics of digital space. In addition, digital media criticism shows how the digital discursive ecology expands metajournalistic discourses, and how journalists react to intensified scrutiny of the profession while coping with the risks associated with digital spaces.

The study concludes that in a largely unfamiliar terrain of digital criticism, the foremost challenge to journalists is how to cope with factionalised platforms, a diverse set of critics and, at the same time, highly polarised spaces. Of utmost importance to traditional journalists is to maintain news journalism's authority as the first line of defence against a deluge of critical and unpredictable anti-media discourse. This article offers two main contributions to the field of digital journalism. First, it positions digital media criticism as a risk to journalism that is largely defined by the tenuous line between legitimate discursive criticism and digital hate speech. Second, the study describes journalistic responses to a digital discursive ecology that features multiple actors and discourses that transcend the boundaries of journalistic culture.

Digital Media Criticism and Its Risks

Digital media criticism is still an underdeveloped area of discussion in digital journalism studies; however, this phenomenon perhaps presents not only an important risk to journalism as such, but may also have the potential to influence journalistic practice and accountability both positively and negatively. Growing studies into media criticism on digital platforms that mostly focus on incivility, far-right anti-press attacks and

threats to journalistic safety (see, among others, Waisbord 2020a; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2018) have insufficiently reflected on previous studies in media criticism (for example, Wyatt 2007; Carey 1974; Fengler 2012; Cheruiyot 2018). Inevitably, in current approaches, there is a disconnect between the normative perspectives of previous studies and the more recent critical perspectives in media criticism. Subsequently, the potential of media criticism to play a role in journalistic oversight has been overshadowed by cynicism about digital media criticism. While not underplaying the threats to the safety of journalists—for example, through online harassment, cyberbullying, racist and homophobic remarks (Gardiner 2018)—I argue that media criticism studies could benefit from an interrogation of the broader implications for digital journalism.

Digital media criticism can be viewed through three prisms. First, there is the well-entrenched normative perspective, which is a carryover from the history of popular media criticism. Second, there is its discursive influence on the practice and performance of journalism and, third, there is its potential as a risk to journalistic authority and a possible existential threat to the profession and institution of journalism.

First, in addressing the normative perspective, a brief background is required, as media criticism tends to appear as peripheral to core debates in journalism, especially about professionalism. The history of media criticism—which is predominantly American—largely takes this perspective: popular media criticism of the traditional media is seen as essential in transforming the media such that it adequately performs its public service function in a democracy. The celebratory view of media criticism sees critics—mostly social critics and veteran journalists—as potential "civilising voices" (Marzolf 1991), thus "modernising" journalism, or as "agents of social change" in reforming journalistic practice (Wyatt 2007). In the pre-digital era, scholars held the view that the dearth of "insightful" and transformative media criticism was to blame for the mistakes and failures of journalism (Lemert 1989, 12; Carey 1974; Brown 1974). Scholars considered popular media criticism to play a pivotal role in promoting media accountability as a practice, as well as press freedom and media literacy (Fengler et al. 2014; McQuail 2003). Additionally, criticism was seen as liberating for audiences, as the practice meant citizens were empowered to oversee the press (Hayes 2008; Marzolf 1991; Dicken-Garcia 1989). Moreover, media criticism is considered instrumental in media literacy: citizen-critics are considered "guides to the media landscape" or "expositors" in interpreting journalistic practices, news processes and conventions for the wider public (Snyder, Kelley, and Smillie 1995, 10; Carey 1974; Wyatt 2007; cf. Zirugo 2021).

Second, criticism in digital spaces brought hope of a participatory culture in journalism—one that would potentially position citizens as the "fifth estate" (Hayes 2008). User comments, in particular, were considered to reinforce interest in participatory journalism and its potential for a productive audience-journalist relationship (e.g., through news tips), as well as media accountability (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2016; Wolfgang 2021; Singer 2011; Mabweazara and Mare 2021). Scholars argued that when source criticism fails, news readers online may provide another form of oversight through user comments at the post-publication "interpretative stage" (Singer 2011). However, while these user comments spaces were meant to remain "open and unfettered" (Hermida 2011, 180), news organisations and journalists maintained

moderation practices, either from the newsrooms or through self-appointed readers. Moreover, hopes for deliberation in these spaces have been dashed as incivility has become rife and offensive remarks and attacks, especially aimed at women and minorities, have taken centre stage (Gardiner 2018), to the point where some news organisations have shut down these spaces altogether.

Third, the risks of criticism are considered to emerge from a rejection of rationality and an open gate to discourses that reinforce anti-press sentiment in digital spaces. As participants in a digital discursive ecology, journalists are inevitably faced with the risk of digital publicity, where in the course of their practice (production, distribution and dissemination of news) they are inevitably exposed to a turbulent space (Waisbord 2020b). This "risk perspective" in digital media criticism has only recently attracted interest and is still underexplored. Existing studies have focused on the insecurities, threats, harm and challenges to journalism when it entered a "risk society" (Beck 1992) in the digital age. This study follows the cue of McCurdy (2011), among others, to orient the risk perspective within the practice of journalism. Here risks imply the vulnerabilities that digital publicity engenders, professional consciousness of the potential dangers in a digital discursive ecology, as well as journalists' perceptions of how to grasp such risks.

Digital media criticism poses risks to journalism at multiple levels: the individual journalist level (the professional), the media organisation level (the news outlet) and the institutional level (media collectively). For the individual journalist, the risks include damage to mental and psychological health, reputation or job security. For the organisation or media outlet, there may be risks to revenue or relations with the state. For the institution, there may be risks to press freedom, trust or even the risk of dis/misinformation.

The critique of journalism in digital spaces is commonly marked by "offensive criticism," for example insults, including racist or sexists remarks (Cheruiyot 2018), which are sometimes accompanied by "anti-journalism trolling" (Waisbord 2020b, 2), "digital vigilantism" (Favarel-Garrigues, Tanner, and Trottier 2020) or "cancel culture" (Ng 2020). These sentiments and attacks in digital spaces may pose a risk to the safety and privacy of journalists. However, from a deliberative standpoint, some scholars have argued that even this irrational discourse possesses value as reflecting the full operationalisation of free speech in a democratic society (Santana 2014; Hayes 2008).

The name-calling of journalists and news organisations is one way through which journalistic discourse has been delegitimised and anti-press sentiments reinforced in digital spaces. Globally, social media users have instrumentalised the Trumpian phrase "fake news" to disparage the media. Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) argued that this label, which is often deployed to delegitimise the media, is potent and could breed self-censorship. Of significance in determining the potency of these delegitimising labels are the powerful figureheads behind it, who might include celebrity artistes and social media influencers but also politicians. Former American President Trump's deployment of the term "fake news," in particular, fuelled political polarisation in the US (Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2021) and possibly increased public distrust of American media. While disparaging labels could have a metajournalistic discursive value in showing the public's disaffection with the media, they thus also pose a risk to

journalistic authority. The possible effect of the preponderance of such negative branding could be the broader non-use or avoidance of media consumption, which is detrimental to any media literacy initiatives.

What emerges from these scholarly discourses about an area of study that has gradually evolved—mostly in media ethics and accountability studies—are two important aspects that I consider important to digital journalism studies. The first is that recent studies of digital media criticism take a pessimistic view on the discursive value of criticism of journalism. This is evident in numerous empirical studies of critical content, particularly user comments. The second is a narrow view of the discursive input of digital media criticism to journalism. There are limited studies into how news professionals perceive and engage with digital criticism, and thus scholars are yet to fully understand what the associated risks portend for journalism as an institution and profession.

Journalistic Responses to Digital and Other Criticism

There are three aspects to journalists' responses to criticism in digital spaces. First, journalists feel the need to protect journalistic discourses by showing that professional journalism is legitimate, thereby protecting the boundaries of the journalistic field. Second, news professionals have the impulse to control journalistic discourse and assert authority over an anti-journalism narrative within digital spaces. Third, journalists find a need to cope with the logic of digital spaces, to appropriate digital platforms for the production, dissemination and interpretation of journalistic discourse amid the chaotic public discourse.

Existing studies have shown that journalists feel the impulse to defend the profession when questioned or attacked as individuals, an organisation or the institution and, more generally, when their occupational ideology is threatened (Waisbord 2013; Carlson and Lewis 2015). Boundary maintenance practices such as openness to public criticism and peer criticism (as in the case of the ombudsperson's column) are measures aimed to ensure stability in the journalistic field. When journalists admit their mistakes and failures, and even publicly acknowledge unethical behaviour or inaccurate news, they are engaging in paradigm repair work that defends the profession (Klocke and McDevitt 2013; Hindman 2005).

Media criticism studies also identify strategic rituals such as objectivity (Tuchman 1972) as defence mechanisms against risks to journalistic authority. Strategic rituals come into play when journalists seek to shield the profession from criticism of news judgement. For example, when blamed for reporting populist leaders' polarising statements, objectivity serves as a justification for "reporting the facts as they are" (Klocke and McDevitt 2013; Glasser 2000). However, when strategic rituals serve as a weak defence, journalists comply with public discourse (cf. Lawrence and Moon 2021) and accept social norms; for example, the recent acknowledgement of the need for diversity in newsrooms through hiring more women following the #MeToo movement. In a digital discursive ecology, therefore, it becomes pertinent to not only maintain journalism boundaries but also journalistic discourse that faces the risk of oblivion in a recalcitrant anti-press discourse.

Coombs (1998) describes a defensive-accommodative continuum that includes various defensive strategies ranging from total defiance to an acceptance of blame (as applied in crisis communications), which has gained acceptance in media criticism studies. Groenhart and Bardoel (2011) applied the strategies in situations of criticism of journalism through an empirical analysis of letters from editors-in-chief in the Netherlands. The following are the seven responses that, according to Groenhart and Bardoel (2011, 11–14), apply to journalists: *rejection* (outright rebuttal of any critics' claims or even counter-attacks); *refutation* (more tempered denial of criticisms); *evasion* (acknowledgement of fault as a way to evade responsibility); *justification* (explaining away journalistic failure or error); *mitigation* (minimising mistakes through genuine excuses); *confession* (acknowledgement of responsibility); and *alteration* (self-correction and offering remedies). In a similar study targeting responses to criticism by editors in Sweden, von Krogh and Svensson (2017) found the defensive-accommodative continuum to largely recur, but with two additional dimensions: *ambivalence*, which refers to contradictory responses to criticism, and a call for *discussion* with critics. This final addition shows that in being prepared to open themselves up to deliberation with critics, journalists possess a willingness to engage with the public.

Scholars have primarily applied the defensive-accommodative continuum in the case of traditional criticism, while it remains untested with regard to digital media criticism. The defensive strategies might thus be inadequate, considering the new risks associated with the digital discursive ecology arising from the varied nature of critics (which includes conspiracy theorists, far-right movements and populist leaders), as well intensely polarised politics and fragmented audiences on a variety of platforms. In some cases, journalists have developed counter-discourse strategies to protect journalistic authority, beyond the traditional defence of autonomy. However, in their study of American newspaper editorials in response to Trump's anti-press rhetoric, Lawrence and Moon (2021) showed that this can be counter-productive, as some news organisations "may have played into Trump's rhetorical jujitsu" (169) in defence of press freedom against his labelling of liberal media as "fake news."

The expansion of the digital discursive ecology has also meant closer scrutiny of national media beyond geographical boundaries and, in particular, international news organisations. Existing media criticism studies have shown that interest in the accountability of the Western global media has grown in opposition to its entrenched culture of racial (mis)representations and stereotyping (Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019; Reese and Dai 2009). In researching how Western correspondents based in African news bureaus respond to criticism, for example, Nothias (2020) suggested the concept of *post-colonial reflexivity*—a multi-layered reflexive process concerning the production of misrepresentations in the global news media which shapes their journalistic responses to criticism. Post-colonial reflexivity expands on Frank's (2003, 442) perspective of "reflexive media criticism," which is described as a response to criticism through self-awareness of journalistic faults. The responsive strategies—whether latent or public—could point to an important relationship between journalists' realisation of their faults and their ultimate actions (e.g., remedies such as public apologies or changes in conduct) in the practice of journalism.

Finally, there is certainly a critical discursive role that journalists play in a digital discursive ecology. As creators and disseminators of the news in digital spaces, journalists are critical "members of a discursive community" (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 8). What this implies is that journalism itself (as a practice, profession, institution or ideology) is a critical object of the discourses within the digital space, while journalists become central actors in the discursive struggle over journalistic authority. In essence, it is thus important to examine how journalists view their position in this digital discursive ecology and thus how they negotiate the broad risks of criticism—either defensively or reactively. The following questions therefore guide this study:

RQ1: How do journalists discursively respond to digital media criticism?

RQ2: How do responses to digital media criticism compare across journalistic cultures?

To address these theoretical questions, I conducted qualitative interviews in two journalistic contexts—Kenya and South Africa. Furthermore, to add to the layer of empirical insights into the phenomenon of digital criticism, I employed a contextual comparative approach.

Methodology

A contextual comparative approach aims to explore a phenomenon—in this case, digital media criticism—as contextually understood across journalistic cultures. Powers and Vera-Zambrano (2018) propose "contextualism" as an alternative to traditional comparative studies, because it "aims to explain the mechanisms or principles that underlie the phenomena being observed across cases" (9). In the case of digital media criticism, contextualism taps into the specificities of journalistic cultures without the baggage of standardised dimensions common in traditional comparative studies. Traditional comparativists have called for studies that counter-balance "naïve universalism" and Western-centrism common in traditional cross-national studies (Esser 2013; Livingstone 2003). A contextual comparative approach responds to this call through appreciating cultural diversity and also by accommodating qualitative research that is not beholden to "out-of-context" measurements based on indicators defined in studies from the Global North (Livingstone 2003; Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2018).

In addition to being underrepresented in digital journalism studies, Kenya and South Africa, two largely similar emerging democracies, have robust media landscapes with a diverse set of media-critical digital publics (Cheruiyot 2018, 2019). They were chosen for this study into digital media criticism for two substantive reasons. First, as underlined in the previous section, it is important to understanding the current discursive media ecology that is the site of digital media criticism. Globally, journalists are faced with a variety of discourses in digital spaces, which makes it all the more important to view the discursive media ecology as not confined to discourses within a national context, but considered in a global space. Understanding the influence of digital media criticism on journalistic practice therefore can be enriched through cross-national studies, and furthermore through comparative studies that could reveal similarities and differences into how practitioners negotiate criticism within their own journalistic cultures.

Second, media criticism studies—especially within the field of journalism—are saturated in an American scholarly discourse, whose output is sometimes incorrectly justified as having "international applicability" (see, for example, Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2021, 3). More non-US studies are thus urgently needed in digital journalism studies to diversify and deepen perspectives into how traditional journalism negotiates a digital discursive space of criticism. In addition, cross-national studies into media criticism are scarce, and especially comparative studies with the potential to inform on this phenomenon in varied journalistic cultures, and most importantly, the peripheralised regions in journalism studies, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa.

As a justification for a contextual comparative study, Kenya and South Africa were selected based on "most similar systems" design (Kohn 1989). The selection and elimination of several possible candidates (national contexts) was guided by the following dimensions: state of media systems, media accountability systems, public service media, freedom of the press, online freedom, internet penetration, type of democracy and geopolitical influence. Apart from the two countries chosen, the other possible candidates for this specific study were Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania and Zimbabwe (see Table 1). Kenya and South Africa became the most suitable match as they have a shared colonial history, they are emerging democracies, and both would largely be considered close journalistic cultures experiencing similar challenges to professionalism in a disruptive digital age.

In-Depth Interviews

The data analysed was based on in-depth interviews with 15 practising journalists in Kenya and 12 in South Africa. Of the 27 journalists, 11 were female. When the interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2018, all the respondents worked for legacy news media in the two countries. These included newspapers, TV and radio (and/or their digital platforms) that were owned by the major media groups in the two countries, such as the Nation Media Group in Kenya and Media 24 in South Africa. The interviews were conducted in person in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Nairobi. The journalists had experience in the profession of between 3 and 27 years, all had social media accounts (either Twitter or Facebook, or both) except one, who accessed social networks through his news organisation's platforms. The questions focused on the critics and criticisms of their work and that of their news organisations in a variety of digital spaces (social networks and/or blogs); their responses to the critics, and their reactions to the content of criticism and the critics. The thematic coding analysis of the interview transcripts focused on: (a) how journalists describe the variety of criticisms on social networks, and (b) their actions in response to the varied nature of media criticisms. The researcher followed procedural and institutional ethical guidelines for qualitative research, for example through seeking informed consent from participants.

Findings: Digital Discursive Resistances

In response to RQ1, *How do journalists discursively respond to digital media criticism?,* I identified several themes which I group together as *digital discursive resistances* or

Table 1. Mapping of the possible country choices for a contextual cross-national comparison.

Countries	Mainstream media type	Media regulation[4]	Freedom of the Press[5]	Freedom on the Net[6]	Internet penetration[7]	Democracy type[8]	Global influence
Ghana	Public service, private media	Statutory regulation	Partly free	No records	27.8%	Flawed	Regional
Kenya	Public service, Big media	Co-regulation, Ombudsmen	Partly free	Free	81.8%	Hybrid	Geo-political
Nigeria	Public service, private media	Statutory regulation	Partly free	Partly free	48.8%	Hybrid	Geo-political
South Africa	Public service, Big media	Self-regulation, News ombudsmen	Partly free	Free	51.6%	Flawed	Geo-political
Tanzania	Public service, private media	Self-regulation	Partly free	No records	6.5%	Hybrid	Regional
Uganda	Public service, private media	State regulation	Partly free	Partly free	31.3%	Hybrid	Regional
Zimbabwe	Public service, private media	State regulation, News ombudsmen	Not free	Partly free	41.1%	Authoritarian/ Nominal	Regional

rather, journalists' reactionary practices when faced with criticism in digital spaces. First, from the findings, the journalists' description of their responses to critics and criticism largely tend towards defensive strategies in shielding journalism as a profession. What is particularly noteworthy, however, are the ways in which journalists negotiate the varied nature of turbulent public discourse in digital spaces and the associated risks. While the forms of digital discursive resistance identified largely align with findings of previous studies that show journalists are usually defensive when faced with criticism (for example, von Krogh and Svensson 2017), multi-layered response strategies to coping as participants in digital spaces were revealed. Drawing from the data analysed, I identified four main forms of digital discursive resistance: consolidation, filtering, rationalisation and counter-discourse.

Consolidation

These are strategies that tend towards defending journalistic discourse from digital media criticism in order to evade risks to journalistic authority. In consolidating journalistic discourse, journalists discredit critics, dismiss criticism and shield the news media and themselves from blame in digital spaces. The common ways to dismiss criticism and critics are arguments about incivility, hate speech and unfair attacks. Journalists describe digital networks as chaotic and lacking in rational and reasoned critics, and identify digital media critics as detractors, who should thus be "ignored" (TV reporter, South Africa) or "not taken seriously" (newspaper editor, Kenya). Journalists are aware that personal attacks and cyberbullying, especially when coordinated and consistent on social networks, may breed self-censorship (see Waisbord 2020a; Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019).

Consolidating practices further tend towards individual or coordinated responses in defence of the profession. The most common consolidating defence strategies are statements of media freedom and independence, which are consistently shared and replicated in digital spaces, especially in situations of intense criticism over a journalistic failure. For example, a strong argument in the anti-press rhetoric that is occasionally rebuffed by South African journalists is the accusation of "media capture"—a term used to refer to the unholy alliances between politically connected individuals and the media that could be detrimental to editorial independence. While "media capture" is fodder for digital media critics, it is most often used as a generalised critique of political bias concerning the mainstream media in South Africa. To consolidate their position, journalists assert their editorial independence but at the same time point the finger at deviant journalists or news media organisations (during the period of interviewing, it was usually ANN7—Africa News Network that was accused of "media capture"). Pointing out deviants in journalism is a common response that is employed to stabilise journalistic discourse (McDevitt 2011).

Finally, journalists also take positions in support of their professionalism and ethical standards when accused of bias or factual errors in the news, which has also been noted in existing studies (Klocke and McDevitt 2013). In the case of digital media criticism, consolidating strategies could take the form of individual replies and rebuttals on social networks, or simply through their news organisation's statements clarifying a

story or dismissing a critic's claims. In their responses, journalists invoke norms such as objectivity to argue, for example, that "facts were presented as they are" (newspaper editor, South Africa). This occurred in both Kenya and South Africa when journalists were criticised for reporting on hate speech. Strategic rituals such as objectivity and boundary maintenance strategies tend to preserve journalistic discourse in emphasising autonomy and professionalism (Klocke and McDevitt 2013; Tuchman 1972).

Filtering

Filtering involves ways of undercutting critics, evading criticism or simply dismissing them to minimise risks. The main objective of filtering is most often the "cleaning" up of journalistic discourse. These practices mark the limits of criticism, but also the profession's centrality in a digital discursive ecology. Filtering practices, however, largely suggest that journalists actively engage with digital media critics and consume criticism regardless of its nature (see types of criticisms in Cheruiyot 2018). After extracting themes from the data, I identified the following ways of filtering: cancelling critics, demarcating criticisms and the discursive construction of good attributes.

Cancelling Critics

In digital spaces, journalists employ several ways to remove, reject or renounce criticism they deem inappropriate, as well as earmark and dismiss offending critics. The common ways of cancelling involve blocking critics from social network pages or reporting abuse, either directly on their pages or through the social networks. Other ways include flagging "notorious critics" (editor, South Africa) to their peers, usually concerning bloggers.

While the decisions to cancel are largely taken individually, the social media policy guidelines of news organisations also play a role. Cancelling critics may imply that journalists are ignoring the concerns they raise, and their inaction may spur even more criticism in digital spaces and anti-journalistic discourses. Craft and Vos (2018, 966) argue there is a "dearth of listening" in journalism practice today, which inevitably contributes to "increasingly contested notions of facts and expertise" in journalism. Cancelling does not shield journalists from the risks of coordinated attacks or mob censorship online. Cancelling is also a method that social critics deploy against other individuals and institutions, as has been documented in recent studies into "cancel culture" (Ng 2020).

Demarcating Criticisms

Journalists construct ideas about what criticism they should expect and that which they consider abhorrent. There are two aspects that are important in the demarcation of criticisms and, subsequently, in the identification of risks. First is the tendency to mark certain *critics* in digital spaces as "legitimate" critics whose criticisms matter to journalism (Cheruiyot 2018). These critics tend to be veteran journalists or practising journalists, as identified in previous studies, but also social media influencers with close relationships to traditional news media and journalists. In identifying critics, both

the nature of and motives for their criticisms matter. For example, in Kenya, media-critical bloggers are considered to be motivated by clickbait.

The second aspect is marking *criticisms* that are acceptable and those that are unpalatable. This process is multi-layered and involves identifying a variety of criticisms ranging from the offensive to the analytical (see also, Cheruiyot 2018). While journalists simply dismiss the offensive criticism (the vile, the hateful and the threatening), they also inevitably use these as a gauge of public sentiment, while maintaining a distanced engagement with them. For example, I asked an online news reporter how she responds to common offensive criticisms, for example, the racist insult "kaffir" used against black journalists in South Africa. The journalist stated:

> I ignore people who have hateful things to say—inciting violence or harm on social media. My work is just to put the story out there, and let them start a conversation amongst their social circles. I do understand the argument that journalists should engage with readers to create conversation with the person who is dispelling knowledge from others.

While the respondents filtered digital media criticism in a variety of ways, it is particularly noteworthy that, even in attempting to ignore offensive criticism, it appears to trigger self-examination of their work. The respondents reported that they were aware of the emotive nature of criticisms, especially in periods of public anger over journalistic errors, and in some cases, they discuss possible remedies in their newsrooms. The public's capacity to inform internal discourse and trigger self-reflexivity among journalistic actors (Zelizer 2017) could be considered an important role of digital media criticism. This leads to the third aspect of filtering.

Discursive Construction of Good Attributes

While primarily a latent activity, journalists filter criticisms in digital spaces through the construction of attributes of "good criticism" (cf. Carey 1974). This practice of filtering entails identifying the criticisms—despite a deluge in digital spaces—that can be considered acceptable and helpful to journalists. The good attributes that were often mentioned by respondents were fairness, honesty, objectivity, facticity, sincerity, positivity and civility. These attributes partly align with journalistic norms and values, but also show that there are important boundary markers between acceptable and unacceptable criticisms. The process of identifying good attributes of criticism indicates journalistic self-awareness of the opportunities (in contrast to risks) offered by criticism, but also the tensions that arise in negotiating the terms of engagement with critics. Some journalists even publicly define the terms for engaging with critics in digital spaces; for example, by declaring on their social media profiles or pinned posts the nature of discussions they would engage in (as "constructive" or "non-political"). While media criticism studies in general argue for a deliberate effort to build a "critical community" (Brown 1974; Carey 1974), the terms of engagement have never been more significant than in the digital age (cf. Waisbord 2020b).

Rationalisation

While rationalisation echoes the description of *justification* by Groenhart and Bardoel (2011), this goes beyond explaining supposed failures and errors and demonstrating

them as necessary in the practice of journalism. Justification means journalists accept responsibility for an action. Rationalisation implies that in self-reflection on criticism, journalists not only accept responsibility and the conditions inherent in a digital discursive ecology, but do so as a way to minimise risks to themselves, their organisation and the media as an institution. Journalists look beyond the toxic discourse and hostile rhetoric in a digital discursive ecology, while acknowledging digital media criticism as a risk of digital publicity (Waisbord 2020b). When journalists rationalise, they acknowledge offensive criticism as hazards they have to deal with in their line of work (newspaper reporter, South Africa). It is also about coping with the information-glut through strategic choices about when to respond and who to respond to:

> It (criticism) is part of the job and today it's even worse because you get feedback from social media instantly, and you get it from all sorts of people and you have to deal with it. Nobody will give you a rule book and say this is what to say. (Newspaper editor, Kenya)

Rationalising practices also include the acknowledgement of the varied nature of criticism and its ubiquity in digital spaces; for example, one respondent asserted that "the best you can do is ignore it" (TV reporter, South Africa). Non-response in digital spaces does not necessarily mean journalists do not heed the criticism; as we saw above, journalists tend to self-examine when criticised. Further probing revealed journalists—individually or collectively—undertake a variety of rationalising actions depending on the nature, timing and possible risks of the criticism, such as a threat to the news organisation's reputation.

Counter-Discourse

These strategies entail journalistic sentiments and actions that aim to counteract digital media criticism and thus offset risks to journalistic authority. Journalists show openness to engaging with critics as individuals as well as in coordinated responses where common positions are taken in periods of persistent criticism. To some extent, counter-discourses align with Groenhart and Bardoel's (2011) strategy of *mitigation and alteration* in that journalists admit to clarifying their positions while pointing to reformed journalistic practice. While there is a strong indication of a willingness to engage in discussion with critics, even more so, journalists impose their opinions in digital spaces as a way to counteract negative discourse. However, the journalists who were interviewed also mentioned tensions that arise in digital spaces when criticisms not only question their professionalism, but their positions on issues of gender equity and racial justice, for example.

In Kenya, in response to accusations that the media give too much news coverage to polarising political debates and pay less attention to "development" issues, journalists feel they have to remind the public of their role in exposing corruption, which they claim is critical for reforms in governance. In South Africa, in response to critics on social media who point to the tendency of the mainstream media to give prominent coverage to newsmakers accused of racism, the journalists argued for the importance of the subject for the health of the country's political discourse. Just like the strategy of consolidation, journalistic norms such as objectivity are deployed in

Table 2. Prominent response strategies of journalists in Kenya and South Africa.

Response	Kenya	South Africa
Consolidation: ringfencing journalistic discourse	Mostly individual responses e.g., retweeting and posting in support of professionalism media and media freedom.	Both coordinated and individual responses but mostly as propping up statements from news organisations or media associations in support of media independence.
Filtering: "cleaning up" discourse or evading risks	Mostly cancelling critics, e.g., blocking critics or deactivation of social network accounts and demarcating criticisms.	Cancelling critics and demarcating criticisms.
Rationalisation: acknowledging criticisms or non-responses	Coping mechanisms such as ignoring criticism.	Coping mechanisms such as ignoring criticism.
Counter-discourse: statements and actions meant to counteract criticisms	Active responses in support of editorial positions and against "critics" ethics'.	Active responses in social networks in support of viewpoints about social and political issues.

developing a counter-discourse concerning the effectiveness of norms in professionalising journalism. For example, the journalists argued that critics themselves are not objective in their criticism of supposed bias in political news.

Comparing Discursive Resistances

In response to RQ2, *How do responses to digital media criticism compare across journalistic cultures?*, I identified similarities and differences based on these four digital resistance strategies of consolidation, filtering, rationalisation and counter-discourse (see Table 2). What is notable when comparing responses to digital media criticism by journalists in Kenya and South Africa is that they use largely similar strategies but they are applied differently in each context.

In relation to consolidation as a response strategy to forestall risks to journalism, practices of affirming media freedom, media independence and professionalism were common, but a few differences can be noted in the two journalistic cultures. In South Africa, respondents were more attuned to coordinated responses to digital media criticism, and most often were motivated by their news organisations, media councils, media watchdogs or media associations. To coordinate responses, the journalists and their news organisations incorporated statements from the media councils or journalism associations such as the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF). Generally, South Africa's media accountability landscape is broad and there is a vibrant discourse about the state of journalism (see, among others, Beer et al. 2016; Harber 2014).

In Kenya, journalists more often engage in the defence of professionalism on social networks as individuals; for example, by affirming that they are "competent" (newspaper reporter, Kenya) or objective, when accused of poor-quality journalism and/or political bias. In some cases, journalists shared statements from newsmakers or political actors supporting the free press (e.g., a case where a declaration in support of the free press by the country's Chief Justice was co-opted in response to critics on social networks).

In relation to filtering risks of digital media criticism, journalists attempt to set the terms of engagement with critics by identifying and evading the extremes of digital spaces. Of all the strategies, these filtering practices were most similar in Kenya and

South Africa, with the most common methods used at the time of the interviews being the cancelling of critics and demarcating criticisms. A common way of cancelling was blocking critics engaging in abhorrent remarks on social networks, for example those notorious for racist slurs (South Africa) or ethnic insults (Kenya).

With respect to the rationalisation of risks, in both countries, journalists acknowledged the chaotic state of the digital space, but still kept abreast of conversations regarding news journalism in digital spaces. A few chose to ignore criticism entirely or withdraw from their social networks temporarily during periods of public outrage.

Finally, in relation to counter-discourses to digital media criticism, the responses were largely similar but there were few differences in approach between the two journalistic cultures. In Kenya, journalists' defence on social networks most often involved demonstrating support for professionalism, while in South Africa, the journalists more often expressed political positions (and even social norms) to counter claims of political bias.

The findings can largely be explained by the fact that both journalistic cultures are quite similar in terms of: strong private media (meaning both have independent media that are relatively free from state interference, but at the same time face challenges of commercialisation and market censorship); the media accountability landscape (both countries have active press councils and strong press watchdogs); political issues plaguing the media (subject to ethnically and racially polarising politics); and a relatively free digital space (see also Table 1).

However, it should be noted that while journalists would largely employ similar strategies in response to digital media criticism as a risk to journalism, cross-national differences emerged with respect to specific issues or subjects of criticism (which is beyond the scope of this study). While the differences could be subject to further study, it would appear that South Africa's expansive media accountability infrastructure would promote a more coordinated approach in response to digital media criticism, while Kenya, with a less robust system, would be likely to rely more on responses by individual journalists.

Conclusion

This study found that journalists employ the following forms of discursive resistance in digital spaces to evade or minimise risks to journalism: consolidation (ringfencing journalistic discourse); filtering (cleaning up journalistic discourse); rationalisation (acknowledging criticism or non-responses) and counter-discourse (countering anti-media discourses). Comparatively speaking, it emerged that South African and Kenyan journalists respond in similar ways. Both negotiate, first, the balance between the public's discursive input to journalism and the safety of journalists in digital spaces; and, second, the methods of negotiating digital attacks and offensive criticism are also similar. The few differences that emerged mainly concerned the prominence of country-specific social or political issues that were the local common subjects of criticism.

The implication of these findings is that in a chaotic digital discursive ecology, the foremost need of journalists is to grapple with factionalised platforms, the concurrent diversity of critics and the varied forms of criticism in these highly polarised spaces. Of

utmost importance to traditional journalists is to maintain journalistic authority (Lawrence and Moon 2021; Carlson 2017) as the first line of defence against the risks of a digital discursive ecology. However, the journalists deployed several forms of digital discursive resistance: they made use of the assumed power of digital platforms to engage with audiences; engaged in journalistic discourse (e.g., asserting professional norms); and sought allies (e.g., media associations or press councils) to offset, sidestep or steer clear of the risks of digital media criticism.

In cases of intense criticism over errors in the news, journalists individually responded through their social networks but also retweeted/reposted supportive statements. Such practices reveal journalists' tendency to employ social-control tactics, especially in periods of public outrage and vicious political discourse (McDevitt 2011). These forms of digital discursive resistance are important because they could point to influences on journalistic practice, media performance and quality. It is, however, important to note that criticism and the journalistic response to it are interdependent. The nature of criticism may have direct implications for the way journalists react to the associated risks.

Finally, the digital space is instrumental in building a discursive relationship between critics and journalists. It is also the platform through which metajournalistic discourse is produced and disseminated for the consumption of both journalistic and non-journalistic actors. Furthermore, the digital space is essential for the development of a critical (digital) community (Carey 1974) and the participation of the public in the scrutiny of media content, the institution and journalists. It is diverse, meaning that criticism transcends geographical boundaries, and it is open to varieties of voices (e.g., both the news consumers and avoiders). However, it is important to note that participation in digital spaces is "segmented by interest and structured by inequality" (Couldry and Curran 2003, 13), and this could therefore mean that digital media criticism is inadequate as a representative accountability mechanism.

It is important to point out that this study has its limits because it focused on the anticipated consequences of criticism based on journalists' perceptions and not on critics and their dispositions as risks to the media themselves. The variety of popular media critics in digital spaces is large, ranging from scholars and watchdog organisations to trolls or media manipulators. Their motives may be altruistic or anarchistic, while recent studies have shown that social media users may not consider themselves as risks to the media but as guardians of social values or norms (Huang 2021). Future studies should interrogate critics as sources of risk to journalism, their motives in criticising journalism and the implications for digital journalism.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the field of digital journalism by expanding our understanding of digital media criticism in the midst of the rise of anti-media rhetoric and digital hate. It further elaborates on the common strategies used by journalists to respond to media criticism, focusing on public discourse about the media as generated and disseminated in digital spaces and across journalistic cultures.

Notes

1. German right-wing critics employ '*lügenpresse*' or 'lying media' to demonise the media.
2. '*Giraegi*' or 'thrash' is used to mean the media in South Korea spreads falsehoods.

3. '*Githeri*' – a cheap maize and bean meal in Kenya – is used to refer to bad journalism.
4. This is based on the type of regulation and the presence of independent news ombudsmen (see http://newsombudsmen.org/).
5. This is the measure of online freedom (Freedom House). https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2016.
6. This is the measure of media independence in a country (Freedom House). https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2017.
7. The percentage of Internet users per population - Internet World Stats (ITU 2017). See: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm#africa.
8. The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index distinguishes four categories of democracy: *Full democracies* are marked by strong constitutionalism, respect of political freedoms and civil liberties as well as good governance. Nations with *flawed democracies* have relatively developed democratic culture of elections and respect of rights, but may still experience poor governance. *Hybrid democracies* have weak democratic institutions, state repression of dissent, rampant corruption and weak rule of law. *Authoritarian/Nominal regimes* are 'outright dictatorships' with suppressed civil liberties and freedoms. https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index

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