



# Covering Hate: Field Theory And Journalistic Role Conception In Reporting On White Nationalist Rallies

By: **Gregory Perreault**, Brett Johnson, and Leslie Klein

## Abstract

In the United States, journalists covering white nationalist groups find themselves in an impossible situation: how do you cover the newsworthy rallies—and the concerns raised by the local community—without providing a platform for hate speech? The present study conducts in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 journalists who have covered white nationalist rallies. Through the lens of field theory, this study seeks to understand how journalists conceive of their role in such coverage, how they situate themselves within the field, and how they articulate the best practices for this challenging form of reporting. This study finds that white nationalist rallies presented a challenge to journalistic habitus, and journalists responded by drawing from the well of experience and professional socialization.

**Gregory Perreault**, Brett Johnson & Leslie Klein (2020). Covering Hate: Field Theory and Journalistic Role Conception in Reporting on White Nationalist Rallies, *Journalism Practice*, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2020.1835525. Publisher version of record available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2020.1835525>

## Covering Hate: Field Theory and Journalistic Role Conception in the Coverage of White Nationalist Rallies

**Abstract:** In the United States, journalists covering white nationalist groups find themselves in an impossible situation: how do you cover the newsworthy rallies—and the concerns raised by the local community—without providing a platform for hate speech? The present study conducts in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 journalists who have covered white nationalist rallies. Through the lens of field theory, this study seeks to understand how journalists conceive of their role in such coverage, how they situate themselves within the field, and how they articulate the best practices for this challenging form of reporting. This study finds that white nationalist rallies presented a challenge to journalistic *habitus*, and journalists responded by drawing from the well of experience drawn from their professional socialization.

Keywords: Hate speech, First Amendment, field theory, role conception, hate groups

*NOTE: This is the ACCEPTED version of the manuscript and hence may not reflect all changes in the final version.*

\*You can hear me discuss this piece on **the J Word podcast** here:

<https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/the-j-word-a/the-j-word-23-secrets-of--AR3rP2CKpi/>

\*And this piece was featured in our field newsletter **RQ 1 at NiemanLab**:

<https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/11/how-are-journalists-like-instagram-influencers-in-some-key-ways-audiences-judge-them-the-same/>

**TO CITE:** Perreault, G., Johnson, B., & Klein, L. (2020). Covering hate: Field theory and journalistic role conception in reporting on White nationalist rallies. *Journalism Practice*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1835525>

White nationalist hate groups—groups that “claim[] that the essence of the United States as a nation is carried exclusively in the social, cultural, economic, and political practices of early European settlers” and have the “goal of ensuring white people exercise power over people of color” (Berlet & Sunshine, 2019, p. 484)—have been active in the United States since the Reconstruction era. However, scholars and advocacy groups have documented that activity among white nationalist groups has increased over the last decade, due in part to a racist opposition to the nation’s first black president, Barack Obama, as well as to rhetoric used by Obama’s successor, Donald Trump, that many see as emboldening and legitimating the causes of white supremacists (Potok, 2017; Berlet & Sunshine, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2019). The present rise in white nationalism is certainly newsworthy, and rallies provide an accessible avenue for that reporting. However, these events are fraught with journalistic peril, such as drawing false equivalencies between far-right and far-left extremist organizations, and the risk of giving an undue platform to white nationalist groups, among others. Thus, this paper seeks to better understand how journalists cover these challenging events in an era when they appear to be growing more common.

This paper relies on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 journalists who have covered white nationalist rallies over the last decade to explore how journalists conceptualize themselves within the broader journalistic field and how they think about the best practices for covering these rallies. We approach this phenomenon using the theoretical framework of field theory. Our findings indicate that journalists in these situations required further reflection on the innate responses the habit-oriented aspect of

the field provided given that a white nationalist rally did not reflect a *typical* reporting assignment for them. Journalists drew on general conceptions of news values and ethics to respond individually and creatively in addressing a social obligation to their audience.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Field Theory and Journalistic Role Conception*

This study operationalizes Pierre Bourdieu's field theory for the purpose of understanding how journalists covering white nationalist rallies define their role in the journalism field. Bourdieu argued that the central frame used to understand the interactions between individuals and social phenomena should be the social space, or "field," in which it occurred (Bourdieu, 2005). Field theory reflects Bourdieu's overarching concern about the "reproduction of fields of intellectual or economic striving" (Lizardo, 2004, p. 377). The theory aims to make sense of elements interacting both within a field and with other fields (Benson, 2004). A field can be identified as the fundamental structure of a space. It is common in many fields for practitioners to fight for the "transformation or preservation" of their space (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 40-41). Journalists, for their part, fight for the preservation of traditional news values and of practice, which compose the field's *doxa* (Vos, Craft, and Ashley, 2012, p. 852). Using news values as criteria to decide what makes something newsworthy exemplifies *doxa* (Willig, 2013).

For Bourdieu, *doxa* both informs and is informed by *habitus*. *Habitus* is "the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations," which reflects "the systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the

generation and structuring of practices and representations” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72).

*Habitus* can be defined as the accumulated experiences in the field that create a deeper understanding of the “journalistic game” (Willig, 2013, p. 8). The *habitus* is so ingrained that people often mistake their feel of the game as natural when it has been, in fact, culturally shaped. Bourdieu (1977) commonly uses sports analogies to explain the *habitus*, such as how the baseball player knows when to swing at a fastball without needing to consciously think about it. As professionals in any field proceed throughout their career, they tend to develop predispositions of what should be expected within the field. The greater their experience, the more adept and creative journalists tend to be in “integrating past experiences” as a matrix of “perceptions, appreciations, and actions” that are used at every moment and “make[] possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 95). *Habitus* indicates the degree to which journalists have a script they follow; once they know the script, they have the ability to improvise on reporting decisions in the moment. It is a result of both primary socialization (through journalism education) as well as secondary socialization (through on-the-job training; Neveu, 2007).

Bourdieu (1998) argues that the journalistic field has maintained weak autonomy from other fields. In the United States, this autonomy is “supposedly protected by norms, such as objectivity” (Tandoc, Hellmueller & Vos, 2013, p. 551) that flow naturally from journalistic *habitus*. Journalistic norms and goals—such as truth-telling, objectivity and adherence to professional ethical standards—are often drawn from journalists’ role conception. Roles represent the individual enactment of the *habitus* as a “predetermined set of discourses and actions appropriate to a particular ‘stage-part’” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.

2). Studies on journalistic role conception examine how journalists articulate their function in society (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996), linking journalists' everyday jobs with the more abstract idea of journalism as an institution (Tandoc, Hellmueller, & Vos, 2013). The ideals journalists express when defining their roles provide them with clear social purpose, represent major components of their professional identity, and differentiate them from actors outside the profession (Deuze, 2005; Christians et al., 2009).

There are numerous roles with which journalists identify (Donsbach, 2008; Weaver & Willnat, 2012). Journalists' role conceptions might include: a *storyteller*, who "puts the world into perspective by providing explanation, background, and context" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 153); a *mirror*, who reflects an image of society back onto itself to shed light on what needs improving; a *disseminator*, who "reports things 'as they are' and...[sees] themselves as detached bystanders, adhering to strict neutrality" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 153); or a *watchdog*, who "proactively scrutinize[s] political and business leaders" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 155). Journalists also commonly see themselves as fulfilling the role as transmitters of the social heritage, passing along stories and values to future generations (Lasswell, 1948).

The coverage of white nationalist rallies offers an especially challenging scenario that is significant for studying how journalists conceive of their social roles and thereby exhibit beliefs and practices defined by the field of journalism. Covering these rallies requires journalists to answer tricky questions about being a *storyteller* (what is the historical context surrounding white nationalist groups in America?), an *information disseminator* (what are the relevant facts, if any, to report regarding white nationalist

groups?), and a *mirror* (should the reporter showcase the perspective of white nationalist groups?). These roles beget further challenges involving how journalists should frame stories about white nationalist rallies. For example, Miller and Andsager (1997) found that journalists tend to rely on episodic frames centered around notions of conflict when covering events such as cross burnings and racist speeches. These trends open another avenue for exploration: understanding the extent to which journalists place white nationalist rallies into broader social contexts, such as racism in America. A better understanding of this issue can reveal how journalists conceive of the duties of their field when they cover white nationalist rallies.

#### *Ethical Issues with Covering Rallies and Hate Groups*

This study also seeks to explore the ethical principles journalists consider when covering white nationalist rallies. Journalists are called upon to report “without fear or favor.” However, fear and favor historically have reared their ugly head in reporting on white nationalism. Journalism historians have documented that coverage of the KKK in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was fraught with fearful journalists favorably covering the Klan, particularly at times when the Klan was powerful enough to enact retribution on critical journalists (Scharlott, 1988).

When covering the rise of the far right today, journalists face a different kind of fear: the fear of being labeled as biased. In general, this fear has led journalists to gravitate toward a norm of objectivity and away from a norm of advocacy in their reporting (Schudson, 2001). In the context of covering white nationalist rallies, a potential issue for journalists is whether clearly labeling these groups’ ideologies as racist, extreme and

morally wrong could be perceived as flouting the norm of objectivity. This issue opens the door to building on Glasser and Ettema's (1989) study of how journalists engage in a "special moral craftwork" of objectifying standards for moral judgment in their reporting while still operating within the "canons of objectivity" (p. 3). Following the violent rally in Charlottesville, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) gave journalists the green light to label racism as wrong and "forcefully challenge people who believe otherwise" (Seaman, 2017). The consequence of not doing so, Glasser and Ettema (1989) warn, "is a devalued, censored, and repressed connection between the press and the public conscience" (p. 18). Thus, it can be argued that *doxa* would naturally motivate journalists to address this infringement on their values, even if it means journalists might find themselves labelled as biased as a result.

The fear of being labeled as biased can also lead journalists to fall prey to what Craft and Davis (2015) call the "objectivity trap," whereby voices on one side of an issue will threaten to label journalists as biased as a means to extort falsely "balanced" or "objective" coverage between two competing ideas that are not equally valid (p. 216). The result is a distorted account of the issue being covered. In covering white nationalist rallies, journalists could feel pressure to cover left-wing extremist organizations (namely, the anti-fascist movement known as "Antifa") as morally equivalent to far-right extremists. Such coverage could distort the issue of racist extremism in America by downplaying the harmfulness of the latter. Indeed, Adams (2020) has documented that the press has abrogated its duty to outline civility norms in society by drawing false equivalencies between competing ideas of varying levels of extremism in the name of following



institutional norms of balance or objectivity. Therefore, another goal of this study is to understand how journalists consider issues of false balance when covering white nationalist rallies.

As for favor, it is certainly not expected that journalists today would report on white nationalists with anything close to the favor some journalists showed the Klan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Scharlott, 1988). However, journalists do risk giving the ideals of white nationalists a platform—if not outright legitimation—through the sheer coverage of white nationalist rallies (Fitzgerald, 2019). Complicating the matter is the fact that white nationalism is more nuanced today than in the past. Certainly, these groups are united in their overarching white supremacist ideology, as evident in the title “Unite the Right” given to the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville. Beyond that, these groups have distinct practices and esoteric rituals that they bring into the public sphere during a rally (Berlet & Sunshine, 2019). The main challenge for journalists is to uncover and explain these nuances to their audiences without glorifying the customs and ideologies of the groups that hold them. Indeed, SPJ’s post-Charlottesville reckoning advised journalists to cover white nationalist rallies without “inflat[ing] situations or mak[ing] matters worse” by giving these groups a platform (Seaman, 2017). Thus, another goal of this study is to explore how journalists address the challenge of thoroughly reporting on white nationalist groups without giving them an undue platform.

The foregoing literature leads us to pose the following research questions—one framed theoretically, the other practically:

**RQ1a:** How do journalists conceptualize their role within the journalistic field vis-à-vis their coverage of white nationalist rallies?

**RQ1b:** How do journalists apply these roles to address the biggest issues they face when covering white nationalist rallies?

### *Method*

To explore journalists' coverage of white nationalist rallies, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 18 reporters who have covered one or more of these rallies over the last decade. Qualitative interviewing has long been a reliable tool for scholars exploring how journalists conceive of their work and social roles. The goal of the method is to explore the meanings that respondents give to information, opinions and interests regarding an important area of their lives (Brennen, 2013, p. 28). Interviewing has been a particularly reliable method for exploring journalists' conceptions of their work through the lens of a particular topic or issue that journalists have covered (Lewis & Reese, 2009; Usher, 2009; Bourk, et al., 2017). The method is certainly not without its limitations: interviewing cannot validly capture the underlying cultural motivations that drive journalists due to a gap between interviewees' practical consciousness and intentional thinking (Ryfe, 2020). However, Ryfe (2020) also suggests that interviewing is still well suited for exploring how journalists make meaning of their actions, allowing researchers to sketch out journalists' motives for making decisions in their reporting.

Therefore, the research team is confident that interviews can achieve the same purpose using white nationalist rallies as the phenomena of focus.

To explore how journalists conceived of their roles when covering white nationalist rallies, the research team relied on scale questions from the Worlds of Journalism survey designed to have journalists rate the values they prioritize in their coverage (see Hanitzsch et al., 2020; Perreault, Stanfield, & Luttman, 2019). This survey provides a useful framework for addressing how journalists can “experience their profession in different ways, even as they retain a shared commitment to some basic, common professional norms and practices” (Hanitzsch et al., 2020, p. 4). This framework addresses the need within field theory to better understand the phenomena shaping and challenging the construction of professional norms and roles (Benson & Neveu, 2005).

Guided by Perreault, Stanfield and Luttman (2019), the survey included open-ended questions designed to allow a more specific group of journalists (those covering white nationalist rallies) to elaborate on their perceived roles. Questions were divided into four areas: (1) questions about journalists’ professional background and current occupational context; (2) questions about journalists’ priorities in regard to their journalistic roles; (3) questions about their most important roles as journalists; (4) questions about journalists’ potential sources of influence on their work. Lastly, participants were asked specific questions about their experiences covering white nationalist rallies such as, “You have covered white nationalist rallies in the past; what are the challenges in that form of coverage?” The interviews were semi-structured in nature,

allowing the research team to balance the goals of formality and precision with exploration and the natural variation among respondents (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

To find participants, the research team searched the database LexisNexis for newspaper stories since 2008 that contained the words “white supremacist” or “white nationalist” within the same sentence as the word “rally.” These terms were selected to return stories covering physical events. Newspaper reporters were selected given that newspaper reporters (1) continue to be perceived as holding a high level of social capital due to their role as “stakeholders” in the community (Hess, 2013), and (2) tend to cover white nationalist rallies either episodically (i.e., as discrete events) or thematically (i.e., as indicative of broader social trends; see Iyengar, 1991). Such variety in coverage opens up a potentially broad spectrum of perspectives on both role conception and best practices in covering these events. The year 2008 was selected as a starting point because it marked the height of Barack Obama’s presidential campaign.

This search produced stories written by 88 journalists. Of those, 42 were invited via email to participate in the study. Of these, five declined the invitation, three expressed initial interest but then stopped responding to follow-up emails, 16 did not respond to any email correspondence, and 18 journalists ultimately participated.

The final number of respondents honors the spirit of Malterud, Siersma and Guassora’s (2016) five factors in determining the number of participants in an interview study based on their concept of “information power.” The goal of information power is to give qualitative scholars clear *a priori* guidelines (*a la* power calculations in quantitative research) for determining sample size for interview-based studies, as opposed to post hoc

determinations based on vague and subjective notions of “saturation” and diminishing returns of quality information from subjects (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Malterud and colleagues do not suggest how following their criteria could translate into raw numbers, but rather encourage scholars to apply these criteria to their research to ensure sample size is given due diligence. The five criteria, which we consider below, are: the breadth of the study’s aim; the role of respondents’ specific characteristics; whether the theory upon which the study relies is well established; whether participants offer a high quality of dialogue in their interviews; and whether the study involves analysis of a single case or multiple cases.

First, the breadth of this study’s aim is narrow: rather than studying how journalists cover the broader concept of racism, we are studying how journalists cover extreme, public forms of racism. Second, respondents’ have specific characteristics: we seek the perspectives of journalists who have covered white nationalist rallies, as opposed to individuals who have witnessed such rallies. Third, the theory upon which this study relies is well established, as opposed to one in need of an abundance of evidence to enhance its validity. Fourth, because we relied on the accounts of reporters covering multiple cases of white nationalist rallies, we were cognizant that our sample should be large enough to sufficiently reflect a diversity of experiences based on the reporter’s race and gender, the newspaper’s location, size and scope of its audience (local, regional or national), and the nature of the event being covered. Finally, we sought to ensure quality dialogue through a semi-structured questioning strategy that asked all participants the same questions related to broad themes, while also asking a combination of probing and directive questions that

elicited greater detail from respondents' experiences within the parameters of field theory (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 207). With all of these criteria considered, 18 participants made up the sample.

The interviews took place between October and December 2019. Each member of the research team was responsible for interviewing roughly one-third of the participants. All interviews were conducted via telephone, and audio was recorded for each interview. Interviews lasted about 45 minutes on average. The member of the research team who conducted the interview also transcribed that interview. Then, each member of the research team read and coded each transcript. Responses to the survey were tallied, and responses to role conceptions in general were compared to responses to role conceptions in the context of covering white nationalist rallies. Coding of responses to open-ended questions occurred in three stages. First, researchers individually conducted open coding of the transcripts, breaking up data into smaller units by relying on a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Onwuegbuzie, et al., 2009). Second, the research team collectively engaged in an axial coding session, in which team members met to discuss individual findings and group them into categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 252). Finally, the team members relied on selective coding to group the categories found in the axial coding session into major themes related to the research questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 252). The findings reported below represent consensus among members of the research team regarding the significance of the findings and their relevance to the two research questions posed in this study.

## **Findings**

The 18 respondents came from 16 outlets: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the AP, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *East Bay (CA) Times*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *Nashville Tennessean*, the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, the *Texas Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Providence (RI) Journal*, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, the *Dayton Daily News*, the *Duluth News-Tribune*, the *Eau Claire (WI) Leader-Telegram*, and NUVO, a self-described alternative news outlet based in Indianapolis, IN that was a weekly print publication until March 2019, when it moved exclusively online. To protect the identity of respondents, aliases are not reported alongside respective outlets, and locations of the events on which respondents reported are not given where doing so could reasonably be presumed to reveal the identity of respondents. This was an experienced sample—the journalists in the sample had an average experience of more than 18 years. None of the participants considered covering these rallies their beat, though a few said that since they had covered more than one rally, the events had become a *de facto* beat for them. The breakdown of respondents was nearly evenly split in terms of gender, with eight respondents identifying as female and 10 respondents identifying as male. The sample was more homogenous in terms of race: only one respondent identified as a person of color, while the other 17 respondents identified as white. This homogeneity, though regrettable, was not for lack of effort to seek out the voices of journalists of color with experience covering white nationalist rallies: the four other non-white journalists in the initial pool of reporters either declined to participate or did not respond to attempts to contact them.

Our two-part RQ sought to explore how journalists conceptualize their roles within the field through their coverage of white nationalist rallies, and how they rely on those

roles when dealing with the major issues the face in such coverage. We first sought to understand how the journalists in our sample conceived of their roles *in general*. In their responses to the Worlds of Journalism scale, journalists identified most strongly with the watchdog role ( $M = 4.69$ ). Journalists largely conceptualized themselves as watchdogs with the aim of serving as not only “a referee and arbiter of facts and bullshit” (Journalist H), but also revealing “the things that are happening that are kept secret from [their audience]” (Journalist N). Participants used standard language associated with the watchdog role, such as a need to keep “a check on government and powerful institutions” (Journalist O), “hold local officials accountable” (Journalist C), “be a check on government and corporate power” (Journalist M), and reveal “what people in powerful positions are doing” (Journalist N). Furthermore, when asked to list the most important roles of a journalist, more than half of journalists started with a description of their role as a watchdog.

The two other dominant roles from this line of questioning were the *storyteller* role with a mean of 4.47, and the *mirror* role with a mean of 4.38. In describing the *storyteller* role, journalists described their reporting as needing to be “narrative focused” (Journalist N). Journalists generally addressed this role through their desire to provide context to stories (Journalist B, E, H). In describing their conception of their role as a mirror, participants emphasized the need to “bring all relevant perspectives to whatever it is I’m reporting on, in a way that’s fair to those perspectives” (Journalist P), provide an unvarnished representation of “what is happening in a community” (Journalist D), and “doing your best to be an impartial witness and a vessel of information” (Journalist H). A



majority of participants framed the *mirror* role in terms of an accurate reflection of society that reveals things that need improvement; as Journalist J put it, “gathering pertinent facts and providing them to readers or viewers with context in a way that helps educate them” (Journalist J).

Journalists articulated an “ideological range” in their roles. As a *mirror*, journalists described themselves as the “vessel of information” (Journalist H). As storytellers, journalists discussed “bring[ing]” all relative perspectives to bear (Journalist P)—implying by extension that the relevant information need only be gathered in the name of being “fair to those perspectives” (Journalist P). Conversely, journalists also assigned value to the role of *watchdog*, extolling the need of the journalist to act as a “referee” (Journalist H) and as a “check” on the powerful (Journalist O). Bourdieu (1977) helps us make sense of the discrepancy in these roles—in many cases presented by the same journalists—by arguing that, within a field, individual agents struggle in their operation of *habitus* when they encounter “objects whose properties are a challenge to the system of classification” (p. 141). As the journalists described it, a white nationalist rally is a singular event and hence, it would be bound to defy many of the natural classificatory system. Nevertheless, *habitus* provides guidance on playing the “journalistic game” through the lens of past experiences. However, most of the journalists in this study had never encountered or experienced white nationalist rallies, and in such cases, as social agents, drew on whatever reporting experiences they found most relevant. Thus, it makes sense that journalists would still cling to ideals of neutrality learned through other forms of acculturation to the field, such as past reporting experiences.

Journalists largely conceptualized their role as watchdogs, storytellers, or mirrors of society in covering white nationalist rallies and they relied on these roles when dealing with one of their biggest challenges: the lack of a “playbook” on how to cover white nationalist rallies—a clear reference to the classificatory system offered by *habitus*. And although this was a sentiment shared among journalists in the practices they described, there certainly were “plays” that journalists applied when forced to improvise. Journalist O best encapsulated the uncertainty shared among reporters: “I don’t know that we’ve come up with the right answer. ... I don’t think we’ve really arrived at a direct formula for writing about white nationalist groups, and I don’t know if we’re ever going to arrive at one, because I don’t think there is one.” Or, as Journalist P put it, “You know, you just do the best you can.” Journalist H was only slightly more specific, saying, “When you’re in the middle of chaos, use your five senses.” Despite the guidance journalists received from *habitus*, they nevertheless appeared to recognize the threat these events posed to their classificatory system. In lieu of clear newsroom policies, most respondents noted that clear newsroom communication on how to cover these events was key.

Although roles offered journalists touchstones regarding how to best operate in the face of challenges that were new and unique to these rallies, participants also expressed difficulty in fulfilling their roles due to what they saw as attempts by white nationalist groups to exploit those roles. For example, participants noted that they wrestled with the issue of whether their coverage would give white nationalist groups an undue platform to amplify their message. However, all of the participants agreed that white nationalist rallies should be covered, and they pointed to these three roles to justify their coverage. Most

participants argued that these events should be covered out of a sense of duty to their audiences. For instance, Journalist P said, “You don’t want to be the magnifier of that speech. But you do want the public to know what these people are saying.” Elaborating further about her specific story, Journalist P invoked both the *watchdog* and *storyteller* roles, saying, “The rally that I wrote about, it involved police resources, it involved taxpayer money, it happened after Charlottesville when people were concerned ahead of time and fearful ahead of time. So, I think it was an extremely important and responsible thing for the news media to cover this.”

Although the journalists agreed that it was important to cover these groups and rallies, some still indicated that it was difficult to decide *how much* coverage to give. Several journalists said they relied on their “Journalism 101” definitions of newsworthiness in order to make this determination. For example, Journalist H said, “It’s usually the decision when you hear an event is coming up, is it big enough, is it going to draw a big enough crowd that it’s going to have a legitimate effect on a major neighborhood in the city you cover?” Journalist Q simply said, “There was going to be conflict, so I had to be there.” Journalist P was one of the few journalists who noted that their newsroom had a specific policy on how much coverage to give hate groups. Journalist P said, “We have a rule here. We’re a newspaper, so we speak in inches of coverage. If there’s a rally, it’s an inch for 100 people. ... If there’s 500 people, we’ll give them 5 inches, and a couple of inches of context.”

Participants described walking a fine line between feeling compelled to condemn these rallies without risking their ability to approach white nationalist sources as impartial

journalists, but they also noted relying on their role conceptions to alleviate their concerns. As Journalist A bluntly put it, journalists should “have a conversation with your editor about how to write ‘they’re stupid’ without them [white nationalists] questioning your professionalism.” Meanwhile, they also wanted to avoid sounding so impartial in their reporting that they conveyed a sense of false balance and gave white nationalist views undue legitimacy. As Journalist R said, “I don’t know if you need to actually say they are despicable. But I hope in plain language in my stories that I explain the beliefs that these groups hold and convey to people what they’re about and what they want to do in our country.” A few other participants elaborated further on this concept:

I think most reporters would consider themselves anti-racist, right? But you’ve got to kind of shed yourself of that from a personal standpoint when talking to sources in white supremacist movements. You have to be able to shake their hands; you have to be able to ask them questions as though you would if you were interviewing anybody else. (Journalist B)

The concept of *habitus* is implicit in Journalist B’s comments, given that they speak to the deeply engrained journalistic disposition to “shed...a personal standpoint.”

This is a round-about manner of reaffirming the value of objectivity, which journalists have used in the past to navigate difficult reporting situations, and which remains a central part of journalistic socialization (Schudson, 2001). Similarly, Journalist K noted:

I think maybe one of the most important things is trying to take a dispassionate view. ... Dispassionate doesn’t necessarily mean balance. It’s

not that there's two sides having a spirited debate. That's not an accurate reflection of what happened. I don't want what I do to be seen as advocacy. I want to provide an accurate portrayal of what happened on those days so people can see it for what it is.

Journalists also expressed the concern that relying too heavily on the watchdog role to criticize white nationalist groups would play into their goal of trying to position themselves as the disadvantaged population. Journalist H noted that part of these groups' strategy is that "they hope they will get attacked" because it "provides YouTube clips that will inevitably show violence between groups of minorities and white people where they [white supremacists] will be portrayed as victims." Similarly, critical coverage, while necessary, could give white nationalists fodder to portray themselves as martyrs to their sympathizers. Journalist C noted how he sought to make his reporting "tempered," but he lamented that it was hard to do so when the comments from sources at white nationalist rallies tend to be explosive. A few participants advised future reporters to constantly be on the lookout for unexpected and newsworthy actions from bystanders that could neutralize the groups' vitriolic rhetoric. One journalist interviewed a Jewish man who saved a KKK member from being beaten to death by members of Antifa at a rally (Journalist H). Another interviewed a father who brought his son to a rally to make sure he would not "fall for [these] ploys" of white nationalists (Journalist G).

Meanwhile, most participants expressed concern that risks associated with *not* covering white nationalist rallies would be worse than the risk of giving these groups a platform through coverage. Journalist E, articulating the concerns of the objectivity trap,

said, “Ignoring them would actually give them more legitimacy. If there’s a huge event happening, and if I don’t cover it because I don’t think they have a good point, that could be used as fuel to prove their point that the media isn’t fair to them.” Similarly, Journalist K noted that “by not writing about [these groups] you might be doing a disservice to the communities affected by them. And that’s generally not an approach in journalism that we’re happy with.” Other participants framed their justification for coverage via the watchdog role, whereby coverage of these rallies would expose white nationalists as the nakedly hateful and extreme groups that they are. As Journalist M put it:

I think ignoring them just kind of emboldens them more...What they say, what they do, when they have physical confrontations, all of that stuff is ugly, and I think that ugliness needs to be shown to the rest of the country.

Journalists also reported struggling with a concern for treating the participants in white nationalist rallies with some degree of humanity. To alleviate this concern, journalists expressed their adherence to the *mirror* role, indicating a desire to shine a light on these groups to show their audience that these groups are operating in their “backyard, and this is what they believe and this is what they want to do” (Journalist A). A common refrain among journalists was that covering white nationalist rallies was necessary to help people understand an evil side of their community. Moreover, respondents expressed a desire to show members of their communities that white nationalism was more insidiously complex than conventional wisdom would suggest. For example, while the press often depicts these groups as “poor, white trash people” (Journalist G), participants noted that that does not describe the people who organize these events, who are more likely to have

attended elite schools and act “like professors or TED talkers” (Journalist A). Journalist G saw this divide between the people attending these rallies and those organizing them as an opportunity to reflect the humanity of the former as individuals preyed upon by peddlers of extremism. Journalist G argued that “everyone is a person that is involved in this story,” and while he acknowledged that they may be “misguided or deluded,” that doesn’t negate the fact that they deserve to be treated with dignity.

A few of the participants suggested that the proper way to cover these rallies would stem naturally out of role conception: namely, the *storyteller* role and its goal of seeking to put the rallies within a bigger picture. For example, Journalist N noted:

It’s very easy to get lost in the minutiae of “this happened, and then this happened, and then this happened.” It’s helpful in asking yourself what the bigger picture is and considering the broad outline of what happened. ... Remember that this kind of stuff happens quite a bit and describe it [with] broader strokes, like with the current political climate.

Participants generally saw the *storyteller* role as their greatest defense against becoming a mere conduit for white nationalist propaganda. As Journalist B put it, “I think reporting in context is my job, and as long as I’m doing that, I don’t have fears that I’m giving them legitimacy.” Several participants suggested that they had faith that their readers would be able to recognize that white nationalist groups harbor extreme and illegitimate ideas for public debate. Still, they acknowledged that this could only be done if they reported the facts as objectively as possible without sensationalizing the participants or the event itself. Journalists I and O suggested reporters should communicate clearly with their audience

why they are writing the story and ensure their coverage reflects that purpose, and Journalist L counseled future reporters that they should “decide first why you want to write about them” before they cover rallies. However, Journalist C cautioned that “poor consumers of news may see something else in the story that a good news consumer might not,” suggesting that the risk of giving white nationalists a platform among certain audiences was, perhaps, unavoidable.

Participants generally agreed that covering violent counter-protest groups like Antifa was important, but few expressed concerns about creating a false equivalency between Antifa and white nationalist groups. Rather, they expressed a duty to convey to their audience that although both groups are extreme, their versions of extremism are different. Still, this was no easy task, with readers ready to pounce on reporters for even the slightest whiff of what they saw as “biased” coverage toward Antifa. As Journalist H noted:

You’ve probably seen plenty of online rhetoric calling Antifa a terrorist organization. A wide number of people you talk to who align politically right are going to share that opinion even if they’re not at all in league with the actual people Antifa opposes.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Journalist O recounted how he faced an online backlash from readers for expressing on social media how “hateful” members of Antifa appeared to him at a rally he covered.

Finally, a common response among participants was a sense of fear and concern for their safety when covering white nationalist rallies. Suggesting that this sense of fear



clashed with his identity as a stoic reporter, Journalist Q said, “I’m not proud to say this, but I felt fear.” Echoing this notion that a sense of fear is (or should be) uncommon among reporters, two other participants said that covering white nationalist rallies marked the first time in their careers that they felt fear in doing their job. A few other reporters suggested that such fear came with the territory in journalism. Journalist J put the goal of fulfilling professional roles above ensuring physical safety, saying, “Sometimes being a journalist means you have to make yourself uncomfortable to get the story.” However, for some journalists, the fear they experienced extended well past covering white nationalist rallies on the days they happened. In particular, three female participants described backlash they received from white nationalists on social media following their coverage of white nationalist rallies. These women expressed feeling concerned over these incidents, though none said she would discontinue reporting on white nationalists because of them.

### **Discussion**

This study provides a glimpse at what may be one of the most challenging assignments for reporters: covering white nationalist rallies. Journalists covering white nationalist rallies displayed the *doxa* expected of field professionals in their articulation of long-held journalistic values: that journalists need to be “fair and accurate” (Journalist O), provide “objective analysis” (Journalist H), and provide “context in a way that helps educate” (Journalist J). *Doxa* was explicitly strong in journalists’ conceptualization of their role in covering white nationalist rallies in that they discussed, both privately and with their newsrooms, the ethical concerns of their reporting (Vos, Craft & Ashley, 2012).

Journalists had more trouble in the operation of their *habitus*. As Bourdieu (1977) argues, *habitus* is often attempting to guide responses to a situation that is necessarily different than what is anticipated: the experience of the present is never the experience of the past. Journalists articulated that they had various concerns about the operation of their roles, in particular the *watchdog* and *mirror* roles. As implied by Journalist H, white nationalists discursively placed themselves as the “powerless” population and, many times, placed journalists among the “powerful.” This put journalists in an uncomfortable position when negotiating their roles, reflecting the challenge to the classificatory system that operates through *habitus*. It was as if journalists covering white nationalist rallies discovered that the game had changed—as if they were expected to play football with a basketball. So, journalists were forced to get creative to counteract the negative effects of carrying out a role that would not operate the way they intended. Indeed, it makes sense that, with an average of 18 years of experience, the journalists in this study were capable of creatively improvising as a result of their own agency within the *habitus*, as *habitus* is a traditional location where journalistic roles operate in the field, and it is understood that with greater experience comes more creativity in how journalists carry out their roles (Willig, 2013).

Significantly, journalists expressed fear of walking into an “objectivity trap” (Craft & Davis, 2015, p. 216) when covering white nationalist rallies, whereby they might grant undue legitimacy to these groups simply by fulfilling their disseminator role. This creates a nightmare situation for journalists where the roles they preferred based on their open-ended responses—such as the *mirror* role—might not only be insufficient to present the

audience with the information they need, but also potentially play into the hands of the hate group on which they are reporting. Indeed, a goal of white nationalist groups appears to be using journalists as a vehicle to get their ideas into the mainstream—a more insidious version of the favor cowed journalists showed to the Klan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Scharlott, 1988). To avoid that outcome, journalists should seek to resist the tendency to cover rallies episodically (with conflict as the driving force of the story) and instead look to cover rallies more thematically by placing them in broader social and political contexts (Miller & Andsager, 1997) in the manner journalists promoted in their articulation of the *storyteller* role. The participants in the study have suggested that this is no easy feat, as many cited conflict as the main reason these events were worthy of coverage, even while they emphasized the importance of considering the broader context.

Another way to elude the objectivity trap is to follow the SPJ's post-Charlottesville guidelines and call white nationalists for they are: racist. Although participants denoted how the pull of *habitus* toward neutrality made this task difficult, such moral equivocating could risk doing irreparable damage to the press's duty to democracy (Glasser & Ettema, 1989) as the creeping ascendance of rightwing extremism mounts an existential threat to both institutions. However, participants suggested that the main ethical question surrounding the coverage of white nationalist rallies is not framed in terms of objectivity versus advocacy, but rather discreteness versus completeness of coverage. Thus, the "special moral craftwork" (Glasser & Ettema, 1989, p. 3) that participants performed in their coverage of white nationalist rallies arose out of their storytelling role. Indeed, participants conceived of their reporting on white nationalist rallies in terms of a social

obligation. *Habitus* is an innately responsive structure, designed to allow individual agents to respond to the day-to-day tasks before them from the basis of the “durable principle of their production” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78). The roles journalists identified are not, after all, merely self-perceptions, given that a “role is conceived, either consciously or unconsciously, in relation to expectations external to oneself” (Tandoc, Hellmueller & Vos, 2013, p. 541). The practical knowledge journalists attempted to operate with was lacking, in part as a result to the challenge to their classificatory system. Journalists’ natural response to the challenge to their classifications was directed toward their obligation to provide their audience with “what they need for self-governance” (Craft, Vos & Wolfgang, 2016, p. 678). Thus, our findings suggest that when the journalistic *habitus* is challenged, journalists used their agency to creatively respond in relation to their audience.

The issue of fear reveals a significant connection between present-day coverage of white nationalist rallies and historical coverage of groups such the KKK. Journalists covering white nationalist rallies today do so at great potential risk to their physical safety. This alone operates as a challenge to the *habitus* classificatory system in that many of the journalists in this sample largely did not face such risks on a day-to-day basis. Although respondents did not report being the victims of violence at these rallies, many shared experiencing an unusual sense of fear. If white nationalist groups become more emboldened in their public actions, journalists covering their rallies will almost certainly continue to operate under a cloud of fear. Also, whereas journalists who reported on the Klan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century faced fear of violent reprisals wrought by Klan sympathizers,

journalists today face not only physical danger when reporting at rallies, but also intimidation by an online army of white nationalists. Violent retaliation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century occurred in communities where the Klan had a strong foothold. Today, online communication has facilitated the creation of shadowy communities of racists with new tools to attack journalists in insidious ways, such as communication threats under the cloak of anonymity, or posting journalists' home addresses or their family members' names. Furthermore, although our sample is small, it is significant that women reporters (and, in particular, one woman who identified as a person of color) reported being targeted online following their coverage more often than their male counterparts. As demand increases for reporting on white nationalist activities, newsrooms should be wary of the dangers their reporters face and put plans in place to enhance their security, online and off.

We found that participants lamented the relative lack of official newsroom policies or guidance on how to cover white nationalist rallies. However, the issues that respondents associated with covering these rallies point toward potential best practices for journalists called to cover future rallies. First, journalists should seek to avoid covering these events as discrete episodes of conflict, and instead cover them more thematically as symptoms of broader ills in society (Iyengar, 1991; Miller & Andsager, 1997). Second, journalists should try to approach the subject dispassionately. As Journalist F put it, "Don't go for the sexy story such as 'let me profile this hate person'.... It would be interesting, people would want to read it, but it's not ethical to add something that is not in any way adding to the public discussion." Third, journalists should strive to interview a variety of

people at the scene of white nationalist rallies beyond those doing the rallying. Such a practice can help place the rally story within a broader context, the main virtue embodied the *storyteller* role. For example, Journalists Q and R reported interviewing white subjects who expressed opposition to the white nationalists but support for cultural symbols such as Confederate monuments. Thus, although these events involve extreme viewpoints, journalists covering future white nationalist rallies should use them as an opportunity to gather a broad range of perspectives. Indeed, reporting that a relatively moderate person sympathizes with the *impetus* for a white nationalist rally (that Confederate monuments should not be removed) can help society better understand the troubling concern that such people could later sympathize with the *goals* of white nationalists.

#### *Limitations*

The racial homogeneity of our sample is perhaps the most important limitation of this study. The experiences of journalists of color covering white nationalist rallies will undoubtedly differ from those of white journalists, especially experiences interacting with white nationalists on the scene of rallies, where safety concerns for journalists of color would certainly be more elevated than for white journalists. The fact that only five of 88 journalists from our initial pool were people of color, while certainly reflecting the racial disparities already present in journalism, does suggest that newsrooms may be sensitive to assigning their journalists of color to cover white nationalist rallies. Regardless, further research should explore the experiences of journalists of color covering white nationalism.

In addition, it is possible that the initial search terms used to develop a set of participants limited the theoretical scope of participants. For example, the research

searched exclusively for the term “white nationalist *rally*” due to its tendency to denote a more “active” (and therefore more newsworthy) event as opposed to a “white nationalist *march*.” Furthermore, we contend that the term “rally” is a more neutral word compared to a word like “demonstration,” which may carry positive connotations. Similarly, the team chose not to search using the term “Alt Right,” as that term is widely considered to be a P.R.-friendly label that softens the positions of extreme right-wing organizations (Perreault & Meltzer, 2019). However, it is possible that our search terms may have limited our sample by excluding a set of reporters whose opinions about covering white nationalism may have been heavily influenced by the public relations strategies of the Alt Right. Future research expanding upon our findings could examine how reporters cover the broader phenomenon of white nationalism, including the Alt Right.

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