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# “It’s Not Hate but ... ”: Marginal Categories in Rural Journalism

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## ABSTRACT

Journalists who cover rural areas in the United States say they are afraid to report on hate groups, and this fear is exacerbated by close community ties and limited resources among rural journalists. We examine the concept of “hate speech” as a boundary object, analyzing in-depth interviews with U.S. journalists reporting in rural communities (n=33) to better understand how rural journalists report on hate. We find that rural journalists articulate a clear definition for hate speech but struggle to apply that definition to events within their communities, even as they articulate numerous forms of hate. Journalists often dismissed acts of hate using the residual category of “not hate, but ... ” to signal something that they felt was out of place or unsuitable but did not rise to the legal definition of hate speech and thus was not worth reporting on. This approach ends up challenging journalists’ normative commitments to their communities and exemplifies their desire to avoid an objectivity trap.

## KEYWORDS

Rural journalism; hate; journalism; white supremacy; bias; objectivity trap

## Introduction

Journalists at rural newspapers fill a crucial role in the information economy of the United States. Such newspapers are critical to maintaining bipartisan conversation and voting behavior (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2018). Rural journalists are often the only sources of information for local weather reports and other daily information that is crucial to local life (Simpson 2019). Conversely, national journalists tend to approach rural issues with a single-minded focus, only telling the story they imagined, drawn from talking to a few community members (Hattaway Communications 2020). Rural journalists working in local U.S. communities thus play an important role in the information economy, often providing the only nuanced local coverage their community members will encounter.

Hate activity has emerged in recent years as a particularly important topic to consider in U.S. news coverage. In 2019 alone, the FBI logged 7,314 hate crimes

(FBI Press Office 2020). Research in news coverage of hate has revealed that journalists have struggled in coverage of hate and hostility (Mourão 2021; Perreault, Johnson, and Klein 2020). While scholars have researched how national journalists approach such topics, they have not thoroughly analyzed how journalists in rural areas cover them. Research indicates that *journalists at the periphery* – that is, journalists distanced from places of power – tend to have more at stake and more acute dangers in facing hostility (de Bustamante and Relly 2021; Gutsche and Hess 2018).

This study examines how rural journalists cover hate in rural America using long-form interviews (n = 33) conducted in late 2020 and early 2021. This focus is vital for a few reasons: (1) rural American areas have historically been home to higher rates of hate activity (Jendryke and McClure 2019); (2) while hate is by no means solely the territory of rural areas – indeed, rural areas report *lower* rates of hate crimes in their communities compared to urban and suburban communities (Wolf Harlow 2005) – rural newsrooms often lack the institutional infrastructure to train their staff for such reporting (Radcliffe and Ali 2017; Wenzel 2019; Jenkins and Nielsen 2020); and (3) such training, and the ability to have other journalists in a newsroom who have conducted relevant reporting, would provide a valuable roadmap for a challenging avenue of coverage (Perreault, Johnson, and Klein 2020).

Through the lens of categorization – an aspect of boundary work – we seek to understand how journalists define and demarcate the bounds of hate. We demonstrate that as rural journalists, they are more closely connected with their local audience but also most likely to fear repercussion after reporting on an act of hate. This study argues that “hate speech” operates as a boundary object for rural journalists. The journalists we interviewed articulated a clear definition for hate speech but struggled to apply that definition to the events they articulated within their communities. Using the common refrain of “we don’t have any hate groups *but ...*,” journalists nevertheless articulated acts of hate in their communities, which were not always associated explicitly with hate groups. Journalists in some cases felt pressure from their audience to apply false balance in their work through labeling groups like Black Lives Matter as a hate group. Journalists operated using the residual category of “not hate” in reflecting on acts of hate, which challenges their normative commitments to oppose hate in their communities.

## Literature

### *Categorization and Boundary Objects*

The present study examines rural journalism through the lens of the boundary object, which is “something shared among disparate groups while holding sometimes radically different meanings” (Carlson 2015, p. 7). The boundary object exists within the framework of boundary work, the practice of distinguishing a group or category from other things, in part by agreeing on definitions of important phenomena, actors, and objects (Gieryn 1983; Carlson 2019). Journalists engage in boundary work to define appropriate boundaries of discussions, using tools such as hyperlinks to call attention to and define as deviant any debate or behavior falling outside the bounds of “acceptable” journalism practice and controversy (Nygaard 2020). In some cases, particular objects, including categories and social distinctions as well as physical objects such as taxidermied animals and

computer programs, can become focal points as boundary objects, having various meanings in different social worlds but sharing a structure that makes them recognizable or translatable across those worlds (Star and Griesemer 1989).

In journalism, "boundary objects can be represented in a variety of forms ranging from specific news topics that connect journalism with multiple audiences" to "the process of making news wherein editors and reporters work collaboratively through a unifying exercise to create and disseminate the news" (Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018, p. 496). In other words, boundary objects can be seen reflected in journalists' news values in that they are shared among journalists, but the meanings may differ. For example, *timely* would seem to be a concept that operates as a boundary object in that journalists share the news value of timeliness but might differ widely on whether news from this week, yesterday, or today constitutes news that is *timely*. Boundary objects have clear definitions, though the definitions may differ between social groups, as Lewis and Usher (2016) describe in the case of the concept of "news" among tech journalists and computer programmers who participated in the Knight-Mozilla Learning Lab.

If we are to consider boundary objects as reflected in topics that connect audiences with journalism, it is worth noting that – as Nelson (2021) demonstrates – journalists often know quite little about their audience. And so, while journalists often reflect on their work in relation to the audience, and they do in this study, it is worth noting that the perception of the audience perhaps says more about the journalist than about their audience (Coddington, Lewis, and Belair-Gagnon 2021). This may mean that the boundary objects meant to connect journalism with its audience do not always connect in the way journalists hope.

Other boundary object studies have examined the way that Gantt charts allow time management across organizational and occupational groups (Yakura 2002), the use of strategy "tools" like core competencies and scenario planning in business contexts (Spee and Jarzabkowski 2009), and program management devices like timelines and status reporting tools (Sapsed and Salter 2004).

At their most functional, boundary objects "enhance the capacity of an idea, theory or practice to translate ... between communities of knowledge or practice"; however, they can also generate antagonistic interpretations and otherwise hinder knowledge transfer across communities (Fox 2011, 70). The process of constructing boundary objects also creates residual categories of "others" or "outsiders" that either do not fit existing definitions or are so new that they have not yet been naturalized into a community of practice (Star 2010; Bowker and Star 2000). The process of identifying residual categories provides a window into the mirror image of strongly defined boundaries by identifying the less powerful actors and concepts within a community. Categories are "historically situated artifacts" and as such they are both learned and negotiated by community members (Bowker and Star 2000, 287). Residual categories are powerful because of their potential – not only does residualness signal "otherness," but also a space where new boundary objects or collaborations between different communities of practice might emerge (Star 2010). In other words, the importance of residual categories lies in their other-ness: they inherently highlight places a community of practice has neglected, ignored, or only recently encountered. They are not unimportant but are undefined and ripe for future definition. They also indicate areas where inertia and status quo will tend to perpetuate unclear non-definitions. Resources in terms of time, money, and mental

energy are usually needed to create the standardization of a useful boundary object (Star 2010).

### **Reporting on Hate**

Journalists covering hate speech find themselves in a contentious arena where they must weigh their normative approaches to the field against the needs of the audience, even as hate groups put pressure on journalists to shape their coverage a certain way. We conceptualize *hate speech* as per the Johnson, Thomas, and Kelling (2021) definition: “speech that attacks or attempts to subordinate any group of people based on social characteristics such as gender, race, sexual orientation, or disability” (1). This definition, built on prior theorizing (Cohen-Almagor 2013; Miller 2021; Slagle 2009), shapes our conceptualization of related issues of *hate groups* and *hate crimes* as related to attempts to subordinate based on social characteristics.

News coverage of hate represents a form of coverage that “may have severe consequences for those at the center of the media reports” – the targets of hate activity (Baugut 2021, 4). As the development of digital technology and decreased financial resources have changed the way newsrooms across the country function, journalists, especially those in rural communities, are less able to lean on trained human news editors to review their coverage of hate activity. Such editors can “see the difference between vulgar personal insults ... and attempts to drum up hate in support of public policy that violates basic human rights” (Russell 2019, 34).

While few studies currently look at how journalists cover hate speech in the United States, this topic has garnered significant attention in other Western countries. In Germany, Baugut (2020) found that Jews interviewed in 2019–2020 believed that local journalism fostered anti-Semitism. However, German journalists sought to combat this perception through numerous role applications depending on the context of reporting (Baugut 2021). Furthermore, the German journalists’ “personal perspectives as citizens may motivate them to act in line with their political convictions even when this requires deviation from what they perceive to be the general task of their profession” (Baugut 2021, 14). Simply put, journalists were willing to depart from their norms to take more active roles defending the interests of targeted Jews. When journalists quote minority groups targeted by hate – as with Muslims in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland – the likelihood that minority groups will be differentiated from the stereotypes against them is significantly higher than when journalists quote members of other minority groups (Matthes et al. 2020). The stakes are high, given that a survey of 15 countries across Europe indicated that mere exposure to populist messaging indicating a “dangerous other” could encourage support for populist ideas (Hameleers et al. 2021).

Recent research on news coverage of hate in the United States suggests similar concerns. Journalists fear that covering hate groups grants them legitimacy (Perreault, Johnson, and Klein 2020); when they do cover them, they do so in ways influenced by knowledge of the groups’ power. For example, fear of retribution led to remarkably favorable coverage of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s (Scharlott 1988). Journalists still express fears to their physical safety (Perreault, Johnson, and Klein 2020), but more commonly their concern is mainstreaming the coverage of hate groups through poor choice of terminology (Berlet and Sunshine 2019; Perreault and Meltzer 2022) or through sourcing that

lends legitimacy to hate (Perreault and Paul 2019). A common concern among journalists is in their falling into an objectivity trap (Craft and Davis 2016) in which journalists attempt to ward off accusations of bias by applying false balance to a story (e.g., balancing a climate change story with a source who is a climate change denier). In reporting on hate groups, this means making comparisons between white nationalists and antifa for example (Perreault, Johnson, and Klein 2020) and, promotes dangerous actors and false ideas to more visible mainstream coverage (Craft and Davis 2016). Prior research has questioned how journalists conceptualize hate speech, arguing that their limited conception of hate speech results in journalists failing to fulfill “a duty to safeguard democracy and ensure citizens have the requisite tools for self-governance” (Johnson, Thomas, and Kelling 2021, p. 32). Without a robust understanding of hate speech, journalists easily become what they fear: a “mere conduit for white nationalist propaganda” (Perreault, Johnson, and Klein 2020, 11).

Rural journalists would seem to have more at stake in this in that they are located in what de Bustamante and Relly (2021) describe as the *periphery*. Like the borderlands occupied by the Mexican journalists de Bustamante and Relly (2021) studied, rural journalists in the United States are “geographically distant from more powerful and stable core political economic centers” (de Bustamante and Relly 2021, 34). The result of being located at the *periphery* is not simply less connection to resources and support from within the profession, but also more professional vulnerability – where threats posed by hate groups may be felt more acutely (de Bustamante and Relly 2021).

### **Rural Journalism**

Nearly half of all U.S. newspapers are in small or rural communities (Abernathy 2018). Rural journalism has historically served a vital community role. In the nineteenth century, rural journalism provided small, isolated communities with crucial information on everything from agriculture to social happenings and community accidents. A rural weekly could cover more than a dozen topics, including the crops being grown, accidents, community infrastructure improvements, and social news (Russo 1980, 24). Rural journalists today are still fulfilling this role of civic connector (Hess 2015), but doing so in fewer numbers as group ownership increases and newspapers close and merge (Abernathy 2018; Coulson, Lacy, and Riffe 2014). Some rural newspapers today are ghosts of their former selves, having endured layoffs and downsizing (Abernathy 2020) or disappearing after merging with larger papers. Coulson, Lacy, and Riffe (2014) found nearly two-thirds of weeklies were owned by groups in 2009, up from one-half in 1997. In that study, 67% of the weeklies in 2009 were considered rural. In addition, owners and publishers of rural, weekly newspapers in the Midwest and South have a hard time recruiting job candidates to their small communities and lack the ability to pay full benefits to employees (Fargen Walsh and Martin 2021). Since 2004, more than 500 newspapers in rural communities have closed or merged with alarming consequences that further isolate that community (Abernathy 2018).

A smaller portion of Americans now live in rural counties than in 2000, and half of the country’s rural counties have fewer residents now than they did in 2000 (Parker et al. 2018). According to 2020 U.S. Census figures, 46 million people in the United States live in a rural area, or 14 percent of the population (U.S. Census 2020). Technology

advances have resulted in job loss and lowered incomes in rural communities, forcing millions to leave for more opportunities (Johnson 2001). Farm consolidation, industrialization and technological advances have resulted in fewer people living in rural areas, larger farms and fewer farmers (Dimitri, Efland, and Conklin 2005). With fewer people, there are fewer revenue sources for rural newspapers, which like most newspapers, have traditionally relied on a revenue model based on advertising (Picard 2008). As Abernathy (2016) points out, if these rural newspapers close there is usually not a television station or radio station that can provide a source of public journalism or provide a watchdog role. In addition, local news organizations have been slower to adapt to digital disruptions and internet content distribution (Holcomb 2018). Newspapers have seen their traditional business model upended by Facebook, declining advertising revenue (Hendrickson 2019; Napoli et al. 2018) and face the prospect of a loss of public notice revenue because of state government actions (Scire 2021).

With renewed emphasis on place in journalism studies (Usher 2019), it is imperative to better understand the motivations and roles of rural journalists and how they cover news. But most journalists in the United States are working on the coasts (Shafer and Doherty 2017). Much of journalism scholarship has been focused on larger newspapers, resulting in a “metropolitan bias” in journalism research (Örnebring, Kingsepp, and Möller 2020) and leaving a troubling gap in knowledge (Radcliffe and Ali 2017; Ali et al. 2020). Ali et al. (2019) noted we are “missing insights into the smallest newspapers.” Ali et al. (2020) noted that the lack of “granular” data on small-market newspapers was frustrating because there is some anecdotal evidence those smaller and rural newspapers outperformed larger counterparts revenue-wise in response to the crisis in the news business.

Some recent local journalism scholarship has focused on rural or weekly newspapers by studying the effects of increasing engagement, such as Wenzel’s 2019 case study of the hyperlocal website *The Ohio County Monitor* as it sought to upend the traditional journalist-audience relationship. Smith (2019) found journalists at three small-town, rural weeklies followed some traditional journalistic practices, but there were concerns about advertising and ethics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, weekly journalists working in rural states found their routines thrown off by the constant demand for news and were hampered by outdated technology and lack of broadband access (Finneman and Thomas 2021). Similarly, a study of rural journalists covering a local disaster found local journalists often understand community dynamics and concerns, but also navigate tensions between professionalism and citizenship (Perreault 2021).

While there are relatively few published studies specifically on rural newspapers and journalists, research on weekly newspapers and some local journalism scholarship can fill in some gaps. Coulson, Lacy, and Riffe (2014) study on weekly newspapers found that nearly 70% of the weekly newspapers were rural. Ali et al. (2019) included some weeklies in their study of small-market newspapers – defined as those under 50,000 circulation.

There is an established line of research on the urban-rural divide, which has implications for the local and rural press. Just 11% of Republicans say they trust the media a great deal or a fair amount (Brenan 2021). Rural residents in the United States tend to vote for conservative politicians (Kaufman 2021) more so than their urban counterparts increasing the relevance of place in studying journalism. The local press could be seen

as one antidote to fight political polarization in the “post-truth” era because people are more likely to trust local news sources than national news (Sands 2019), and local journalists are seen as more caring, trustworthy and neutral or unbiased. Simply put, trust in local news media remains high in contrast to low levels of trust in national news (Sands 2019).

Given the importance and prevalence of small-town newspapers, it is surprising there is not more known about how the rural press operates given that most journalism serves local audiences and when people lose access to local news sources there is less political engagement and more polarization (Hayes and Lawless 2015; Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2018). These small, rural newspapers serve critical information needs.

### **Research questions**

All of this together reflects the essential nature of rural journalism, and the critical role it plays in coverage of hate. With this in mind, we propose the following research questions:

**RQ 1:** How do rural journalists define hate?

**RQ 2:** How do rural journalists delineate boundaries on issues of hate?

### **Method**

To respond to the research questions, the research team reached out to pre-identified journalists covering rural areas. The research team recruited participants using established contacts through their respective institutions and through a purposive, snowball sampling method using alumni lists, professional organizations and social media to identify and reach out to journalists. Journalists were identified as rural based on their newsroom’s geographic placement within a rural area or adjacency to one and where journalists were assigned. In addition, to qualify for the study, journalists had to consider themselves to be working in rural areas.

This approach to identifying journalists was literature driven. According to the U.S. Census, rural areas are any areas not included within an urban area, but scholarly literature reflects no set definition. The few recent studies on rural journalism have not sought to define “rural” (Finneman and Thomas 2021; Smith 2019), yet instead described the practices of rural journalists in relation to place and circumstance. Woods (2010) argued that “rurality” is a social construct. Usher (2019) in her study on place in journalism noted that characterizing places is difficult and that place in journalism research can be a newsroom, but also where journalists go out and do work. Rurality can also be determined by low population density, distance from large urban centers, remoteness, prevalence of geographic barriers such as rivers and mountains as well as social and cultural isolation (Deavers 1992). It made sense for the purpose of our study to aim for areas identified through U.S. census where either (1) newsrooms were based or (2) journalists worked, but additionally, rely on journalists own self-conception of the focus of their reporting.

Journalists were contacted through a process of purposive sampling (Koerber and McMichael 2008) in a range of states and locations across the U.S. Journalists were defined for this study as people who work primarily in the practice of journalism for their main job by writing and publishing on timely and pertinent news topics (Fröhlich,



Koch, and Obermaier 2013, p. 815). The researchers individually interviewed journalists (n = 33) who worked for outlets such as *Avery Journal-Times* (N.C.), *The Houma Courier* (La.), *The West Side Journal* (La.) and the *High Point Enterprise* (N.C.). While some of these news organizations were not situated in *rural* areas, we elected to include journalists who reported primarily on rural areas given that they would still be conducting rural journalism. Participants were recruited via email and connected via video call following approval from the researchers' Institutional Review Boards. Interviews were conducted from November 2020 to March 2021. Journalists (n = 33) were interviewed via a semi-structured questionnaire, with an average interview time of approximately 1 hour, following a similar structure to other interview-oriented studies on the experiences of working journalists (Perreault and Ferrucci 2020; Perreault, Stanfield, and Luttman 2020). Of these journalists for whom demographic information was available (n = 31),<sup>1</sup> 15 of them were women and 16 of them were men. All but two journalists (n = 29) were white. The respondents resided in Missouri, Ohio, Florida, Kansas, Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Louisiana. Journalists for whom work experience was available had an average of 17 years of journalism experience with a median of 9 years of experience. Similarly, for the journalists who shared degree information, 20 respondents had journalism degrees. All respondents said they identified as a rural journalist and described their work as rural journalism. See Table A in the Appendix for all demographic information.

Questions were divided into three areas to examine: (1) journalists' background and experience, (2) how journalists define different terms, such as journalism and rural journalism, and (3) journalists' experiences covering hate speech and hate groups. Additional questions were asked as a part of a line of research on rural journalism, but the only questions examined for the present study come from the above line of questioning. This line of questioning included open ended prompts such as, "What do you consider to be hate speech?", "How would you define hate speech?", and "What issues dealing with diversity have you covered?"

Interviews were conducted until the researchers felt they achieved the appropriate information power in regards to the study participants (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora 2016). Information power is "determined by items such as study aim, sample specificity, use of established theory, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy" (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora 2016, p. 1757). The research team applied four criteria in assessing the number of interviews: (1) the high quality of dialogue in interviews, (2) the established nature of the theory, (3) the relatively narrow aim of study (rural journalists' coverage of hate), and (4) a specificity of sample. The researchers transcribed the interviews to discover themes and narratives using textual analysis and then addressed the research questions using a constant comparative approach (Glaser and Strauss 2017). Fram (2013) argues that the constant comparative approach where researchers re-examine data through other data and adjust the research questions to describe the results is well-suited for this study's research approach. In the coding process, the researchers used literature concerning journalistic boundary objects and journalistic definition making as a guide. After each response was coded, the emerging themes from the coded interviews were compared to identify unities, disparities, nuances and associations among them. This comparison helped to reveal patterns in the data.

This study was done in accordance with Institutional Review Boards at Appalachian State University, Louisiana State University, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and East Tennessee State University. All studies were filed with their IRBs separately, but structured after the Appalachian State University Review Board submission (approval #20-0055). Participants in the United States verbally consented to participate and were informed their participation was voluntary. All participants were deidentified. In this study we will use quotes from participants with limited descriptors, except where context is germane, in order to ensure respondents cannot be identified.

## Findings

### *Defining Hate*

While the authors asked about specific types of hate with specific prompts (e.g., “How do hate groups appear in your reporting? Do they? Have you personally encountered hate groups or hate speech in your reporting?” and “How would you define hate speech?”), journalists often responded by collapsing the discrete categories together – viewing hate as a broader camp including hate groups, hate speech, hate crimes and bigotry. These journalists generally shared a belief that “inappropriate” comments or actions did not meet the criteria of hate (e.g., Participants 16, 19, 23). In the findings that follow, we will reflect on the journalists’ definition of hate as a term which umbrellas numerous forms of hate.

In regard to RQ 1, “How do rural journalists define hate?”, journalists in this sample largely articulated textbook definitions of hate speech. However, they were liable to bring in numerous other forms of hate in defining and reflecting on hate speech. They also argued that their audiences would often define hate speech quite differently.

Rural journalists defined the term in remarkably similar ways. Some participants emphasized the threat of violence as being a primary determinant of hate activity such as “something that could incite violence towards another group or hatred that has some type of action behind it,” (Participant 25) and an activity that “incites violence towards a particular group of people” (Participant 31). More specific definitions emphasized the recipient more than the potential for violence. Participants defined hate speech as “anybody that is saying something disparaging to any race, ethnicity, group, or sex” (Participant 31), “attacking people for their race or religion” (Participant 3), and “words or messaging that targets a specific group about something that is out of their control, like the color of their skin or their gender and their sexuality” (Participant 33). One journalist argued the gravity at which point something becomes *hate speech* was not necessarily about solely prejudice or bigoted language but rather about threat of violence: “It’s not necessarily just saying something like calling a gay person ‘homo,’ ... I mean, that’s prejudiced. When I think of hate speech, I think of things like using the N-word or using really derogatory language towards someone in a way that rises ... to the level of violence” (Participant 23).

Many of the journalists interviewed reflected that much of their reporting process was reader instigated. It is valuable to consider that journalists also said that their definition of hate departed from the definition that would be used by their audience. Several journalists said their audience would excuse things that would generally be considered hate

speech as either a joke or rooted in their religious beliefs. One journalist indicated that her audience would be likely to respond to an accusation of hate speech with a comment such as, “we’re not being hateful, we’re just wary of people who are gay” (Participant 25). Sometimes the audience includes people who are “ignorant jerks” (Participant 18), and rural journalists must conduct a delicate balance of working to cover hate and then considering their audience’s response to covering it. Another journalist noted that they had struggled to cover a state representative who used hate speech: “I would have the whole town screaming at me about how they think I’m paid by the former state representative ... they, like, literally think he pays me to write up hit pieces about the new state rep, which is so outrageous” (Participant 18). This statement implies that the journalist’s audience would be more likely to think he made the story up than to believe that a favored state representative used hate speech. Even if the audience did accept that the state representative made a hateful statement, the audience might be liable to argue “that hate speech isn’t a thing—they would say that it’s people being overly sensitive” (Participant 33). Other respondents said that their audience would have restricted hate speech so that its definition only refers to using a racial slur, but conversely would also argue that “progressive inclusive ideas are also hate speech” (Participant 31).

One journalist indicated that while her audience’s definition of hate speech might be less articulate than her own, these were communities that largely were not hate driven. As a self-identifying lesbian woman who grew up in a rural area, she said that her sexuality would typically be the sort of information that many would suspect to promote hate in a rural area. However, this journalist had found acceptance and willingness to listen among her audience even when they did not understand. Participant 25 noted that when writing a story about an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid in her county, she received a call from someone who was irate over the use of the term *undocumented* and insisted that immigrants should be called *aliens*. She walked the caller through the use of the term in Associated Press Style and explained why the term *alien* could be hurtful: “It was a really great conversation, and it ended with her being like ‘I get where you’re going ...; it’s going to take me a little while to understand why calling someone an ‘alien’ is not something that’s nice’” (Participant 25). Participant 25 argued in effect that while her audience’s definition of hate speech did not match her own, this definition could be clarified by journalists through patience and education.

Journalists struggled in some cases in labeling certain activities as hate – such as a black church being set on fire (Participant 23 argued it was a result of a “religious” conflict more so than race), Confederate flags placed in places intentionally visible to historically marginalized communities (Participant 6), and swastikas scrawled on the side of public buildings (Participant 8). For Participant 23, the respondent struggled with whether what they had experienced was “hate” as much as prejudicial.

There were a couple of instances like over last summer where there were a couple law enforcement officers who made some inappropriate Facebook rants or sharing things that were just ... seemingly prejudicial or just like attacking or hate– aggressive maybe? Aggressive towards the BLM movement (Participant 23).

Participant 23 explained that this Facebook activity by law enforcement included showing memes of trucks running over protesters holding a Black Lives Matter sign and arguing

that Black Lives Matter protesters wouldn't be "burning down these businesses if they could use their Food stamps there."

These findings together indicate that while the definition of hate speech was clear for most journalists, defining it in relation to their audience was more difficult. Thus, their definition of hate speech was not fully functional because they had difficulty applying it in practice.

When defining hate speech, many journalists also discussed activities such as vandalism, attacks on Black Lives Matters protestors and even non-speech related activities of the Ku Klux Klan (e.g., Klan meetings). Journalists perceiving hate speech, hate crime, bigotry and harassment as homogenous would seem to suggest that the definitions journalists used were not functional. Furthermore, journalists did not express a problem with this vagueness in the sense that they perceived the hate they witnessed as symptoms of a deeper overall societal illness (e.g., America's long struggle with diversity, equity, and inclusion as also evidenced in slavery, Jim Crow laws, etc.; Participant 14, Participant 25, Participant 31).

### ***Boundary Objects and Hate***

In regard to RQ 2, "How do rural journalists delineate boundaries on issues of hate?" journalists largely responded to the question about coverage of hate in a similar way. Some journalists described their experience with hate groups explicitly. Yet when asked about their experience of hate groups, most journalists responded with some version of, "I don't know that I necessarily have met with any hate groups, but ..." (Participant 3). The "but" in these responses was often followed by what were activities inspired by hate groups.

While most journalists interviewed had articulated experience with hate activity (n = 22), it is worth noting that more than a third of them did not articulate any experience with hate. In the former group, some journalists (n = 5) experienced run ins with formal hate groups (e.g., a Ku Klux Klan march on the courthouse or a Proud Boys counter protest after a Black Lives Matter protest); some journalists (n = 5) articulated hearing hate speech from political figures and authority figures (e.g., a state senator or a school board member); one journalist mentioned having a felony-form of hate crime (e.g., a brutal attack on a gay member of the community); and the vast majority of journalists described witnessing hate speech and/or hate-inspired vandalism from private members of the community.

Among respondents who had not experienced hate activity, two journalists responded to their experience with hate groups by discussing Black Lives Matter, arguing that though members of their community sometimes thought of them as a hate group, they themselves did not. This reflected a more common sentiment echoed by journalists: that their audience defined "hate" differently than they did. This finding suggests journalists are then placed in a precarious situation given their tradition of providing 'balance' – they felt the desire to adhere to journalistic norms but also experienced a power weakness consistent with peripheral journalists (de Bustamante and Relly 2021).

Rural journalists who had *not* experienced hate activity defined it simply as something that "doesn't happen here" (Participant 21). Journalists who could detail stories of hate they covered in rural communities engaged in more complex considerations of definitions. In these interviews, journalists described a decision-making process as to

whether to cover a hate group event or hate crime that depended on the audience, the journalist's definition of hate speech and the journalist's own news values.

It's worth noting a nuance here in our sample: editors in our sample were much more likely to stress reliance on official sources – and to avoid engaging in reaction gathering from the community – and more specific advice for this form of reporting than reporters. For example, Participant 6 argued that “you get a comment from the mayor or the police chief and then ... [you] wouldn't want a lot of reaction from the public.” Similarly, Participant 4 argued that “just because there may be someone protesting outside the school event. If it has nothing to do with that school event, it doesn't need to be included.”

Several journalists reported knowing about hate groups in their area but were not sure exactly how to access the story and whether such reporting would be worthwhile. One journalist recalled sending a reporter out in response to a police report regarding drivers in pickup trucks with Confederate flags temporarily gathering in a part of town. Participant 8 explained that the editor chose not to cover the report because they were “not going to write a story that six pickups were driving around.”

Other topics of hate included reporting on a brutal attack on a gay teenager that eventually resulted in hate crime charges; a local college coach accused of directing anti-semitic comments toward a player; vocal opposition to a proposal to remove a Confederate statue; a counter Black Lives Matter protest where a teenager waved a Confederate flag; swastikas sprayed on a water tower by three teenagers espousing white supremacy; and a reporter receiving threats on social media after reporting on racist language local high school students painted on school property.

One journalist noted that a Ku Klux Klan recruiter had moved to her area and started “worming his way into local fire department and law enforcement” (Participant 30). She was notified about this person by the Southern Poverty Law Center, who had traced him to the area. On her own time, she did research and found photos of him in a Ku Klux Klan outfit and brought it to the local law enforcement and fire department. She said she called him to talk about the information and found that he had suddenly disappeared. Similarly, another journalist received information that the Proud Boys had come to a family-hosted children's Christmas event in his area. He found photos and wrote a story about it, saying that the family was genuinely stunned and did not realize that they had members of a hate group taking pictures with their children. Of note in both of these anecdotes is that rural journalists had close enough ties to the community that, when they told community members about the presence of hate group members, the journalists' community relationships facilitated trust.

Reporting hate activity resulted in the loss of advertising in some cases. In the case of the students who spray painted swastikas on a water tower, one of the individuals cited was the son of an advertiser at the local newspaper. Although the advertiser pulled his advertising from the newspaper, the editor of the newspaper persisted in reporting. In the reporting, the editor called the graffiti “disgusting” and felt the newspaper must publish information on the arrest. Participant 18 said covering hate speech can result in backlash because of the risk of being labeled as a “fake news person” or “liberal snowflake” (Participant 18).

Many of the journalists described their experience of hate as being tied inextricably to Black Lives Matter protests in their rural communities. These hate incidents were counter movements organized and motivated to end discussions created by BLM (Participant 5).

Journalists said they were more likely to encounter isolated incidents of hate as opposed to systematic works that could be attributed to hate groups. One journalist noted that in his community there had been church burnings and a “gay man was attacked, like violently attacked, and hospitalized ... because of his sexuality,” but such stories were very unusual (Participant 23). Similarly, often hate-incited incidents were discussed in relation to counterprotests to Black Lives Matter protests. Journalists, particularly among those in diverse areas, described individual hate crimes and acts of hate speech that came not only through protests but also letters to the editor.

The journalists in this sample largely expressed that their communities were not diverse but simultaneously expressed pride that acts of hate against individuals from historically-marginalized communities were largely the exception – with the operation of hate groups, at very least, undetectable.<sup>2</sup> Also noteworthy is that nearly a third of all respondents had not experienced any acts of hate they could describe – which only further supports the prior point that acts of hate were the exception in rural journalists’ communities. Finally, as noted in RQ 1, it is noteworthy that here again in RQ 2, respondents reflected on hate groups and hate speech by discussing concepts that fit within the broader umbrella of hate such as hate-inspired vandalism (e.g., spray painting “white power” and swastikas; Participant 8).

## Discussion

While rural journalists share a similar *definition* of hate speech, their *identification* of hate activities varied tremendously. It is “nothing like all the Proud Boys had a rally in town or anything like that,” Participant 18 said. She added that her state representative “basically, like, he strives to be Donald Trump ... He’s said a lot of things that I would consider racist and that I would consider ableist and totally inappropriate for a state representative to say” (Participant 18).

In regards to the first research question, most of the journalists in our sample shared detailed examples of encounters – either news events they covered or comments from readers or sources – that they described as racist, homophobic, and ableist or, as the above reporter put it, “totally inappropriate” (Participant 23). However, these journalists generally agreed that “inappropriate” comments or actions did not meet the criteria of hate. In regards to the second research question, journalists identified the term *hate* as a boundary category that produces a large residual category of things that are not hate speech but are “not OK” (Participant 19). It triggers a clear-cut definition, but the definition does not fit journalists’ perceptions, resulting in things that might be hate speech in practice (Carlson 2021) being passed over as unpleasant rather than an act of violence. Issues of hate fit – in other words – within the broad tent of newsworthy topics (Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018). The problem was that – like “news” itself (Lewis and Usher 2016) – hate could be clearly defined but no standard definition that journalists could use to determine how newsworthy it was compared to other issues they may need to report on.

While it was only explicitly defined this way by one journalist (Participant 21), the journalist defining hate in relation to physical violence is noteworthy in that it would seem consistent with the alignment between physical activity and typical news values (Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018). However, as studies of hate speech in Europe have

indicated, hateful rhetoric actually has a great deal of power (Matthes et al. 2020; Baugut 2020). The rhetoric of language does not need to be tied to physical acts to be powerful and have effect. As journalists classify hate speech, they tend to do so in a way that fits pre-existing frameworks of news attributes and values rather than adapting to create a new understanding based on new realities.

The findings also suggest that the *textbook* definitions for hate speech are not helpful tools for journalists who need to understand realities in their communities since the definitions do not fit their observations. The classification breaks down – it does not map onto the real-world experiences journalists encounter. One way of looking at this phenomenon is that the category has not become *naturalized*, in that it has not yet achieved an unquestioned and invisible space in the reporter's repertoire of narratives and archetypes. However, journalists do have a common and shared definition of the concept, so it might be more accurate to suggest that the term itself is an object that generates a residual category of things that are not hate speech but also are not *NOT* hate speech. This category contains most of the racist and sexist ideas and behaviors that journalists encounter in the real world. However, because it is a residual category and not explicitly defined by the journalist's textbook understanding, the events and encounters are shared informally among reporters and tend to be underplayed and less worthy of news reporting. There is no clear, shared practice of understanding, labeling, and responding to real-world hate encounters (Perreault, Johnson, and Klein 2020).

Journalists here perceived an objectivity trap in a manner similar to journalists who cover climate change or the 2020 election (e.g., that a story about climate change should be *balanced* by including sources who do not believe climate change is real). This is consistent with what other scholarship on coverage of hate has suggested (see Perreault, Johnson, and Klein 2020). Journalists feel compelled to balance stories in a manner which ends up amplifying dangerous actors and ideas. Here we see it in journalists who felt pressure to apply the term *hate group* to Black Lives Matter. The use of the "not hate" residual category then presents an opportunity for journalist to sidestep the trap. This desire to blame the audience for challenges in reporting of course is not new and perhaps understandable in that the audience is largely an imagined audience (Coddington, Lewis, and Belair-Gagnon 2021; Nelson 2021). But this may also be reflective of the vulnerability rural journalists feel as actors at the periphery (de Bustamante and Relly 2021). Given that they are "distant from more powerful and stable core political and economic centers," it could be that certain types of contentious stories translate into risks for their professional and personal wellbeing (de Bustamante and Relly 2021, 34).

The nature of "not hate" as a residual category in application also suggests that the topic is ripe for collaboration and future cooperative work between journalists and other social actors. Because its definition is ambiguous and vague as a result of its negative definition from the more formal term, journalists could shape and solidify it in conjunction with social justice groups.

Research on hate in other Western countries has found that minority groups tend to believe journalists foster hate speech and hate groups, even if unintentionally (Baugut 2021). This has been historically true in the United States, as reflected in the positive coverage of the Ku Klux Klan (Scharlott 1988). With this in mind, we suggest that one way hate speech is unintentionally fostered is through the very definition of the category. Given the difficulty journalists have in applying the definition they articulated in this study, they could

unintentionally foster the forms of hate that Baugut (2021) describes in some situations. Furthermore, it is important to underline the fact that this reality is unintentional on the part of journalists. We found that journalists felt normatively obligated to report on hate groups and were motivated to do so even when their job responsibilities did not encourage it – a finding that aligns with similar research by Perreault, Johnson, and Klein (2020), Johnson, Thomas, and Kelling (2021) and Baugut (2021). While the rural journalists in this study could articulate a clear definition of hate speech, that definition was often so narrow that it excluded potentially relevant events in their own community.

Rural journalists felt a close tie to their community and certainly felt a commitment to be the “great wide window through which readers look out into their community” (Schramm and Ludwig 1951, 314). As Abernathy (2016) implies, the closures of rural papers, shrinking population in rural areas, and personnel cuts would naturally have an impact on reporting. Indeed, many of the journalists interviewed, in describing their reporting process, reflected that much of it was reader instigated. This audience orientation is valuable for rural areas in holding a community together (Abernathy 2016; Barthel et al., 2016) but also indicates that robust rural journalism is even more challenging. This reality would make it likely that hate speech is more limited – even to the point of invisibility – than it is in reality.

### ***Limitations and Avenues for Future Research***

The present study charts an ambitious agenda to better understand rural reporting on a topic that is challenging for even the most well-staffed and well-funded newsrooms in the United States: hate. While the authors were systematic in their use of U.S. Census bureau statistics to identify rural areas and rural reporters, many rural areas are not represented. A wider range of rural areas could have shifted the nature of the findings. Finally, the authors want to stress that nearly a third of journalists had no experience of hate, and many others had experiences that seem relatively tame in comparison to a hate group rally. While the focus of this piece regarding rural journalists covering hate is a vital one for understanding how newsrooms with resource limitations handle a topic worthy of widespread concern, this *does not* imply that rural areas have unique connection to hate. Future research should consider additional rural areas and particularly consider further examination of complicated areas such as Texas, which has closer relations with a national border but also a long history of hate.

In this study, journalists strongly affirmed that the rural areas they covered were not what national outlets portrayed – that they were largely kind, considerate, willing to learn and listen. That said, without a robust definition of hate, they could scarcely think otherwise.

### **Notes**

1. Two journalists requested to not share demographics, and given that gender, ethnicity, age are not the primary focus of this study, their interviews were nevertheless included.
2. Worth noting perhaps is that several participants linked these explicitly, offering that they didn't have many issues related to hate and related it to a lack of diversity in their community (e.g. Participants 26, 31 & 32).




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## Appendix

Table A.

Participant Number	Region/Title	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
1	Midwest/Reporter	Female	60	White
2	Midwest/Editor	Male	49	White
3	Midwest/Reporter	Male	27	White
4	Midwest/Editor	Female	41	White
5	Midwest/Editor	Female	69	White
6	Midwest/Editor	Male	51	White
7	Midwest/Editor	Male	38	White
8	Midwest/Editor	Male	57	White
9	Midwest/Editor	Male	35	White
10	Midwest/Editor	Female	70	White
11	Midwest/Editor	Male	60	White
12	South/Reporter	Male	66	White
13	Midwest/Reporter	Female	39	White
14	South/Reporter	Male	23	Hispanic
15	Midwest/Reporter	Female	26	White
16	South/Editor	Female	35	Asian-American
17	South/Reporter	Male	57	White
18	South/Editor	Male	24	White
19	South/Reporter	Female	34	White
20	South/Reporter			
21	South/Reporter			
22	South/Reporter	Female	25	White
23	South/Reporter	Female	24	White
24	South/Reporter	Male	55	White
25	South/Editor	Female	26	White
26	South/Reporter	Male	24	White
27	South/Reporter	Female	24	White
28	South/Reporter	Male	56	White
29	Midwest/Reporter	Female	33	White
30	South/Reporter	Female	73	White
31	South/Reporter	Male	24	White
32	South/Reporter	Male	24	White
33	South/Reporter	Female	23	White