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USING THE CRISIS: MEDIA STUDIES PEDAGOGY AND THE PANDEMIC

ANDREW Ó BAOILL, PH.D.
School of English and Creative Arts, NUI Galway

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic threw into sharp relief – and in some ways sharpened – existing structural inequalities, both within academia, and in the broader social systems within which it operates. However, the pandemic, and the ensuing disruption of university operations, offer opportunities for embracing a fresh vision of the role of media studies, and for reorganising how we do our work. Critical scholars have previously explored the tensions inherent within our current model of media education, including the ideological space inhabited by media studies. This paper offers a political economic analysis of some of the ways in which we can use this moment of reshape media studies education in a positive manner.

Keywords: COVID-19 ▪ critical pedagogy ▪ crisis ▪ media studies

1. INTRODUCTION

McChesney notes (2013), in the context of media systems, the existence of 'critical junctures' when old certainties break down and there is – for a time – a possibility for radical restructuring. A critical juncture in media requires – in McChesney's model – at least two of three factors: a new technology that challenges the existing system; a major political crisis; and challenges to the legitimacy of the existing system (p. 67). While McChesney is, of course, focused on the media system itself, the COVID-19 pandemic (along with other systemic pressures) contribute to opening up such a moment for media education. This juncture, then, offers opportunities for embracing a fresh vision of the role of media studies, and for reorganising how we do our work.

Critical scholars have previously explored the tensions inherent within our current model of media education, including the ideological space inhabited by media studies as part of 'Humanities II' as Miller terms those emerging fields that have found favour within the neoliberal university, often being placed in tension (for resources and recognition) and contradistinction with 'traditional' humanities (2012). Critical media and communication studies have rich legacies (Dolber & Ó Baoill, 2018) but

have often been marginalised within the communications field. One leading political economist of media (Mosco, 2009) identifies three broad themes of interest to critical political economists of media: commodification, structuration, and spatialisation. Mosco's work is helpful here, given his interest in the manner, in which structural factors, including institutional power and ideology, shape the impact of digitisation. In this paper I briefly sketch out the opportunities (and some of the challenges) the current situation presents for undergraduate media studies education in each of the thematic areas he identifies, drawing in particular on my own experiences and previous research in the media studies sector, largely in the United States and Ireland, and more generally across the region identified by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as associated with the Liberal North Atlantic or Liberal model of media. The paper thus offers a framework for undertaking analysis and review of our pedagogical systems during this critical juncture.

2. A MOMENT OF CRISIS

As institutions, universities are good at replicating process, but poor at pivoting quickly. This seems to be exacerbated by the managerialism that now dominates the contemporary university, with each fragmented unit subject to near-constant assessment of short-term quantified metrics of 'success' (Schuetze, 2012, p. 63), frequently high-stakes, as access to funding (and in some cases, actual continued employment) dependent on narrow measures of success or failure.

In the early stages of the pandemic, as universities moved to shut campuses midway through semester, many instructors were directed that the 'pivot' online should consist of synchronous delivery of traditional lectures, using online video conferencing tools. This represented something of a fetishisation of the trappings of university instruction, rather than a consideration of the actual learning process. Large-scale lectures, and the associated practice of student note-taking, emerge out of particular exigencies political economic circumstances: the need to provide content at scale (and under budget), where students were already co-located, and at a time when asynchronous interactive tools (such as books) were limited. As Duch, Groh & Allen note, "lecturing is still efficient and has persisted as the traditional teaching method largely because it is familiar, easy, and how we learned. It does little, however, to foster the development of process skills to complement content knowledge" (2001, p. 5). All too often, the manner in which the learning process is discussed is grounded in what Freire (1967) termed the 'banking model' of education, which encourages students to see their core 'work' as being attending lectures and taking notes, rather than engaging actively with more complex tasks, such as application or synthesising. This seems interrelated with the increasing pressure on universities, and instructors, to act as service providers within a commercial marketplace. It is often easier – if misleading – to articulate the 'service' received by customer-students from X hours

of content than it is to communicate the transformational nature of a participatory learning activity.

Quite soon, however, we could see evidence of 'Zoom fatigue' (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020), as the limits of transposing instruction from one mode to another became clear. The inefficiencies of synchronous monological instruction – acceptable when weighed against its advantages for in-person instruction – were intensified online, with students complaining of overwork, while instructors bemoaned the lack of interaction and the non-verbal cues that shape our performance of a lecture. Merely replicating the structure of in-person teaching online was clearly not sufficient, and the disadvantages of over-reliance on live video for transmission of information – and the potentially discriminatory impacts – are becoming clear. But the broader developmental value of university education also suffered. This included, of course, various co-curricular activities – study abroad, service learning, off-campus work placements and the other forms of pedagogical projects that rely on presence in particular spaces – with both students and the groups with which they had planned to work suffering. It had a particular impact on the opportunistic activities that sit on the margins of the university system, lacking official imprimatur or administrative champions – the community member auditing a class (or, indeed, simply sitting in on a lecture informally); collaborations and informal links between student organisations and members of the local community.

The pandemic also threw into sharp relief – and in some ways sharpened – existing structural inequalities, both within academia, and in the broader social systems within which it operates. Internet-based remote learning – particularly synchronous video – presumes access not only to equipment (computer) and services (broadband), but also to appropriate workspaces. Some of those issues are relatively easily fixed – the Irish government has launched a scheme (DFHERIS, 2020) to provide thousands of laptops to students – but others are more complicated. In consequence, we have more recently seen criticisms of the privacy violations (and presumptions) inherent in classroom policies requiring that students keep their cameras on during synchronous online sessions. There are also complicated issues of power, privilege, and economics involved in the very decisions of students whether to return to their study for the current academic year, or instead to defer completion of studies for a year (or potentially more). For academics, there is evidence of institutions engaging in "a new flood of academic governance violations since the pandemic began" (Bailey, 2020).

The funding shortfall faced by Irish universities – exacerbated by a longstanding neo-liberal ideology that has encouraged a reliance on funding from (presumed) well-heeled international students and ancillary sources – has resulted in my own institution (in Ireland) developing a new policy that requires many postgraduate research students to provide unpaid teaching labour of up to 150 hours per year (Furey, 2020). Such tactics predate the current crisis, of course, but illustrate the manner in which economic uncertainty at an institutional level can have particularly onerous impact on the already precarious, and contribute to increases in

inequality. Kuehn (2013) and others (Dolber & Ó Baoill, 2018) have drawn attention to the dynamics of 'hope labour' that operate in media work, and also in academia, where those hoping to secure employment in the sector are under pressure (external and internal) to provide unpaid labour, in the hope that it functions as an investment, rewarded by potential paid future employment. The reliance on revenue from ancillary sources – from accommodation, from campus dining, and (in the US) from student athletics – along with fears regarding recruitment put pressure on administrators to return to on-campus instruction in the new academic year, despite public health concerns.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF CRITICAL EDUCATION IN THE 'NEW HUMANITIES'

In multiple higher education systems we are seeing a hollowing out of the middle ranks of faculty, with larger administrative ranks, the emergence of a relatively highly paid 'star' caste, and the work of instruction increasingly delegated to contingent – adjunct, sessional, precarious – labour. Concerns over the increasing reliance on contingent labour partner debates about the appropriate role of internships, and critiques such as those of Toby Miller (2012), who acknowledges both the "legitimate aspects" of the systems of accountability that quantify and evaluate, for example, research proposals, or 'value add', and the need to maintain autonomy as a field. How, Miller wonders, can the humanities in the United States – which have seen significant reductions in enrolments and shares of resources in recent decades – demonstrate its relevance to issues of public policy; respond to the political economic imperatives of changing funding, demographics, and social contexts; and sustain an integrated approach to the field's identity. How can we, he wonders, overcome "a radical disarticulation between professors, prophets, and practitioners"?

The position of media studies and journalism education within these debates is an interesting one. Miller notes, in the US context, that the changing demographics of the undergrad population – with growth in numbers occurring primarily in the lower socioeconomic sections of the population – is prompting an increasing interest in vocational education, and courses with a clear professional path. Media production courses, more than others, have long relied on practitioners for content delivery, so our relationship with issues of contingent labour differs from many other areas of the academy, particularly within the humanities. With an established history of internships, and work placements, coupled with a strong thread of critical analysis and radical critique, there are significant constitutive tensions within the field (Dolber & Ó Baoill, 2018).

Given the longstanding linkages between media education and industry, the case for focusing on developing critical student capacities is arguably particularly compelling. As Brockbank and McGill argue, "the prospect of encouraging autonomous yet interdependent critically reflective learners [...] can be realised where those responsible for policy and action at institutional levels are prepared to support

facilitative methods" (2007, 336). That is, fostering critical learning depends on institutional support and engagement. A significant challenge of course is that, as Miller and others have explored, the trend in universities – driven by economic and other pressures – has been towards media education in service of (primarily commercial) industry. Brockbank and McGill also identify a cultural resistance within universities – linked to an older elitism and a romanticisation of the role of the professor – "to teaching as professional practice" (2007, 112) and a resulting "unexamined and unreflected practice of teachers in higher education" (2007, 113).

A critical pedagogy that seeks to imbue students with a Freirian critical consciousness must first grapple with this tension – an ideology of exceptionalism within university education, which understand the protection of central values of intellectual freedom as being grounded, and intrinsically bound to, a vocational vision of 'the scholar' that not only is increasingly at odds with the conditions within which most (if not all) scholars work, but constitutes a false consciousness that militates against both effective action to shape the political economy of academic labour and also to position the academy as an effective agent of social change. There is appropriate suspicion among academics that process changes in higher education emanate from a drive towards corporatisation that commodifies the learning process, devalues learning, and is agnostic at best (and antagonistic at worst) towards the development of a critical social consciousness among students. However, we must not allow reasonable suspicion to drive us towards a wholesale – and reactionary – rejection of the utility and potential of pedagogical tools. It is from this perspective that we can draw on Brockbank and McGill's advocacy for a critical and reflective approach to the work of teaching, one that assists us in what Burbules and Callister have termed "the process of rethinking the meaning and ends of education" (2000, 17) that "maintains a critical distance from our tools, even when – especially when – we find them most useful" (2000, 179).

Alongside a need for reflective practice on the part of critical teacher-scholars, inculcating critical engagement in our students can fruitfully draw on the tools of reflective learning, as a means to bridge practice-based training and critical theory-led learning. Reflective learning, as a practice, can encompass a range of activities, from 'reflection-in-action', through dialogue about practice, to reflection on the practice of learning through reflection itself (Brockbank & McGill, 2007, 88–97). Some critiques of reflective practice note that the concept of 'reflection' can be trivially synonymous with 'thinking', or simply reduced to an instrumental approach to learning, and that the quality of engagement matters (Brockbank & McGill, 2007, 100–103). There is also a risk that reflection can be focused on the responsibility of the individual, to the exclusion of attention to systemic analysis of power and practice. For critical scholars and teachers of media, a pedagogy that includes reflective practice can operate, then, on a number of levels: we should encourage students to critically assess the media systems within which they operate; we can foster an understanding of individual agency (and its limits) as learners and media professionals; and through

encouraging a reflective approach to the process of learning in and about the media, we can assist students to uncover parallels between systems of media and education which will support a critical consciousness that can be generalised and applied to other domains of action (Dolber & Ó Baoill, 2018). That is, a reflective media studies pedagogy can contribute to (indeed, be constitutive of) a reflective citizenry.

In tandem with concerns about the nature of the entanglement between the university and capitalist systems, some scholars have engaged in reflection on what is sometimes termed the 'third mission' of universities, with Schuetze (2012) claiming that the understanding of this responsibility, often characterised using the concept of 'community service', is both overly broad, and often treated as an optional extra, lacking "easy measurement by quantifiable indicators" (71). In contrast, he argues for an "active embrace of engagement with the community" (72) that is adequately supported and positioned at the core of university missions. For critical scholars, the praxis of engagement with communities – variously defined – can constitute an important avenue for linking the work of research and theory with affecting positive social impact. Peters & Avila, for example, argue that "teaching and research tend to be pursued by academics in ways that are disconnected from ecologies of place, and out of relationship with external publics" (2014, 134) and advocate for a (careful) blurring of the roles of academic and community practitioners.

3. OPPORTUNITY EMBEDDED IN CRISIS

If pandemic restrictions constrain us in many ways, they also – as Ong and Negra (2020) have noted – open up "opportunities for rich intellectual inquiry", something that can offer solace to those seeking to develop spaces for critical thinking and active pedagogy in the (virtual) classroom. On a practical level, we can cautiously embrace the modes of instruction forced upon us, by considering the differing affordances of these technologies. A first consideration will be how we can use the newly central modalities to tackle the challenges thrown up by the pandemic – countering atomisation and isolation; fostering dialogue and empathy; providing space for reflection and active learning. Further, though, we can look to ways in which we can tackle longer-standing challenges. How can we not just repair, but build up? Of course, there are some responses that operate on an individual basis, but there are also interventions that can have a wider impact, impacting on issues of structure and process within the academy, and in some cases beyond. Overlapping with this distinction is a typology that distinguishes between issues of content – what we teach about – and issues of structure – how we teach.

One multi-faceted example that illustrates the many ways in which we can encounter, and respond to, an issue arises in the case of broadband provision. This is, of course, an issue of longstanding activism and academic attention as a relatively concrete marker of the intersection of political economic factors with issues of access and inclusion. As individual instructors, we can design our teaching approaches to

take account of the differing levels of broadband provision available to our students. Keeping synchronous sessions to low-bandwidth modes, such as text channels, and maintaining an awareness of the possible challenges of downloading multimedia content, constitute a form of universal design. Re-examining the rationale for requiring students to progress in a particular staged manner through material (such as by releasing materials in tandem with an existing 'lecture slot' schedule), or what forms student collaboration and team exercises can and should take, allow us to re-engage with our instructional material, confirm our pedagogical goals, and build new teaching frameworks that support those goals. Of course, such exercises of self-reflection take time and energy – and are generally uncompensated, most explicitly (and glaringly) for those working in precarious and contingent positions.

Beyond course design, the material conditions within which students operate can offer an opportunity to engage them in critical exploration of how those conditions are shaped by political economic forces. While the imprint of 19th century colonial empires on the routes followed by contemporary broadband cable can feel abstracted for students (particularly those situated broadly within the global North), the students' own access to broadband (and similar technologies such as mobile phone networks) results from a confluence of urbanisation, public policy, economic forces, and technological innovation. The students' own material conditions – and the manner in which they are shaped by policy decisions, from the macro to the very local – provide, therefore, a visceral example of the structural forces shaping our relationships with communication systems. The jarring changes experienced over the past few months facilitate conversations about agency, options, and limits, facilitating broader conversations about the operation of such factors. In a Freirian sense, the lived experiences of students offer the potential for an active process of meaning-making by the students, and the development of a critical engagement with social conditions.

Beyond our individual teaching, though, the fact that there are such critical structural forces at play means that our responsibilities as scholars and teachers cannot be limited to our work in the classroom. Questions of broadband access – and public policies that affect patterns of access – become intrinsically linked to questions of educational access and equity (Darmody, Smyth & Russell, 2020). In other words, broadband policy must be recognised as a matter of third level educational policy in a way that it has rarely been framed as previously (due to the manner in which on-campus access, or other modalities, were presumed to compensate for any shortcomings in this area).

4. COMMODIFICATION

One of the ways in which the neo-liberal model of education is being challenged is through the mainstreaming of open science and similar models, which seek to ensure that publicly-funded research activities result in outputs that are publicly available (Armeni et al, 2020). Similarly, Open Educational Resources (OERs) offer a means

to formalise and expand the collegial culture whereby academics share course plans with each other. Notably, unlike the MOOC (Massive Open Online Open) model, this model distinguishes between the resources that are available to instructors, and the act of instruction itself. As The San Jose State Philosophy Department put it, MOOCs produce "the educational equivalent of a monoculture, in which only a few voices will ever be heard. [...] Now, only a few star professors are part of the conversation" (2017, 263). Where the MOOC centralises instruction, elevates a singular instructional voice, undercuts demand for instructors, and merely leaves accreditation as a potentially decentralised process, OERs build a decentralised heterogenous network of providers and resources, facilitating myriad approaches to implementing the tools developed, and supporting goals of accessibility through the availability of open-access resources that can replace high-cost textbooks.

The difference in model is mirrored in how these approaches are propagated. While MOOCs require significant centralised resources, and operate within a circuit of reproduction and reinforcement of hierarchies of prestige and resources within the educational sector, OERs operate more clearly as a public good, with benefits dissipated across the educational sector (including, potentially, beyond the formal educational sector). The fact that rewards accrue to the broader sector, rather than to those who develop and deploy OERs, means that there are fewer direct market-based incentives for any individual institution to invest in their development – we encounter a form of free-rider paradox (Hampton, 1987). However, the pandemic affords an opportunity to prompt engagement in this sector – the twin pressures of a mass (if possibly temporary) movement towards asynchronous remote delivery, and a sudden economic shock for students, exerts pressure on institutions to respond (and be seen to respond) in innovative ways. At my own institution, this has resulted in funding for the development of an OER platform, and a project to pilot the development of OER resources. This will benefit our own students in the short-term, through the availability of low-cost instructional resources, but the most significant benefits come from the network effects of making these resources available for adoption or adaptation by others. The pandemic has, in this case, resulted in an opportunity to articulate the role of the university as an agent of social benefit – a creator of public goods – beyond transactional or market-based models. There was, certainly, an energy for such developments previously, but the circumstances of the pandemic – in opening up a critical juncture for higher education – provided the opportunity to act on those impulses. As we shall see below, this opportunity for challenging commodified models of educational provision expands the spaces available for other forms of innovative course provision.

5. STRUCTURATION

In shifting our focus from the instructional acts of the classroom to our broader role as educators, it becomes clear that the issue of broadband provision – referenced

earlier in the context of critical engagement by students – becomes, also, a matter of concern for educators. Just as classroom technologies are intrinsic to our success in the physical classroom, so too is access, by ourselves and our students, to residential broadband, an essential tool in our effective operation as instructors in an online context. The politics of broadband provision are, thus, entwined with our work as educators, and must form part of the policy demands of our unions and our professional associations. While questions of the evolving nature of the digital divide continue to be investigated by media scholars, the issue has not in recent years formed part of the public policy agenda of our scholarly organisations (as evinced by a review of public policy interventions by groups such as the IAMCR, and the National Communication Association in the United States). As the issue increasingly impinges on the teaching work of scholars across the board – and not just those working with non-traditional student cohorts, such as adult and part-time learners – we may hopefully see this issue more clearly taken up as a policy concern for those focused on education policy.

On an intermediate level between matters of public policy, and specifics of lesson content, we have the question of course design. Here, instructors grappling with the challenges in unequal access to broadband provision and computer resources can usefully learn from the principles of 'Universal Design for Learning' (UDL) (Rose & Meyer, 2002; King-Sears, 2009). While UDL is typically understood as a response to differing innate learning approaches of individual students, its core principle of engaging with students in multiple ways not only ensures equal access for students with disabilities, but also provides a framework for designing courses in a way that does not unnecessarily disadvantage those who lack, for example, high-speed broadband. Again, this critical juncture has prompted attention to pedagogy and process that offers opportunities to re-centre these concerns in the instructional process.

6. SPATIALISATION

If the shift to largely online learning exacerbates certain inequalities between and among students – arising both from individual economic status and the spatial geography of broadband provision – it can also flatten the differences between core and peripheries and foster opportunities for new collaborations and innovative models of instruction. Collaborations across institutions were, of course, already possible, and there was some institutional support for such efforts (notably programmes like the EU's Erasmus Mundus joint MA framework) – but the prevalence of blended and online learning across all levels broadens opportunities for considering such structures.

Institutions based in metropolitan hubs, with their physical proximity to industry, policy groups, and other universities, offer advantages to students in terms of ease of access to guest speakers and to work experience opportunities. For putative guest speakers, the travel time involved was previously a concern that limited acceptance of invitations, while such institutions had the burden of greater costs associated with hosting visiting speakers. Those advantages are not wholly nullified by recent

events, but the necessary swing towards – and acceptance of – guest appearances via video conferencing tools means not only that more geographically remote institutions have access to speakers comparable to their metropolitan counterparts, but also that new opportunities for hosting guest speakers become feasible. As just one example, I would point here to a series of seminars, hosted by the UNESCO Chair in Community Media, based at the University of Hyderabad (UNESCO Chair). Utilising Zoom and Facebook, each episode in the series focused on a different geographic region, with the series spanning the globe in terms of both speakers and audience. Such efforts were, of course, technically feasible prior to the pandemic, but the social context, and audience expectations, have changed, and consideration of remote participation options (for speakers and audiences) has very quickly become central to event planning.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has not just disrupted short-term course delivery for universities. This is not just a moment of crisis. It is also a critical juncture that can, if we as scholars seize the opportunity, embed new practices that support educational access and equality. We have an obligation, as ethically engaged critical scholars and instructors, to seize on the potential embedded in this moment.

The path dependency model suggests that it is only at times of critical junctures that opportunities open up to shift the overall trajectory of our social systems. For the university systems explored here, that trajectory has in recent decades (as Miller and others have noted) included a neo-liberal retrenchment of university mission, steering away from the so-called 'third mission' of social engagement, increasingly reliant on market-driven sources of funding. The early response to the pandemic highlighted the reliance on synchronous large-group teaching as part of this model, and the pandemic has more broadly exacerbated the budgeting and funding pressures faced by universities, as some of the revenue streams cultivated by universities – such as significant increases in numbers of international students – have been hard-hit by pandemic-related constraints.

The concept of critical junctures does, though, offer some hope: at times of systemic crisis, opportunities open up to reshape systems, and to re-route the paths we travel. McChesney suggests that such a crisis occurs when two of three conditions are met: technological change; political crisis; and challenges to the legitimacy of the political order. The sudden adoption of online learning technologies, together with the wide ranging political and economic implications of the pandemic, provide the conditions for such a critical juncture.

The fact that a critical juncture exists does not in itself ensure that radical changes will result – nor that any changes will be, necessarily, positive from our perspective. Naomi Klein (2007), amongst others, has noted the manner in which so-called 'disaster capitalism' has been leveraged by those advocating for neo-liberal capitalism,

from Pinochet's Chile onwards. We have already seen the crisis used to weaken worker protections – including, for example, the targeted laying-off of large numbers of critical scholars at the UK's University of Leicester. However, using Mosco's tri-fold model, above, we can identify a set of areas in which progressive scholars, and policy makers, might focus efforts to leverage this moment for social benefit:

- We can use learning technologies, together with changed expectations regarding mediated communication, to break down the core/periphery divide, rather than to exacerbate it, mainstreaming remote guest speakers and asynchronous models of blended learning within our teaching.
- We can foster new modes of learning, including the expanded use of critical reflective practice – our students have experienced first-hand the upending of everyday expectations, and seen in real time the impacts of radical policy decisions. Rather than seeking return to business as usual, a form of erasure of these experiences, we can draw on those experiences and insights, replacing Thatcher's neo-liberal mantra that 'there is no alternative' with an understanding that 'another world is possible'. Reflective practice encourages holistic and active engagement by students, building on both their own experiences and academic resources, and can foster active citizenship.
- We can re-articulate the connections between education and broader social and economic policy, including a focus on issues of inclusion and equality. Shifts in teaching modalities provide opportunities to advocate for, and to implement, use of Open Educational Resources (OERs), which are grounded in conceptions of education as a public good, and which offer the potential for greater inclusion and equity.

There is, finally, an opportunity to reinvigorate the 'third mission' of universities, as societies grapple with how to rebuild social and economic infrastructure. Neo-liberal imperatives have driven the university systems in recent decades to embrace their roles as 'partners' of commercial entities, and agents of economic development. There is an opportunity now to advocate for universities as also agents of social inclusion and integration. To support civic engagement by the broader public, to integrate service learning, and to advocate for an expansion of the role of universities as incubators and institutional homes for social enterprises. All of these have, of course, existed, but often marginalised within their universities. As we are now confronted with this critical juncture, we should ensure not just that we counter those who would leverage it to accelerate the neo-liberal project, but also that we take positive steps to imagine how we can use this crisis to build back better.

Andrew Ó Baoill, Ph.D. is a lecturer at the National University of Ireland, Galway, where his work focuses on political economy of the media, community media, and technological change. He holds a PhD from the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, and a New Foundations grant from the Irish Research Council, focused on the sustainability of community media.

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NORMATIVE ROLE CONCEPTIONS OF JOURNALISTS IN AN AUTOCRATIC REGIME

TATSIANA KARALIOVA, PH.D.
Butler University, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore and provide a better understanding of how journalists who work in a non-free media environment that is characterized by high level of state involvement conceptualize normative journalistic roles. This study used in-depth qualitative interviewing to explore opinions of journalists who live and work in Belarus. Normative theories of the media, concepts of news media and democracy as well as the literature on the roles of news media in authoritarian regimes guide the paper theoretically. The findings of the study demonstrated that Belarusian journalists have similar understandings of normative roles as their colleagues in democratic nations. Exclusive for the orientations of journalists from state-run news organizations were mouthpiece and ideological/propagandistic roles. Certain roles were described as encompassing different goals by the representatives of state-run and independent news media. The study revealed that roles of journalism that help support the social ideal as understood by journalists in this autocratic country could be described as having two mostly competing directions: one that reflects the ideal of the nation's development toward free society and representative democracy and another direction that represents the ideal of protecting the status quo, sustaining conformity in the society, and preserving national security.

Keywords: normative journalistic roles ▪ democracy ▪ press freedom.

1. INTRODUCTION

For many decades scholars of news media have been connecting types of socio-political systems with the ways news media are expected to operate (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956; Baker, 2002; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Christians et al., 2009; Hallin & Mancini, 2012, among others). Despite the diversity of approaches, most of these works, however, until a few recent years explored normative roles of journalists mainly in democratic nations with a focus on Western countries. The Worlds of Journalism Study project that was founded in 2010 led the efforts on expanding the map of journalism studies, and the recent collection of studies analyzed data from 27,500

journalists in 67 countries (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad & De Beer, 2019b). Still, scholars recognize that "the Western dominance and researchers' uneven coverage of world regions have had notable consequences for our understanding of journalism" (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & De Beer, 2019a, p. 6). In thinking about normative journalistic roles, it is essential to overcome western bias and predetermined framing in journalism studies to go beyond an understanding of a journalistic normativity as singular and recognize a potential multiplicity of normative approaches (Zelizer, 2009; Nerone, 2013).

The purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of how journalists who work in a non-free media environment that is characterized by high level of state involvement conceptualize normative journalistic roles. This manuscript represents a part of the bigger project that also looked at institutional roles and daily reporting practices and the gap between normative expectations and described journalistic practices (or, in other words, the project explored the ideal roles as described by journalists, perceived actual practices, and the gap between the two). This study uses in-depth qualitative interviewing, one of the fundamental methods for learning about the experiences of others, to explore personal experiences, practices, and opinions of journalists who live and work in Belarus.

After a brief period of democratization in Belarus in the early 1990s, authoritarian rule consolidated in the late 1990s. With the support of cheap energy from Russia, Belarus transitioned from competitive authoritarianism to a full-scale authoritarian regime (Levitsky & Way, 2002). The state has monopolized subscription, distribution and broadcasting services. It also owns the main broadcast media and socio-political newspapers with largest circulations while applying policies that limit activities of the non-state press (Klaskouski, 2011). Government control over news media is enforced through libel law, politicized registration and licensing of mass media outlets, and economic pressure. In the past year, workers in news media organizations experienced intensified levels of harassment and violence, especially during political unrest in Belarus that started in the fall of 2020. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, only in 2020, 477 journalists were detained by law enforcement and in total spent more than 1,200 days in jails (Belarusian Association of Journalists, 2020).

Broadly, mass media system in the country could be described as having two major forms of mass media: (1) state-run media, which constitute the majority of socio-political print outlets, TV, and radio stations, and (2) independent (i.e. not supported by government subsidies) news media. Broadcast media are predominantly state-run (with the exception of news media that operate from abroad, such as Belsat TV), with some commercial broadcast media that are either entertainment-oriented or have smaller audiences. However, it is important to note that independent news organizations dominate online and in the last few years have experienced an increase in readership and popularity. The state-run media receive subsidies in various forms, including allocation of advertising, and experience direct involvement

of various authorities (for example, city council or the president administration) in their editorial practices, which results in exclusively favorable coverage of governmental offices and in absence of alternative voices or pluralism. The independent media are mostly privately owned, have more editorial freedom, and vary greatly on the degree of profit interest. These two types of news media have led to the emergence of two different journalistic settings, including two professional journalistic associations (Jarolimek, 2009). Studying experiences of Belarusian journalists both from state-run and independent news media represents an exceptional opportunity to provide an insight into reporters' normative orientations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Normative Theories of the Media

During the early communication research era in the U.S., political scientists studied normative roles of the press, or how the press ought to operate to sustain political order, democracy in particular (Zelizer, 2011). The landmark work "Four Theories of the Press" (1956) by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm is considered to be the first comprehensive attempt to conduct a systematic normative analysis of how the press operates in various social and political environments. The authors argued that social and political structures influence the form press systems take and explained the logic and functioning of the press according to four systems, or theories: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and soviet communist. "Four Theories of the Press" was later criticized for its inherent ideological bias and its theoretical framework being shaped by Cold War mentality and industrial capitalism (Nerone, 1995).

Another, more recent, comprehensive work on normative theories of the media by Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White (2009) presented a framework based on three levels of analysis: normative orientations on a philosophical level, types of democracies on a political level, and roles of mass media on a media level. At the philosophical level, the authors discussed corporatist, libertarian, social responsibility, and citizen participation normative traditions while elaborating on fundamental issues, moral foundations, major actors, and functions of normative theory of communication. The book described principles and practices of four models of democracy (administrative, pluralist, civic, and direct) and presented four roles of media (monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative) in contemporary democratic context.

Similarly, Baker (2002) described how roles of the media differ in an elitist, liberal pluralist, republican, and complex democracies. For example, in a liberal pluralist democracy, mass media are segmented and partisan, socially responsible, and may serve an advocacy role for different groups and institutions, with a watchdog role being one of the most important ones. For a republican democracy, news media are reflective and discursive, inclusive in the pursuit of a common good, civil, balanced,

and comprehensive and expected to facilitate discussion and collaboration among various groups of the society.

Although normative theories and roles of media described in this section belong to democratic tradition, the range and diversity of those principles and orientations allow to establish various normative role orientations that become prominent under certain political circumstances, such as different types of democracy. This literature also sets a background for exploration of normative roles of journalists in non-democratic environments. Next, it is important to describe social-political tasks of the media in a democracy identified in the literature and how the concept of democracy itself is discussed in relation to journalistic practices around the world.

2.2. Roles of News Media in a Democracy

For the specific primary democratic tasks of the media, Curran (2005) identified the following four tasks: to inform, scrutinize, debate, and represent. In more detail, Schudson (2008) described the following seven functions of journalism in a democracy: information, investigation, analysis, social empathy, provision of a public forum, mobilization, and promotion of representative democracy.

Scholars of journalism studies also highlighted a particular importance of looking not at how the media should serve democracy, but at the actual pragmatic performance of such normative expectations in a given democratic society (Curran, 2005; McNair, 2009). A criticism of the actual practices of performing normative roles, such as a watchdog role, was voiced, among others, by Bennett and Serrin (2005) who argued that the watchdog role of journalism has been weakly institutionalized in daily routines of the press in the United States. Commercial pressures, understaffed newsrooms, lack of time, increasing conglomeration, and an unsupportive public are the reasons the press failed to perform a watchdog role (Bennett & Serrin, 2005). The disruption of traditional journalism models by digital technology, including social media, also "raises clear risks for professional journalists and institutions" (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016, p. 811).

Thinking about the usefulness of the concept of democracy in journalism studies, we need to turn to the article "How much democracy does journalism need?" by Josephi (2013) who argued that journalists should not be equated with the governments of the countries where they work and journalism should not be limited to journalistic practices only in democratic regimes. The author noted that some of orientations and role conceptions of journalists in non-democratic nations are quite similar to the ones of journalists in democratic countries. The article called for a closer look at specific practices and the ways news workers seek to provide journalistic services by reporting accurate and verified information, which is what this current study offers.

2.3. Empirical Studies of Journalism Cultures and Journalistic Roles

Apart from theorizing about the normative roles of journalism in democracy, scholars of journalism studies explored orientations of journalists focusing on other aspects as well (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). The study that mapped journalism cultures across nations showed that some principles, such as detachment, non-involvement, presenting information on important political processes, and monitoring government, were perceived as important across all regime types while interventionism, or "the extent to which journalists pursue a particular mission and promote certain values" (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 372), was more important in developing societies and transitional democracies (Hanitzsch et al., 2011).

Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) conceptualized journalistic roles as discursive constructs of journalism's identity and place in society. They suggested that journalists exercise important roles in two domains: political life and everyday life. Within the political domain, the authors identified roles that address six essential needs: informational-instructive, analytical-deliberative, critical-monitorial, advocative-radical, developmental-educative, and collaborative-facilitative. In the everyday domain were three areas: consumption, identity, and emotion.

To explore the whole range of normative roles, in this study respondents addressed roles in the domains of political and everyday life. The next section provides a brief overview of how these and other aspects of mass media functioning in non-democratic regimes were described in the literature.

2.4. Roles of News Media in Authoritarian Regimes

The normative role of the press in earlier European authoritarian regimes was control over the society for the purpose of maintaining the established political order (McNair, 2009). Restrictive licensing, libel, and copyright laws were used to control information and minimize its destabilizing effect. With the development of new forms of news media, the range of the roles expanded.

In recent literature, the use of mass media in non-democracies has been described, for example, as a tactic of rule that authoritarian leaders employ to extend the regimes' durability, mostly by preventing the appearance of alternative power centers and marginalizing alternative political movements and actors or by eliminating collective action potential (for example, King, Pan & Roberts, 2013; Walker & Orttung, 2014). Legitimization of incumbents is achieved by favorable coverage of regimes and policies, absence of critique, and depiction of success and harmony in a given country (Prekevicius, 2005; Karaliova, 2013). Regimes use mass media for the ideological purpose of shaping political discourse in such nations as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Iran. In this process, they rely on consumerism, anti-Western and anti-revolutionary rhetoric, and nationalism (Miazhevich, 2007; Prekevicius, 2005; Walker & Orttung, 2014).

After the establishment of the communist regime, the mass media system in China largely followed the Soviet model, according to which news outlets were considered a "mouthpiece" of the communist party. Between the 1980s and 1990s, mass media in China experienced a period of transformation and diversification when rapid development followed post-Mao's market-oriented socioeconomic reforms (Huang, 2001). Today, the country has one of the most dynamic media markets in the world, with more strictly controlled political and ideological aspects and less controlled economic aspects of news media (Qin, Stromberg & Wu, 2014). This was described by Walker and Orttung (2014) as a "quasi-commercial media environment in which the party-state retains a dominant editorial hand" (p. 73).

State-run and private news media cover the same events and actors differently. For example, in their study that looked at how news media covered uprisings in Egypt, Hamdy and Gomaa (2012) found that three types of news outlets (state-run, semiofficial, and independent newspapers) told completely different stories about the same historical events by choosing different frames to portray protestors, causes and consequences of the events, as well as proposed solutions.

Still, viewing the role of mass media in authoritarian regimes as a purely propagandistic tool would be an oversimplification. Recent studies have shown that many political, economic, and societal factors need to be considered to adequately describe and understand such roles. For example, some current autocratic regimes may choose to tolerate existence of both state-run and commercial media that serve as a source of more diverse information (Qin, Stromberg & Wu, 2014). Similarly, according to Egorov, Guriev and Sonin (2009), resource-poor dictatorships may tolerate free media because they "allow a dictator to provide incentives to bureaucrats and therefore to improve the quality of government" (p. 645).

In light of the reviewed literature, this study addresses the following research questions:

How do journalists from a non-democratic regime conceptualize normative roles of journalism in the society and how do their opinions differ based on their affiliation with state-run and independent news media?

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative interviewing as a research method that documents rich accounts of experiences, knowledge, and ideas (Alvesson, 2011). In-depth interviews help develop detailed descriptions, integrate multiple perspectives, and describe processes, or "grasp a situation from the inside" (Weiss, 1994, p. 10). Because of the highly restricted and controlled environment in Belarus, there were potential risks for the researcher who travelled to Belarus to conduct part of the interviews. Depending on participants' availability during fieldwork time in Belarus, interviews were conducted in person or via Skype, with snowball sampling used to recruit participants for the project.

The snowball sampling methodology was selected for two reasons. First, in an effort to eliminate any potential risks of any form of punishment for respondents, it was decided that the researcher's professional background and experience of working as a journalist in Belarus would allow to be cognizant and careful in selecting first participants who trust her and will be willing to participate. Second, after each interview a participant was asked to share information or talk to two-three colleagues from other news organizations who never met the researcher previously and introduce the topic of the study to secure preliminary consent to participate. Then the researcher reached out to those participants to explain the goals of the study in details. Extensive efforts were made to include participants of various backgrounds, political and ideological views, and positions in newsrooms.

The participants for this study were 19 news reporters and editors who work for daily mainstream newspapers and online media in Minsk as well as seven experts (media critics, journalism professors, and media law experts). The researcher kept recruiting and interviewing participants until theoretical saturation was reached. In total, 26 people from 12 news organizations were interviewed. The ratio of journalists from state-run and independent news media was 10 to 9, accordingly. The age of respondents was between 24 and 66 years old, with 13 female and 13 male respondents. Considering potential risks for respondents, the names of participants as well as the names of news organizations were not revealed, and all identifying information was stored securely with only the researcher having access to it. To maintain confidentiality, gender and other characteristics of participants' identities or work were randomized or concealed in the written report.

Interviews lasted from around an hour to an hour and a half, and participants were asked, for example, to describe the main roles of journalism in the society as they see them, to identify the three most important roles of journalists, or to share their thoughts on how their colleagues from other Belarusian news media would prioritize these roles. During the interviews, examples and the exchange of details were encouraged.

Constant comparative method of analysis as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used to analyze the texts of the interviews.

4. FINDINGS

This report on how Belarusian journalists describe their normative professional roles in the society was structured according to two domains where journalists exercise their roles: the domain of political life and the domain of everyday life (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). The roles are listed in the order of prominence, or how many interviewees named them and how important they thought the roles were overall.

4.1. Domain of Political Life

In the domain of political life, the roles most named by the respondents, in the descending order of prominence, were the role of providing information, educational role, watchdog role, providing commentary, and serving as mouthpiece. A mediator role, ideological/propagandistic role, the role of providing a tribune for public discussion/dialogue, and promotion of democratic values were mentioned in fewer interviews.

Providing information. Providing information to the audience was by far the most often named role. Importantly, journalists often spoke about journalistic norms important for this role, such as objectivity, pluralism, truthfulness, impartiality, and balanced reporting. A journalist from an independent news organization said:

> First, the main role of journalism in the society is to inform people. Foremost, it is providing objective and balanced information that allows people to make decisions and draw conclusions so that members of the society could make decisions on their own how they want to live and evolve.

In normative terms, the role of informing was named as important because it provides the society with tools necessary for decision-making and, hence, improvement of people's lives. This discursive strategy of journalists empowering their audiences with knowledge for their own good reappeared several times in the description of other roles as well, such as educational and watchdog roles, and providing commentary.

Talking about specificity of this role in Belarus, another journalist working for an independent news organization noted that in a democratic society, providing information would be the most important role of journalists, but this is probably different for Belarus, where the role of mediator and ideological/propagandistic role in some cases becomes more important.

Although journalists working for both state-run and independent media agreed on the importance of providing information, some respondents emphasized a more active role of reporters in doing so. Providing objective information and diverse opinions, according to one respondent working for an independent news organization, is a journalist's "job and duty," even if someone, like "an official, a propagandistic machine or another stakeholder," is trying to distort it. This is an example of a politicization discursive strategy, or description of a normative role using terms of political struggle, to legitimize this function as essential in the society.

Educational role. An educational role of journalism, as described by the respondents, included such functions as education, enlightenment, improvement of legal awareness, and moral education. For example, one journalist from a state-run news organization spoke about explanatory journalism and the importance of explaining complicated issues by organizing hotlines and having Q&A sections on their

website. Another journalist working for a state-run newspaper emphasized the goal of improving legal awareness of audiences, particularly regarding consumer rights. In this sense, she said, journalists serve as actors protecting consumers from unfair practices of businesses. Here and later, the educational role was described as legitimate because journalists represent the public interests, thus enabling fairness in the society.

Moral education or, as one journalist from state-run newspaper put it, "making people better," was an idea discussed by some respondents. This function, according to one interviewee, includes "education, improvement of moral principles, testing those principles by some theoretical situations, provoking a person to evaluate some events and other people's behavior, to think critically, to develop higher standards and more noble standards of behavior." On the other side, another news reporter from an independent news organization delegitimized the role of moral education by discursively shifting responsibility from journalists to the public and describing a more detached role of journalism. This opinion hints about the division over how news workers view their actual roles and practices regarding interventionism in the journalistic community in Belarus.

Watchdog role, journalism as fourth estate, and help in solving problems. While both journalists working for state-run and independent media spoke about the first two roles in almost all interviews, a watchdog role (as well as a conception of journalism as a fourth estate) was described mainly by journalists working for independent news organizations and only mentioned by journalists working for state-run news organizations on very few occasions.

A watchdog role of journalism as conceptualized by respondents included several aspects defining journalisms' functions and specifics of role enactment in Belarus. Several journalists working for independent news organizations and one journalist working for a state-run media said they supported the concept of journalism as a fourth estate. In the words of one respondent, journalism as a fourth power serves as "an independent public institution that controls the state, on one hand, and impacts moral beliefs of citizens, on another hand."

The watchdog function is especially important in Belarus, said another reporter from an independent news organization:

> In situations when other parts of the system of checks and balances, other branches of the government, do not fulfill their functions, when there is a predominant branch of government in totalitarian countries, and in our case it is executive branch, or, more precisely, presidential institution, – then parliaments and courts do not fulfill their functions of checks and balances for that government.

Here and elsewhere, journalists used the discursive strategy of dramatization to highlight the importance of the watchdog role in the society, and in the Belarusian

society in particular. This was also observed in the following example when another journalist from an independent news organization, while also expressing her belief about the importance of the watchdog role for Belarusian journalists, said it is not because of the type of regime but despite the type of regime that the role should be exercised:

> I support the idea of journalism as a fourth estate and I think that even in a harshest dictatorship it could be put in practice. Of course, sometimes we have to step on our own song's throat, such as for example, limit ourselves in certain social benefits, in having a 'decent' work at a government institution, in a salary or in some comfortable environment of editorial office or something like that. But this is important.

On few occasions, journalists also recognized that it is not only government officials that journalists need to keep accountable but also those in power in a broader sense, such as business owners or top clergy.

Some journalists, especially ones from state-run media that are not supposed to be critical of government, avoided using terms such as "watchdog," "keeping accountable," or "criticizing" but spoke instead about how news reporters often help solve people's problems and represent their interests, or, as one respondent put it, "defend people's interest when they are powerless in dealing with government officials." In those responses, journalists were again described as representatives of the public's interests who facilitate fairness and help improve the lives of people, which helped legitimize a modified version of the watchdog role for state-run media.

One journalist noted that news workers often help solve problems "if not directly then by calling attention of the society to it." The origin of this "help in solving problems" function and the reason it was so prominent in journalists' responses could be explained by the existing bureaucratic system of government that is characterized by the lack of transparency and accountability.[1] Several respondents noted that in Belarus, the watchdog role is often underperformed, especially in state-run media that refrain from any critique of the government or only provide an "approved" type or amount of such critique because of the fear of retaliation.

Commentary and public opinion formation. Commentary together with public opinion formation were mostly mentioned by journalists working for state-run media. Several respondents spoke about a growing importance in today's media environment of providing the public with analysis of events and said that commentary allows news media to create a certain impactful picture of the world.

1 According to the Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index, Belarus received a score of 40 on the scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean) and was among the countries and territories "where citizens face the tangible impact of corruption on a daily basis," including "untrustworthy and badly functioning public institutions like the police and judiciary," as well as bribery and indifference of authorities. (See http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016)

Some interviewees assigned a somewhat paternalistic role to journalists providing commentary. For example, one journalist was describing the role of providing analysis of current events and facts as an "attempt to rise above the crowd, meaning not only to protect the people but also to guide them if they are confused…." Another news reporter described journalists as possessors of particular knowledge that they share with a public that "doesn't know or doesn't want to know" about certain complex issues. These two examples illustrate how journalists discursively enabled news workers as agents "protecting" the people for their own good. Quite often, journalists were talking about a type of commentary with a stronger persuasive or, as they described it, ideological component, which is discussed further in the subsection on an ideological/propagandistic role.

Mouthpiece role and legitimization of power. The mouthpiece role, although never openly labeled this way, was mentioned mostly by journalists from state-run news organizations. Communication of government stances on different issues is essential in the society, said one journalist, otherwise "the position of government offices becomes unclear." That respondent also said: "There could be different rumors about some important projects in the society, and if there is no official position and no official comments about it, then the rumors will grow and grow… which could be quite destructive." This example shows how the mouthpiece role is legitimized as an important normative role that helps prevent rumors.

However, some journalists were not sure if serving as a mouthpiece for government by extensively covering events of various public offices could be considered a role of journalism as such and if it is all that necessary, especially in the scope in which it currently exists at their news organizations. One journalist from a state-run newspaper said:

> I don't know if this could be called a role… Of course, we cover lots of public events and activities [organized by government offices]. But these news stories do not actually fulfill any educational role and do not help form any opinion. They are just news stories that could as well not be written at all…

When talking later in the interviews about the changes they would want to make at their news media, some journalists said that they actually want less of these "official" news stories because they all look the same and nobody is interested in them, thus discursively acknowledging superficial character of the mouthpiece role.

Another aspect of serving as a mouthpiece for the government, namely legitimization of power, was described by a journalist working for an independent news organization when he spoke about the roles state-run media fulfil in the society:

> State-run mass media do not control power. They legitimize power… When officials enforce another clearly unfair tax, then independent mass media defend people's interests and report on why this tax is bad and why it should

> not exist or how people's rights and the constitution are violated. And state-run media provide commentary by officials that allows a spin in such a way that it shows how this law is fair and we need it.

In this example, a journalist denied a normative character of the role of legitimization of power and, furthermore, highlighted the potential damage for the society this role could make.

A similar message about power legitimization, but this time with a completely opposite connotation, was shared by a journalist working for a state-run newspaper who said that one of the important roles is to "lead [the public] to a certain way of thinking, to explain some processes" and to serve as agents between the public and the state to help avoid tension. In this way, the legitimization of power role was justified and presented as normative because it helps sustain peace and conformity in the society.

Mediator role. Journalists serve as mediators between people and authorities and provide opportunities for dialogue. Journalism in this sense is "a bridge between those in power and people because it allows people to reach out to an official directly and ask some questions," said one journalist working for an independent news organization. The idea of mass media, in particular independent news organizations, serving as an institution that allows for the feedback from people to be heard, was supported by a respondent who said that it is extremely important in societies where "it is very hard to know what people think without fair and balanced elections." Therefore, news media serve as a "last communication channel between the society and the government."

Although the mediator role was also mentioned by journalists working for state-run media, it was described as having other goals, such as dialogue facilitation and reconciliation between social groups, not just the government and the people. In this sense, journalists often assume a more active role as conciliators. For example, one journalist said that he always tried to find ways to "solve people's problems" by reaching out to officials to allow them to respond or offer a solution before writing a story. He said: "Many people say that a journalist should be on the people's side. But I see that in the government there are people as well."

Similarly, another journalist from a state-run newspaper said that he does not approve of adversarial questioning of officials in interviews: "I am his [an official's] friend and helper on air, because I am a journalist. … I am a bridge between the society and that official, but I can help him to figure it out and give a response, although it's his response." This journalist also expressed his frustration with how independent media, as he said, often attack government officials even when such attacks are not justified. By presenting an alternative view on how journalists should position themselves regarding government officials, i.e. not as adversaries but as colleagues, journalists from state-run media were able to legitimize the mediator role and explain why it is important in their view.

Ideological and propagandistic roles. Ideological and propagandistic roles were described in three types of responses: when journalists working for independent news organizations were talking about state-run media; when journalists working for state-run media denied playing such roles; and when journalists working for state-run media acknowledged it.

In the first case, respondents said that state-run media often play a propagandistic role, or work as a PR-service for government. When doing so, one interviewee said, they "do not cover issues unfavorable for the government." Journalists from independent news media delegitimized the ideological role by labeling it 'propaganda,' or 'PR,' or by highlighting the factitious character of news coverage.

Some journalists working for state-run media either denied or did not name the ideological and propagandistic roles as notable for their work. At the same time, some other journalists did in fact acknowledge the importance of the ideological role for them. One respondent, for example, said that state-run news media serve as providers of state ideology and viewpoints and are needed in the society as "an element of national security" that helps keep the society within certain boundaries. Another news reporter described the role while expressing his obvious frustration and struggling to articulate the role in normative terms:

> For example, now I work for a state-run newspaper and we represent the interests of the government. Like when X [name of the government official] told us to write about things that would distract people from their everyday problems. So it is probably an ideological role… If they would tell us to mislead readers then we would probably try to mislead readers. This is some kind of unhealthy role… I don't know how to name it…

Notably, another interviewee who also acknowledged the importance of an ideological role of journalism, normalized the notion by expressing his belief that this role is inherent for all mass media, including ones in other countries. This discursive strategy of normalizing the role, while making it appear to be globally acceptable and needed to preserve the national security, helped present it as legitimate.

Tribune for public discussion/dialogue. Although somewhat similar to the mediator role, the role of tribune for public discussion/dialogue gives more power directly to community members to speak about issues that are significant for them, which, according to one journalist from an independent news organization, news media need to provide a platform for. The journalist shared an example of how their organization is doing that in a series of news stories devoted to certain problems or questions asked by their readers. This discursive strategy of empowering the public with deliberation opportunities highlighted the normative side of the role. Another respondent emphasized the importance of journalists becoming a part of public discussion and facilitating an interactive dialogue with audience members: "Today a journalist is more included in this public discussion than ever before …. His goal is

to recognize the audience he is working for, to communicate with it in an interactive mode, online, using new media platforms."

One more aspect of serving as a tribune for public discussion was emphasized by a journalist working for a state-run newspaper who spoke about newspaper columns with letters from readers as an outlet for feedback and frustration. Here again, like for the role of legitimization of power, the tribune for public discussion role is presented by state-run media as normative because it helps sustain peace and conformity in the society and prevents discontent.

Promoting democratic values. Promotion of democratic values was not a very prominent theme as it was mentioned only by two journalists working for independent news media in their descriptions of normative roles. However, both of them felt quite strongly about it and clearly expressed their views that journalists, as one respondent said, must "promote tolerance, stand up to stagnant thinking, totalitarianism, and racism, and promote freedom of speech and expression." This role, another interviewee said, is central for news reporters, especially in Belarus:

> The most important thing for journalists is, according to their constitutional rights and the Mass Media Law, to provide all information about civic values, about true democratic values. This is especially [important] for journalists working in a country that is so far from these democratic values. I believe that this is very important because everything depends on that, our present and our future depends on that.

In this example, the role was presented as legitimate by reference to media law and the constitution, thus transferring normativity of legal status to the status of the role. Both journalists who highlighted the role as important were about the same age, in their 30s, during the interviews, held senior positions in their respective newsrooms, and faced persecutions for their professional activity in the past.

4.2. Domain of Everyday Life

The two roles in the domain of everyday life described by respondents were service and entertainment. These roles were not as prominent as ones in the domain of political life and were listed last among the roles of journalism in the society by the participants.

Service function. The label "service" itself was used by only one respondent, a news media expert, while other respondents vaguely described the role using terms such as "applicable" or "useful" news, or "providing helpful information," or news stories that are "closer to people." A media expert said that the service role is de facto the most prominent role played by many Belarusian mass media because writing about politics is "painful and risky, and service brings money and does not lead to problems with the government." For local news organizations, the expert said, this

could be translated into practices when they do not cover important issues that could help their audiences make informed decisions. Sometimes these local news organizations could write news stories criticizing the president but not local authorities, because it could endanger relationships with them. While an overall service function is in fact important, the interviewee said, mass media should be playing other roles as well:

> Everyone needs [to play] a service role. But there should be other roles as well. And these other roles are not easy ones and not very safe for news organizations to fulfill. Therefore, quite often they give up on those roles, directly or by devaluating them to rehearsal of news reported by BelTA[2] or something like that, so they do not do any editorial work of their own regarding this.

Notably, state-run journalists considered this service role important because this "applicable" type of news provided a sense of being useful for their readers, which highlighted the role's normative character and importance for people. For example, one news reporter said, "Judging by the feedback from the readers, … we need more stories that would be helpful for people and more applicable in their lives. For example, where to invest money or something like that…"

This aspect of the service function was highlighted by several other journalists who also thought that this "applicable" type of news is expected and particularly appreciated by the audience.

Entertainment. Entertainment as a role of journalism and journalists, although not necessarily viewed as a normative role per se, was acknowledged as an important one by several respondents. The role was usually mentioned last in the journalists' lists of roles. Some of them explained that they talk about it because they believe it is important for their audiences. For example, one journalist said:

> The role of entertainment is probably the third one. Just because you asked about the roles that are important for the society. This might be not important for me … but I understand that it might be important, considering circulations, ratings of entertainment stories, that such stories are popular, which means they are important for consumers.

Another respondent noted that the prominence of the entertainment role is explained by the changes in the media environment and appearance of new media, which shifts focus from other functions of journalism to entertainment.

2 BelTA, or Belarusian Telegraph Agency, is a state-run news agency, or "the country's official news agency" that serves as a "source of up-to-the-minute news about Belarus' supreme authorities." (See http://eng.belta.by/about_company/)

5. WHAT IS JOURNALISM/JOURNALISTS?

Although not initially a part of the interview guide, this question emerged as a noteworthy subject for discussion as respondents were expressing their views on how their colleagues in other news organizations view normative roles of journalists. Such discussions also included questions about the central, or critical, roles and practices that are essential for news workers to be considered journalists.

Some journalists from independent news organizations believed that their colleagues working for state-run media do not fulfill the watchdog role and, therefore, questioned their legitimacy as professionals. For example, one reporter said:

> In the strict sense of the word, I would not call them journalists. They are rather "staff members [of a public office]." Because in one or another way journalism means performing these functions, foremost monitoring the power. When a journalist works as a mouthpiece for government, essentially just delivering their decisions, this is a bit of a different job. This is the job that in business is called, I don't know, PR, and for the government it could be called propaganda or providing information.

Though not frequently, this view was expressed by other interviewees who called their colleagues who work for state-run media "service employees" or "propagandists." However, this was rarely as strongly worded as in the excerpt above and overall journalists from state-run media were not denied their legitimacy as journalists.

According to a Belarusian media expert, journalism that does not fulfill a watchdog function, does not represent readers' interests and limits its role to service journalism is still journalism; it is just not free:

> I think this is also journalism, but it is not entirely free journalism. Because in their editorial offices journalists still discuss important news and events that impact their lives, but they do not have courage to write about it. Local news organizations, for example, do not have courage to write about national politics because national politics is mostly done in Minsk. Or, for example, if local authorities make an unpopular decision they [local news organizations] do not write about it because they don't want to damage their relationships. … But they realize that this is self-censorship and that they are not allowed to do certain things. So, this is still journalism but journalism with self-censorship.

It is important to note that more than half of the respondents recognized that there are some true professionals working in both types of news organizations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The hierarchy of normative roles described by Belarusian journalists turned to be quite similar to the hierarchy of normative roles of their colleagues in other countries. Notably, respondents mentioned most of the roles that are described in the literature as essential ones for democracy, namely providing information, investigation, commentary, serving as a public forum, and promoting democratic values (Curran, 2005; McNair, 2009; Schudson, 2008). The three roles that became prominent in the specific circumstances of an autocratic regime were a mediator role, ideological/propagandistic role, and serving as a mouthpiece. These roles were defined by participants as normative because they help prevent rumors, sustain peace and conformity in the society, and preserve national security. In addition, respondents highlighted the interventionist character of some roles and underemphasized the roles in the domain of everyday life, namely a service function and entertainment, which is also similar to the roles described in the literature on journalists' normative roles perceptions in other countries.

Thinking about the four normative roles of media in a democracy discussed by Christians et al. (2009), namely monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative, the hierarchy of role orientations of journalists in Belarus suggests prevalence of the monitorial role mainly for independent news media. The facilitative and radical roles were also more important for journalists from independent news media while a collaborative role was more pronounced in the discourses of journalists from state-run newspapers. This study positions the two types of news media, independent and state-run, on adversarial/monitorial vs. loyal/collaborative poles of role orientations, respectively (Figure 1). This division, however, should not be viewed as an absolute one because respondents suggested modified versions of some adversarial/monitorial roles, which state-run news media are not able to fulfill. For example, journalists spoke about a modified version of the watchdog role as "helping people solve their problems" or journalists being "representatives of the people." In addition, the study showed that certain normative roles that are important for democracies can attain a different meaning in a non-democratic regime. For example, while a mediator role is important in democratic countries, in an autocracy it becomes prominent in another way, as the last communication channel between the citizens and the government in the society with a less transparent government.

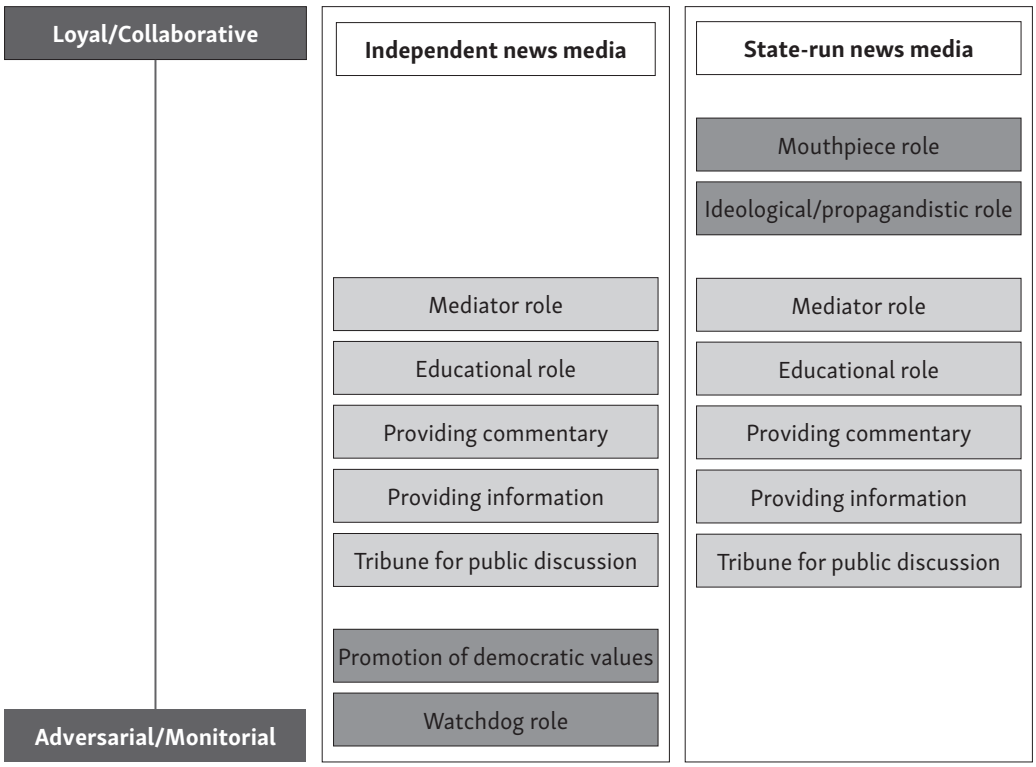

Figure 1. Normative role orientations of journalists from independent and state-run news media.

Speaking in terms of normative theory, the roles of journalism that help support the social ideal as understood by journalists working in this particular regime cannot be described as having one direction or goal. Instead, these roles represented two mostly competing directions. One direction in this case reflects the ideal of the nation's development toward representative democracy, which is characterized by the society of informed and concerned citizens who participate in deliberation processes and make informed decisions. Another direction represents the ideal of protecting the status quo, sustaining peace and conformity in the society and preserving national security. These two directions are reflective of the two normative understandings of the roles of journalism, or how the press ought to operate to promote or sustain certain political order (Zelizer, 2011), a democracy and an autocracy in this case. It is important to mention that these two directions might become more or less prominent in news media depending on specific political conditions in the country and in the world. For example, during the Crimean crisis in Ukraine, in the light of uncertainty about Russia's intentions toward Belarus, the direction of preserving the integrity of the country by supporting conformity and peace in Belarus and sustaining the status quo might have appeared as a preferable option for certain news outlets.

Although socialization of Belarusian journalists is not the focus of the study, one can observe the impact of media globalization and diffusion of journalistic norms and orientations on how news workers in non-Western countries view their roles and norms (Cottle, 2009; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Reese, 2008). The numerous workshops, seminars, educational trips, and meetings of Belarusian journalists with their colleagues in Europe, as well as the globalization effect of social media and other new media platforms seem to have had its impact on how journalists describe their understanding of normative journalistic roles. This socialization in a global context and adherence of Belarusian journalists to the public trustee model of journalism also speaks to the globalization of the professional logic (Waisbord, 2013). At the same time, journalists' commitment to collaborative, interventionist, and advocacy roles demonstrates a hybridization of professional culture of Belarusian journalists.

Tatsiana Karaliova, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of journalism at Butler University in the United States. Her academic background is in journalism, and before graduate school she worked as a reporter and editor in various news outlets in Belarus. Karaliova earned her M.A. in journalism at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and her Ph.D. at the Missouri School of Journalism. Her research interests are mainly in journalism studies, with the focus on journalism and democracy and the ways journalists work in non-free environments and view their normative roles and daily practices.

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WHO WATCHES THE WATCH DOGS? HOW WATCH DOGS 2 REPRESENTS HACKER CULTURE AND HACKTIVISM

JOHN J. FENNIMORE
North Carolina State University

ABSTRACT

In Watch Dogs 2, players team up with a collective of hackers to expose the dangers of the city-wide online infrastructure and the company behind it. Hacktivists in the physical world subvert computer systems to protect the public's digital privacy and agency against private interests. While hacktivists often disregard the law, they hack in disruptive yet nonviolent ways to encourage social changes. While hacking is a common gameplay mechanic in many mainstream games, there is relatively little research investigating games about hacking. This textual analysis examines how Watch Dogs 2 succeeds and fails in representing hacktivism. Watch Dogs 2 lovingly embraces the attitudes and values of hacktivists. Through its simulation of hacking, the game helps players understand what makes hacking so enthralling. However, the ethical argument the game makes for hacktivism is threatened by story and gameplay decisions made to keep the game appealing to the audiences of the game's publisher, Ubisoft.
Keywords: *Watch Dogs 2* ▪ Ubisoft ▪ representation ▪ hacker ▪ hacktivism ▪ video games

1. INTRODUCTION

In July 2020, weeks after news broke of how game publisher Ubisoft mishandled dozens of employee claims of sexual misconduct (Schreier, 2020), the publisher announced that anyone who logs into their Uplay accounts during Ubisoft Forward – a livestream announcing upcoming games from the publisher (which would not address the allegations as per another announcement from Ubisoft (Bankhurst, 2020)) – would receive a free copy of *Watch Dogs 2* on PC (Sitzes & Petite, 2020). In the context of the sexual misconduct scandal at Ubisoft, the giveaway might be seen as a way for Ubisoft to help keep its audience on its side.

Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs* series of games is well known for embracing the concept of hacktivism and the culture surrounding it. The official website for *Watch Dogs 2* informs players that they can "ignite the rebel in you and break the rules – for the

lulz [sic], for what's right, and most importantly, because you can" (Ubisoft, 2016). A player teams up with the San Francisco chapter of DedSec, a worldwide collective of hackers, to expose the dangers of the city-wide online infrastructure and the company behind it. The plucky group of young heroes create their very own social movement based on hacktivism – the promotion of a political agenda or social change through technology (Manion & Goodrum, 2000) – as they accrue followers to their cause through social media to strengthen their abilities and influence. The group organizes demonstrations against organizations and corporations who exploit people's data for their own financial and political gain. However, DedSec go beyond traditional activism to break into offices and find evidence of suspect behavior.

Even if a game is not primarily about hacking, users have likely played a mainstream game with a hacking mechanic from *Bioshock* to *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. Despite the popularity of hacking as a game mechanic in many popular games, there is relatively little research investigating games about hacking. Game studies has mostly investigated how users hack or modify video games (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017; Murphy, 2013), including how hacking a game reveals or creates new meanings about games as intellectual property (Kretzschmar & Stanfill, 2019; Postigo, 2008) and how hacking changes the way people play games (Newman, 2018; Zhao & Zhang, 2019). This study aims to expand the scope of academic research not only on how hacker culture is represented in mainstream media but on how a video game's gameplay can complicate or, in the case of *Watch Dogs 2*, threaten to ruin the message of its story.

The article begins with an overview of the relevant literature on hacktivism and hacker culture to establish the core definitions. The article then goes into a textual analysis of *Watch Dogs 2*, with a focus on how accurately the game represents the definitions and core values of hacker culture and hacktivism through both the story and the gameplay. The scope of this article is limited to the main story missions, the side missions, and the cutscenes between each story mission. It will not incorporate the missions included in the game's paid downloadable content.[1] I argue that *Watch Dogs 2* lovingly embraces the attitudes, ethics, and values of hacktivists. Through its simulation of hacking, the game helps players understand what makes hacking so enthralling. However, its portrayal of hacktivism is threatened by story and gameplay decisions made to keep the game appealing to Ubisoft's audiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definitions: Hacking, hacker, and hacktivism

As Powell (2016) notes, previous research on hacking was largely concerned with

1 *Watch Dogs 2* has a season pass offering new missions, multiplayer modes, items, and enemy types. Not every player buys season passes, so their understanding of the story is limited to the base game. Thus, incorporating the missions from the season pass would not add much to the analysis.

how it illuminates new ways of both engaging with and changing the function of machines, intellectual property, and materials. Many have also attempted to explain the general culture and values of hackers. Pawlicka, Choraś, and Pawlicki (2021) note that defining the hacker is difficult because the backgrounds and motivations of hackers are diverse despite the mainstream representation of hackers as anti-social basement dwellers who crack computer security in the name of cybercrime.

While hacking can appear in many different forms – from the iconic image of a hacker soldering a circuit board to an internet troll creating bots to spread misinformation on social media (Pawlicka, Choraś, & Pawlicki, 2021) – hacking can be defined as "critical, creative, reflective and subversive use of technology that allows creating new meanings," (Kubitschko, 2015, p. 83). Comparing the work of hackers to the work of creative artists, Nikitina (2012) calls hackers' work procedures "reverse creativity." Hackers start with an already created project and work backwards from the creator's thought process to find flaws that they can exploit. According to Powell (2016), hacking can represent a democratization of technical or scientific knowledge while hackers establish their own authority rooted in the imagination and expertise consolidated through participation. The activity of hacking is inherently political. "DIY and hacking culture operate by undermining and appropriating systems and structures through material practice," (Powell, 2016, p. 613). Hackers and the computer industry evolve together (Söderberg & Maxigas, 2021), and thus a key part of hacker culture is the symbiotic yet antagonistic relationship between hackers and the industry. "Applied to our context of inquiry, hackers are conditioned by the technical infrastructure upon which they draw, as well as the labor demand for their services," (Söderberg & Maxigas, 2021, p. 47).

Hacktivism falls under the definition of electronic civil disobedience, as it "does not condone violent or destructive acts against its enemies, focusing instead on nonviolent means to expose wrongs, raise awareness, and prohibit the implementation of perceived unethical laws by individuals, organizations, corporations, or governments," (Manion & Goodrum, 2000, p. 14). This is different from electronic activism which simply uses the internet to share information, coordinate action, and lobby policy makers (Manion & Goodrum, 2000). The goal of hacktivism is to create a disruption in technology and promote activism (Manion & Goodrum, 2000). Other criteria include 1) no damage to people or property, 2) no financial gains, 3) actions grounded in ethical motivations, and 4) accountability for actions (Manion & Goodrum, 2000). Hacktivism is also different from cyberterrorism, damaging hacks targeting governments and societies in order to intimidate them into adopting certain political ideologies (Denning, 2006).

Examples of hacktivism can be found in video games. In 2018, a user hacked the online player ranking system of the Nintendo game *Splatoon 2* and wrote the message "please add anti-cheat" across the leaderboard (Clark, 2018). The user hacked *Splatoon 2* because the game was rife with cheaters while Nintendo was doing nothing about them (Clark, 2018). The act is an example of hacktivism because it was

a disruptive yet nondestructive hack that called attention to an issue. Another notable example of players disrupting a video game is the Running of the Gnomes event in *World of Warcraft*, where players recreate the offline breast cancer charity event, Race for the Cure, by playing as pink-haired gnomes in pink clothing and racing though the virtual world. Collister (2017) argues that the event reflects hacktivism even though its organizers do not frame the event as hacktivism. The event is disruptive rather than destructive to the game world, though the game's server can crash due to the sheer volume of player participation. It also raises awareness of an issue as the game's chat boxes are flooded with messages about breast cancer. While no one alters the game's code during the event, the event could be seen as a hack because it subverts the intended role-playing gameplay of *World of Warcraft* (Collister, 2017).

2.2. The values and ethics of hacker culture

Coleman's ethnography of the San Francisco hacking scene discusses how hacking is characterized by "a confluence of constant occupational disappointments and personal/collective joys," (Coleman, 2013, p. 11). As a performative act taking the forms of inside jokes or humorous hacks, humor in the hacker world not only expresses the joy of hacking but also represents the hacker's definition of creativity and individuality.

"This expression of wit solidifies the meaning of archetypal hacker selves: self-determined and rational individuals who use their well-developed faculties of discrimination and perception to understand the 'formal' world – technical or not – around them with such perspicuity that they can intervene virtuously within this logical system either for the sake of play, pedagogy, or technological innovation. In short, they have playfully defiant attitudes, which they apply to almost any system in order to repurpose it," (Coleman, 2013, p. 7).

On the contrary, hacking is often a frustrating activity as hackers navigate and tinker through software and technology. Hacking demands that users both tolerate frustration and deeply engage with the activity (Coleman, 2013). As hackers overcome baffling problems in technology, they can enter a state of eudaemonia or the feeling of joy stemming from the self-directed realization of skills, goals, and talents (Coleman, 2013). Eudaemonia is central to hackers' sense of accomplishment and pride. Hackers feel gratified not only working with the functions and limits of technology but creating new functionalities that the original creators do not intend (Coleman, 2013).

Hackers derive pleasure in outwitting constraints both collectively and individually. As hackers copied lines of code from friends and modified their software early in their hacker lives, they learned that they were bound to their peers through coproduction although there is also a competitive element to the interaction (Coleman, 2013). Hackers emphasize a culture of meritocracy and individuality in the way they value unique and clever hacks as well as their performative humor (Coleman, 2013). At the same time, however, much of hacker production is collective, subverting the values of individuality. Söderberg & Maxigas (2021) suggest that passing down expertise and

shared cultural values to new generations of hackers is key to what they call the functional autonomy of hackers, which enables hackers to illuminate new ways of critically thinking about predominant technological designs and to create alternative pathways.

Hackers can be categorized by their expertise (what they know), values (what they are), actions (what they do), and tools (what they have) (Jaquet-Chiffelle & Loi, 2020). Their moral principles define the legal and/or ethical limits that they respect while trying to reach their objectives. According to Coleman (2013), all hackers share a relation to legality despite differences in ethical motivations and values; their actions reveal legal grey areas and emerging legal meanings. "Hackers provide less of a unitary and distinguishable ethical position and more of a mosaic of interconnected, but at times divergent, ethical principles," (Coleman, 2013, p. 19).

The most common categories of hackers include white hats, black hats, grey hats, ethical hackers, script kiddies, true hackers, and hacktivists.[2] White hats are skilled programmers who search for vulnerabilities in cyber security to defend information and to prevent attacks from malicious hackers. Ethical hackers are white hats hired to hack into a client's system under a set of formal rules to find and to patch vulnerabilities.[3] Black hats are skilled programmers who find and exploit vulnerabilities in cyber security for personal financial gain and other malicious intentions with no regard to the violation of laws or ethics.[4] Grey hats are skilled programmers who search for weaknesses in computer security for fun, for a challenge, for peer recognition, or for the improvement of security. Grey hats' intentions may not usually be malicious, but their actions might not necessarily respect applicable laws.[5] True hackers, originating in the hackers from west coast counterculture in the 1960s (Jaquet-Chiffelle & Loi, 2020; Levy, 2010; Tuner, 2006), believe in the positive impact of computers and information access and hack only for personal fun and challenge while respecting the law. Script kiddies are inexperienced hackers who use tools and code developed by more experienced hackers. Hacktivists are skilled programmers who exploit weaknesses in computer systems not for personal gain but to further a political cause, opinion, or ideology. While the actions of a hacktivists are ethically motivated, hacktivists do not usually respect laws. Hacktivists are generally left-wing, anti-capitalist, and anti-corporate idealists who hack to expose the secrets of large corporations or governments and to encourage social and political changes (Pawlicka, Choraś, & Pawlicki, 2021). Sometimes they leak classified documents in

2 The following definitions come from Jaquet-Chiffelle and Loi (2020).

3 Pen testers are white hats who specialize in penetration tests, or the simulation of an attack on a computer system. According to Jaquet-Chiffelle and Loi (2020), all pen testers are white hats but not all white hats are pen testers.

4 All black hats are cyber criminals according to Jaquet-Chiffelle and Loi (2020), but not all cyber criminals are black hats as they may not have the expertise all black hats have (they may copy hacks developed by black hats). Crackers, defined by Jaquet-Chiffelle and Loi (2020), are black or grey hats who specifically break into computer systems without permission. Many hackers use the term crackers to differentiate themselves from cyber criminals (Ali Saifudeen, 2021; Coleman, 2013; Jaquet-Chiffelle & Loi, 2020).

5 Many grey hats follow their own moral principles that differ from the law or from other hackers' ethics.

the name of free speech or send DDoS attacks on corporate websites to protest the actions of the corporation. Hacktivists especially crave publicity and share their actions on social media (Mansfield-Devine, 2011).

Hackers deconstruct technology while building and maintaining alternative ones. As Söderberg and Maxigas (2021) argue, "embedded in the word 'hacking,' and key to the hacker identity, is the promise that freedom can be realized through the repurposing of tools and by routing around constraints and regulations," (p. 43). Hacktivism as a form of political engagement includes digital direct action serving a watchdog function. Hackers not only share their knowledge with citizens through public gatherings and through mainstream media coverage but also advise politicians and legislators. According to Kubitschko (2015), hackers' activities spread awareness and knowledge to enable others' engagement. Many hackers are privacy advocates who are concerned with transparency in government, communication as a human right, free access to communication and information infrastructures, and developing alternative methods of communication for citizens that are more anonymous, secure, and safe from state and corporate interests (Kubitschko, 2015). Anonymous communication is especially important because anonymity is often the catalyst for whistleblowing (Kubitschko, 2015).

> "Understanding how something works is a prerequisite for judging its significance and ramifications. The technical expertise of hackers has allowed them to intervene in politics in more consequential ways than is the case with the 'prefigurative politics' of many social movements. The paths taken by hackers in terms of technology choice have not only demonstrated the possibility of an alternative, but have on many occasions forced the computer industry to follow suit," (Söderberg & Maxigas, 2021, p. 48).

Hackers can be divided by their actions, expertise, tools, and values, but are united by their ability to alter and undermine computer systems to shed light on new ethical and legal meanings about how they function. Hacktivists work to push political ideologies by subverting computer systems and creating a disruption. The actions of Hacktivists may not be legal but are ethically motivated. Hackers also take accountability for their actions, never hack to inflict violence, and never hack for personal financial gain. This understanding of the multifaceted cultures and ethics of hacker culture will direct the textual analysis of *Watch Dogs 2* and inform the article's investigation of how the game represents the definitions, values, and ethics of hacktivism through its story and gameplay.

3. METHODS

The textual analysis will use Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric as a frame of reference (Bogost, 2007). Procedural rhetoric is "the practice of persuading through

processes in general and computational processes in particular... [and] a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created," (2007, p. 3). Game designers make claims about phenomena in the physical world by modeling them through digital simulation. The decisions game designers make in crafting the simulation changes what the simulation tells the audience.

> "We must recognize the persuasive and expressive power of procedurality. Processes influence us. They seed changes in our attitudes, which in turn, and over time, change our culture. As players of videogames... we should recognize procedural rhetoric as a new way to interrogate our world, to comment on it, to disrupt and challenge it. As creators and players of videogames, we must be conscious of the procedural claims we make, why we make them, and what kind of social fabric we hope to cultivate through the processes we unleash on the world... the logics that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions, and what we want it to become" (Bogost, 2007, p. 340).

Grounded in the overview of the relevant literature, the textual analysis examines how *Watch Dogs* 2 succeeds and fails in representing hacktivism. The analysis concentrates primarily on the cutscenes that play before, during, and after the 15 main story missions as well as the conversations that occur between the characters during the gameplay of the story missions. I also considered what the player does within the missions, what actions they can perform within the virtual world, and how the game mechanics govern their actions into the analysis. As Bogost and others (e.g., Malaby, 2007) argue, the design of a game shapes the messages and themes players interpret from the experience of the game, and thus the gameplay has just as much bearing on the analysis as the story. I also included the gameplay and story content of side missions, though the side missions were not the primary focus of the analysis. I analyzed and evaluated the scenes and gameplay based on the criteria of hacktivism: the actions of the characters promote political ideologies, actions are ethically motivated regardless of legality, actions are disruptive yet nonviolent, actions do not lead to financial gain, and the hackers take accountability for their actions.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. Representation of hacker culture

Watch Dogs 2 involves a city-wide operating system known as ctOS 2.0, created by Blume Corporation to secure safer and more efficient metropolises according to the game's official website (Ubisoft, 2016). However, many believe that corporations are

using ctOS to monitor and manipulate citizens for profit. You play as Marcus Holloway, who was wrongfully flagged by predictive algorithms as the primary suspect of a high-tech robbery. Under the alias "Retr0," he leaked incriminating documents on the predictive algorithm and then joined DedSec after he snuck into Blume's offices to erase his criminal profile (Ubisoft, 2016). To take down Blume and ctOS, DedSec need to accrue followers to their cause by performing public stunts and exposing dark secrets within Silicon Valley. This not only separates them "from the trolls" as one DedSec member said, but also strengthens their technological capabilities (Ubisoft, 2016). By signing up in the DedSec app, followers can pledge to donate the processing power of their devices to DedSec. The game's progression system for hacking abilities reflects this story element. Similar to role-playing games where players earn experience points until they level up and increase their stats, players in *Watch Dogs 2* gain followers by completing missions and doing other activities until they reach a certain threshold and earn points usable to learn new hacking skills like shutting down security cameras or hacking cars to control them remotely.

The goal of growing followers is in line with the hacktivist ethos. Contemporary social movements take advantage of social media and other digital tools to quickly amass tons of protesters under a common cause (Tufekci, 2017). Hacktivists in the physical world aim to share their information with as many people as possible. Hacktivists want people to know how corporations and governments exploit their data because such knowledge gives people the power to try and take back control. Also, social movements can use digital platforms to further their goals and craft and amplify their own narrative (Tufekci, 2017). DedSec do this throughout the game; they share the incriminating evidence they find through videos stylized with their unique visual artistry inspired by videos from the real-life hacker collective Anonymous. An audio log in Blume's headquarters says that DedSec put their company "firmly into their warped perception of 'bad guy' territory," but DedSec's narrative of the dangers of big data is backed up by the cold facts they unearth (Ubisoft, 2016).

The cooperative element of hacking is also apparent in the gameplay. The leaderless nature of DedSec allows everyone an equal chance to contribute. The success of DedSec also hinges on the support they can grow from followers, not only in how the player's abilities grow but in how other DedSec members occasionally provide intel before a mission starts. Part of the reason the group gets back on track after losing morale in the middle of the story is by attending a hacker festival in the desert. The competition that they win helps reestablish their group solidarity, an important aspect of real-life hacker conventions (Coleman, 2013). The game's integration of online multiplayer further reinforces the collaborative spirit of hacking. If players are open to online play, players can occasionally encounter other players in their game and choose to join them on exclusive co-op missions (Ubisoft, 2016).

However, the competitive aspect of hacking is also apparent in the game. The hackers of DedSec have their own unique personalities and sense of humor which occasionally clash with one another. This reflects the concept of hackers using wit

and humor to distinguish themselves from one another (Coleman, 2013). DedSec are in opposition to a rival hacking group known as Prime_Eight, who sell and exploit data to anyone with money including Blume and even terrorists. DedSec's opposition to Prime_Eight is also accurate in showing how people in hacker culture tend to distance themselves from crackers (Ali Saifudeen, 2021; Coleman, 2013; Jaquet-Chiffelle & Loi, 2020). The multiplayer mode reinforces the competitive aspect of hacker culture in addition to its cooperative one. A player can invade another player's game and try to hack it while the target tries to hunt the invader down.

The gameplay, through simulation, symbolizes both the joys and frustrations inherent to hacking. Most missions involve game players sneaking around a restricted area filled with guards who would shoot the player on sight. Players must use their hacking abilities and observation skills to evade the guards and to complete the objective. Players can use their smartphone to hack all kinds of things for different effects. They can make electric gauges and panels shock nearby guards or just cause a distraction (see Figure 1). They can use remote-controlled gadgets to scan for guards and even distract them with sounds. *Watch Dogs 2* is as much a puzzle game as it is an action game. Not everything goes as planned, so the player must deal with those frustrations accordingly.

Figure 1: The player about to shock a guard by hacking an electrical panel. Image source: Watch Dogs 2 (Ubisoft Montreal), image captured and modified by the author.

Similar to the process of hacking, the core gameplay of *Watch Dogs 2* invites players to subvert and repurpose the design of the level to complete objectives (Ali Saifudeen, 2021; Powell, 2016; Söderberg & Maxigas, 2021). Players begin by surveying the area and then deconstruct it down to its individual interactive elements and obstacles.

Players then figure out flaws in the system. When the player leaves the area with the task complete, satisfaction rushes through their body at a job well done. It embodies the idea of hacking as "reverse creativity" (Nikitina, 2012) where players work backwards from an already completed system to find flaws and exploit them. The game simulates hacking by reflecting its subversive and satisfying nature.

The hacktivists of *Watch Dogs 2* look, act, and think like real life hacktivists. They value freedom of access and the right to privacy while fighting against anyone who uses technology to exploit the public. The way they fight is by informing the public about how companies and governments exploit the public's data. Sharing information is DedSec's way of helping people take back the power. As the number of DedSec's followers grows, so does DedSec's ability to encourage social changes. Increasing the number of followers improves not only players' hacking abilities but also the strength of the movement overall. The gameplay immerses players in the cooperative and competitive aspects of hacker culture keeping hackers together as well as the subversive joy of hacking itself. *Watch Dogs 2* helps players understand the potential impact of hacktivism and why it is so compelling to perform.

4.2. Representation of hacker ethics and values

Like hackers of the offline world, the hackers of DedSec embrace liberal ideals of free speech, access, transparency, equal opportunity, and publicity. One of the earliest cutscenes in the game talks about how tech companies watch every move of their customers and craft a digital profile on each customer "to be bought, sold, or stolen in an instant," (Ubisoft, 2016). Most of the hackers, including Marcus, who form the core group of DedSec in San Francisco were burned by the effects of big data, and now all of them fight so that big data cannot abuse anyone else. All the members of DedSec share the playfully defiant attitudes embodied by many hackers (Coleman, 2013). Their attitudes come not only from their sense of humor and technological expertise, but from their capacity to perceive the true intentions of big data and apply their expertise in stopping the intentions. "I say we tear down the fucking wall, show everyone what Blume's been up to, man. Show the world that their personal data is being used to rob them of their fucking freedoms," Marcus says (Ubisoft, 2016). The group also practices what they preach; the DedSec app is transparent about the way it collects processing power while never collecting personal data.

Through the actions of DedSec, the game attempts to make an ethical argument in favor of hacktivism. DedSec expose wrongs, raise awareness, and prevent unethical laws and practices from being established, which is a key trait of electronic civil disobedience (Manion & Goodrum, 2000). Over the course of the story, DedSec reveal the criminal intentions of a religious cult and expose Blume and a security firm's plan to put ctOS functionality into armed robots and to use the robots against civilians. DedSec also expose Blume and a social media company's plan to manipulate users' social feeds and to rig election machines for a political puppet. At the end of

the game, DedSec reveal that Blume's CTO, Dušan Nemec, was using his access to all the data that Blume collected from ctOS to create a program that could manipulate stock markets, other tech companies, and the public. DedSec also take accountability for their actions. In fact, during the mission called "Hack Teh World [sic]," Marcus leaves the symbol of DedSec drawn in red lights on the servers of Blume's Dublin office after downloading all their data (Ubisoft, 2016).

While DedSec's actions, namely breaking and entering as well as stealing and leaking confidential information, are illegal, *Watch Dogs* 2 attempts to ethically argue that the actions are justified. According to Jaquet-Chiffelle and Loi (2020), one can make an argument that a choice was the most (or even only) ethical option if they take the viewpoints of everyone involved into account. Sometimes the most ethical option is not legal. A white hat by principle does not share the secrets of a client when they break into their systems to find vulnerabilities. However, if a white hat discovers that the client is committing serious crimes, then breaching trust and sharing the discovery with law enforcement would be an ethically optimal action (Jaquet-Chiffelle & Loi, 2020).

> "If their ethical values conflict with those at a business level their ethical evaluation of the situation will depend on the prioritization of the values. A strong personal ethical value or a well-established important societal value might prevail on any other business-related value and lead to breaking the code of conduct. This is in particular true if the ethical hacker unveils critical non-ethical behaviors within the company. In this case, the evaluation of whether the hacker is ethical will be significantly more complex (Jaquet-Chiffelle & Loi, 2020, p. 201).

Marcus and the rest of DedSec are not white hats of course; they are hacktivists. We can view the actions of hacktivists as unethical as it works against the interests of the people or organizations they target. However, if the actions lead to the targets being held accountable for their unethical behavior and prevents them from continuing their behavior, then we can view the hacktivist as acting ethically (Jaquet-Chiffelle & Loi, 2020). If privacy ought to be a universal right, then breaking into a system and leaking the secrets of a corporation to the public would be a violation of that right and therefore unethical. However, if a company is secretly doing unethical things, then one could make the argument that exposing the secrets to the world would be ethical. A key moment in *Watch Dogs* 2 where Dušan confronts Marcus especially explores the dynamics of ethics:

> *Dušan: "Guess what, Marcus! GUESS WHAT! The people want to be told who is good and who is bad. They don't care how it works, only that it does."*
> *Marcus: "But it doesn't fucking work!"*

> *Dušan: "A few fucking civilian casualties is the cost you have to pay for the betterment of the world. You're fighting a war no one gives a shit about."*

Dušan argues that it does not matter what Blume does with ctOS so long as the public is satisfied with ctOS making their lives more convenient. The loss of life from flaws in ctOS is a small cost to pay as Blume improves ctOS so it can better help people around the world. The ethics of DedSec's actions are contingent on privacy being a universally ethical value as the societal value would prevail over Blume's business-related values. Dušan argues that because people do not care about how their data is being used, DedSec do not have an ethical leg to stand on.

However, DedSec work to raise awareness about the ways that companies violate the privacy of the people who use their services, helping to drive the conversation about it and making digital privacy a societal value. The increase in awareness is evidenced by how the follower account rises when players complete both story and side missions; more and more people are embracing DedSec's message. By the end of the game, the movement grows so much that even Blume starts to notice how large, loud, and stubborn public support of DedSec are according to an audio log in the final mission (Ubisoft, 2016). The growing public concern helps DedSec make an ethical case in exposing Blume and Dušan, even if their actions involve breaking into offices and stealing data. *Watch Dogs 2* shows that when the public concern for privacy outweighs the profit motivations of tech companies, the actions of hacktivism in holding tech companies accountable are ethical.

The game also makes an argument through the story that hacktivists can break through the limits that restrict traditional systems from holding companies accountable. During a story mission where players are tasked with exposing a criminal organization masquerading as a religious cult known as New Dawn, Marcus meets with a councilwoman known as Miranda Comay. She has been trying to expose New Dawn for years, but her actions are limited because she is a councilwoman as she tells Marcus. However, Marcus can expose New Dawn on her behalf because of his status outside of the law (Ubisoft, 2016). This reflects the way that hacktivists can inform government bodies to bring about change; hacktivists have a different set of ethical limits that define their actions compared to government and thus can act in different ways to hold people accountable.

While DedSec's actions are ethically motivated, DedSec do not follow the other criteria of electronic civil disobedience: no financial gain, no damage to people or property, and non-violence. Money is a significant part of the progression of the game as players can buy new weapons, cars, drones, paint jobs, and clothing. Players can hack the bank accounts of non-player characters on the street and take their money, pick up money from guards they knock out, and even rob cars. This runs counter to the ethical value of hacktivists doing their work to advance political change but not to pursue personal financial gain. Players can win races if they want to earn money without hacking or hurting people (Ubisoft, 2016). However, the more money players

receive, the faster they can buy all the cool stuff they want; the game encourages players to find money by any means.

Marcus, and by extension the player controlling him, can complete his missions without any violence by sneaking though the environment undetected. However, not only does the non-violent gameplay require more skills than the average player, but the game at best does not encourage players to go the non-violent route and at worst actively dissuades them. *Watch Dogs 2* has a total of 32 weapons, five of which are non-lethal. All these weapons can be bought and crafted via a 3D printer in the hackerspaces in the game world (see Figure 2). At launch, the game had only two non-lethal weapons: a taser gun and a launcher that shoots stun grenades. Ubisoft added three more non-lethal weapons to the game via updates after launch, two of which are locked behind the "No Compromise" paid DLC (Ubisoft, 2016). While these weapons are non-lethal, it does not make the weapons non-violent. The non-lethal weapons are not as effective as the lethal ones. Players have much better odds completing missions with more potent (and permanent) weaponry. Lethal weapons are also more effective in neutralizing rival hackers in a competitive multiplayer mode. Not only does the gunplay undermine the ethics of DedSec's actions, but it hurts the spirit of hacking as players can just delete guards from the area instead of working around them.

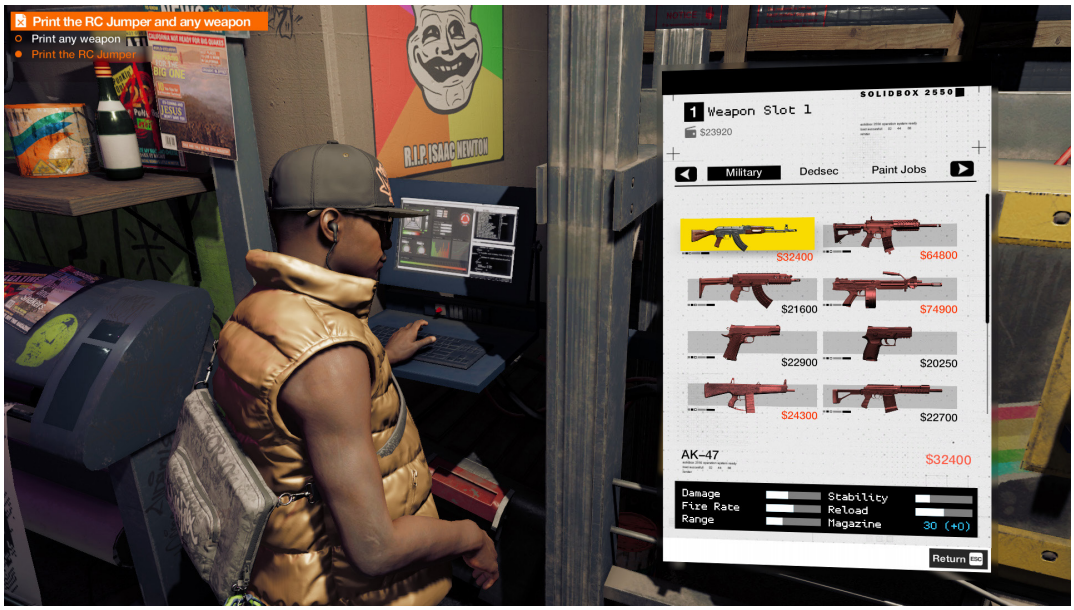

Figure 2: The player can select several lethal weapons to make with the 3D printer in DedSec's hackerspace. Image source: Watch Dogs 2 (Ubisoft Montreal), image captured and modified by the author.

While most of the violence is avoidable, there are some unavoidable story-related moments that go against DedSec's values. Some side missions involve invading people's privacy; Marcus hacks into people's cameras and live streams the footage of

himself pulling pranks on them to his followers. Invading the privacy of people like Dušan follows DedSec's imperative of holding people who violate other people's privacy accountable for their actions. However, when it is performed just for a laugh or to scare someone straight like in some of the side missions it goes against that imperative. DedSec's most destructive act occurs during "Hack Teh World." During the mission, DedSec put a virus on a satellite before it is launched into space. Once the satellite is in space, DedSec hack different places around the world, which includes disabling a power plant and compromising a server farm. During the mission called "Robot Wars," Marcus takes control of a drone to destroy the research facility it is housed in (Ubisoft, 2016). The actions in these two missions could be examples of cyberterrorism (Denning, 2006).

Moreover, the game does not properly recognize unethical behaviors. There is no morality or reputation system unlike the previous *Watch Dogs*. The story itself barely engages with the ramifications of DedSec's more destructive acts while only briefly reminding players that the acts are probably illegal. The few times Marcus finds himself on a criminal watch list are quickly resolved. At one point after celebrating a victory, Marcus drunkenly refers to DedSec as the "baddest motherfucking hacking, coding, stealing – we don't tell the cops I said that," (Ubisoft, 2016). In the latter half of the game, a news report mentions that the people support DedSec's efforts "if not their methods," (Ubisoft, 2016). In fact, all these actions are seen as the way to create social changes. It is these actions that put Dušan in prison. The game for the most part uncritically views DedSec's actions leading up to the arrest of Dušan as ethically acceptable. The game ignores DedSec's violent actions when attempting to argue in favor of hacktivism.

5. DISCUSSION

What defines all hackers is their ability to alter technology systems and create new meanings. For example, a white hat can show a client how a seemingly impenetrable security system can be circumvented. Whereas the process of reverse engineering a system can be frustrating, it only makes the success of overcoming the system more satisfying. Hackers are bound not only to their peers through both cooperation and competition but also to the tech companies that develop the infrastructure they work with and aim to circumvent. What makes each hacker different is their actions, expertise, legality, and ethics. This defines what hackers do and the limits of their actions.

Hacktivists believe in the transformative power of technology but also recognize how it can be abused to harm people for personal gain. They believe in the value of privacy, access, and freedom of information. Their work lies in modifying computer systems in disruptive yet nonviolent ways to make statements about how the systems work to rally social changes. Not only do they attempt to change technological infrastructure and how it is run, but they also create and maintain alternative

technology that helps preserves people's freedom and free access to technology. The knowledge and new meanings that they share potentially empowers not only other hacktivists but all citizens to take back control of their lives. As most of our lives are run by digital technology, subverting technology has the potential to subvert and change how society works.

DedSec exposing and stopping the abuses of tech companies and government entities falls in line with the hacktivist values of free speech, access, privacy, and agency. While many of DedSec's actions are illegal, DedSec make a case for the ethics of their actions because they lead to positive social and political changes. DedSec raise awareness to build up their individual and collective hacker values into societal ones. By revealing hidden truths such as how people's data are being used for private interests, DedSec justify their unlawful actions. However, the ethical justifications of their actions are undermined both because the ends do not justify the means (i.e. invading the privacy of targets just to prank them) and because the means do not justify the ends (i.e. killing guards, destroying property, and stealing money while exposing secrets). The game barely supports more ethical actions such as completing objectives without violence and outright forces the player to commit unethical actions. *Watch Dogs 2* fails to back up the representation of hacktivism's ability to encourage social changes by failing to commit to the criteria of nonviolence and no financial gain.

Watch Dogs 2 immerses players in the mindset of a hacktivist and helps players understand why hacktivists do the things they do. Its characters and stories embrace the playfully defiant attitudes of hacker culture and the anti-corporate, pro-freedom mindset of hacktivists. The gameplay replicates both the joys and frustrations of the creative process of hacking, not to mention its cooperative and competitive aspects. Players come to understand what makes hacking so exciting and fulfilling. The game has many moments that build its case for both the ethical foundation and the importance of hacktivism even if hacktivist actions are unlawful. However, the game does not commit to hacktivism's criteria that hacks should be made without violence against people or property and should not be made for financial gain. The destructive hacks seen in the game do not represent the actions of hacktivists in the physical world. Like all hackers, hacktivists are limited in what they can do by the values that they choose to follow. If the game was following all the principles of hacktivism, then the game should not allow the player to commit violent acts or acts made for financial gain.

6. CONCLUSION

Watch Dogs 2 argues that hackers are essentially the Robin Hood of today. They steal from the rich and powerful and give to the poor. Instead of stealing money (though DedSec can steal from both the rich and the poor), they steal information and data to prevent the rich and powerful from abusing and exploiting the poor and

vulnerable. This requires illegal operations. However, because hacktivists stop abuse and encourage social changes, they could make the argument that their actions are ethically optimal. As the unknown woman in one of the early cutscenes of the game says, "whistleblowers, activists, and hackers have drawn their battle lines, putting the establishment on watch. But are they threats themselves, or have they become freedom's last line of defense?" (Ubisoft, 2016). As the game posits, hackers like the ones in DedSec are the latter.

The game embraces the hacktivist ideals of freedom of information, privacy, and agency and demonstrates how tech companies and governments abuse the power of technology for their own gain. However, whereas the developers of *Watch Dogs 2* are making a rhetorical argument through the gameplay about the power of hacktivism in changing society for the better, they are ruining their own argument by including the option of violence and unavoidable story moments that go against the ethical values of its characters. *Watch Dogs* is Ubisoft's take on Rockstar Games' incredibly successful *Grand Theft Auto* franchise, and thus replicates much of *Grand Theft Auto*'s gameplay of looting and shooting. The crime simulation that defines *Grand Theft Auto* may have been fine for the first *Watch Dogs* game where the tone was moody. However, it does not fit with the quirky, revolutionary tone of *Watch Dogs 2*. In fact, it threatens the game's ethical argument for hacktivism.

The developers do not completely discount the value of peaceful protest and electronic civil disobedience. If they did, Dušan would likely have been killed in some over-the-top boss battle instead of going to prison. However, the game still portrays the violent and destructive actions committed by the characters as necessary for social change. DedSec may look, talk, and think like hacktivists, but DedSec's actions do not always align with the values and ethics of hacktivists. It is understandable of Ubisoft to believe that digitally recreating nonviolent protest would not entertain its audience, but DedSec earning social changes without resorting to violent and destructive acts would have sent a stronger message. Letting players commit acts of violence for financial gain in the name of hacktivism does a disrespect to actual hacktivists.

While this article is grounded in literature about hacker culture and hacktivism, the analytic part mostly ignores factors outside of *Watch Dogs 2* such as real-world markets and events that may have influenced the creation of the text. The article also ignores the audience reception of the game. Thus, a production analysis or a reception study on *Watch Dogs 2* would be valuable for further understanding the game's representation of hacker culture and hacktivism. Other possible research directions include examining other games about hacking and comparing their messages and gameplay mechanics to *Watch Dogs 2*. Another direction could be examining a text about hacking that is in a medium different from video games. One could investigate what themes and representations are common across media about hacking.

John J. Fennimore is an award-winning writer and scholar. He is a graduate of the Media Studies master's program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and is

an incoming student of the Communication, Rhetoric and Digital Media PhD program at North Carolina State University. He is intrigued by the commercial aspects of video games, the psychology of players, and the power dynamic between players and video game corporations. His master's thesis explores the impact of cosmetic items on the gameplay and game design of Fortnite. He's written over 1,000 articles and gained over 11 million pageviews for the gaming, entertainment, and news sections of real-time information platform Heavy.com. He's presented at the Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference 2020 & 2021, the DePaul University Pop Culture Conference 2019 & 2021, and Global Fusion 2019 where he won third place in the student paper competition. His favorite games are *Hades*, *Bloodborne*, *Bayonetta 2*, *Undertale*, *Nioh* 2 and *Yoshi's Island*.

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