GAMIFYING THE NEWS
EXPLORING THE INTRODUCTION OF GAME ELEMENTS INTO DIGITAL JOURNALISM

RAUL FERRER CONILL
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Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Media and Communication Studies

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Abstract

For over a century, crosswords, puzzles, and quizzes have been present in newspapers. Digital journalism has only increased the trend of integrating game elements in news media, often blurring the traditional boundaries between news and games.

This dissertation aims to explore and understand how and why news organizations and newsworkers use gamification in digital news websites and to analyze the objectives behind its implementation in news production. The importance of trying to understand this development stems from the different roles that digital games and news have in contemporary democratic societies. While journalism is often regarded as the main source of information for the public to act as citizens, digital games predominantly remain considered as entertainment media.

Drawing from media sociology and new institutionalism, this study engages with the literature on converging processes of popularization and professionalization of journalism, and how different institutional logics of gamification and journalism interact. Methodologically, this qualitative multiple case study analyzes four diverse news organizations (the Guardian, Bleacher Report, the Times of India, and Al Jazeera), interviewing 56 newsworkers, and conducting game-system analysis of their respective gamified systems.

The findings suggest that while news organizations often frame their motivations within the celebratory rhetoric of gamification, a deeper look into the material manifestations of gamified news systems tend to problematize the empowering claims of gamification. Instead, a complex interplay between the professional and commercial logics of journalism and the hedonic and utilitarian logics of gamification shapes how news organizations and newsworkers implement gamified systems. This dissertation contributes to a larger debate on the friction professionalism and the market, on institutional interaction, and the increasing transgression of journalistic institutional boundaries.
Acknowledgements

In any case, the rules don’t concern us at this point. We have to play this game in any eventuality, and so, we will abide by them in the best traditions of sportsmanship, until we have worked out where they may be most usefully broken to our advantage. (Terry Pratchett, Unseen Academicals, p. 174)

I subscribe to all stereotypical metaphors often used in acknowledgement statements for doctoral dissertations. Journey, check. Rollercoaster, check. Dancing madly on the lip of the volcano, check. However, I feel these metaphors fail to fully visualize the paradoxical feelings I am experiencing at the end of this research. These five years have been both the longest blink of an eye and the shortest eternity. I can barely believe that five years ago I became a Ph.D. candidate. It feels like it was both yesterday and 20 years ago. Nevertheless, I loved every single minute of it, except for the ones I hated.

It has been an incredible privilege to be a research student in Sweden, and in particular in the department of Geography, Media and Communication (GMK) at Karlstad University. What a gem among the trees. This place gave me the privilege to sit and read. The privilege to sit and think. The privilege to sit and write. A large amount of sitting was involved in the production of this dissertation, is what I am trying to say. But the true privilege this department has given me is access to a large pool of talented people who have helped me along the way. Not only my colleagues working at the department, but also scholars who have come to visit and play, and friends I have made at conferences and events that the department funded. So many that I probably should publish these acknowledgements as a separate appendix.

I have been extremely fortunate to have a brilliant team of advisors. My biggest thanks go to Michael Karlsson. More than planets aligned the day I got him as an advisor. He has taught me so much I cannot imagine how I could even begin to repay him. I hear that a fine scotch would be a good way to start. He encouraged me when I was insecure, reined me in when I was too adventurous, and brought out the whip when I needed...motivation. Always available, knowing when to give me either Swedish or Spanish-style feedback. With understanding, jokes, and laughter. There is no way I could have done this without him, and I dearly hope he keeps mentoring me for years to come. Huge
thanks to my co-advisors, Henrik Örnebring and Christer Clerwall. Henrik always pushed me to widen my horizons, both in my research and in academia; to go down the historical road, often suggesting murky and absurd literature that always proved to be remarkably relevant. Christer, not only as my co-advisor but also as my boss, always supported my decisions and asked the tiniest little questions that would make my arguments crumble. I forced myself to make better arguments just to circumvent Christer’s seemingly simple questions for which I had no answers.

I could not have completed this dissertation without the help and camaraderie of my friends and fellow Ph.D. colleagues. First, I want to thank those who have moved to greener pastures of research but who, as Ph.D. candidates (and still today) shared their knowledge and became friends: Johan Lindell, Florencia Enghel (mil gracias!), Paola Sartoretto, and Ilkin Mehrabov. Second, to my other Ph.D. friends who still are in the fight. A million thanks to David Cheruiyot, for being the most positive and optimistic person I’ve ever met. Doing most of my sitting next to him and writing with him has been a delight and an honor. To Reinhard Handler for being the sobering counterpart to David’s optimism, but always with laughs and barbeques. To Jenny Jansdotter for being the free spirit she is, and always inspiring me with her superhuman capacity to deal with everything. Mad respect for Jenny. To Maud Bernisson for the quirkiest humor that even people dead inside can enjoy, and for cracking me up when we both know all effort is futile. Another round of thanks go to Sol Agin, Sascha Benes, Fredrik Hoppstadius, Linnea Saltin, and Fredrik Edin for being part of this process.

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I completely loved my time as a Ph.D. candidate, and I will miss it dearly. Not only because of the student discounts. I look forward to the next levels of academia. I can now go back to reading Terry Pratchett and maybe apply for a tenured position at the Unseen University.

/Raul Ferrer Conill
Ankh-Morpork, Summer of 2018
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SETTING THE RULES: INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Let me break the fourth wall already on page one to establish an emotional connection with you, Reader 1. Would you read this dissertation in detail if I gave you some points for it? Would you pay more attention if I awarded you a shiny badge? Or perhaps you would read it faster if I said you were competing with Reader 2?

Probably not, for several reasons. For starters, I do not know what makes you tick. I do not know who you are (maybe a curious student, an intrigued practitioner, or "Reviewer #2"). So, I have no clue about what is the best reward to motivate you to read these pages with more focus and intent. Also, this is a doctoral dissertation, a genre not known for its light-hearted tone or easy-to-read content. Games and serious scholarship do not generally mix well. Besides, I hardly could transform this dense text into a meaningfully funny read. And most importantly, Reader 1, you have probably figured out by now that I have no obvious means to track your behavior, to gather data about you as you read, or to entice you to keep reading as you eagerly learn about how news organizations implement gamification. Without the technical capacity, the gamification edifice crumbles and we (you and I) are left with an old-fashioned thesis that will not read itself.

This is why print does not gamify well, and why only digital news outlets have opted to use gamification to motivate users to do things. What users and what things are what I will talk about in the following chapters. In this introductory section, I will set the rules of this dissertation in two chapters. Chapter 1, introduces the object of study, the rationale, the aims and purpose, and the research questions, among other vital pieces of the puzzle. Chapter 2 offers the necessary context that will help you, Reader 1, jump over the (short) wall that serves as a boundary between Journalism Studies and Gamification scholarship.

Are you ready?
Chapter 1: News and the introduction of gamification

In 2009, the digital edition of the Guardian created a crowdsourcing microsite where newsgivers invited readers to sign in, review and categorize almost half a million documents regarding that year’s MPs’ expense scandal. To entice participation, the microsite rewarded its users with points, placed those who reviewed most items on a leaderboard and showed the community’s efforts in a progress bar. The microsite was an attempt to combine data and user participation, and it served as an experiment: a major legacy news organization used typical game elements, such as points and leaderboards, as a motivational strategy. The story was a huge success, classifying over half a million documents with the help of readers, and marked the first significant use of gamification in news media. It also signified another example of journalism’s romance with technological experimentation and an apparent internal need to pursue internal change in response to external change (Curran, 2009; Örnebring, 2018a).

Thus, contemporary journalism is embedded in what may seem an institutional paradox. On the one hand, a wide range of converging processes has led traditional news media into an existential crisis that, while experienced globally, affects individual news organizations in different ways (Pickard, 2011). This crisis has manifested itself in forces as distinct as a continuous decline in newspaper sales and commercial pressures (Nielsen, 2016; Wadbring & Bergström, 2017), a broad “attack on the autonomy of professional journalism” (McChesney, 2003, p. 299), and the resulting decline of journalistic credibility (Franklin, 2011). So too has there been a growth in tabloidization and entertainment (Bird, 2009; Marshall, 2005) and an increasing complexity of networked journalistic practices, focusing on immediacy rather than facticity (Singer et al., 2011). On the other hand, journalism has benefited from an emergence and proliferation of different approaches to news engagement. From participatory journalism (Singer et al., 2011) and citizen journalism (Allan, 2009) to multimedia journalism (Deuze, 2004) and data journalism (Brashaw, 2014). Thus, the precarious state of journalism as a profession (Örnebring, 2018b) seems to clash with how news organizations innovate and invest in technology when searching for solutions (Steensen, 2011).

This paradox may be resolved by acknowledging that the news industry operates in a reactive mode in a “desperate search for new revenue streams to
fund and deliver journalism in the future” (Franklin, 2011, p. 91). The discursive construction of the crisis narratives varies across contexts but is often approached from a techno-economic perspective (Luengo, 2014). Journalistic institutions tend to grapple with change by adopting new technologies, with the hopes that they will become part of a commercial assemblage that will secure their viability. Gamification, understood here as the use of game design elements and game thinking in non-game contexts (Deterding, Khaled, Nacke, & Dixon, 2011) promises just that. Rooted in marketing and in old forms of using games as a motivational feature (Zackariasson, 2016), this relatively new concept has been increasingly adopted in digital news media as an attempt to solve some of the financial problems and audience attrition described above.

This dissertation examines how four news organizations – the *Guardian*, *Bleacher Report*, *The Times of India*, and *Al Jazeera* – experiment and make use of gamification as a new formula that promises to revolutionize user engagement, consumer loyalty, and employee productivity (Zichermann & Linder, 2013). From a media sociology and institutional logics perspective, this multiple case study research engages with different cases of gamification of journalism that are widely diverse, offering a holistic portrayal of a dynamic often misunderstood. Here I argue that news organizations carry institutional logics that are inherent to journalistic operations that will lead to experimentation with new technologies and approaches such as gamification. The ways these logics manifest in each organization will interact with the logics of gamification and will shape how gamification is adopted by each organization. The overarching goal of this study is to explore and understand how news organizations and newswriters use gamification, why they adopt games in certain ways and not others, and the extent to which the prevalence of specific institutional logics shape gamified news products. As such, this study is not about gamification as a technology, nor how it affects journalism, but rather how organizational culture, individual action, and the role of management shape the way newsrooms and news organizations adopt gamification. This is a story of journalism’s increasing popularization and audience-orientation (see Nadler, 2016; Zamith, 2018a); of institutional overlap and boundary transgression, as foreign objects, such as game elements, make their way into news production (see Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Ryfe, 2006, 2017); and of a
fascination for change within journalism and journalism studies (see Lowrey & Gade, 2011; Peters & Broersma, 2013).

**Why study gamification in journalism contexts?**

The importance of journalism and its links to the foundations of a democratic society have been established, discussed, and critiqued by a myriad of scholars (see Bennett, 2003; Carey, 1999; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Strömbäck, 2005). As such, journalism can be considered a cultural practice that is dependent on a temporal and spatial context (Carlson, 2016), and that has the capacity to both shape societal knowledge (Ekström, 2002; Örnebring, 2016a; Tuchman, 1973), and cement public opinion (Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Lippmann, 1997).

But even considering the roles of journalism beyond democratic action (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018) and addressing the call for de-coupling journalism and democracy (Grönvall, 2015; Josephi, 2013; Zelizer, 2013), as an industry, journalism remains a powerful endeavor in terms of global business and in the social imaginary. I refer here to Conboy’s (2010, p.412) notion of “journalism as miscellany, as the continuous recombination of novelty, information, opinion, and entertainment” as the wide understanding of journalism as a cultural artifact.

Incidentally, play and games are also practices regarded as a fundamental cultural trait (Caillois, 1961; Huizinga, 1949) or even as a human mode of being (Sicart, 2014). Games in particular, as a ritualized form of play (Mäyrä, 2008) have also inspired a large industry that keeps growing, not only in the sense of profit but also in the spaces in which games are introduced. This leads to a critical juxtaposition framing the relationship between journalism and games: while traditional journalism as an industry and practice is said to be in crisis, the game industry is booming and expanding, becoming more and more pervasive.

News organizations increasingly opt to use game-like strategies that aim to approach and engage with the public through social media and playful approaches (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). This development is a reminder of the historical embeddedness of games and puzzles in newspapers in the last century. And while the traditional addition of playful items in newspapers served to attract the public, print approaches tended to keep news and games separate, with the established
narrative being that games are fun, but news is serious. In broadcasting, news
and games rarely mixed because news segments were an oasis among
entertainment programming. Television and radio news programming did not
need the boost of games. However, in print, the newspaper was an omnibus
format that needed to carry both the news and a section of entertainment in the
same product to appeal to a larger public (Arnot, 1981; Poynter, 1942). The
main difference today is that various gamified approaches aim to blur the fun-
versus-seriousness dichotomy, due to specific features that digital gaming brings
to journalism.

Beyond the basic outcome of entertainment, gaming – especially
multiplayer gaming – provides sources for participatory action, social
interaction, and often stimulates civic action (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, &
Moore, 2006; Lundmark, 2015; Quandt & Kröger, 2013). If game elements
present digital rewards that could entice and cement readership, then they could
become a tool used by news organizations to engage users in the consumption
of news and fostering the habit of reading news. Thus, if Diddi and LaRose
(2006) are correct and habit strength is the most powerful predictor of news
consumption, then it is easy to understand why news organizations would try
to incorporate games in their digital publications. On the one hand, habits,
traditions, and rituals of media consumption are linked to a generational
context (LaRose, 2004). On the other hand, Werbach and Hunter (2012) claim
the narrative of a gamified system has the potential to nurture new user habits.
Ultimately, the goal seems to be to capture games’ capacity to motivate users to
undertake a specific task.

If gamification were to fulfill its commercial promise, it would attempt to
provide new value to journalism (Nicholson, 2015; Zichermann &
Cunningham, 2011). Personalizing the news experience with relevant, targeted
news, embedded in a social environment, would be central, just as keeping the
quality of the news intact would also be essential. This would mean engaging
new readers with news content, aiming to broadening their views, avoiding
selective exposure, and seeking to enhance users’ knowledge. In theory, it could
spur newsworkers to produce more and better content. However, several critical
voices argue that implementing gamification often diverges from the idealistic
goals of gamified systems (Conway, 2014; DeWinter, Kocurek, & Nichols,
2014; Fuchs, 2014). Merging games and news could have several potential
dangers as well. First, the banalization of journalism, appropriating the entertainment aura of games, and diminishing the notion of journalistic professionalism and seriousness, selling the core values of journalism to various actors, such as entertainment media, who might not share the journalistic standards or objectives of leading news organizations. Furthermore, if the gamified layer does not suit the experience that news organizations want to convey, there is a risk of adopting a gratuitous set of game elements and rewards that are poorly implemented. A corresponding caveat can emerge from crafting a game-like experience that is so engaging that users forget one of the goals of visiting news websites: becoming informed about current events. Finally, in the cases in which gamification is oriented toward journalists, the issues of professionalism, autonomy, and precarity make the study of gamification of journalism even more pressing.

**Research problem and purpose**

The emergence of gamification in journalistic contexts is occurring in multiple ways, and is embedded in different processes of news production, distribution, and consumption. However, in the current academic scholarship, there is a wide research gap at the intersection of gamification and journalism. This gap is both conceptual and empirical, and does not reflect gamification’s application in practice. We know very little about why news organizations adopt gamification; how the process of implementation occurs; and how newsworkers respond to games. As more news outlets choose to implement gamified strategies in their digital editions, more pressing is the need to address this gap.

Considering the current hype and expansion of gamification in several fields and the importance of journalism in democratic societies, the interplay of both could have a serious impact on each other and their role in society. On the one hand, gamification as a practice involves rewarding users for performing a specific activity, and has been applied in several terrains. This poses risks and questions about motivational dynamics, leading toward a reward society guided by external stimuli (Manion, 2012). Rewarding every aspect of life could create tensions with activities that are inherently valuable for people, such as informing themselves of the world they inhabit. On the other hand, journalism, often hailed as a valuable characteristic of modern democracies (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007) is embedded in an increasingly competitive media system
(Nielsen, 2016) leading to a decline of readers and viewers (Boczkowski, 2005; Freedman, 2009). This decline occurs especially among younger generations (Wadbring & Bergström, 2017) in favor of other types of entertainment media, such as digital games. This is an example of what Blumler (2010) identifies as the two-legged crisis of journalism: a crisis involving issues of viability of mainstream journalistic organizations, as well as diminished civic adequacy. In other words, the contributions of journalism to citizenship and democracy are under question.

Thus, the gamification of journalism is important for what it represents: news organizations experimenting with new technologies, usually foreign to the journalistic genre, with the hopes that they will contribute to recovering their economic viability and their societal relevance. Studying gamification in journalism contexts serves as a mechanism to understand wider discussions in journalism studies. Issues such as the tensions between the commercial and professional logics of journalism, the dominance of technology, the dichotomy of fun versus serious, entertainment and popularization, and the ways that journalists and news organizations interpret innovation, are some of the underlying topics that are present in this dissertation.

More concretely, the nature of the research problem that motivates this study is threefold: exploratory, conceptual, and empirical. First, the lack of an established understanding of how gamification has made its way into mainstream journalism calls for an exploration of this emerging practice. An analysis of existing gamified systems regarding game elements and discursive intent will help clarify this issue. Second, a conceptual definition of not only what constitutes gamified journalism is needed, but also a deeper understanding on how boundaries between journalism and games can blur. Furthermore, conceptual instruments that allow investigating gamified practices in news media, including analytical tools and typologies need to be developed to study this phenomenon empirically. Currently, there are neither instruments to specifically research gamified expressions of journalism, nor established methods to understand or measure their effects. The theoretical discussion and propositions that support this study will establish the foundation to overcome this problem. And third, beyond the theoretical and conceptual implications of gamifying journalism, there is a need to gather empirical data to investigate the
rationale news organizations and newworkers use for adopting gamification, or whether they understand what gamification is supposed to deliver.

With this backdrop, the overarching purpose of this research project is to explore and understand how news organizations and newworkers use gamification on digital news websites, and to understand the objectives behind the modes of implementation. More concretely, this study aims to a) explore how gamification has been introduced in journalistic contexts, specifically within digital news media; b) understand why news organizations and newsworkers choose to adopt gamification; c) discuss how newsworkers make sense of their own choices when implementing gamification and how they perceive gamification affects news production; and d) conceptualize the interplay of gamification and journalism’s logics and how this interplay may affect how gamification is deployed by a news organization.

To fulfill its purpose, this research project studies four case studies – the Guardian, Al Jazeera, the Times of India, and Bleacher Report – and analyzes which are the logics that drive the implementation of gamified strategies. The focus is on the reasons to introduce gamification; the processes of implementation; the gamified systems; and the potential implications for the current and future evolution of journalism.

**Research questions**

The overarching narrative of this dissertation focuses on the question of how, why, and what are the ways that journalism is adopting gamification in its digital news websites. I aim to provide an overview of a relatively new practice that has captured the attention of practitioners, but that has not been empirically addressed in current research. To achieve its aims this study proposes the following research questions:

**RQ1:** *How have news organizations made use of gamification on their digital news websites?*

This question is intended to meet the first aim of the study, to explore how gamification has been introduced in journalistic contexts. While it is clear that news organizations have started to use game elements in their digital outlets, there is no current established scholarly understanding of how this process is occurring. The application of gamification in digital systems does not cover an
easy all-size-fits-all approach (Fuchs, 2015; Walz & Deterding, 2015). While the patterns of implementation are extremely varied, the theoretical discussion on gamification, supported by the empirical data, provides an image of how to identify gamification of journalism. Beyond the ‘how’ question, this dissertation also tries to understand the ‘why’ question.

RQ2: Why do news organizations and individual journalists use gamification approaches in their stories and/or on their news websites?

This question addresses the second aim of the study, to understand the motivations that lead news organizations and newworkers to adopt gamification. This question looks into what drives journalists and news organizations to implement gamified strategies and both the explicit and implicit aims behind the use of gamification within journalism. The literature points to diverging reasons for implementing gamified systems within different disciplines (Werbach & Hunter, 2012), but the idiosyncrasies of journalism require a deeper analysis on why the gamification of news has appeared in the first place. Here I focus not only on the internal dynamics of news organizations but also on the external forces that facilitate journalism with adopting certain technologies (Papacharissi, 2015a; Steensen, 2011).

The effects of gamifying journalism are beyond the scope of this study, but it is important to study whether newworkers consider gamification has changed their practices, because it highlights the interaction of technology with news production practices. This is addressed by the third research question.

RQ3: How do newworkers perceive gamification affects the news production process?

This question relates to the third aim of the study, to discuss how newworkers make sense of their own choices when implementing gamification and how they perceive gamification as a factor that shapes the production of news. The organizational, socioeconomic, and technological assemblage in which news organizations are embedded is usually responsible for the dynamics of news production (Boczkowski, 2010; Czarniawska, 2011; McNair, 1998). Thus, it is
expected that the introduction of gamification would have an impact on the professional culture and the news production process.

Beyond the perception of individual newworkers, I am also interested in the larger dynamics that shape how games and journalism intertwine, which is investigated by my fourth research question.

**RQ4**: How does the boundary transgression between news and games enact the interplay of their respective institutional logics?

This question provides room for discussing and conceptualizing the interplay of gamification and journalism’s logics and how this interplay may play a role on how gamification functions when applied by a news organization, which is the fourth aim of this study. As the boundaries between gamification and journalism become increasingly blurred, the logics they carry interact, clashing and/or reinforcing their strategies, norms, and values (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Friedland, 2012). Furthermore, the analytical framework provided in this thesis aims to offer a theoretical model that can explain the reasons and implementation choices behind gamification (in Chapter 11). This model responds to a series of characteristics, the interplay of which shape and modify the way gamification manifests within journalism contexts.

**Research scope, boundaries, and limitations**

Individual expressions of gamified journalism emerge in diverse instances. This variety of examples manifests not only in the type of game mechanics and game thinking applied, but also in the different types of journalism in which they are implemented. To accomplish the aims of the study, and due to the breadth and multifaceted nature of this phenomenon, it is necessary to have a broad scope including the gamification of journalism as a whole, encompassing different types of publications, in different countries, and different forms of gamification.

However, this study is bounded by two major delimitations. First, the focus is on digital publications because gamification and its use of technology are most easily and effectively applied online. Print and broadcasting are generally omitted in this study, as gamification in the terms that will be defined in the next chapter does not apply in those formats. Second, I opted to focus on news production, news organizations, and newworkers, as these are the actors that implement gamification. While I think that conducting reception studies
on gamified news may be enlightening, the only way the audience makes its place in this study is by its aggregated concept of affective publics (explained in Chapter 3, following Papacharissi, 2015a), the metrics they generate, and how newworkers imagine their audience would respond to gamification. This imagined audience (Litt, 2012) plays a role in how news organizations apply gamification, but this study does not look at how audiences react to gamification. Future studies should seek to find if and how gamification resonates with news audiences.

This study takes into account neither non-English or print publications. This is both a boundary and limitation of the study, as other forms of gamification in other countries may not be represented here.

Finally, this dissertation takes a multiple case study approach. The four cases studied reflect the breadth of scope of the phenomenon while at the same time make it manageable. On the one hand, the cases represent different types of journalism traditions, covering publications from different countries, and with highly different gamified approaches. This is done specifically to give a better overview of gamified news as it emerges. An overview without the examples may not be specific enough, and the use of a single case would offer a narrow and skewed view of a more complex phenomenon. On the other hand, the cases allow delineating the type of data gathered and the methods for analysis. Methodological limitations and a detailed explanation of why and how the multiple case study was constructed are presented in Chapter 5.

**Theoretical framework**

The delimitations in literature and fields that will contribute to this study are selected with respect to the interests that motivate this study. As such, the interplay of gamification within journalism incorporates characteristics of journalism studies, media and communication studies scholarship, game studies, and new institutional theory.

The main point of departure engages with notions of popular journalism and its ties with entertainment as a way to conceptualize why news organizations use games in the first place. To do so, this study adopts a media sociology approach, drawing from the ‘Hierarchical model of influences’ (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) to explain how, at various levels, journalism is influenced to adopt gamification. This model proposes that content and
practice are contingent on five levels of influence: social systems, social institutions, organizations, routines, and individuals. And while this is a solid stepping stone to understand why news media are compelled to introduce gamification, the model fails to “capture all of the complex interrelationships involved in the media” (Reese, 2007, p. 31) or to address technology as “multiscalar and at the heart of transformational connectivity affecting media work, tools, processes, and ways of thinking” (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016, p. 405).

To circumvent this shortcoming, this dissertation adopts a sociotechnical approach (Lewis & Westlund, 2015) using the heuristic of the Four A’s – actors, actants, audiences, and activities. This analytical tool allows this dissertation to account for the technological actant as an influential player in news production. It also provides the theoretical link toward institutional news production, and acknowledges institutional logics that interact when boundaries across different institutional orders are transgressed. Finally, it draws from institutional theory and adopts an ‘Institutional logics perspective’ (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012) as both a meta-theory and a method of analysis combining both organizational and individual levels. This approach offers connections between individual agency, cognitive processes, and socially constructed institutional practices and power structures as guiding logics of institutions. In this study, the guiding logics of journalism – professional and the commercial (Hanitzsch, 2007) – and the logics of gamification – hedonic and utilitarian (Hamari, 2013) – serve as the theoretical foundation.

My core theoretical argument is that once the boundaries between news and gamification blur, they set in motion the interplay of the professional and commercial logics of journalism with the utilitarian and the hedonic logics of gamification. These interactions, then combined with the symbolic and material practices of news organizations and newsworkers, explain why and how gamification is implemented within journalism and how it adheres to any of these logics.

**Summary of methodology**

This study employs a multiple case study design, analyzing four case studies to investigate the use of gamification in digital journalism. The cases are chosen following a maximum variation approach, selecting cases that showcase variety
regarding both news media and gamification implementation. In order to collect case study evidence, I adopt a qualitative multi-methods approach. The need to understand both the adoption and production process of a gamified news service requires multiple sources of evidence, developing converging lines of inquiry. First, I analyze the gamified news systems as technological artifacts to gain an understanding of the systems reach, functionality, a combination of game elements, overall rewarding schemes, and behaviors that are enticed. Second, I conduct in-depth interviews with 56 newsworkers – journalists, editors, technologists, commercial specialists, and executives. The participants comprise two different profiles: newsworkers who made decisions to implement gamification, and newsworkers who worked for the news organizations but who had no direct role in creating the gamified systems. My interest in the first group focuses on their experiences regarding the early stages of the project, why they opted to gamify their system, and how they proceeded. The second group informs the study about how they perceived gamification’s influence on their daily practices. In particular, the game-system analyses and the qualitative interviews will help answer research questions aiming to understand the reason to gamify a news system (the ‘why’ questions) and also about the way the systems were designed and the experiences of informants during the process and procedure of creation (the ‘how’ questions).

Guided by the theoretical framework, the analytical strategies focus on the case description and a thematic analysis of the data. Additionally, pattern matching, logic models, and a final cross-case synthesis establish the main analytical techniques to explicate the study case evidence. A thorough discussion of methodological choices and study design is given in Chapter 5.

Contributions and significance of the study

This study contributes to further expand the field of Journalism Studies, most specifically in news production, journalism logics, and the mutual shaping of technology and journalism. By studying how gamification is adopted and implemented in digital news media, I expand scholarship on how news organizations imprint their institutional logics and affected by external logics when adopting foreign technological processes and how newsworkers grapple with them. Additionally, this dissertation contributes to a deeper scholarly understanding of both the application of gamification in digital journalism and
the implementation of gamification in environments with conflicting and overlapping logics in general.

Moreover, by responding to its research questions, this study offers specific contributions to academic literature that could be useful for further research in the intersection between gamification and journalism. More specifically, this study:

• Situates gamification within journalism production and differentiates its specific characteristics from other playful manifestations of news media, by explaining how news organizations have used gamification on their digital news websites.
• Explores the ways that gamification is being introduced into journalism, evaluating how this adoption is being done, and why news organizations and newsworkers choose gamified strategies in their stories and news websites.
• Elucidates how journalists and newsworkers perceive the effects that the gamification of journalism has on news production.
• Establishes an analytical framework to investigate the guiding logics behind gamified news systems, and the interplay of journalistic norms and values with the objectives and strategies of gamification.
• Proposes a critical agenda for studying the interplay between gamification strategies and journalistic contexts.

Regarding significance, this research project signifies the first lengthy empirical study in the intersection of journalism and gamification; the former, an industry in commercial crisis that at least in the public imaginary, is still a stronghold of the values of modern democracies; the latter, a booming marketing tactic generating millions in revenue and stretching across uncountable daily practices. While games in the news have had some traction in academic literature, the research gap concerning gamification of journalism remains pristine. This study contributes to filling this gap.

The target audience of this study is scholars and researchers focusing on journalism and gamification, or on the institutional boundaries of journalism and their transgression by external institutions. Additionally, practitioners and students, both in the media industry and business development of digital media outlets, could also benefit from the findings of this study.
Dissertation outline

This dissertation is composed of five sections that together contain eleven chapters. The current section, Setting the Rules: Introduction & Background, serves as an introductory overview of this project. In this section, Chapter 1 establishes the research problem and questions that motivate the study, and outlines the aims and purpose, the contributions and significance, as well as boundaries and limitations. Chapter 2 offers the background of the study by contextualizing the interplay of news and games. Here the gamification of journalism is positioned, and I discuss the turn to gamification and give an overview of the state of the art of research in gamification.

The second section, Unlocking Levels: Theoretical Framework, establishes the theoretical foundations of the study. Chapter 3 presents a media sociology and sociotechnical accounts of how several factors have an impact on journalism. In Chapter 4, I adopt an institutional logic perspective to conceptualize journalism and gamification as institutions that carry their own distinct logics.

The third section, Walkthrough & Cheat Codes: Methods, comprises Chapter 5, providing an in-depth description of the research design, the methodology of choice, and a discussion of the data collection procedures and the analytical strategy used in the study.

The Grind and Warp Zones: Results & Analysis, the fourth section unpacks the empirical material sustaining the study. The first four chapters (6, 7, 8 and 9) introduce and analyze the four case studies that support the study. Each case is analyzed according to a case protocol and analytical strategy (established in Chapter 5), offering in-case analysis anchored in the context and findings of each case. Chapter 10 engages in a cross-case analysis, merging the findings from each case and discussing the results provided by the cases as a single unit of analysis.

Finally, the fifth section, The Final Boss: Discussion & Conclusion, presents Chapter 11, where I trace links between the empirical and theoretical dimensions of the study and formulate a theoretical construct to analyze gamification in journalism. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the
findings vis à vis the theoretical framework, presenting answers to the research questions and establishing an agenda for future research.

**Terms and definitions**

This study uses a wide range of terms that can lead to confusion, as they are used differently in the literature. With the aim of simplifying the reading experience, this section provides clarification or definition of some of the most relevant terms that are used in the text.

**Engagement**

The concept of engagement has commonly been used in journalism research to refer to civic or political engagement (Dahlgren, 2009). In this dissertation, the notion of engagement refers to the act of emotionally involving users so that they interact with a system (O’Brien & Toms, 2010). Thus engagement refers only to the interaction between user or users and the news’ interface, and is not concerned with activities that may occur before or after such interaction.

**Gamification**

The most common definition is given by Deterding and colleagues (2011), as the use of game-design elements in non-gaming contexts. This study will broadly address gamification as the use of game elements in non-gaming digital systems, with the expressed intent to entice new or existing behaviors. This is done without trying to turn that system into an actual game. Furthermore, using Lewis and Westlund’s (2015) heuristic, gamification is also considered as a technological actant within the institutional news production process. In Chapter 4, I argue that gamification is an informal social institution.

**Game mechanics**

This study combines two definitions of game mechanics. First, Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004) conceptualize game mechanics as the various actions, behaviors, and control mechanisms afforded to the player within a game context, hinting to a unidirectional effect afforded by the interface. Second, Sicart (2008a) understands game mechanics as the methods invoked by agents, designed to interact with the game. This study understands game
mechanics as the various actions, behaviors, and control mechanisms afforded by the interaction of agents within a game context.

**Institutional logics**

The notion of logic is usually understood by scholars as a set of principles underlying a type of reasoning. This study adopts an institutional logics perspective to sustain its theoretical propositions and to anchor part of the analytical strategy. I use Thornton and Ocasio’s (2008) definition as the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values, and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their daily activity, organize time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences.

**Journalism**

Journalism is not a fixed range of practices, and there is little consensus about its essential nature (Conboy, 2010). Deuze (2005) understands journalism as the process of obtaining raw information, verifying that information, shaping it to a coherent piece of news, and casting it to the audiences with the aim of being useful and newsworthy to them, while remaining true to the facts. This study uses Vos’ (2018) theoretical definition of journalism as “a set of beliefs, forms, and practices involved in the crafting and distributing of socially significant news and discussion” (p. 9).

**News**

The definition of journalism described above introduces the problem of defining news. Broadly defined, news is the report of recent or previously unknown events that is broadcasted by news platforms. Harcup and O’Neill (2017) propose that news is a notion that fluctuates, a cultural construct that mixes social, temporal, and individual influences. Thus, “who is selecting news, for whom, in what medium and by what means” (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017, p. 1486) has a great influence in the shaping of news.

**Newsworker**

While Altheide (1978) distinguishes between news “assemblers (newsworkers) and promoters (newsmakers)” (p. 359), and Gans (2007) includes as everyday
newsworkers a myriad of actors such as family members and friends, this dissertation considers newsworkers to be all professionals involved in the news production process, including journalists, editors, and publishers (Hardt, 1990; Hardt & Brennen, 1995), as well as technologists and managers who contribute to the final product of the news and operate under the same institutional banner (Örnebring, 2016b; Örnebring, Karlsson, Fast, & Lindell, 2018; Singer, 2003).

**System**

The use of the term system is usually connected to media systems, referring to the structure of media markets, the political parallelism of media organizations, the role of the state in mass communication processes, and the professionalization of journalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The use of the word system in this dissertation draws, however, from the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) tradition, in which a system is a constellation of technologies and media objects (scripts, algorithms, sensors, templates, visual design, interfaces, affordances) constructed to interact with the user (Manovich, 2001). In this dissertation, system is the journalistic digital artifact, the technological actant (Lewis & Westlund, 2015) where news and game elements are placed in an interactive interface.
Chapter 2: Context at the intersection of news and games

This chapter sets forth the necessary context to situate the study. To clarify the object of study, I begin by showcasing the phenomenon with a few real-world examples of news organizations using gamification. I then proceed to discuss the process by which journalism becomes gamified. While the concept of gamification is still somewhat new and not widely understood, it carries a historical background in which journalism and news organizations have used games and play as a hook to attract readers. Thus, I present how news media have incorporated games, from the crossword more than a century ago, to newsgames and gamification in current times. Finally, I discuss gamification in general, its broad implementation in daily life, and what has been called the 'gamification turn.'

Exemplifying the gamification of journalism

The gamification of journalism occurs on two levels. First, as a meta-process in which journalism as a whole is slowly adopting more game-related qualities. As a meta-process, it is more difficult to demarcate empirically, but may be exemplified by increased use of humor, interactive interfaces, and listicles. Second, at the micro-level, news organizations implement game elements in single news stories or their entire websites. This latter form of gamification is the focus of this dissertation, as it carries the symbolism of the meta-process, but manifests in concrete material cases.

A quick look at how gamification has been used in journalistic contexts shows a diverse set of practices, with multiple goals that often negotiate the idealistic and instrumental goals of gamified systems. Much as Ettema and Glasser's (1998) 'Paradox of the disengaged conscience,' which claims that the moral function of journalists as "custodians of conscience" cannot be paired with their practices as mere observers of fact (p.61), gamification usually promises an ideal that may not be present when it is implemented (DeWinter & Kocurek, 2014; Fuchs, 2015). At this point, it might be useful to clarify and illustrate how gamification functions in journalism contexts by showcasing a few examples.

One of the first news organizations to actively use a gamified strategy was the Record Searchlight, a Californian daily newspaper that in 2011 outsourced
a solution for the user comment section because it lacked the expertise to do it in-house. The paper hired gamification consultant Bunchball to incorporate game mechanics as digital rewards to entice readers to moderate the user comments section and keep it as civil as possible. The system allowed users to vote on comments posted by other users, using “rewards and recognition (…) and reputation, giving people a stake in their online identities” (Lyons, 2011, para.3). Those who had the most votes received a badge that would appear next to their names from then on, as a marker of their reputation in the community. According to their chief officer, the number of comments rose by 10%, the time spent on site per session increased 25%, and “the number of comments that had to be deleted fell noticeably despite the overall increase of number of comments” (Wood, 2012, para.13). The utility of gamification at the Record Searchlight had nothing to do with reading more news; instead it was about fostering civic behavior on the website.

Also in 2011, as an addition to its news aggregator, Google introduced a new gamified layer aimed to allow users to track reading habits, create a more personalized news experience, and find articles on favorite topics. ‘Google news badges’ employed a set of 500 themed badges that could be leveled up by extended use of the service as a motivation mechanism. After the immediate hype and celebration on specialized media (Mitaru, 2011), a stream of criticism ensued (Wauters, 2011). Users perceived the system to be disruptive to the main activity of reading the news (Knaving & Björk, 2013). What Google missed here is that the system relied on providing vague feedback and was unclear about its purpose. There was no real outcome for advancing in the system other than leveling up the badges. On top of that, there was a very limited focus on persuading users to expand their content types, which would lead to broadening the variety of badges earned. Instead, ‘Google news badges’ resulted in users narrowing the number of chosen topics and providers, reinforcing users’ selective exposure with limited added value (Liebørøth, Møller, & Marin, 2015). One year later, the system was phased out due to lack of impact. This failed attempt to gamify news consumption is important because it shows that gamification needs to be understood within a social context and the value that provides to users.

In 2012, MTV in partnership with the Knight Foundation launched the ‘Fantasy Election ’12,’ an ironic reproduction of a sports fantasy league, but
comprising congressional and presidential candidates instead. Just as in any fantasy league, when the team players performed well in the material world, users received points. When the candidates underperformed, users could trade them for better-performing politicians. Over the course of the campaign, players competed with friends and family for a higher ranking in the ‘Fantasy Election ’12’ leaderboard (Lafrance, 2012).

Other examples offer more subtle and simple gamified experiences. The Catalan newspaper *Ara.cat*, ran a story that playfully guessed the user’s place of birth within Catalonia, by assessing the Catalan dialect readers used in the interface. An interactive story by the *Guardian* simulated the journey of a Syrian refugee attempting to get to Europe, using the game-like element of ‘choose your own story’ narrative, making minimal use of gamification.

Beyond these brief examples, news organizations’ implementation of gamification has followed multiple approaches, both regarding the interactive and graphic design, and regarding in the motivations, behaviors, and emotions that it is designed to foster (Walz & Deterding, 2015). Similarly, the aims for gamifying the news and its potential success are multiple and diverse. Such differences depend on news organizations’ institutional identity, their degree of professionalism and commercial urgencies (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Usher, 2013). Moreover, diversity in gamification means that it is not always easy to tell when a news system can be considered gamified.

**When does journalism become gamified?**

Concrete instances of gamified journalism do not occur by chance or as a result of a spontaneous burst of playful approaches. Gamification requires intent. An organization needs to consciously decide to gamify news, even if it does not necessarily call it gamification. The news organization is also responsible for how complex and intricate a gamified system becomes. Scholarship on gamification emphasizes the importance of decision-making, planning, and design in the process of gamifying an activity (see Deterding, Khaled, et al., 2011; Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). For example, Werbach and Hunter (2012) propose a six-step framework for implementing gamification, starting by defining the business objectives and delineating the target behaviors. Only in the final step, deploying the appropriate tools, do the game elements come into play. Such a structure is a recurrent aspect in gamification design frameworks
(see Mora, Riera, Gonzalez, & Arnedo-Moreno, 2015 for a thorough analysis of 18 gamification design frameworks) and highlights the importance of the institutional dimension of gamification and the need to investigate its role in news media. The institutional and behavioral aspects of gamification are as important as its gamefulness (Walz & Deterding, 2015).

It is through the gamefulness frame that we can identify the gamification of journalism. A gamified system’s intent and economic lens only manifest interpretatively, but its signature and most detailing aspect is the use of game elements. Werbach and Hunter (2012) identify “three categories of game elements that are relevant to gamification: dynamics, mechanics, and components” (p. 78)¹. Table 1 offers a list of dynamics, mechanics, and components, as presented by Werbach and Hunter (2012, 78-80), which is by no means an exhaustive list, but helps exemplify the layered process by which an activity can be gamified.

Table 1 – Examples of game elements: dynamics, mechanics, and components

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<th>Dynamics</th>
<th>Mechanics</th>
<th>Components</th>
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<td>Achievements</td>
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<td>Competition</td>
<td>Badges</td>
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<td>Progression</td>
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These categories are organized by level of abstraction, and when implemented in the context of an activity, that activity can be considered gamified. Dynamics refer to the larger strategies that the gamified system will establish, such as the narrative, emotions, and progression that the user of the system will experience.

¹ These categories are loosely based on the MDA framework (Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics), a game design and game research methodology developed by Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004).
Mechanics are the basic processes that aim to enact one or more dynamics, such as rewards, competition, and challenges. Their purpose is to drive the action forward and foster user engagement. Finally, the components are the visual representations of the mechanics, like points, badges, and leaderboards. The components are the elements with which users interact and create the game-like feeling. Other frameworks use the notions of mechanics and components interchangeably, and thus embrace complexity. For example, the Octalysis framework (Chou, 2013) identifies eight core drivers of human behavior that can be enacted by 76 different game mechanics.

Whenever a task or journalistic process is embedded with a game element, such as dynamics, mechanics, and components, it becomes gamified. Whether it is producing the news, generating content, consuming the news, or curating user comments, if the activity is supported by game elements to motivate its completion, we can consider a journalistic process to be gamified. Returning to some of the previous examples, the Redding Searchlight implemented gamification when it used game elements – in this case, the most common components: points, badges, and levels – to motivate users to moderate user comments. Google News gamified consuming news when they awarded users with badges for reading news. The process of embedding existing journalistic processes with game elements constitutes the gamification of journalism, and it serves as another iteration of the long-standing tradition of using games by news organizations. In the next section, I look back at how games made their way into newspapers and, more recently, how they have been integrated into digital news outlets.

Of news and games – a history of continuity and change

The history of news and games can be traced back at least as far as 1913, when the New York World published its first crossword puzzle (Augarde, 2003). The World, a staple of the American yellow press, agreed to print the diamond-shaped brainteaser, which conspicuously spelled the word ‘FUN’ in the top three boxes. The crossword gained popularity and several quality newspapers – such as the British The Times in 1930 and The New York Times in 1942 – incorporated the concept despite its sensationalist origins (Arnot, 1981). As a staple of print news media, “the trajectory of the crossword puzzle epitomizes the relationship between games, play, and the news” (Foxman, 2015, p. 7).
Puzzles and crosswords earned space in print because the "press is a composite, omnibus vehicle carrying a variety of loads" (Poynter, 1942, p. 83) and their popularity helped boost paper sales and broadening the type of target news consumer while keeping the fun separated from serious news. After a century, a myriad of word games, quizzes, numerical challenges, and playful pastimes have populated print news media to incentivize newspaper consumption. Broadcasting news media rarely use games in their programs. As segments of continuous programming, television and radio newscasts are preceded and followed by programs that often focus on entertainment.

The transition to digital journalism created spaces for continuity and for change. Identity and knowledge quizzes continued the way games had been used in paper. Quizzes, while existing in paper format, gained popularity online due to their interactivity, spreadability, and viral significance as tools for personal identification (Berberick & McAllister, 2016). Simulation and topical games signified actual changed in how news organizations re-introduced games (Wojdynski, 2015), as new approaches that genuinely mix news and games in a digital interface. This is supported by Jacobson’s (2012) analysis of multimedia journalism and how serious games provide the audience with a storytelling technique that helps them explore news stories on their own terms. These new formats refer to what has usually been referred to as newsgames and gamification.

**Newsgames and gamification of journalism**

Bogost, Ferrari, and Schweizer (2010) define newsgames as the “broad body of work at the intersection of video games and journalism” (p.6). These can be categorized as editorial games; infographic newsgames; documentary newsgames; puzzle newsgames; literacy newsgames; and community newsgames. Regardless of their categorization, what makes newsgames unique is the fact that they create a standalone playable digital game involving news or current affairs content. Moreover, newsgames signify a distinct journalistic genre as they transcend the digitization of print news into a software-based artifact that combines features of both journalism and digital games. When comparing newsgames to traditional journalism, Plewe and Fürsich (2017) mention that newsgames enhance journalism when they adeptly combine game logics to generate “experiential engagement with the existential crisis of
involuntary dislocation” (p.1). From a news production perspective, Wei (2013) suggests that “by using emotion and empathy, games allow (journalists) to inform readers in a new way, in which they both remember and understand” (para.15). Newsgames have gathered an important interest, both in journalism and digital game practice, including quality publications like The Washington Post and Al Jazeera. Similarly, newsgames have shown the capacity to engage the audience, as The New York Times’ newsgame – titled “How Y’all, Youse and You Guys Talk” – became the publication’s most popular content item of 2013 (Meyer, 2014).

A strand of scholarship considers newsgames as a genre within the gamification of journalism (García-Ortega & García-Avilés, 2018a; Wojdynski, 2015), which they understand as the growing trend of combining news and games. However, in this dissertation, I consider the phenomenon of gamification of journalism as a distinct practice that consists of integrating game elements within journalistic processes.

To simplify my argument, newsgames bring news to games, while the gamification of journalism brings games to the news. What distinguishes these approaches is their procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2008; Treanor & Mateas, 2009). Newsgames carry a self-contained narrative that is to be explored by users. Gamification, on the other hand, intends to offer a game-like experience that is rooted in the original aim of the medium in which it is embedded (Ferrer-Conill & Karlsson, 2015). Thus, the gamification of journalism is different from newsgames because it integrates game elements within regular journalistic processes and it changes the way journalism employs technology to harness the power of games. This is supported by Sicart (2008b) who argues that while newsgames are digital games that are used to participate in the public sphere with the intention of explaining or commenting on current news, gamification does not attempt to create a full-fledged game; instead, gamification seeks to influence behavior through game elements.

From a journalism studies perspective, gamification of journalism may be more fruitful for research than newsgames, because it is journalistic processes adopting game elements, rather than games adopting journalistic topics. Moreover, while scholarship on newsgames has been prolific (see Burton, 2005; Sicart, 2008b; Siitonen & Varsaluoma, 2013; Teixeira et al., 2015; Treanor & Mateas, 2009), there is limited research on gamification of journalism (see
The term gamification was coined in 2002 by Nick Pelling, as a reaction to the increase of mechanized appliances in everyday life. Gamification was supposed to apply "game-like accelerated user interface design to make electronic transactions both enjoyable and fast" (Pelling, 2011, para.2). Zackariasson (2016) argues that "using game mechanics to motivate and reward individuals, for different purposes, both in business and in education, is not new" (p.220-1) but that the term gamification is a new term encompassing motivational strategies based on games. Indeed, half a century ago, Caillois (1961) discussed how games are appropriated by different structures in social institutions and become instrumentalized to achieve different goals. However, what made ‘gamification’ an appealing and popular buzzword are its implied technological advancements, as well as the notion of an expanding digital game culture (Zackariasson, 2016).

In the following years, gamification saw major implementation across several different daily practices as a strategy to manage user engagement and motivation through game elements. Gamification service providers offered gamified systems to be applied in social networks, mobile applications, and websites, with the aim of motivating online user engagement (Paharia, 2010). The hype, speed, and spread of implementation were so considerable that some writers expected gamification to flourish in every aspect of life (Burke, 2011). Indeed, in the last decade, there has been an explosion of the use of gamification in many fields, from education and health to commerce and management. The value of the gamification market is expected to grow from US$4.91 billion in 2016 to $12 billion in 2021 (Statista, 2018). In response to the commercial hype, academics have turned their interest to gamification, but they first did so in an overly optimistic fashion.

Celebratory rhetoric
The early conceptual writings on gamification aimed to both define the term and to conceptualize how it operates. Deterding, Sicart, et al. (2011) define
gamification as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (p. 10). Their definition is the result of what they believe is an emerging well-demarcated phenomenon that combines complex gamefulness, gameful interaction, and gameful design, altogether distinct from the mere notion of playfulness. While the term semantically implies turning things into a game, Werbach and Hunter (2012) clarify that the goal is not building a game, but rather "to design systems that motivate people to do things" (p. 31).

Despite the difficulty in defining gamification, early literature on gamification often uses celebratory rhetoric. Predominantly in the form of popular science literature, authors hail gamification as a viable solution to engage users and generate social inspiration (Duggan & Shoup, 2013; Zichermann & Linder, 2010). Werbach and Hunter (2012) argue that the reasoning behind the application of gamification in a web-based system is to enhance engagement, offer choices, reaffirm progression, and provoke useful social habits. Paharia (2013) promises that thanks to data-driven motivational techniques used by game designers, gamification becomes a powerful engine for creating true loyalty among users, offering a sustainable competitive advantage to the business applying it. The optimistic undertones spread both in academia, and specialized literature focused on how to use and channel gamification for other purposes. The selling point is that the malleable use of gamification adapts to every context of application, and that the right combination of dynamics, mechanics, and components can be applied to achieve organizational goals. Marketing and business-oriented applicability (Zichermann & Linder, 2013), education (Kapp, 2012), health and wellness (McCallum, 2012), and neuroscience and emotion (Marczewski, 2015) are among those fields in which the hype of gamification as a 'positive revolution' has been most present.

A critical response
As a response to the champions of gamification, a new wave of research has adopted a critical tone. DeWinter & Kocurek (2014) challenge the positive discourse claiming that "gamification often blurs the boundaries between labor and leisure, and not always in obvious ways" (p. 102) and DeWinter and colleagues (2014) claim that gamification of work is a form of Taylorism 2.0. Fuchs (2014) goes further and argues that "gamification might be seen as a form of ideology and therefore a mechanism of the dominant class to set agenda and
to legitimize actions taken by this very class or group” (p.143). For a similar line of thought see Kopeć (2015). In further critical pieces, Conway (2014) questions how social processes are pushed toward increased measurement and reward of performance through gamification; O’Donnell (2014) warns about algorithmic surveillance on which gamification depends; and Bogost (2015) criticizes gamification as an approach that appropriates play to serve and further capitalistic agendas.

The tensions between these two strands of scholarship – celebratory vs. critical – invite further exploration of the role of gamification and its implementation in social institutions. As a result, Fuchs and colleagues (2014) call for scholars to rethink gamification; Raftopoulos (2014) suggests a need for transparency in gamification and the development of responsible gamified systems; and Dragona (2014) and Wilken (2016) discuss new tactics for counter-gamification or processes of de-gamification, respectively.

With limited existing research on gamification of journalism, this study seeks to break new ground. Considering that gamification has been applied extensively in a variety of other contexts, I expect that news media will use a positive spin on gamification to support its integration. At the same time, I keep in mind that gamification carries problematic baggage that needs to be considered. How these two discourses manifest in gamified systems is a matter of empirical discovery. However, there are theoretical arguments that can help scholars understand the intersection of gamification and journalism. In the following section I explore the theoretical framework that, combining media sociology and new intuitionalism, aims to explain the integration of gamification in journalism.

**Summary**

This chapter has provided the context in which journalism and games interact. First, I exemplified cases of gamification in news media, and discussed when journalism becomes gamified. Then I provided a historical account of games in journalism, from the introduction of crosswords to newer genres in digital journalism. I argued that the gamification of journalism is different from newsgames, quizzes, puzzles, or crosswords. To this extent, the gamification of journalism is characterized by the use of game elements in news production processes where the objective of such processes remains intact, and the addition
of game elements modifies the activity in itself. The gamification of journalism thus refers to the integration of gamification strategies within journalism practice. Finally, I showcased gamification as a wider phenomenon, both in daily life situations and in the literature, and exposed the overly celebratory discourse of early gamification research and the subsequent critical discourses against it.
UNLOCKING LEVELS:
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

If this was a fully gamified dissertation, Reader 1, it would use this intermission to award you with a badge and to unlock the theoretical levels. The badge would signify that you have completed the introductory section, in which I outlined the study, mapped the gamification of journalism, and discussed the historical relationship of games and news. But that section included only the onboarding phase, rules setting, and housekeeping. Now that you have proven your interest, we can move forward and the system would unlock new levels.

The role of theory in research is akin to the role of the interface in games. It is a framework for observing and understanding what is happening before our eyes. Through the interface, we can tell if this is a puzzle, a first-person shooter, or one of those games in which an Italian plumber jumps on seemingly peaceful mushrooms. Theory is the game equivalent of the first lemming, guiding the rest through the research, organizing its ideas, and providing a context for predictions. These predictions often end with an “oh, no!” followed by a popping sound.

In journalism and gamification, interfaces have a similar function. The size of a newspaper may theoretically explain the nature of its content. A game-like immersive gamified system may theoretically explain that it tries to reformulate the activity that it is gamifying. The job of the researcher is to go ahead and investigate those theoretical propositions.

In the following section I introduce the theoretical framework that guides this study. 

Chapter 3 covers the process of popularizing the news, from the Penny Press to Shoemaker and Reese’s ‘Hierarchical model of influences.’ It discusses the sociotechnical components that can explain why news organizations and newsworkers integrate gamification in digital journalism.

Chapter 4 outlines the adoption of gamification through the lens of ‘Institutional logics,’ and how the adherence to different logics shape the symbolic and material practices of news organizations and newsworkers.

Are you excited, Reader 1? No? What if I promise a few cheat codes to advance more quickly after this section? A reluctant yes is still a yes. In theory.
Chapter 3: A sociotechnical account of gamifying the news

This chapter presents the first part of the theoretical framework that will guide this study of how and why different news organizations are adopting gamification. Here, I propose that the choices a news organization makes are contingent on larger processes that cannot be informed solely by looking at the organization. To understand what may be influencing news organizations to jump on the gamification wagon, I take a media sociology approach. I depart from a history-bound narrative of journalism divided into popular and quality journalism, to then unpack the ‘Theory of ludenic newsreading’, one of the first theoretical attempt to connect play and news. Then I turn to the ‘Hierarchical model of influences’ to explain what are the main influences that contribute in shaping media content, at several levels of analysis. Finally, I outline the sociotechnical heuristic of the Four A’s – actors, actants, audiences, and practices – to incorporate the role of technology in the institutional production of news. I suggest that several of these influencing factors converge to make gamification of news a relevant approach for contemporary news media.

Popularizing journalism

The term 'popularization' of journalism hints at a process of transformation towards a ‘more popular’ journalism. However, the attempt to make the news popular has been a long, continuous aspect of news that dates to the late 18th century, with the publication of the first popular Sunday newspapers in the UK. As a low-brow and inclusive form of journalism, these newspapers provided “a miscellany of news and entertainment for a cross-section of readers” (Conboy, 2004, p. 154). These publications tried to attract audiences using the appeal of sex, sensation, scandals, and sport entwined with domestic and foreign news. A few decades later – in the 1830s – the emergence of the ‘penny press’ signified “a revolution in American journalism” leading to “the triumph of ‘news’ over the editorial and ‘facts’ over opinion” (Schudson, 1978, p. 14).

Since then, the classic view of the social role of journalism has separated two parallel manifestations of journalism: quality journalism and popular journalism (Dahlgren, 2009; Zaller, 2003). According to Costera Meijer (2001), this conceptual duality ascribes opposing characteristics to these forms of journalism. On the one hand, quality journalism is invested in the public sphere and politics, stressing rationality and opinions, and legitimizing itself
through a detached, independent, and autonomous journalistic identity. On the other hand, popular journalism is involved in the private sphere and everyday life, making emotionality and experience the source of proximity and involvement with the audience.

This duality has existed over two centuries and remains the informal mechanism by which news organizations and the public frame journalism. However, a historical perspective suggests that journalistic quality and popularity are a false dichotomy cemented since the days of the Penny Press.

**From the ‘penny press’ to the ‘paradox of popularity’**

The penny press symbolized a gradual but significant transition from elite newspapers covering commerce and politics to daily newspapers that adopted social life as a way to organize content, and declared commercial and political independence. While Schudson (1978) claims “the penny press invented the modern concept of news” (p. 22), Nerone (1987) considered the penny press as a “mutation,” an “evolutionary development rooted in shifts in social and cultural environment” (p. 377). Even if Nerone challenges the ‘myth of the penny press’, in this study, the relevance of the penny press stems from the general agreement that it was a major shift in journalism “from a tool of political privilege to a social instrument of popular democracy” (Nerone, 1987, p. 378).

Spurred by technological innovation, literacy advancement, and the ‘natural evolution of journalism’ (see Schudson, 1978, pp. 31–43; also challenged by Nerone, 1987), the penny press set in motion what is often considered modern journalism by “championing the values of its predominantly working-class public” (Glasser & Ettema, 1989, p. 4). Fifty years later – in the 1880s and 1890s – with the emergence of the ‘new journalism,’ a new shift toward popular narratives would help establish the professional ideals of journalism and further the discursive dichotomy between quality and popular news.

The schism occurred when ‘new journalism’ publications – predominantly descendants of the penny press – took two different approaches, by either subscribing to the ideals of entertainment or the ideals of factuality. These two distinct models of journalism are what Schudson calls “the ideal of the story and the ideal of information” (1978, p.89). New journalism renewed the formula of sensationalism, crime, and popular stories. However, the strand
following the ideal of factuality became what would later be considered high-quality journalism and appreciated by middle and high classes, while the strand subscribing to the ideal of entertainment derived in the yellow press and tabloids, which would be preferred by the working classes. Moreover, as Örnebring and Jönsson (2004, p.292) suggest, despite displaying its merits, tabloids and popular journalism symbolized the opposite of good journalism: “populist, sensationalist, emotionalist, simplifying, uncouth, and irresponsible.” And while the authors argue for the merit of tabloids, popular journalism became the example of bad journalism in which the discursive construction of good journalism could thrive.

The duality of good and bad journalism, of serious and entertaining journalism, is still present today. Furthermore, while the idea of journalism is still malleable and not monolithic, these categories carry the power to delegitimise news media. Bird (2009) proposes that contemporary journalism is going through a process of tabloidization, and that while it might not be a result of losing relevance among the public, it hurts the authority of journalism as a social institution. Processes of increased emotionality in journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013, 2016), enhanced news personalization (Andersson Schwarz, 2016), and a transition from political news to lifestyle pieces (Karlsson, 2016) seem to support Bird’s claims.

However, in a regime of seriousness that favors hard news and politics over tabloids and sensationalism, there are voices of cautious dissent. Different types of journalism, such as sports, entertainment, or lifestyle journalism have had to make a stand for legitimacy or concede a low-brow informality (see Dubied & Hanitzsch, 2014; Hanusch, 2010, 2012; and Rowe, 2007 for a discussion on other forms of journalism beyond hard news). Nadler (2016), for example, frames popular news regarding pervasiveness, widespread exposure, and visibility. Making news part of the everyday experiences is a matter of “mobilizing publics and creating new forms of feedback between news outlets and their publics” (Nadler, 2016, p.15, emphasis in the original). Costera Meijer (2001) goes further by proposing that journalism, in order to fulfill its democratic duty, may have to veer towards popular journalism. Based on her study of Dutch talk shows, she suggests that the re-evaluation of journalistic quality could be based on the introduction of a dialogue with the audience, fostering emotionality, involvement, and experience. These additions could
contribute to strengthening the standards for public quality: social cohesion, citizenship, empowerment, and collaboration.

The problem, however, is that, as Costera Meijer (2007) found in a study of young news consumers, there is a ‘paradox of popularity.’ On the one hand, even if a younger audience understand serious news is important, it does not mean they will consume it because it is not entertaining. On the other hand, making the news entertaining does not solve the problem because it delegitimizes journalism and reduces the importance of the content.

**Entertainment and the ‘Theory of ludenic newsreading’**

The appearance of ‘new journalism’ in the 1890s meant that publications needed to increase circulation to increase their revenue through advertising. Thus, knowing that “the public is even more fond of entertainment than it is of information” (Hearst, as cited by Schudson, 1978, p. 99), newspapers tried to diversify the public and balance the editorial function of journalism with the entertainment function. Starting with Sunday papers, editors took a gendered approach to entertainment, publishing about topics intended to appeal to women, such as poetry, romantic fiction, and lifestyle news. To accommodate entertainment, newspapers made visual changes, such as reducing the size of pages, increasing the size of headlines, and increasing the use of pictures. ‘New journalism’ led toward what Conboy (2010) calls the “first paradox of journalism’s history” (p. 412). This paradox resides in the “dissonance between ideal and pragmatic, informational and entertainment” roles of journalism, and the friction between the dominant theses about the distinctiveness and seriousness of journalism.

This friction is still valid in contemporary journalism. In recent years, Hanitzsch (2007) found that contemporary journalism “harmonizes readily with entertainment-oriented popular journalism” and therefore, it has maintained the “trend toward a blending of information with advice and guidance as well as with entertainment and relaxation” (p. 375). A similar account is given by Bolin (2014), who claims that as journalism has “expanded and diversified” it has also “entered and affected entertainment” (p. 345).

And yet, since the establishment of the ‘two models of journalism’ in the 1890s, both news media and journalism scholarship present the seemingly false dichotomy of journalism that is either ‘serious’ or ‘entertaining.’ Nadler (2016)
suggests that “there are many potential forms of journalism that do not fall so easily on either side of this dichotomy” (p.25). I would argue that some examples of gamified journalism straddle this divide. Moreover, these examples of news that aim to entertain while being serious journalism invoke Stephenson’s ‘Ludenic theory of newsreading’ (1964), harnessing the power of play to establish a relationship with the audience.

Stephenson’s theory is important to this study because it proposes practical implications for news producers, suggesting that a) “a newspaper should lend itself freely to the attributes of play;” b) “regard has to be paid to the newsreader’s ‘play’, and to the encouragement of developed newsreading habits;”, and c) news organizations “can now begin to find reasons for concern about the format of a newspaper to suit the play of its readers” (Stephenson, 1964, pp.374-5). By calling on news organizations to adapt newspapers to enhance their game-like elements, Stephenson’s theory called for rethinking the seriousness of news and for accommodating notions of games and play in the production and consumption of news. Thus, the remarkable merit of the ‘Ludenic’ theory is a normative inclusion of editorial roles:

"The editor has to make his newspaper interesting; for some readers this can be achieved by primitive play conditions, such as are characterized more by a scattering of the mind than by well-developed absorption. Sophisticated newsreading is contemplative rather than scatterbrained.” (p. 151)

From the perspective of news production Stephenson’s theory “provides a powerful tool for editors and newsmen” who may be concerned on how their journalistic product is perceived and utilized by readers” (Dozier, 1975, p.8).

Stephenson proposed the idea of newsreading as a satisfying activity invoked by communication pleasure and a play-like quality that newspapers afford. In his words, “(d)own to the smallest detail, therefore, newspaper reading, in its subjectivity seems to be play, mainly ‘pure play attitude’ but with the attributes of a game in the rules and self-consciousness it deploys” (Stephenson, 1964, p. 370). Through the medium of the newspaper, the reader plays with communication. It is in the materiality of the format and the familiarity of the content that newspapers can become like a game.

Thus, for news producers, exploring the utility of play in news media can serve to connect emotionally with audiences. “If play underlies much newsreading behavior (…) then journalists could intentionally incorporate
elements into their articles as a means of improving the traditional labor of media: informing the public” (Dozier, 1975, p. 8). Dozier concludes that recognizing “the utility of play could provide media practitioners with a perspective from which to evaluate demands for entertainment, mature play, moral responsibility and social utility, among diverse media audiences” (pp. 18-19). Thus, electronic newspapers could deploy play as the main motivation for readers (Dozier & Rice, 1984), and at the same time make use of the newspaper’s layout and design to address the symbolic action evoked by the play dimension of newsreading (Glasser 1982, 2000). To Glasser, “the imagery a journalist creates, not the facts a reporter presents, seizes the imagination of the reader and shares with the reader a reality that in some way interprets or diagnoses the ideals of the community” (Glasser, 1982, p. 105). Thus, fostering newsreading pleasure should be a priority in the production process. How news organizations and newswriters incorporate aesthetics and conditions of play in the news as a product affects the mediation of play as part of the newsreading experience. Therefore, readers experience enjoyment through how the news looks like and not through its content. “What is paramount for purposes of play is not, therefore, the content of news but its form” (Glasser, 2000, p. 26).

According to this theoretical discussion, news organizations and news producers should be invested in going beyond the dynamics of entertainment into the aesthetics of play. If readers turn to news outlets seeking the pleasure of consuming the news, then news organizations should be keen to attract new news readers through play conditions. While the gamification of news has only started to emerge in the last decade, it can be considered a new iteration of the tradition of popularizing journalism.

To explicate this transition, I turn to media sociology to account for the influences pushing news organizations to adopt gamified approaches.

**Media sociology and the ‘Hierarchical model of influences’**

Media sociology investigates the linkages and dynamics at the intersection of media and fundamental social processes (Waisbord, 2014). Within journalism studies, scholars have explored the ways in which society organizes itself around media, and at the same time is organized by media. The canonical works of Tuchman (1972, 1980), Schudson (1978, 2012), Shoemaker (1991), and Berkowitz (1997) declared the importance of the interaction of individuals in
the production of news. A second wave of a broader infusion of sociology in journalism research, such as the work of Benson (2004), Ryfe (2006), and Lowrey (2011) in field theory and new institutionalism; Boczkowski’s (2005) ethnographic work on the digitization of journalism; or even in the analysis of journalism studies by Zelizer (2004), proposed that scholars consider the importance of organizations and institutions when assessing journalistic work. In recent years, a panoply of work using media sociology frameworks has emerged (Anderson, 2013; Belair-Gagnon, 2015; Belair-Gagnon & Revers, 2018; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Usher, 2016) acknowledging the cultural and technological intricacies of news production. These three waves of sociology-oriented studies reinforce my theoretical and conceptual discussion.

I use media sociology, and specially Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996/2014) ‘Hierarchical model of influences,’ to account for what I believe is a shift in several social processes that can spur and influence news organizations’ adoption of gamification. Zackariasson (2016) argues that gamification has become popular at this point in time due to technological advances and the mainstreaming of video game culture. In journalism, gamification has popularized at a slower pace than in other industries. The hierarchical model attributes influencing power over media content to five elements on different levels of analysis. From the macro to micro levels, content is influenced by social systems, social institutions, media organizations, routine practices, and individuals. As Shoemaker and Reese (2014) discuss, this approach incorporates a critical examination of the power behind societal institutions and how they imprint their characteristics onto subsequent levels. Media, situated in their historical and philosophical context, serve as a cultural form that is shaped not only by symbolic and ideological underpinnings of society, but also by the economic and political configurations in which media institutions operate. My theoretical argument is that on each level of influence, there are social processes that facilitate a shift toward gamification.

Social systems - Affective economics and affective publics

The surrounding social system serves as a macro level of influence for media content. “The system creates certain structures and institutions in order to maintain itself and among these are the mass media, the communications structure” (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, pp. 13–14). However, a social system is
a porous concept. Several dynamics interact, pulling and tugging and shaping social systems with different intensities. Social trends, such as digitization, interconnectedness and affect, spill over institutions as social behavior imprints those trends. While these three trends have an important role in gamification, it is affect, perhaps, the most intriguing development.

As a form of organizing social dynamics around affect and emotion, the ‘affective turn’ and producers’ attention to emotional engagement are present in various social domains (Clough & Halley, 2007). From the perspective of journalism, Wahl-Jorgensen (2016) argues that this shift has “opened up new spaces for more emotional and personalized forms of expression” (p. 128) in journalistic contexts. Following the rapid proliferation of social media, news organizations incorporated affordances that would trigger affective behaviors, such as sharing, liking, and commenting and the emergence of sentiment data and predictive analytics within digital journalism (Andrejevic, 2011; Petulla, 2013). Similarly, Papacharissi (2015b) argues that affective news emerges out of a hybrid production based on subjective experience, opinion, and emotion. Thus, the grand narrative of journalistic objectivity is further problematized by the “current cultural period in which a new economy of emotions is emerging” (Athanasiou, Hantzaroula, & Yannakopoulos, 2009, p. 5).

This is exemplified by what Jenkins (2006) calls ‘affective economics,’ which means a “new discourse in marketing and brand research that emphasizes the emotional commitments consumers make in brands as a central motivation for their purchasing decisions” (p. 319). By focusing in the consumers’ affective connection to media, producers increase audience participation and engagement. However, as Andrejevic (2011) points out, the notions of participation and engagement need to be understood as modes of interactivity, rather than traditional political empowerment. Whether willingly or not, whether knowingly or not, the user adheres to new productive roles, such as data provider or data laborer (Manovich 2012). Digital news users, just by visiting the site, generate metrics that are used in the news production process as a way to gain a commercial edge by offering audiences content they feel is connected to their interests (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016).

As news organizations negotiate affect as currency, affect is also negotiated as an experiential drive for news audiences. Papacharissi (2015a) coins the concept of ‘affective publics’ as “networked public formations that are
mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (p. 125). If news organizations manage to mediate emotion through their platform or interfaces, affective audiences are more likely to engage with them.

When affective economics and affective publics converge, the discursive expression of sentiment materializes through affective forms of storytelling or interfaces affording affective mechanisms. Thus, gamification can be understood through affective processes occurring at the macro level, such as the emergence of affective economics and affective publics. News organizations, reacting to the dynamics of affective structures, are compelled to experiment with new methods that either create new opportunities within the frame of affective economics or establish emotional connections with affective publics. Gamification is one of those methods with which news organizations experiment.

**Social institutions – Boundaries and interactions**

At the social institution level, the model focuses on the interdependencies “with other institutional power centers in society, relationships that can be coercive or collusive and can shape media content” (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 95). Institutions, as social structures fulfilling the needs of society, emerge and evolve in coexistence with other institutions. Journalism as an institution follows similar processes (Örnebring, 2013). The emergence of journalism was sustained by political messages and commercial infotainment (Conboy, 2010; Schudson, 1978, 1997). Thus, news media’s relationship with apparently separate institutions led scholars to frame news media as commercial institutions (Bagdikian, 2004; Hamilton, 2004) or as political institutions (Cook, 2006; Schudson, 2002). To lay claim to its own institutional jurisdiction, journalism requires institutional boundaries to demarcate interactions with other institutions and professions (as explored by Carlson & Lewis, 2015). Institutional boundaries change, with alternating periods of fluidity, rigidity, and porosity. For example, the relationship between politics and journalism has experienced both symbiotic and adversarial epochs. How politics frames news media permeates social structures, affecting how news media content is created.

For this dissertation, the influence that the evolution of media industry and other knowledge-based institutions has in contemporary journalism is
important. In the last two decades, as technologic organizations have been expanding their structures as social institutions, the acceleration of change has been outstanding. The way that tech giants such as Google and Facebook offer their services has impacted journalism greatly. Their technologic features have evolved in a way that the frictions with news organizations are growing, and the boundaries between them are less and less clear. Similarly, when news aggregators, social media, and platforms like Summly or Blendle offer innovative models of news consumption – aggregation of publishers, personalization, and collaboration – they put pressure on journalistic institutions to innovate as well. As audiences evolve, traditional news must evolve with them or eventually they may be replaced by a newer breed of news services (Carey & Elton, 2010; Kosterich & Napoli, 2016). When new journalism actors like Buzzfeed and Huffington Post irrupt in the news media industry and gain momentum by attracting younger audiences, legacy news organizations notice. When they use gamified strategies with great success, legacy news media feel legitimated to experiment with gamification as well.

Traditionally, successful strategies in other social institutions tend to permeate – at different rates – the institutional logics of journalism. The frictions, competition, and adaptation at the institutional level lead to a constant re-conceptualization of journalism, limiting the formation of a common idea of what journalism is, and what journalism is supposed to be (Conboy, 2010).

**Media organizations - The quantified news organization**

At the center, the model focuses on the characteristics of news organizations and how they impact the intraorganizational dynamics. A news organization “distinguishes itself from others based on its ownership, goals, actions, rules, and membership, establishing boundaries to the extent that we can distinguish organizational members from outsiders” (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 130). How these characteristics materialize within the news organization establishes guidelines for individuals and teams producing the news. In this study, the organizational context is particularly important as a crucial deciding factor for how gamification is integrated.

An organization’s culture carries the background and traditions that affect how well the organization adapts to change. In response to dwindling
newspaper sales and an apparent lack of interest younger generations show in the traditional notion of news (Wadbring & Bergström, 2017), legacy news organizations are trying to attract more audiences by experimenting with innovative forms of journalism and digital services (Meyer, 2009; Purcell, Rainie, Rosenstiel, & Mitchell, 2011). The shift toward audience orientation (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018) and user data (Bolin & Andersson Schwarz, 2015) have reigned a quantitative turn in journalism (Coddington, 2015). News organizations’ use of metrics is an optimal case to exemplify how data affect journalistic work (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012). While metrics and web analytics data often refer to the tracking of user behavior and engagement with a system, metrics can also result in the quantification of working processes.

The power of metrics goes beyond the reorganization of newswork dynamics (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016) and organizational strategies. Metrics can impact on journalists’ affective position towards their own working practices and serves as a measurement of their own performance and impact (Green-Barber, 2014). In her study about metrics used in different journalistic publishers – Gawker Media and The New York Times – Petre (2015) shows that metrics have a powerful influence over journalists’ emotions and morale, becoming a simultaneous source of stress and reassurance. Elsewhere, I obtained similar results when investigating how Bleacher Report used gamification and metrics to incentivize newsworkers’ production patterns (see Ferrer-Conill, 2017). The established link between the emotional disposition of journalists and what they consider a measurement of their performance and impact is what Kennedy (2016) calls a ‘desire for numbers.’ Such desire for an uninterrupted flow of data places metrics and algorithmic quantification as the dominant internal references for success, often overpowering more established professional norms and values, such as quality, objectivity, and verification.

Such a feature of web metrics can be exploited by news organizations to further shape news production. These concerns are voiced by Tandoc and Thomas (2015), who highlight the ethical implications and dangers of allowing web analytics to be part of the news construction process, with the power to determine practices and routines.
Routine practices - Journalism as work and practice

At the routine practices level of analysis, the model focuses on how media workers do their jobs. Routines are the connection binding organizations and individuals, mostly because within the organizational space, rules and norms are established and guide how individuals behave, instead of how they think they should behave. According to Shoemaker and Reese (2014) "(t)here are three sources of routines: audiences, organizations, and suppliers of content" (p. 164). This is particularly significant for this study because a) it introduces the audience as an influencer of routines, a feature central to gamification, relying on metrics and audience quantification; b) it demarcates content as a symbolic form of organizational work; and c) it incorporates external suppliers of content – such as gamification consultants, technologists, and designers – shaping how newswork is conducted at an organizational level.

Heterogeneous journalistic cultures – based on institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies – provide a wide range of different types of journalistic ideologies, norms and values (Deuze, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2007). Still, different journalistic approaches operate within the sense of professionalism and adherence to norms and values of journalists (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003; Reese & Cohen, 2000; Schudson & Anderson, 2009). Routinizing and reifying newswork legitimize the role of newsworkers as professionals (Tuchman, 1973). However, as the digitization of the news process settles, digital news production required a reconfiguration (Boczkowski, 2005, 2010). The amount of data produced, processed and transferred, and the complexity and multi-tiered nature of the content streams have transformed traditional news production and established a new set of tasks and activities that rely more on technical skills than journalistic norms and values. Technological advances and innovations are shaping news production practices, streamlining the way information is gathered and processed (Czarniawska, 2011), facilitating outsourcing newswork (Örnebring & Ferrer-Conill, 2016), and sometimes even allowing computational and algorithmic power to produce content (Anderson, 2013; Clerwall, 2014). Furthermore, news media’s perceived economic crisis and a limited budget for investigative journalism have led to an increase of press releases as journalism (Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008) and normalizing precarious working conditions (Örnebring, 2018b).
Moreover, while research shows that journalists are generally reluctant to adopt change and embrace emerging technology (Deuze, 2009a; Singer, 2004; Westlund, 2012), the need to adapt to the new milieu has opened doors to a myriad of new channels and formats that require new journalistic practices. For example, news outlets adopted blogging as a legitimate structure of their digital presence (Nielsen, 2012), developing and openly curating news as events unfolded, and tended to social media as a form to redefine crisis reporting (Belair-Gagnon, 2015). Similarly, new forms of storytelling that depart from print formats including audio, video, slideshows, and interactive features have steadily been incorporated in the digital editions of news outlets (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013; Thurman & Walters, 2013).

**Individuals – Newsworkers and audience-orientation**

At the micro level of analysis, there are individuals. The characteristics defining newsworkers are also a defining factor in news production. Their background, education, age, gender, social class, experience, political leaning, or power within an organization are among the explicit contributors to obtain different forms of news (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2009). The “discursive constructions of the institutional values, attitudes, and beliefs with regards to the position of journalism in society and, consequently, to the communicative ideals journalists are embracing in their work” (Hanitzsch & Vos 2017, p. 123). Thus, “(p)ersonal and professional factors are closely related, and both help determine content, particularly to the extent that communicators have the power necessary to imprint their own decisions on the product” (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 238). However, individual professional values and beliefs, ethics, biases, and attitudes establish an implicit set of traits that are difficult to assess, even if they still have a strong influence on the content. Furthermore, as journalistic outputs are often the product of teams with different organizational alignments, they seldom characterize the values of individual journalists (Tandoc, Hellmueller, & Vos, 2013; Tandoc & Takahashi, 2014). Of course, individual characteristics must partially align with the routine practices and organizational goals of a journalistic enterprise, but it is their interactions that they materialize in content.

Thus, the legitimacy offered by the professionalism and autonomy of journalism has started to be challenged, as new actors with different skill sets are
being incorporated in news production. This happens from inside the news organization – technologists and business people have an increasingly important role within the newsroom, something that journalists tend to address with reluctance (Parasie & Dagiral, 2013; Singer, 2004; Waisbord, 2013a; Westlund, 2013); it also happens from outside the newsroom – social media, bloggers and citizens in general have the agility and immediacy that legacy news media lack in reporting events that are incorporated into the news (Carpenter, 2008; Domingo & Heinonen, 2008; Hermida, 2012). Thus, I adhere in this study to the notion of newsmakers as multiple types of journalistic actors with different backgrounds and various journalistic roles (Hardt & Brennen, 1995; Örnebring, 2016b). Moreover, journalists with multiple skills have become an industry norm that organizes news production that is changing journalistic culture (Nygren, 2014).

Finally, the gradual involvement of audiences in news production processes and the increasing quantification of audience behavior need to be acknowledged (Napoli, 2011). The easy access and the level of granularity of this information allow journalists and editors to incorporate the audience into their daily decisions (Zamith, 2018b). And while newsmakers’ reliance on metrics and data only offers a partial representation of the audience, newsrooms are employing more audience-oriented roles to translate and interpret audience data. These emerging roles facilitate the incorporation of the measurable audience in newsroom operations as they give meaning to data that can be used to make editorial decisions (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). The importance of the audience for news organizations is not new, but the appearance of new audience-oriented positions – such as engagement editors, audience editors, and social media editors – within editorial teams further symbolizes the institutionalization and normalization of audience-oriented approaches, which in turn shapes how individual newsmakers work.

The individual level of analysis is crucial for this study, as the personal background and education of each newsmaker affect their inclination towards gamification. However, the hierarchy of influences fails to incorporate the influences that the technological underpinnings of gamification have on the news. To accommodate this analytical step, I turn to a sociotechnical view of newswork.
Sociotechnical institutional newwork

The ‘Hierarchical model of influences’ carries the markers that explain how, from the macro to the micro levels, digital newspapers could implement gamification. Such a broad and all-encompassing model embodies the notion of a socially constructed cultural practice. However, such an approach carries its flaw and limitations. As Lawrence (2006) points out, the “hierarchical model of concentric circles is far too simplistic to capture the dynamism of the whole board” (p. 227). While it may work graphically, the model fails to represent that influences may occur at all levels in similar strengths and with different sorts of interactions. Implicitly, a hierarchy assumes that different levels have different degrees of influence. However, the model does not account for such hierarchical forces. Furthermore, there is a certain fuzziness about where levels end and begin. For example, the institutional level does not easily recognize organizational features as part of an institutional entity or how technology exerts influence on the organizational, routine, and individual levels at the same time.

To account for these shortcomings, the theoretical framework on which this study rests incorporates a sociotechnical perspective that both combines the media sociology approach but does not discount the relevance of technology. I should clarify that I do not intend to give prevalence to gamification and its technological foundation. Following the steps of Steensen (2009), I argue that a study including technological innovation in journalism should not be framed by the technology’s assets, but by the ways that technology, organizational structures, and individual agency interact. Thus, according to Steensen (2009) innovation in online newsrooms is constituted by five factors: newsroom autonomy, newsroom work culture, the role of management, the relevance of new technology, and innovative individuals (p. 833). While, the distinct role of technology does not necessarily fit into the ‘Hierarchical model of influences,’ sociotechnical perspectives do not place technology as the only explaining factor, either.

By applying a sociotechnical perspective to journalism, I can account for the technical system and the social system as entities that are always present and simultaneously operating (Fortunati & Sarrica, 2010). The outcome of digital journalism depends on the interrelation of these two systems. Moreover, with a sociotechnical approach, I intend to conceptualize complex organizational
news production strategies that recognize the interactions between individuals and technology (Sacco & Bossio, 2017).

Sociotechnical approaches are gaining interest in journalism studies (see Ananny, 2013; Ananny & Crawford, 2015; Hermida, 2013; Nielsen, 2012; Weber, 2012). While sociotechnical approaches are often linked to Actor-Network Theory (see Anderson & Kreiss, 2013; Anderson & De Maeyer, 2015; Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010), they do not necessarily adopt it. In this dissertation, I am interested in non-human actors (actants) as much as the cultural norms and practices of the human actors that enable them. Therefore, I align with Lewis and Westlund’s (2015) heuristic for the study of institutional news production and consider technological actants as “inscribed and instructed by humans, socially constructed to suit journalistic, commercial, and technological purposes within news organizations” (p. 6). In this way, I can accommodate the way that social actors, technological actants, work-practice activities, and audiences – the Four A’s – interconnect during the news production process. These elements are valuable as analytical lenses throughout this study.

**The Four A’s - Actors, actants, audiences, and activities**

The connections between the ‘Hierarchical model of influences’ and the Four A’s are evident. First, as a sociological model, I argue that all four components act as functional mechanisms at all levels of influence. Social systems, institutions, and organizations shape and are shaped by the actors, actants, audiences, and activities that comprise them. Second, at the micro levels, the hierarchy is bound by routine practices – activities – and individuals – actors and audiences. Incidentally, this approach is similar to Papacharissi’s (2015a) notion of affective publics, which encompasses the “interaction of people, technology, and practices and the imagined collective that evolves out of this interaction” (p. 126). However, Lewis and Westlund place the Four A’s within a framework of institutional news production, which means that the frame of reference is already within the institution level, and operating at a micro level.

When Lewis and Westlund discuss actors, they argue that “a sociotechnical emphasis would also address the roles of other actors, within and beyond the news organization” (2015, p.4), including, beyond editorial roles, technologists and businesspeople. This broad understanding of actors is
particularly relevant for this study. The introduction of gamification by news organizations is contingent on these groups of actors, both internally and externally, often operating beyond the boundaries of the organization or even journalism. Furthermore, they interact with each other when designing and implementing gamified systems, carrying with them distinct logics from their corresponding background fields. In this dissertation, I chose to use the term ‘newsworker’ for roles that participate in news production and newswork in general. The term includes journalists, editors, and managerial roles.

As has been pointed out above, technological actants are not taken into consideration by Reese and Shoemaker, but they are a factor that I feel compelled to incorporate, because beyond its institutional markers, gamification can be conceptualized as a technological actant that, when embedded in journalistic contexts, has the potential to shape content and production processes. In a gamified system, beyond the algorithms, interfaces, and metrics, game elements are conceived and programmed with a technological agency in that they entice newsworkers and audiences to achieve pre-defined goals. However, their inclusion and automated mechanisms have an impact on users – audiences and newsworkers alike – and invoke internal and external perceptions about the norms and values of journalism. In other words, how news organizations implement gamification in digital journalism has implications on how other organizations within the industry and the public view and trust that publication.

In this study, audiences are not part of the empirical inquiry. However, their role in the news production process serves as a crucial element in editorial and business decision-making, as news organizations try to establish a connection with the public (Heikkilä, Kunelius, & Ahva, 2010). Audiences are useful to news media by consuming and sharing the news, by tracking their behavior and collecting their user data, and by participating in the production process. Thus, news organizations treat audiences as recipients, commodities, and active participants. In gamified systems, audiences and users are expected to engage with the system and fulfill the system’s goal, “serving normative, commercial, and cultural functions alike” (Lewis & Westlund, 2015, p.8). Regardless of their approach, news media often carry a discursive construction of audiences based on the mutual exchange between journalism and audience, seeking engagement and reciprocity (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014).
Finally, Lewis and Westlund (2015) understand activities as routinized practices and “patterns of action through which an organization’s institutional logic is made manifest through media” (p. 9). Furthermore, the Four A’s framework ascribes journalistic activities to Domingo and colleagues’ (2008) five stages of news production: access and observation, selection/filtering, processing/editing, distribution, and interpretation. This is particularly relevant because when the news is gamified, the implementation process adheres to one of these stages.

This heuristic model is useful in this dissertation as an analytical tool and as a guide to organize certain parts of the analysis. In particular, I use the Four A’s to a) make the influencing levels identified by Shoemaker and Reese (2014) more concise and explicit, b) include the technological factor as an influential component of news production, and c) situate the theoretical discussion within the domains of institutional news production, which acknowledges internal and external logics that interact when boundaries across different institutional orders are transgressed.

Thus, the linkage between the ‘Hierarchical model of influences’ and the ‘Institutional logics’ in which journalism operates – the next component of the theoretical framework, discussed in Chapter 4 – offer a fruitful theoretical foundation that can explicate how news organizations and newsworkers account for external and internal factors while integrating gamification.

**Theoretical synthesis and propositions**

From a media sociology perspective, this dissertation begins with the assumption that journalism is the “product of cultural, economic, political, and technological forces in different times and spaces” (Belair-Gagnon & Revers, 2018). In this chapter, I have outlined the historical roots of how entertainment and information journalism emerged, and how, despite its long-lasting duality, the popularization of journalism is embedded in what seems to be a paradox: when news is presented seriously and soundly, it is perceived as the real thing but is often considered too boring or depressing to consume by the broader public. When news is made more appealing and accessible, it is less likely to be perceived as news by readers (Costera Meijer, 2007). This means that to assert its place and relevance in society, journalism needs to appeal to a wider audience
while still maintaining its authority and legitimacy, which come from professionalism and the ‘hard news’ bias.

I also discussed one of the first theoretical attempts to connect playful and gameful perspectives in journalism. The ‘Ludenic theory of newsreading,’ in which Stephenson (1964) proposes that news is contingent on the reader experience and on readers playing with the news, evokes enjoyment as a form of habitual interaction. Furthermore, Stephenson acknowledges that news producers should take stock of this and provide an experience more akin to play and conducive to enjoyment. The final product is in the hands of editors who should mold it to suit the needs of the readers.

I then proposed that the ‘Hierarchical model of influences’ “(p)articularly for journalism, helps to untangle many of the criticisms of press performance, and identify their implicit normative and theoretical assumptions” (Reese, 2007, p. 35). For this study, it is a useful starting point to situate news content as influenced by a series of factors at the level of social systems, institutions, organizations, practices and routines, and individuals. When examining each level of analysis, there is a confluence of developments that help explain the introduction of gamification in digital journalism.

Finally, to include the technological aspect of gamification, I made use of the sociotechnical heuristic of institutional news production proposed by Lewis and Westlund (2015), in which actors, actants, audiences, and activities become the analytical tools to understand how the news is produced.

Reflecting on the theoretical discussion and synthesis, this chapter offers a set of theoretical propositions that will help guide this study.

- The parallel understanding of journalism as entertainment and journalism as information is still present in journalism. Newsworkers consider efforts to make journalism popular and entertaining less professional.
- With a generational shift and an apparent crisis of audience engagement, newsworkers justify using gameful and affective approaches to help attract new readers and users, especially among young audiences.
- The boundaries of journalism are transgressed by new forms of newsworkers, carrying new skills and understandings of journalism from other fields.
• News organizations, in a time of crisis, are prioritizing experimentation and technological solutions that place the user at the center.

• The perception of change at various levels is affecting how newsworkers and news organizations adopt technological actants.

The theoretical explanation for what influences the adoption of gamification in journalistic contexts has been approached from a media and journalism perspectives. However, I also seek to understand how institutional news production fluctuates within the boundaries of journalism, and how it interacts with the transgression of gamification. Therefore, in the next chapter, I look at new institutional theory to make sense of how these dynamics and logics emerge and interact.
Chapter 4: An interplay of institutional logics

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the popularization of the press in the 19th century led to the separation of entertainment news and serious news, and how a few scholars have considered proposals for playful approaches in news production. Then I employed the 'Hierarchical model of influences' to understand how journalistic content is influenced at the macro, meso, and micro levels. Its value for this study lies in a scholarly recognition that a development such as gamification is contingent not only on the practice of one journalist or the innovative drive of a news organization. Developments at all levels contribute to how news products materialize. I complemented this approach with a sociotechnical perspective, to include the role of technology in institutional news production.

In this chapter, I turn to new institutional theory to conceptualize and relate journalistic processes and practices that adhere to dynamics that operate at organizational, individual, and routine levels. The 'Institutional logics perspective' is useful to this study as a conceptual and analytical tool that helps explain how "individual and organizational actors are influenced by their situation in multiple social locations in an interinstitutional system" (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 2). While journalism studies usually adopt organizations, practices, and individuals as separate levels of analysis, I argue that adopting an 'Institutional logics perspective' allows for an explanation of individual and organizational journalistic agency. This agency is contingent on a structural formation of logics anchored in the institution as a whole. Such an approach does not require scholars to compartmentalize each level of influence; instead it offers a set of guiding dynamics that influence actors across the institution.

This chapter starts by making the case that scholars should consider journalism and gamification as institutions. Then I address institutional logics theory and how it can be applied to journalism research. Finally, I unpack the dominant logics of journalism and gamification. These logics are a set of evolving structures that shape how organizations, practices, and individuals adhere to and interact with institutional norms and values.

My overall theoretical argument proposes that journalism as an institution adheres to its institutional logics differently across actors within the institution. Moreover, when incorporating gamification in a digital news publication, news
organizations invoke and incorporate gamification logics into news production processes. The logics that gamification carries with it interact and compete with journalistic logics. The interplay of institutional logics – those of journalism and gamification – influence how newworkers and news organizations integrate gamification. Institutional logic interplay is not exclusive to journalism. Most social institutions are in constant interaction with each other. Politics and banking, or religion and capitalism are, for example, institutions that often interact with each other, changing and evolving at different paces (Roland, 2008). And when institutions interact, scholars tend to discuss their logics in duals, as if the struggle and competition lays out a one-or-the-other scenario. However, while at times institutions and their logics compete, they can also reinforce each other. In this dissertation I take a similar approach, investigating two pairs of logics – professional and commercial; hedonic and utilitarian – but I do not consider them always competing, or the only logics that sustain journalism and gamification.

Logic continuum and false dichotomies

Using two dominant logics for journalism and two for gamification presumes a binary approach. Words like ‘prevalent’, ‘dominant’, or even ‘competing’ hint at a ‘one-or-the-other’ approach that is only exacerbated by the fact that these logics can be considered as a continuum from professional to commercial, in the case of journalism, and from hedonic to utilitarian in the case of gamification.

This is not necessarily true. An institutional order has many underlying logics, and while some are in constant tension, others work together. It all depends on how they manifest in reality. For example, Hamari (2015) considers that gamification makes systems more hedonic in order to support the utilitarian outcomes of those systems, services or activities. This means that the hedonic logic of gamification tries to support the utilitarian logic. I do not mean that they always support each other. Sometimes, the hedonic logic is stronger, and other times the utilitarian overpowers any attempts to make an activity enjoyable.

A similar account can be made of journalism. While the narrative of separation from commercial and professional goals has been prevalent for decades, the truth is that most often, a strong professional logic meant commercial success. Furthermore, with few exceptions (e.g., public services,
non-profit organizations), a news organization that cannot fulfill the demands of the commercial logic will not be able to fulfill the professional logic either. So, while we understand them as opposing, and at times they are, it is not always the case.

When these logics are placed along a continuum, is because they represent different understandings of what the dominant goal of either journalism or gamification should be. Leaning toward one or the other visualizes that dominance. However, leaning toward the center of the continuum should be understood as a tendency to fulfill both logics, and as evidence that the two logics coexist in (at least partial) equilibrium within their respective institutions.

Journalism as institution

The social shaping of journalism accounts for the various socio-cultural configurations that influence journalism. In an attempt to accommodate agency and structure, and autonomy and constraint within news production, scholars have theorized journalism as institution (Örnebring, 2013; Ryfe, 2006). According to Lowrey (2018) journalism as institution can be understood as “an organizationally bound enterprise with routinized practices, subject to varying factors and forces in the environment” and as a “meso-level collective field, shaped by external forces but also capable of agency within a collective space that has negotiated boundaries, legitimacy, and an internal logic” (p. 125).

Newworkers’ understanding of news media as an institution “occurs as consensus arises across organizations on the definition of news and on processes to make it, but in ways that may defy efficiency” (Cook, 2006, p. 126). The roles of journalism in society are interlinked with how that society sees journalism, and also with the ways that journalism asserts its own authority and legitimacy (Carlson, 2016). In other words, the instrumental links to democracy and citizenship that legitimate journalism collide with the political economy of news media, as reminders of the many journalism interacting with many social contexts (Hanitzsch, 2007). While there are various forms of material journalism, news media generally adheres to a common set of underlying guiding logics.

Thus, professionalism and the norms and values that are conceptually accepted by newworkers bound journalism within an institutional field in the
social imaginary. This suggests two things. First, the routines and practices that help define journalism are internalized assumptions and behaviors rooted within the trans-organizational field of journalism (Ryfe, 2006). Second, the institutional walls that demarcate journalism help strengthen and solidify journalism norms and values, permeating news organizations, routines and practices, and individuals (Lowrey & Gade, 2011). The institutional edifice becomes the crucial mediator of macro-level forces on the meso- and micro-levels, both within the institution and beyond its boundaries.

As journalistic institutional walls shield and cement the collective notion of journalism, they also act as boundary markers separating journalism from other economic, political, and social institutions (Lawrence, 2006b; Schudson, 2002). Internally, the institution of journalism has its own political economy (Compton & Benedetti, 2010). Externally, Örnebring (2013) argues that the institutional base for journalism, as a particular set of organizations in society, took form in the industrial era and is still shaped by the political, cultural, and labor organization of nation-states. Both internal and external institutional dynamics tend to converge and remain in friction. Sjøvaag (2013) proposes that “the factors that shape the news include the entire institutional apparatus from macro-level social and political structures to the micro-level personal background of the journalists themselves” (p. 158). In this sense, news exists as the product of “work done in an institutional context,” and the autonomy of newsworkers is contingent on the autonomy of the institution (Sjøvaag, 2013).

On the one hand, the institutional walls, while in constant contact with other institutions, keep molding a relatively homogenous journalistic institution. On the other hand, the social organization of newwork depends on interactions with actors in neighboring institutions (Benson, 2004; Sparrow, 1999). Institutional theory has often been criticized because it explains agency and continuity better than change (Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002). This does not mean that institutions are static. Instead, institutions are multifaceted, evolving, and prone to change, journalism among them.

An issue with this approach is the fuzziness of how institutions are defined. However, a porous and vague definition allows for broader flexibility when using institutions as analytical tools (Ryfe, 2006) to study how actors within and outside the institution interact, accounting for heterogeneity and homogeneity across the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Here, I borrow
Örnebring’s (2016b) view of journalism as an institution as “the shared norms and routines of news production as created and maintained by a specific and historically contingent set of organizations (e.g., newspapers, news agencies, broadcasters, but also professional organizations like journalists’ unions and associations)” (p. 3f, emphasis in original). This is, of course, an expansive understanding of institutions. In this case, they encompass the way in which journalists socialize as members of the institution, how news organizations address structural and financial needs in order to sustain their operations, and the shared understanding of journalism’s role in society (Örnebring, 2016b).

This dissertation takes a similar approach with a distinct conceptual and empirical approach. Instead of only looking at continuity and change across the institution, I turn my gaze to how different news organizations and newsworkers, conditioned by their specific contexts, adhere to the current dominant institutional logics that shape journalism. In other words, I consider the overarching homogenizing characteristics of the journalistic institution and account for how heterogeneous actors choose to interpret or adhere to those characteristics differently. Thus, I suggest that how news organizations and newsworkers make sense of the institution defines how they follow its institutional logics. Ultimately, their degree of adherence to these logics affects the way in which news organizations and newsworkers produce the news.

**Gamification as institution**

Institutions, as defined by North (2000) “are the rules of the game of society, or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction” (p. 23). Gamification, as a marketing tool that combines commercial goals with playful elements, serves as a structure for reorganizing human interaction within underlying neighboring institutions. Using Örnebring’s definition of journalism as institution, I propose that gamification as institution can be understood the shared norms and routines of gamified systems as created and maintained by a specific and historically contingent set of organizations (e.g., consultants, market service agencies, technologists, but also professionals and champions within the gamification industry). These shared, unconscious, motivational processes triggered by established game-like experiences try to organize and optimize economic, educational, cultural, and
political processes of historically contingent organizations. Furthermore, just as journalism exists as a broad institution, gamification follows routinized practices, shaped by external forces, establishing spaces of agency within well-negotiated boundaries, legitimacy, and internal logics. For example, the infamous PBLs – points, badges, and leaderboards – is so extended as a practice, that it has been associated as gamification itself. The presence of champions and vendors of gamification establish what gamification is and how it operates, as system to mediate human interaction. North (1990) also states that as "institutions exist to reduce uncertainty in human interaction, they are clearly an extension of mental constructs the human mind develops to interpret the environment of the individual" (p. 25). Gamification, like other institutions, carries rules and constraints to structure human or machine interactions, to interpret and shape individual patterns of behavior (Kopeć, 2015).

Institution formation, however, occurs at the interplay of shared mental models about society and culture, and the process is historically contingent (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Gamification in itself carries specific mental models about societal behavior and carries a cultural base rooted in video games (Zackariasson, 2016). Its historical contingency is not, however, long enough to constitute institutional power, but the mechanisms by which games and play are appropriated and instrumentalized as they become institutionalized within the structures of society were discussed by Caillois already in 1961 and can be paired with aspects of human nature (Huizinga, 1949). As gamification becomes more embedded in societal processes, it seeps into activities, organizing daily tasks. Thus, gamification can be considered what North (1990) calls an 'informal institution,' which is only loosely formed by a tacit acceptation of interested actors and is more or less explicitly stated and perceived by the concerned agents. With the promise of fun, economic principles and routines are perpetuated with a congratulatory cheer (Fuchs, 2014).

Gamification as institution is an unexplored concept, perhaps because gamification as a concept has not been around for long enough to be approached systematically within an institutional framework. However, even within the framework of an 'informal institution,' I argue that gamification can tentatively be considered an institution because it operates with similar internal dynamics. Even if the idiosyncratic nature of gamification as institution merges software and algorithmic logics with ludic methods, metaphors, or attributes
(Kopeć, 2015), it still establishes the organizing principles, practices, and symbols that influence individual and organizational behavior. These are what Thornton and colleagues (2012) consider to be the internal dynamics of an institution, and they are present in journalism and gamification.

There is ample scholarship studying journalism, as well as gamification, through the interaction of an array of logics. However, the structural organizing dynamics behind these logics are seldom scrutinized by scholars. The fact that journalism has a professional logic and a commercial logic is present widely in the literature. In this study, I attempt to understand how logics offer a structure in which agency can be enacted at various organizational and individual levels. Thus, as institutions with their array of logics, I turn to institutional logics theory to set the theoretical and analytical framework to help me delve into journalism and gamification’s logics.

**Institutional logics theory**

The benefit of institutional logics theory is that, while it accounts for homogeneity in norms, it addresses heterogeneity in practice, by accounting for organizational and individual capacity to enact difference via cognitive and normative processes. While individuals and organizations need to be situated within the structures of society to understand their behavior, the logics at a societal level are not entirely determinative. They have partial autonomy concerning logics at various levels of analysis. The appreciation of underlying dynamics between multiple social phenomena (Mohr, 2000) emphasizes the contradictions in logics between the institutional orders, placing this contradiction at the center of institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012).

As an approach evolving from field theory and new institutional theory (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), the institutional logics perspective is "a metatheoretical framework for analyzing the interrelationships among institutions, individuals, and organizations in social systems" (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 2) accounting for both homogeneity and heterogeneity. Its most simple premise assumes that “institutions operate at multiple levels of analysis with potential for cross-level interaction effects” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 14). There are four core principles of the institutional logics perspective: a) the partial autonomy of social structure and action; b) an understanding of how institutions operate at multiple levels of analysis; c) the
integration of the symbolic and material aspects of institutions; and d) the historical contingency. These four principles can be applied both to journalism and gamification, strengthening my proposition that both entities can be considered institutions. Moreover, I contend that institutional logics are a better fit for this dissertation than the work of Bourdieu in journalistic fields because they theorize how ideas move across institutional orders, rather than thinking about interactions within fields. Instead, as Ryfe (2017) states “the roles of journalism will be strongly shaped by the logics of the other social fields it serves” (p. 40). My interest lies in the intersection of fields carrying their own logics and how they interact with journalistic logics. Furthermore, institutional logics include the role of technology as an individual social order, while Bourdieu considers technology as social action embedded in journalistic *habitus* (Klutz & Fligstein, 2016; Sterne, 2003).

Alford and Friedland (1985) first introduced (and developed further in Friedland & Alford, 1991) the concept of institutional logics to exemplify the contradictory practices and values embedded in the institutions of modern western societies. Later, Thornton and Ocasio (1999) defined institutional logics as “the socially constructed, historical pattern of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (p. 804). Thus, institutional logics comprise structural, normative, and symbolic institutional dimensions in which individual agency, cognition, socially constructed institutional practices, and rule structures converge (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Accordingly, an institutional logics perspective complements new institutional theory by recognizing individual agency operating at the symbolic and material practice. While the logics interact at a supranational level, they can only be observed at individual and organizational levels (Friedland, 2012).

Furthermore, the institutional logics perspective goes beyond the new institutionalism understanding of organizational isomorphism (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which accounts for how organizations within an institution – and therefore operating under similar symbolic conditions – tend to acquire similar material practices through coercive, normative, or mimetic dynamics, in an attempt to gain legitimacy among the other institutional players. This suggests that organizations and institutions are path dependent, meaning that
“the decisions made early on in a process govern the path of later choices and events” (Lowrey, 2018, p. 135). For example, Ryfe and Kemmelmeier (2011) propose that ‘path dependency’ helps explain the continuity and transitions within the historical evolution of modern journalism. This is why inertia is an important factor in how news organizations operate (Thorén, 2014) and why change is often resisted. Path dependency explains why journalism – and other institutions – experience long periods of relative stability followed by “critical junctures, in which the system is shocked and opportunities for new directions arise, followed by the creation of new institutional orders and a corresponding increase in stability” (Ryfe, 2006, p. 138).

Studying journalism through an institutional logics perspective is fitting in this study because it helps scholars visualize the internal and external dynamics that guide individual and organization practices, and how newsworkers adopt the symbolic norms and values of journalism as an institution, and in turn how they materialize in journalistic practice and content (see Lowrey, 2011, 2018, and Ryfe, 2006, 2017). This approach incorporates the socio-cultural context and the inherent logics behind institutions as the structure in which organizations and individuals operate, subjected to the friction and tensions that arise when different institutional logics attempt to impose their power. How journalism conforms to a particular structural logic depends on the agency enacted by newsworkers and news organizations. Together, the dominant logics act as the discursive and guiding structure that organizes how actors operate within journalistic institutions, while allowing for endogenous processes of institutional change, as actors adhere predominantly to either of the competing logics. In other words, institutional logics “provide both opportunities and constraints for individuals and organizations” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 78).

**Interinstitutional ideal-types**

In an interinstitutional system, the relationships among institutions, individuals, and organizations are influenced by their situation in multiple social locations in the system. Institutions are subjected to various institutional orders that shape how actors within an institution reason as well as how they perceive and experience rationality (Thornton et al., 2012). The different orders represent different domains of institutions, composed of elemental
categories representing the cultural symbols and material practices that govern a commonly recognized area of life.

Thornton and colleagues (2012, p.52ff) propose institutional order ideal types as analytical tools for institutional logics. These ideal types represent a way to couple empirically various interinstitutional orders and their organizing elemental categories that shape individual and organizational action. In their framework, the ideal-typical institutional orders are family, community, religion, state, market, profession, and corporation. Just like the ‘Hierarchy of influences model’ the institutional orders show different social domains that influence journalism. The notion of journalism as a profession, and also as a commercial entity, is well established in the literature.

The categorical elements – e.g., root metaphors, sources of identity, the basis of norms, sources of legitimacy – represent how individuals and organizations, if influenced by an institutional order, organize their behavior within the institution. According to ‘Institutional logics theory,’ these elemental categories are grounded in social science empirical research to interpret cognition and practice within and across institutional orders.

Table 2 – Institutional order ideal types for profession, market, and corporation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Orders</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Market</th>
<th>Corporation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Categories</td>
<td>Professional as relational work</td>
<td>Transaction</td>
<td>Corporation as hierarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Root Metaphor</td>
<td>Personal expertise</td>
<td>Share prices</td>
<td>Market position of firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Legitimacy</td>
<td>Professional association</td>
<td>Shareholder activism</td>
<td>Top management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Authority</td>
<td>Association with quality of craft</td>
<td>Faceless</td>
<td>Bureaucratic roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Identity</td>
<td>Personal reputation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of Norms</td>
<td>Membership in guild &amp; association</td>
<td>Self-interest</td>
<td>Employment in firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of Attention</td>
<td>Status in profession</td>
<td>Status in market</td>
<td>Status in hierarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of Strategy</td>
<td>Increase personal reputation</td>
<td>Increase efficiency</td>
<td>Increase size &amp; diversification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal Control</td>
<td>Celebrity professionals</td>
<td>Industry analysts</td>
<td>Organization culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanisms</td>
<td>Personal capitalism</td>
<td>Market capitalism</td>
<td>Managerial capitalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic System</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 shows how the institutional orders of profession, market, and corporation, as well as the elemental categories that serve as a mechanism of action (Thornton et al., p.73). I present these three because they are the most relevant for this study. The profession ideal type matches the professional logic, and the market and corporate comprise what can be called the commercial logic of journalism. However, community, state, and family are institutional orders who have strong historical ties with journalism.

On the X-axis, the ‘profession,’ ‘market,’ and ‘corporation’ institutional orders represent governance systems by which actors in the institution form their sense-making choices. These institutional orders are not meant to be exhaustive, and other idealypical institutional orders may be a better fit in specific empirical contexts. The Y-axis is composed of elemental categories representing the cultural symbols and material practices particular to each order. These are the building blocks specifying “the organizing principles that shape individual and organizational preferences and interests” (p.54). Through the combination of these cultural symbols, individuals and organizations understand their sense of self and identity. These elements should not be conflated with institutional logics. The combination of institutional orders and the elemental categories form an ideal type that needs to be understood as a core assumption, a theoretical model for how the boundaries of the institutional orders are systematically defined and identified. Thus, ascribing to these symbols generate the dynamics and forces that we call institutional logics. When institutional symbols and practices resemble a specific ideal type, we associate real-life action with a theoretical guiding logic. For example, when an organization or individual adopts as a root metaphor the notion of relational work, which allows personal control over the execution of professional expertise, that organization and individual are situated within the institutional order of profession. If that root metaphor was the transaction in itself – e.g., selling more newspapers – then the prevalent institutional order would be the market. The internal and external dynamics that influence organizations and individuals to give preference to one or the other are the professional and commercial institutional logics, respectively.

The prevalence of multiple institutional logics is not only possible, but is often the case. These logics coexist in tension, as actors in the institution adhere to one or the other, or partially to both. I use the word ‘adhere’ because logics
are not imposed, and logics are not chosen either. Much like discourse, logics are structures that organize and are organized through contextual sources of power. In the words of Binder (2007, as cited by Thornton et al., 2012, p.183), “logics are not purely top-down: real people, in real contexts, with consequential past experiences of their own, play with them, question them, combine them with institutional logics from other domains, that what they can from them, and make them fit their needs.”

Organizations and individuals reside in a historically contingent context that is fluid and malleable. Furthermore, and supported by path dependency, actors can reside in an institution and adhere to a non-dominant logic for an extended period. As time passes, dominant logics will either erode the non-dominant logic and become increasingly dominant, will find a balance with the non-dominant logic, or will cease to be dominant. This often presents a critical juncture where newsworkers and news organizations will be able to choose to change or adhere to the same logic.

I argue, the institution of journalism is predominantly immersed in friction and tension between the professional, market, and corporation institutional. Zelizer (1993) argues that journalists can be understood as interpretive communities. However, the institutional order of community refers to the self-reflexive understanding of who journalists are and how they understand what they do. Journalism would not be defined by what it produces. Community is an influential institutional order, but I chose to focus on professional, market, and corporate orders because they encompass the dominant logics in contemporary journalism. The theoretical coupling of the institutional orders of the media and journalism can be further analyzed by considering how actual logics operate within their distinct domains.

The study of logics often adopts a dualistic approach, promoted by the notion of tension and priority. If there is a dominant logic, there often is another logic contesting that power. In this study I follow the dualistic approach, but simply because it helps me to combine two institutions and examine their interactions. However, institutions usually carry several underlying logics. Not all of these logics are dominant, but most of them offer a specific point of view by which researchers can explain how organizations and individuals behave. Both journalism and gamification have several underlying logics shaping how these institutions operate.
In the following sections, I apply an institutional logic perspective to both journalism and gamification.

The logics of journalism

Journalism is subjected to several internal and external logics. The tension between the professional and commercial logics is the classic dilemma within the journalistic field (Frost, 2007; Gross, Curtin, & Cameron, 2001; Richards, 2004).

The idea of having a guiding logic that establishes rules for defining, selecting, organizing, and presenting information is nothing new (see Altheide & Snow, 1979). Many scholars have taken the idea of a media logic and conceptualized it further, either regarding specific functions or in terms of specific context. For example, Castells (2009) describes the “inherent logic of the media system, particularly by the new electronic media” (p. 375) as the interplay of several logics, often paired as opposing dualities. These range from the logic of structure and the logic of agency to economic and professional logics. To Dahlgren (1996) media logic points to “specific forms and processes that organize the work done within a particular medium. Yet, media logic also indicates the cultural competence and frames of perception of audiences/users, which in turn reinforces how production within the medium takes place” (p. 63). Deuze (2009) applies media logic “as a mapping tool for contemporary media work” that allows “to examine the [1] institutional, [2] technological, [3] organizational and [4] cultural features of what it is like to work in the media” (p. 29).

In digital journalism scholarship, Westlund (2017) identifies four logics – professional, commercial, participatory, and automated – through which different actors engaging in the institution of journalism negotiate their understanding of journalism. Lewis (2012) also adopts an institutional logics perspective, but through the professional and participatory logics and the tensions they generate. Ekberg (2017) recognizes three logics in news media, commercial, editorial, and technological, and Belair-Gagnon and Revers (2018) make a case of recognizing the cultural logics of journalism.

This study concentrates on the two dominant logics in journalism – professional and commercial logic – as the set of dynamics that “reduces uncertainty and enables the efficient production of news suitable for an
audience” (Asp, 2014, p.266). I chose not to integrate the technological logic, because even if it is an element to keep in mind, both for journalism and gamification, it is not a dominant logic – or at least not more than the commercial and professional logics. Many technology-driven decisions are made with an ulterior motive, either normative or, as most often occurs, economic.

**Professional logic**

According to Nerone (2018), “news culture grew through the interaction of two polarities: the transmission of privileged information to elites in commerce and government, and the dissemination of news as an instrument of representing public opinion in religious and political conflicts” (p.21). The historical foundation of journalism combined the functions of an advertising outlet, a political loudspeaker, and an instrument for community building (Carey, 1992; Schudson, 1978, 1997). And while the evolution of journalism has led to a reconfiguration of its professional self-proclamation as the Fourth Estate, Conboy (2010) points out that there is still not a consensual understanding of what constitutes journalism, as it still contains a mixture of “the ideal and pragmatic, informational, and entertainment” (p. 412).

Yet the professionalism turn of journalism has led to a widespread ideal that journalism ought to uphold certain norms and values that distinguish its practices from those of other groups of information workers (Zelizer, 1993). These norms and values, argue Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) are embodied in the idea that journalism’s main aims are to attain the truth; to serve the citizens; to adhere to verification; to remain independent from commercial and political powers; to provide a public forum for discussion; and to do it all in a comprehensive, relevant, and engaging manner. As Costera Meijer (2001) puts it, journalists should inform citizens in a way that enables them to act as citizens.

Paradoxically, what may appear to be an unattainable set of goals became one of the pillars for a cohesive model of professionalism (Keeble, 2005; Waisbord, 2013a) spurring different models of journalists such as the gatekeepers (Shoemaker et al., 2009), advocates (Janowitz, 1975), and watchdogs (Waisbord, 2013b), and shaping journalism practice in order to meticulously adhere to standard journalistic procedures (Tuchman, 1973). Furthermore, these professionally accepted values have cemented journalists’
role and legitimacy when addressing the citizens and telling them what the news is (Deuze, 2005).

In this way, journalism’s professional logic is heralded as the moral compass that first endows journalists with the authority to make the news, and earns the trust of the public (Karlsson, 2011) in a virtuous cycle. Trustworthy and relevant news increases the status of journalists who then need to retain their trust in the public by keeping the professionalism banner high (Peters & Broersma, 2013). In short, the professional logic addresses audiences and readers primarily as citizens, both to uphold its democratic function and also as a mechanism for demarcating levels of legitimacy. The risks of losing audiences’ trust include public questioning of newsmakers’ professionalism and their authority. However, even within the confines of commercial-oriented news outlets, journalists adopt the ideals of what journalism is supposed to be with more ease than the institutions they work for (Stensaas, 2005).

**Commercial logic**

In its more common form, journalism operates within a commercial setting (Nielsen, 2016). As a result, “(f)or most organizations, the primary goal is economic, to make a profit. Secondary goals built into this overarching objective include producing a quality product, serving the public, and achieving professional recognition” (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 139). This primacy of economics means that regardless of its norms and values, news media are still defined by a commercial imperative that makes viable the practice of journalism as a profession (Conboy, 2010). At times, this ‘commercial imperative’ has translated into a successful industry that not only generated large profit to its stakeholders but also that leaned towards corporate conglomerates and monopolizing strategies (Bagdikian, 2004; Croteau & Hoynes, 2006; McManus, 1994).

Thus, the pledge of allegiance to the reader that was envisioned by professional norms can be challenged when the news becomes commodified (Hamilton, 2004). If journalism is dependent on revenue streams, its allegiance would not necessarily be to the reader or to the truth, but with what allows journalism to exist as a profession. The conflict of interests is even more apparent in moments of flux when traditional business models or formats are being replaced, and news media, in general, are in crisis.
In recent years, these commercial urges have become more prominent, potentially shaping news content and working dynamics (Hamilton, 2004; McNair, 1998; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), a process that has been accentuated by the appearance of networked technologies (McChesney, 2013). The manner of this occurrence can be seen in the amount of advertising incorporated by digital news media, new forms of quantification and metrics-driven practices (Petre, 2015), increase in popular content, editorial roles losing power in the newsroom in favor of business-side workers taking decisions, or simply commodifying users as a way to attract more advertisers (Hamilton, 2004).

**The logics of gamification**

The rise of gamification can be understood as a combination of technological innovation – extended internet connectivity, networked devices, algorithmic power, and advanced interfaces – cultural acceptance of digital games and media convergence, and a group of active popular champions.

In 2011, McGonigal published an influential book called *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. She argues that by using game elements within everyday environments, we can turn those environments into equally fun and engaging experiences as games. Reality is too slow, too boring to engage individuals who grew up playing video games. Based on the notion that millennials are the first generation to have been born into a world filled with pervasive digital games within the context of home and everyday life, McGonigal’s book influenced researchers and marketers to expand on the new trend of gamification. Thus, conceptually, gamification was based on making things fun and engaging to make ‘us better, and change the world.’ As discussed in Chapter 2, a group of champions adopted a celebratory rhetoric about the qualities of gamification as a viable solution to engage users and generate social inspiration (Duggan & Shoup, 2013; Zichermann & Linder, 2010). The optimistic undertones within the narratives of gamification as a source of social change and human expression were common in the first years of the gamification turn. This is what Chou (2013) calls the ‘human-oriented’ drive of gamification: re-formulating activities so that they resemble games and be enjoyed more by humans.

At the same time, gamification was appropriated by service-marketing and enterprises to extract economic value by engaging users with game-like services.
Paharia (2013) sums it best, claiming that “businesses now have a powerful engine for creating true loyalty among their customers and for generating a sustainable competitive advantage in their markets” and that “(g)amification’s goals are the business’ goals, whatever they may be” (p.68). In contrast to the ‘human-oriented’ drive of gamification, this is what Chou (2013) calls the ‘function-oriented’ drive of gamification, and is supposed to give a purpose – often commercial – to the engaging qualities of gamification. The function of gamification is what organizations attempt to achieve with it and is how proponents advertise and monetize gamification (Herger, 2014; Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011; Zichermann & Linder, 2013).

And while critics have questioned whether gamification can deliver its ‘human-oriented’ drive and challenged the ways it is used for a commercial ‘function-oriented’ drive (Bogost, 2015; Conway, 2014; DeWinter & Kocurek, 2014; Fuchs et al., 2014; Kopeć & Pacewicz, 2015), the tensions between critics and champions illuminates the internal dynamics or logics that drive gamification as a practice. Drawing from Hamari’s (2015) typology of hedonic and utilitarian gamified systems, I propose the two dominant dynamics as the hedonic and utilitarian logic of gamification. The former is connected to the ‘human-oriented’ drive and the latter to the ‘function-oriented’ drive.

Having already argued for the institutional underpinnings of gamification, I find that institutional theory explains better journalism than gamification. This is because the adherence to gamification logics is less theoretically developed, but also because journalism is older and more established than gamification. Gamification, as a newer ‘informal institution’ lacks specific ideal-typical institutional orders that can replicate its logics, simply because its elemental categories have not been conceptualized, yet. This offers an opportunity for scholars to inductively address the elemental categories of hedonic and utilitarian logic through the evidence of each case. During the results chapters I will assign the elemental categories – e.g., root metaphor, sources of legitimacy, basis of norms, etc. – to the different logics of gamification.

**Hedonic logic**

A hedonic interface aims to inducing enjoyable experiences by users, for enjoyable entertainment-oriented leisure purposes (Hamari, 2015, p. 11). In
human-computer interaction and user experience research, hedonic interfaces and services are based on hedonic motivation, which assumes that individuals complete certain tasks because it is intrinsically enjoyable to do so. Thus, the hedonic logic of a system serves as the antithesis of the utilitarian logic, as it prioritizes different motivations for implementation, such as gratifications, pleasure, arousal, or value to foster user engagement (O’Brien & Toms, 2010).

The use and appropriation of game thinking and game mechanics to trigger a specific outcome, while not entirely novel, it is new in its approach. Gamification builds upon technical affordances that center around reflexivity, self-quantification (Whitson, 2013), and personalization, as the data gathered and analyzed is focused on each individual (Przegalińska, 2015). The experience centers on the stimuli offered by different types of motivational affordances that generate an emotional and psychological response, enacting a behavioral response (Zhang, 2008). Drawing from classic and contemporary theories of motivation and the current crisis of engagement (see Deci & Ryan, 1985; Latham & Locke, 1991; Bandura, 2002; Pink, 2011; Amabile & Kramer, 2011) many authors portray gamification as a reward-based system that motivates users by transforming activities into a game-like experience.

The ludic and hedonic notions revolve around connotations to the semantic field of games and play (Fuchs, 2012). Borrow (2016) considers that the interrelated nature of playfulness, gamefulness, ludicity can be overcome by adopting Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) concept of flow into gamification research. The four key aspects of design that would enact flow in gamification are: “(1) intrinsic enjoyment and a sense of fun; (2) a concurrent sense of challenge and control; (3) limited or peripheral advertising; (4) a conducive interface that is not disruptive to the enjoyment of the application as a whole” (p.193). Thus, the use of motivational affordances (Zhang, 2008) in gamification aims to use game elements to enhance user engagement through enjoyable interaction. The scholarly consent is that the success of gamifying a service is contingent on the meaningful and playful approach that is given to such gamified initiative (Nicholson, 2015).

There are different ways in which an interface aims to attract and motivate users with game elements. Several authors have tried to conceptualize the general approach or disposition that an interface has to adopt to deploy gamification successfully. Sicart (2014) uses the notion of “playfulness as a way
of engaging with particular contexts and objects that is similar to play but respects the purposes and goals of that object or context” (p.21). Playfulness is then an attitude that would be imprinted in the interface to entice users. To Llagostera (2012), the interface and user experience draw from the principles of persuasive technology (Fogg 2002). Thus, the aesthetics, design, and sophistication of the system must entice the user to keep using it. Deterding (2014) considers a similar approach but constrained within confines of a game and game-thinking; he calls it a gameful approach. Fuchs (2012) refers, instead, to the ludic interfaces on which gamification is built.

In sum, when the hedonic logic is dominant, a gamified news system will prioritize a gameful interface that tries to meaningfully reconfigure the activity that is being gamified – like newsreading – in an attempt to make the experience enjoyable and entertaining for users.

**Utilitarian logic**

Systems designed for utilitarian purposes aim to be efficient and unobtrusive tools that enable maximum productivity for users and to achieve their intended purpose (Hamari, 2015, p. 11). The common pattern in most of the scholarly work is that applied gamification is used to do something. Regardless of the context for what is used, authors identify several instrumental uses or aims for gamification: Deterding (2012) proposes gamification as design for motivation; Llagostera (2012) considers gamification a form of persuasion; Werbach and Hunter (2012) conceptualize gamification as an agent for habit formation; and Hamari and colleagues (2014) understand gamification as a way to affect or reinforce behavior.

The utilitarian logic of gamification is guided not only by what is being gamified (context) but also why something is being gamified (instrument). Regardless of a system’s contextual (e.g., commerce, exercise, learn, work) or instrumental (e.g., motivation, persuasion, habit formation, behavior modification) characteristics, the consistent feature of gamification is enacting an activity or behavior. This is important because it sets a framework for whether gamification is beneficial, and for who, and for what purpose. The notions of empowerment, of making something boring fun, of engaging users to participate need to be questioned vis à vis notions of exploitation, surveillance, and control. As new norms and casual rewards are transferred to
daily practices, a procedure and mode that become a pattern of control can be
imposed on users and their activities (Conway, 2014; DeWinter et al., 2014).

As digital games pervade everyday tasks usually not reserved for play, it is
important to analyze how gamification is conveyed through media devices, and
how media and games become normalized within daily lifeworlds. Thus, games
have transcended from a liminal and playful activity to become drivers of
engagement and motivation within productive and affective processes. Such a
development points toward a covert appropriation of playfulness to transform
social and personal behavior. This feature places gamification in the midst of a
reorganization of social life, with the promise of fun and engagement. The
question of allegiance of the gamified initiative is central to the utilitarian logic
of gamification, and yet, this fact is usually underrepresented in the current
gamification discourse. However, it is important to remember that while logics
compete for dominance and they are often two poles of a continuum, they are
not strictly dichotomous. Instead, they can coexist by reinforcing each other,
and achieving their goals at the same time.

Theoretical synthesis and propositions
In this chapter, I established the theoretical linkages between journalism and
gamification as institutions (Hamari, 2015; Lewis, 2012; Örnebring, 2013). To
do so, I drew from new institutional theory and the 'Institutional logics
perspective.' Institutional logics help address the structural, normative, and
symbolic institutional dimensions in which individual agency, cognition,
institutional practices, and rule structures converge (Thornton & Ocasio,
2008). This means that news organizations and newswriters are subjected to
their institutional context, but at the same time can enact their agency to adhere
to one of the various dominant institutional logics. These choices operate at the
symbolic and material levels.

I then presented the notion of interinstitutional ideal-types, as a
theoretical model to represent the way by which organizations and individuals
make sense of their own identity and practice. Moreover, ideal-types coexist,
shape and are shaped by neighboring institutional orders. In real case scenarios,
news organizations and newswriters are not necessarily placed in an ideal-type,
as the adherence to material and symbolic practices not only can fluctuate, but
also take different elemental categories from various ideal-types. For journalism,
the professional logic is a good match to the professional ideal-type, while the commercial logic draws from the market and corporation institutional orders. Finally, I present the professional and commercial logics of journalism as the two dominant logics to which news organizations and newworkers ascribe. I also present the hedonic and utilitarian logics of gamification as the two dominant logics shaping how gamification is being applied.

Reflecting on the theoretical discussion and synthesis, this chapter offers a set of theoretical propositions that will help guide the multiple case study.

- Journalism and gamification can be considered institutions as two set of structures that organize social interaction.
- Each institution carries its own dominant set of logics that will act as the sense-making framework for news organizations and newworkers who adhere to them.
- News organizations and newworkers are subjected to a historical context, personal identity, set of goals, and internal understanding of institutions. Analyzing these individually can explain how they adhere to an overarching logic. This adherence, in turn, can also partially shape their symbolic and material practices.
- Institutions do not operate in a void. They coexist and interact with other social orders, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes blurring boundaries between them.
- The interplay of multiple logics in neighboring institutions can help make further sense of how a concept like gamification is applied within journalism.

The ‘Institutional logics perspective’ encompasses wider dynamics and discourses embedded in institutions that coexist, overlap, and fight for dominance. The degree of organizations’ adherence to these logics is influenced by various social factors. Using institutional logics not only gives me the theoretical tools to conceptualize these influences and their manifestations in the material and symbolic practices of news production, but also provides this study with an analytical framework by using ideal types and institutional orders. The ways that actors adhere to these logics help explain how cases that entwine gamification and journalism operate.
I am not sure how you press “up, up, down, left, A, B, A, B, start” on a print or digital dissertation. In the good old days, when playing with the Nintendo, it used to work like a charm for starting a new game with infinite lives, alternating characters, or unlocking all the extra features.

Before the internet, specialized magazines often printed games’ cheat codes and walkthroughs. To follow them, one had to be precise and methodical, pressing the right combination of buttons in the right order. Otherwise, the code would not yield any advantage for the player. Walkthroughs were particularly useful because they exemplified the chronological steps for completing the game. Walkthroughs also inform the following section, in which I discuss the methods used in this study and outline the process of data collection and analysis. Sadly, I am one step short of metaphor bingo because qualitative studies do not symbolize cheat codes as well as quantitative methods do. The codes used in this study are interpretative, the spitting image of a socially constructed phenomenon.

And let’s face it, Reader 1, this dissertation does not need cheat codes because there is little I can do to stop you from cheating and rushing all the way to the final chapter. Similarly, gamified systems rarely have cheat codes. Even if they rely on tracking patterns of behavior, there are always ways to game the system. Out of the four cases, only the case of Bleacher Report is difficult to cheat, and probably because it is the one that involves gamifying newworkers’ practice, and thus requiring strong methods of control. The other cases track behaviors that users can fake or circumvent. Documents can be classified without being checked; news items can be accessed without being read; and videos can be forwarded without being watched.

For gamified journalism, having users cheat may seem like a failure, but that depends on the real organizational goals. If metrics are the goal, then scrolling and clicking without reading the news may still be a success. In the dissertation at hand, reading the findings should be enough. If you skip the methods section, I will understand. Go ahead, I will not judge you.
Chapter 5: A qualitative multiple case study

This chapter describes the methodological design of the study, outlining the steps taken to conduct the research and the methods employed. It starts by establishing the epistemological and ontological perspectives in which the study is situated. Then I discuss the research design and its qualitative nature. I proceed to discuss the choice of cases and the methodological approaches chosen to investigate and analyze them. Finally, I discuss notions of the quality of this study, the procedures of data collection, and the ethical considerations.

Epistemological and ontological considerations

In an attempt to make sense of the field of media and communication, Littlejohn (1983, cited in Gunter, 2000) established a two-dimensional meta-theoretical classification that “combines both dimensions – the epistemological and the ontological – of communication research,” thus allowing the “discrimination of four theoretical perspectives underlying contemporary communication research: a) the behavioristic; b) the transmissive; c) the interactional; and d) the transactional perspective” (p.3). The first two perspectives – behavioristic and transmissive – adopt a non-actional ontological position, considering reality an external entity that can be empirically and objectively observed, studied, and tested. They also adopt a World View I epistemological position that assumes knowledge is created by observable and measurable facts that allow for causal explanation and prediction as a contribution. These two approaches follow a positivistic philosophy of science. The interactional perspective adopts a hybrid ontological position regarding the concepts of man, human action, and human interaction, partly drawing from non-actional theory and actional theory perspectives. The transactional perspective adopts an actional ontological position, assuming that reality is shaped by the subjective meanings and understandings that individuals enact. These two perspectives – interactional and transactional – adopt a World View II epistemological position, that as social constructionism, accounts for human subjectivity and interpretation as a prism that shapes how knowledge is created.

This study is positioned within the transactional perspective. On the one hand, it finds itself in an actional ontological position, considering humans as individuals who carry their idiosyncrasies and thus impose their subjectivities
onto human action and behavior. On the other hand, it takes a social constructionist epistemological position, assuming that social science is interpretive and hermeneutic, applying subjective meaning to the world. Knowledge in itself – and how individuals create it – are inherently linked to the social and personal conditions of the researcher, and to the social context of the object of study.

Adopting these ontological and epistemological positions means that I am, as a researcher, drawn toward interpretative and impressionistic qualitative methodologies. Not only do I believe that this choice allows me to better answer my research questions, but also that such an understanding of reality and the construction of knowledge shapes the type of questions this study sets out to answer. I aim for an in-depth understanding of how and why newsworkers and news organizations use gamification, knowing that these gamified artifacts are constructs subjected to a variety of social contexts. Furthermore, this study is interested in how journalists perceive their practice, by studying how communicative symbols (such as gamified journalism) are used and interpreted. Thus, I assume that social life depends upon a complex set of countless interactions of social and technological accounts that shape and provide malleable meanings to life (Magnusson, 2015). This assumption informs the theoretical choices as well as the methodological and analytical strategies that support this study.

Finally, this study cannot be fully situated within the scope of only one of the three major theoretical perspectives (positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism). In an effort for hybridity and convergence (Gunter, 2000), this dissertation adopts epistemological and ontological modes from interpretive and critical realist perspectives. Drawing from interpretivism, I recognize my preconditions and limitations as a researcher and address the empirical material as “culturally and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty 1998 as cited by Gray, 2009, 26). Furthermore, I understand that news organizations and newsworkers often need to establish their legitimacy. Therefore, I also draw from critical realism, by often questioning values and assumptions embedded in the empirical data, and challenging, when necessary, conventions distilled in the social and organizational cultures of those who participated in the study.
Qualitative research and multiple case study design

Thornton and Ocasio (2008, p.109) claim that “(t)heory and methods go hand-in-hand.” An institutional logics perspective is predominantly informed by a qualitative approach, often relying on triangulation of various types of data and multiple methods of data collection and analysis. While an institutional logics perspective does not necessarily rule out quantitative methods, I chose a qualitative multiple case study to conduct this research project. This choice is appropriate not only because it resonates better with my ontological and epistemological positions, but also because qualitative research is better suited to develop an in-depth understanding of an emerging phenomenon, particularly when addressing the meaning that individuals ascribe to that phenomenon (Bryman, 2008).

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) understand case study research as a unitary qualitative approach characterized by its flexibility. The case study approach is helpful due to its specific value towards contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2014) that are new or not widely understood within the social sciences (Thomas & Myers, 2015). Thus, as a methodology the case study aims to understand the mechanics and dynamics in which the object of study operates in a specific context (Woodside, 2010). Moreover, a multiple case study provides the room for comparison and exploration between cases that share a common characteristic, in the search for differences and similarities.

Multiple case study approaches have gained popularity in recent years in journalism studies (see Aitamurto, 2016; Birks, 2010; Larrondo, Domingo, Erdal, Masip, & Van den Bulck, 2016; Tandoc & Vos, 2016). These studies predominantly cover new developments in journalism, with the aim of understanding them better.

For this project, the suitability of a multiple case study approach lies in the fact that gamification of journalism is an emerging trend taking place in different ways within different organizational contexts. Having multiple cases provides room to study this phenomenon from various angles, to gain a better understanding of how it is occurring. Case studies offer strengths that large sample cross-sectional research cannot offer: they provide an overview of an otherwise under-researched area, rather than testing hypotheses; they are driven by an internal, rather than external, validity; and they offer insight into causal mechanisms, rather than causal effects (Gerring, 2007). Case study research is
also valuable when the empirical inquiry addresses a heterogeneous population of cases. Hence, for a study such as this one, exploring a new phenomenon, in which the population is rather small and different from each other, a qualitative case study approach is an optimal methodological choice.

The appropriateness of a case study approach is, however, not a precondition for a successful study. As Yin (2014) points out, the absence of a clear-fixed structure, the often methodological eclecticism and loose design, and the overall uncertainty about procedures to follow might lead to a vague and unsystematic implementation of the research project. To address this issue, Thomas and Myers (2015) propose a typology of the case study. This typology aims to provide a systematic structure that facilitates “the distinction between subject and object; the importance of clarifying the purpose of the study; an awareness of the likely analytical approach to be pursued, and an identification of the likely process to be followed in conducting it” (Thomas & Myers, 2015, p. 65). Figure 1 offers an applied version of the case proposed in this dissertation to assist in both the construction and analysis of the multiple case study.

![Figure 1 - Case study typology](image)

Following this structure, the proposed case study uses four key subjects (that is, the four separate cases, which according to Bryman (2008) are the unit of analysis). The object of study is easily identifiable as the phenomenon of gamified journalism, embodied here in four cases that exemplify its implementation, underlying logics, and internal dynamics. Its purpose carries intrinsic interest, containing exploratory elements. The approach is both illustrative and theory-building, and at the same time tries to investigate whether gamifying the news is constrained by institutional logics. The methodological choices study a set of multiple parallel cases, as they happened...
in distinct contextual settings. They were not nested within each other, nor did they involve a sequential reproduction of each other.

**Research design**

This study combines inductive and deductive reasoning. Departing from an inductive approach, I explore and examine several examples of how gamification has been adopted in journalism. Then I look back to theory trying to identify theoretical perspectives that could help address the phenomenon in a meaningful way. Next, I adopt a deductive approach in which a working theoretical framework is developed, followed by a selection of cases that may shed light on the capacity for the theoretical choices to explicate the phenomenon. In this case, the 'Hierarchical model of influences' helped explain different factors that could shape how journalism is adopting gamification. Further, an 'Institutional logics perspective' incorporates wider dynamics and discourses embedded in institutions that coexist, overlap and aim for prevalence, shaping the interaction of journalism and gamification. Finally, I return to inductive reasoning to cement a theoretical and analytical contribution based on the multiple case study. Based on Gray’s (2009) model for combining inductive and deductive methods (p. 18), Figure 2 proposes this study's research design at the reasoning level.

![Figure 2 – Research design at the reasoning level](image-url)
Qualitative research predominantly emphasizes an inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research (Bryman, 2008, p. 36). This study adopts inductive reasoning both to map the research problem and to build its theoretical contribution. However, as Gray (2009) proposes, inductive and deductive processes are not mutually exclusive, and combining them offers rich potential for research.

Beyond the abstraction of the research design at a reasoning level, and with the aim of simplifying and concretizing, at a more procedural level the research design covers the following steps:

- Survey and demarcate the practices of gamification in journalism.
- Identify and problematize its use.
- Substantiate and anchor the practice theoretically as a larger trend and, more specifically, at an institutional level.
- Establish theoretical propositions.
- Screen and select the cases comprising the multiple case study.
- Create a case study protocol.
- Study the organizational context of each case.
- Collect case evidence in the following order:
  - Digital artifacts
  - Interviews
- Create an evidence database.
- Conduct four separate in-case analyses.
- Conduct a cross-case analysis.
- Propose a theoretical contribution.
- Write the case study report.

In the following section, I provide a detailed overview of the four cases of this study.

**Overview and choice of cases – avoiding the monolith**

According to Yin (2014), due to the comparative nature of multiple case studies, it is important to select cases strategically in order to anticipate similar or diverging results among cases. To avoid treating journalism and gamification as monolithic practices, I follow Deuze’s (2005) approach and “ignore real or perceived differences between mainstream and alternative news media, between
serious and popular journalism or between hard and soft news” (p. 458). Thus, the selected cases include divergent journalistic ventures, from sports journalism to legacy journalism, from commercially driven business models to fully subsidized models. A similar approach is adopted toward gamification, opting to include different gamification approaches, from website-wide systems to story-based systems, and with different target behaviors and goals.

While the number of gamified news systems keeps growing, it is a new practice that has a small pool of cases. This study rests upon four cases, selected following a theoretical replication logic. Replication logic, opposed to sampling logic, entails a careful selection of cases that help predict contrasting results that could be previously anticipated (Yin, 2014). Thus, the theoretical framework informs the selection of cases.

The first screening process aimed to select a pool of cases situated within the scope of the study. I searched extensively for gamification and game-related topics used in journalism or news media. This search was conducted in online search engines, academic literature, specialized literature and gamification providers, as well as gamification and media blogs. I obtained more than a hundred cases of game-like, playful, and gamified approaches. Most cases referred to newsgames and quizzes, but more than 30 cases referred to examples that could be considered gamified. The next step involved filtering down the number of cases that would fit within the scope of the study. I looked for cases that had the following characteristics: 1) use of gamification in relation to editorial content; 2) applied by a well-known news organization; 3) on a digital news website; 4) in English; and 5) deploying more than one game component. The fifth criterion is a boundary-setting choice, as I am interested in cases of gamification that exemplify complexity. After this screening process, only nine candidate cases fulfilled all the criteria.

To avoid repetitive cases and to make the number of cases more manageable, the final filtering process of selection used a maximum variation approach. This is what Gerring (2007) calls the ‘diverse’ case-selection technique, in which cases share a common object of study – gamified journalism – but diverse cases that illuminate the widest range of variation are prioritized. The diversity, in this case, was achieved according to four criteria. First, the type of news organization using gamification. Second, the scope of implementation, depending on whether the gamified system was a whole website (system-wide)
or it was only a story (item-specific). Third, the degree of game-like user experiences within the gamified system. Finally, in an attempt to provide an overview as broad as possible globally, I assigned higher priority to cases situated in different national settings.

The final selection of four cases includes Bleacher Report, the Guardian, the Times of India, and Al Jazeera. All cases involve gamifying some part of the news; they are implemented by well-established organizations, having a digital outlet, offering content in English, and use more than one game component in their strategies. At the same time, they use gamification in quite different ways. Table 3 situates the diversity of each case within the criteria for the maximum variation selection process.

**Table 3 – Multiple case study approach - diverse case selection criteria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Journalism dimension</th>
<th>Gamification dimension</th>
<th>Scope of implementation</th>
<th>National context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bleacher Report</strong></td>
<td>Sports, mass-market, online only</td>
<td>Moderate (storytelling)</td>
<td>System-wide</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Guardian</strong></td>
<td>Generalist, upmarket, legacy</td>
<td>Moderate (mechanics)</td>
<td>Item-specific</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Times of India</strong></td>
<td>Generalist, mass-market, legacy</td>
<td>Low (mechanics)</td>
<td>System-wide</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Al Jazeera</strong></td>
<td>Alternative, semi-public, legacy</td>
<td>High (storytelling)</td>
<td>Item-specific</td>
<td>Qatar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although these cases are further contextualized and analyzed individually in subsequent chapters, the following paragraphs give a summary of the cases.

**A brief summary of the cases**

Chronologically, the first case is the Guardian. In 2009-2010 the British publication implemented an investigative journalism crowdsourcing campaign to search through a large set of documents that would trigger a major political scandal regarding UK’s parliamentary expenses and the misuse of allowances by Members of Parliament. The Guardian created a specific microsite enticing users to access, review, and classify about half a million documents. A progress bar showed the amount of data covered by the community and how much was left to cover. Also, a leaderboard displaying the most active users, along with the number of items they reviewed, was placed on the Guardian’s landing page to grant status to those who reviewed most documents. This is one of the most
iconic examples of the gamification of journalism, and I chose it for its relevance, even though the *Guardian* did not make use of the word ‘gamification’ on their microsite.

A different type of interaction occurs in a gamified digital system such as the one at *Bleacher Report* (B/R), a popular sports news website. B/R turned journalists into players by awarding them digital and physical rewards according to their performance statistics. Authors’ reputation levels depended on the number of reads, comments, lead stories, and other metrics that awarded points to each author. Almost immediately, journalists could evaluate the impact of their work on the organization, and pushed authors to keep contributing to the site.

The Times Points program is a gamified loyalty program designed and employed by media conglomerate Times Internet Limited, India’s largest digital media network. The points system is included on the *Times of India*’s online news website. In this case, the gamified system is integrated across twelve different media sites that offer a wide and eclectic range of content, including traditional news, real estate, and entertainment. At the *Times of India*, the system rewards users with points and badges for different types of behaviors. Users compete in two sets of leaderboards, one for the *Times of India* and another combining all users of all the publications using Times Points.

Finally, *Al Jazeera*’s Pirate Fishing storytelling technique, in which the degree of immersion and playfulness is high. In this case, gamification is used as a storytelling technique where users begin the story as junior reporters and must consume content as the story progresses. Users collect evidence and earn points and badges, which allows them to advance to subsequent levels of the story. This story prioritizes media consumption and interaction, rather than user traffic.

**Data collection strategy – sources of data and methods**

Following Woodside’s (2010) recommendations for case study research, a mixed-methods approach is optimal for this study, as it probes case participants for explanations and interpretations of operational data, and analyzes the data and context in which the case occurs (p. 16). In this sense, the combination of multiple methodological practices and empirical materials in a case study is a
strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth" to the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 5)

To respond to its research questions, this study makes use of two main sources of data: digital artifacts and in-depth interviews. The triangulation of data, "the convergence of data from different sources to determine the consistency of a finding" (Yin, 2014, p. 241) occurs regarding data (multiple data sources), theory (different perspectives), and methods (mixed methods).

Following Yin’s (2011) principle of creating a case study database, all sources are compiled in an array of folders, Excel and Word documents, Evernote notebooks, and an NVivo project. In the following chapters, I give an overview of specific data sources for each case.

**Digital artifacts - Gamified systems**

While Yin (2014, p.117) considers artifacts as potentially less relevant sources of data for case study research, in this study, they are central. The digital artifacts are the gamified systems, which can be studied as unitary socio-technical devices. These digital artifacts are the technological actants (Lewis and Westlund, 2015) that inform this study through the form and function of the gamified system and how it relates to journalism. Moreover, they have the power to corroborate evidence emerging from interviews, as these digital artifacts reflect non-disclosed objectives within the system. By studying the game elements and rewards that populate the system, it is possible to assess the intent of the news organization beyond its public statements.

Studying gamified interfaces in journalistic contexts presents several methodological challenges, especially from the perspective of media studies. According to Gunter (2000), media research has often studied its output with either quantitative or qualitative content analysis. The problem here is that 'output' is only a portion of what a system conveys to the user. Moreover, while the algorithmic architecture behind each system might be interesting, it is beyond the scope of this study. From a game studies perspective, the notion that games can be approached heuristically and read as 'texts' has been increasingly contested (Juul, 2000). Loops of interaction and design options tend to coexist in a layout with which the user must interact, offering different meanings that are difficult to unpack. In game studies, methodological discussions have
offered one of the most interesting debates of a young field of study (Lammes, 2007; Mäyrä, 2008).

Digital artifacts, however, pose a much harder problem to document. The reason for this is that gamification includes an important degree of interaction, which cannot be captured through screenshots or downloading the page locally. This became quickly clear as Bleacher Report started to abandon the gamified platform during the period of this research. To solve this particular problem, collecting data through digital artifacts was done by interacting with them when possible, reading the documents provided by their creators (press releases, websites, and interviews), or articles by external critics. In the case of the Guardian, for example, I could not interact with the system – which is no longer available online – but I gathered data about it through different repositories of the site, screenshots, and other documents.

**In-depth interviews**

The need to understand both the creation and use of a gamified news service interface requires an in-depth and personal method that captures the subjective perceptions of creators and users. This is precisely what makes qualitative interviews a method suitable for this research. While the analysis of the gamified systems provides information about the use of game elements, the use of qualitative in-depth interviews shed additional light on the reasons why news organizations choose to gamify a news system, and investigates the experiences of newsworkers while interacting with a gamified system for news production. Moreover, the interviews contribute to the study by providing context required to anchor the gamified systems within ideal-typical institutional logics.

The strengths of this method are the positive rapport generated by the interviewer and the interviewee; a high validity, as the interviewee can talk about the topic in detail and depth; complex questions and issues can be discussed or clarified; it helps avoiding contamination by the interviewer’s preconceptions; and it is easy to capture the data (Remenyi, 2011). Interviews focus directly on the study’s research questions and provide insights and perceived causal connections, but at the same time, they provide information about the context of the interviewee. This method poses some weaknesses too, as it highly depends on the setting and on the skill of the interviewer, who also, might give unconscious signals to the interviewee. Furthermore, interviews can
be time-consuming and expensive; they may pose a threat to the reliability of the study, as they can present challenges in efforts of replication; it is also difficult and time-consuming to extract and analyze the relevant data (Remenyi, 2011). Besides, there can be weaknesses in responses, due to lapses of memory or reflexivity, which is a response given by the respondent because he or she might think that is what the interviewer wants to hear (Bryman, 2008). Nevertheless, some of these issues can be addressed when analyzing the data collected. In the following section, I discuss the strategy and methods used to analyze the data.

Analytic strategy

The analytic strategy used in this dissertation is inspired by Yin (2014), relying on theoretical propositions to establish analytic priorities. The ‘Institutional logics perspective’ informs the analytical procedure by incorporating ideal types. According to Thornton and Ocasio (2008) ideal types “are a method of interpretive analysis for understanding the meaning that actors invest their actions with” (p. 110). Thus, the categories used during the analysis are predominantly based on the ideal types formulated by the institutional logics perspective. Furthermore, as a complementary strategy, following Lewis and Westlund’s (2015) Four A’s, I develop a case description analytic strategy to organize the multiple cases. While the theoretical propositions guide the analysis generally, the case description approach homogenizes the structure of each case. This solution provides the cross-case analysis with a comparative component.

After establishing the general strategy, I propose a set of analytic techniques to approach the data. First, I use pattern matching logic which compares empirically-based patterns with those asserted by the propositions, thus strengthening internal validity (Yin, 2014). This is particularly valuable, considering that the general strategy and the selection of cases are based on a theoretical replication logic. A second technique is explanation building, which according to Yin (2014) is a pattern matching technique that attempts to establish an explanatory relationship between different patterns (p.147). To incorporate sequential stages of pattern matching, I apply logic models as the third analytic technique. Logic models allow for thinking about an explanatory pattern matching that stretches over a set of sequenced theoretical propositions,
both at the individual level and the organization level. This technique will help analyze data and make inferences on how gamification works in journalism and think about the possible outcomes. Through this process I match the elemental categories of institutional order with instances from the data. The final analytic technique is the cross-case synthesis. By aggregating the findings across all four cases, this technique allows for comparing cases individually, addressing the multiple cases as a single unit of analysis, and eventually, proposing answers to the research questions.

The analysis of individual sources of data was done following Alvesson’s (2011) notion of ‘reflexive pragmatism’ by challenging and questioning my interpretations until relevant narratives emerged from the data. I employed a custom-made gamified-system analysis method to analyze the digital artifacts, and thematic analysis to analyze the interview data.

**Qualitative gamified-system analysis**

When assessing the gamified digital artifacts, the data collection process and the data analysis are closely related. As I tested the gamified-system I collected and coded data simultaneously, following what Fernández-Vara (2015) calls ‘interpretative analysis.’ However, there are limited models for analysis of gamified systems. To solve this issue, I draw inspiration from several game analysis methods, and propose a method for analysis that fits this study.

Lammes (2007), for example, proposes a reflexive methodology that considers games as situated cultures. Aarseth (2003) calls for a game analysis that focuses on game-play, game-structure, and game-world. Consalvo and Dutton (2006) deploy a methodological toolkit rooted in interaction mapping, object inventory, interface study, and logging gameplay. Zagal and colleagues (2007) provide a method of analysis focusing on rules, goals, entities, and entity manipulation afforded by the game. Sköld and colleagues (2015) make a case for analyzing the activities afforded by the system; the way in which knowledge is produced, organized, and managed in the system; and the context in which they are placed. Murray (1998) proposes there are three characteristic pleasures afforded by digital interfaces, namely immersion, agency, and transformation. Hunicke and colleagues (2004) break down games into three distinct components, mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics (MDA). Finally, Werbach

Because gamified systems are not games per se, they conform to these frameworks designed for game research only partly. These methodological approaches, however, have several elements that are relevant to this study. The qualitative gamified-system analysis method proposed here uses the following analytical categories: game-structure of the system (rules and goals); interaction mapping (activities, feedback); game elements inventory (dynamics, mechanics, components); knowledge organization (editorial content); reach (within the journalistic system); game experience (immersion, agency, and transformation vis à vis traditional digital news interfaces); and finally the aesthetics and emotional responses evoked in the player.

Such a tailor-made method affords this study a level of analysis that serves the needs of this study. In this context, the qualitative nature here is superior to a quantitative approach, as the former offers a richer understanding of the different interactions between several layers of abstraction within the system, while the latter provides only a numerical and categorical presence of different elements within the system. I use open coding to code and subsequently analyze the prominent items in the system.

The ultimate goal of this method is to connect the coded and categorized data to the analytical framework to position cases among the ideal types and to determine adherence to institutional logics.

Thematic analysis and adherence to institutional logics
The transcribed interviews are analyzed with thematic analysis, following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first phase of the analysis, familiarization with the data consists of reducing the transcriptions and textual documents into a series of 3-4 page summaries. I have created these summaries in reflection of the interview guide, covering the main overarching themes, while identifying the most relevant data provided by the respondents.

After the initial coding, the special formatting of the data allows for a faster analysis giving way for identification of patterns emerging from the data. This preliminary step is the initial level coding phase, producing summarized data that are then introduced into the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo to continue the second level of coding, creating the
nodes that will comprise the codes. This induces an initial data reduction that allows for more focused coding. By pattern matching, the first themes started to emerge at this point. This focused coding was done on top of the transcribed summaries in order to eliminate, combine, or subdivide coding categories. The intention behind the focused coding is to identify repeating ideas and larger underlying themes that connect codes and categories. The categories utilized in the focused coding result from a back-and-forth interrogation between the data and the theoretical discussion.

I use the 'Institutional logics perspective’ as an analytical tool to assess individual and organizational journalistic agency against the constrains of the structural formation of logics. The logics reflect the dynamics that shape the material and symbolic practices, and demarcate the boundaries of journalism. Moreover, these boundary-setting logics fluctuate as they interact with external institutions carrying a different set of logics. The overarching elemental categories are metaphors, sources of legitimacy, sources of authority, sources of identity, basis of norms, basis of attention, basis of strategy, informal control mechanism, and economic system. Linked to each theme, data are finally coded into matrices that combine the categories, or codes for each theme. Examples of existing subcodes are identities, goals, decision making, sense-making, practice, structure, and agency, among others. The final matrices try to give a fast overview of the narratives derived from the interviewees.

Note on validity, reliability, and generalizability

According to Bryman (2008), the most important criteria for the evaluation of social research are reliability and validity, which are often associated with quantitative approaches. Qualitative research, however, has often been critiqued by the lack of consensus for assessing its quality and robustness. To address this issue, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four alternative criteria for evaluating qualitative research: credibility (which parallels internal validity), transferability (which parallels external validity), dependability (which parallels reliability), and confirmability (which parallels objectivity). According to the authors, addressing these criteria increases the level of trustworthiness of a study.

In this dissertation, I approach reliability and validity through the lens of trustworthiness as a framework or measuring bar for the quality of research.
The term validity relates to the integrity of the conclusions generated from a piece of research (Bryman, 2008) by following a research procedure that measures what the researcher sets out to study (Yin, 2014). This means that in a qualitative discipline, in which many claims are non-measurable, the idea of validity becomes a matter of appropriateness and authenticity. It is challenging to make definite claims from a social constructivist perspective, especially when addressing concepts as subjective as journalism and gamification. However, by making use of multiple sources of evidence and establishing a chain of evidence, construct validity can be increased in multiple case study research (Yin, 2014).

Internal validity – credibility – refers to the attempt of establishing causal relationships with minimal systematic errors and is usually out of reach for qualitative research. In this dissertation, I use four of the tactics Yin (2014) proposes to raise internal validity for case study research: pattern matching, explanation building, using logic models, and a cross-case synthesis.

External validity – transferability – refers to the process of generalization, upon which results based on a small sample group can be extrapolated to an entire population. Since the sample is not representative of a population, then external validity would not be attainable. However, Yin (2014) distinguishes between two understandings of generalization: statistical generalization and analytical generalization. The former – generalizing from a sample to a population – would be out of reach of the immediate capacities of case study research. However, the latter – replication logic in multiple case studies to exemplify a set of theoretical constructs – provides enough room for the scientific method to generate valuable research. Thus, this dissertation aims for analytical and theoretical generalization rather than statistical generalization.

Moreover, Thomas and Myers (2015) propose that “to seek generalizable knowledge is to miss the point about what may be offered by certain kinds of inquiry, which is exemplary knowledge” (p. 41, emphasis in original). Instead, they argue that what “enables the construction of the good case study, its critical reading and its use” is phronesis (Thomas & Myers, 2015, p.41). The phronesis of both reader and inquirer – their capacity to assess the transferability and fittingness in the context of case study – is what makes case study research valuable. It is not the generalization of knowledge, but its exemplary quality that sheds light on the complexity and particularity of what this dissertation studies. By establishing a set of theoretical propositions guiding the discussion and
conclusions, this study increases its analytical generalization and its creation of exemplary knowledge.

Reliability – dependability – is accomplished when there is a high probability of obtaining similar findings by performing the same research (Priest, 2010), or in other words the capacity to replicate the results of a study by other researchers following the same procedures. Bryman (2008) discusses the difficulty for qualitative research to sustain high degrees of reliability, and questions the need for high reliability in this type of approach. Social settings are contingent on the context, and their particular nature makes for almost impossible replicability. However, to raise the reliability criterion, this study attempts to be as reflexive and transparent as possible, and systematically documents and describes the procedural performance of the research.

It is important to note that an attempt to aspire for rigor should not be understood as a way to downplay the peculiarities of qualitative case study research. As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) claim, qualitative researchers ought to welcome the creativity, innovation, and reflexivity that qualitative case study methodology affords, instead of trying to adhere to quantitative standards. I intend to embrace this point.

**Gathering empirical data – a reflexive account of procedures**

The process of gathering evidence started in late 2014 and early 2015, after a change of direction in my research design. From testing user engagement with gamified news, I decided to first tackle gamification as a new phenomenon that needed to be approached in three stages: production, distribution, and consumption. To get acquainted with the field, I started exploring existing gamified systems deployed by news organizations.

At this point, I established a theoretical framework that could inform how gamification interacts with all three dimensions of journalism. This helped me create the first preliminary research design. After deciding to conduct a multiple case study, I screened examples for the candidate cases. To showcase the variety of possible approaches to gamification in journalism, I opted for a maximum variation strategy and eventually chose the four cases outlined above. The first search for documents and evidence related to the cases sought to uncover how these organizations explained and justified their choices. This search was performed both on the organizational level (documents on their websites) and
also on the external level (documents in third party websites). These documents serve as contextual evidence of the cases. The documents were saved as PNG and PDF files, and added to the case database.

The initial searches were followed by a process of familiarization with the game elements of the gamified systems as digital artifacts. I tried to get acquainted with how the systems worked, what were the game elements, and which behaviors news organizations rewarded. I tested the systems of Al Jazeera and the Times of India and studied the systems of the Guardian and Bleacher Report. I analyzed the systems occurred at the same time I was analyzing the interviews.

In June of 2015, I started to create a list of journalists and systems creators of both Bleacher Report and Al Jazeera, with the intent of conduct a preliminary pilot study to test the interview guide and research design. The first set of interviews were conducted between February and August 2016. I first conducted a pilot test, where the instrument was a semi-structured interview with journalists of Bleacher Report (see Appendix 3). The instrument proved to be problematic because it lacked the flexibility to adapt to the seemingly very different experiences of interviewees, who interacted with different forms of the gamified system.

During this period, I made a third and final substantial change to the study, and chose to focus only on news production, due to the complexity of the levels and the difficulty of addressing all three dimensions of journalism in one comprehensible research design. I reworked and refined the theoretical framework, which helped lead to a new research design.

The new design strengthened the need for interviews and increasing the sample. The sampling goal included four informants who participated in creating the system, and eight informants who worked in the organization but did not have any involvement with the gamified system. The former group would inform about the gamified system. The latter would inform about the informants’ perceived implication that gamification had in their respective organizations and working practices. Thus, the expected sample was 48 informants. All newsworkers – journalists, editors, managers, and technologists – were first contacted through LinkedIn. I contacted all the individuals with profiles that mentioned worked in creating these gamified systems, and then all other profiles who worked in the case organizations. As a sampling platform,
while LinkedIn has its limitations, it provides a snowball-like sample that allows the researcher to bypass organizations and address individuals directly. I am aware that people who join this social networking site carry their own personal characteristics, and therefore is not necessarily representative of an organization’s population.

Of all 746 newsworkers to whom I sent a contact request, a total of 266 potential respondents accepted, which represents a response rate of 35.65%. I then approached my new contacts with an interview request detailing the study description and aims. It is worth pointing out that the initial round of emails had a low response rate. Most responses declining the invitation claimed they knew nothing about gamification. In response, I refined the text requesting an interview with a more generic description, focusing on “data in journalism, metrics, and gamification” (see Appendix 2). This strategy proved to be more effective for securing interviews. Of the 266 new contacts, I managed to interview 57 informants, of which one requested to be excluded from the study because I could not anonymize the organization he worked for (see Appendix 1 for a complete chronological list of interviews). Thus, the interview rate is about 21% (see Table 4). Although the plan was to have 12 informants per case, I continued interviewing until I had reached data saturation (see Appendix 4 for the in-depth interview guide). Since all the respondents are distributed around the world and do not share a common site, all interviews were conducted using a networked application (Skype, Google hangouts, Whatsapp) or regular phone call. The audio was recorded with a handheld Olympus WS-650S recorder. Most of these calls were aided by video and non-present face-to-face communication. There are specific implications for conducting interviews online and for using computer-mediated communication technologies (see Salmons, 2012). First, this approach provides the researcher with the flexibility to schedule and re-schedule interviews freely, allowing for a wider reach in terms of location. Considering interviewees were located in a wide range of places, this approach was crucial, considering the costs and time that would have been required for in-person meetings. There are a few limitations associated with this approach, too (see Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016). Participants may be less interested and more easily distracted. Technical issues and sometimes the absence of visual cues may be problematic. Pragmatically, the use of online
communication has benefited the study greatly, with benefits outweighing the limitations by a large margin.

All interviews took place between February 2016 and July 2017. The total length of interview audio is 43 hours and 13 minutes, averaging 46 minutes and 19 seconds per interview, as shown in Table 4. All transcriptions were verbatim. To ensure transcription quality, I followed recommendations by Poland (1995). I employed three layers of transcription. The first layer was done with an automated software called Transcriberly. The second layer was conducted by a professional transcriptionist. Finally, I conducted a third layer to ensure the transcriptions were correct.

The interview analysis followed what Alvesson (2011) calls a “reflexive pragmatism” (p.105) as a way to question and challenge interviewees’ interpretations until something reasonably well supported and valuable for the study emerged. The methodology for analyzing the interviews was thematic analysis, both manually and with the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

Table 4 – Interviews summary per case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Contacted</th>
<th>Interviewed</th>
<th>% Success</th>
<th>Total Time</th>
<th>Av. Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bleacher Report</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18.42%</td>
<td>10:49:50</td>
<td>00:46:25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times of India</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21.31%</td>
<td>09:21:56</td>
<td>00:43:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Jazeera</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19.40%</td>
<td>09:19:59</td>
<td>00:43:05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25.81%</td>
<td>13:41:31</td>
<td>00:51:21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>266</strong></td>
<td><strong>56</strong></td>
<td><strong>21.05%</strong></td>
<td><strong>19:13:16</strong></td>
<td><strong>00:46:19</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sample of interviews for each case is discussed in each case’s results and analysis chapter. Moreover, while all cases were analyzed following the same format, they are presented in this dissertation in a way that highlights the peculiarities of each case.

**Ethical considerations**

The data gathered for this study were in no evident way sensitive data. All digital artifacts were available openly online. Regarding participants, there are a few considerations to be made. Approaching individuals via LinkedIn could be considered an intrusive form of approaching potential participants. However, the fact that I approached newsworkers who were connected to each other in the network, at least to the second degree, makes the sampling process
comparable to a snowball sampling. During email pre-interview communication, each interviewee received information about the project and the interview procedure. At the beginning of the interviews, I asked the participant whether I could record the conversation and whether I could use the data resulting from the interview (see Appendix 2). Participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time. All but one participant accepted the terms and agreed to participate. The participant who did not agree with the terms was excluded from the final sample. A small number of interviewees requested anonymity. To accommodate their wishes, I have anonymized all interviewees, and their positions have been slightly modified so that they cannot be traced. It is worth noting that Karlstad University does not require an ethics committee approval for research projects that do not focus on sensitive and personal data.

Summary

This study is situated within a growing corpus of multiple case studies within journalism studies. It does so by analyzing four gamified news systems and interviewing 56 newsworkers at four news organizations: the *Guardian*, *Bleacher Report*, the *Times of India*, and *Al Jazeera*. The participants comprise two different profiles: newsworkers responsible for implementing the gamified systems, and newsworkers who work for these news organizations but who have no direct interaction with the gamified systems. While this study lacks the cultural immersion of ethnographic research, it relied on a qualitative maximum variation strategy to illuminate on the gamification of journalism as a process of news production. The results of the analyses are presented in the next section, organized into four single-case chapters and a cross-case examination chapter.
THE GRIND & WARP ZONES: RESULTS & ANALYSIS

You have reached the grind, Reader 1. Grinding is the performance of repetitive and tedious tasks during gameplay. It is not supposed to be enjoyable, but most games make sure the effort is rewarded with valuable results to maximize players’ satisfaction.

This section embodies the concept of the grind, as it introduces the results and data analysis of the study. I find the metaphor fitting because you will have to cover four long repetitive case-analysis chapters, plus a cross-examination full of tables. And just as in games, it is in these chapters where all the good gems are hidden. It will pay off to examine the cases separately, as each case offers a different view on how gamification is implemented. Personally? I prefer the Bleacher Report case, but mostly because it is challenging on so many levels.

Incidentally, most gamification systems rely heavily on the grind. The activity or behavior that the system targets is what the system wants users to do, over and over again. But, do not take my word for it. Nicholson (2014) describes how loops of interaction turn the grind in a continuous cycle of behaviors and rewards that reinforce each other. Can you imagine a game in which there is only grind? Terrible, I know. If the premise is that users need a reward to consume the news, it is difficult to think of a system that rewards news consumption in a manner that continues to entice news consumption in the long run, without becoming tedious.

Thankfully, this dissertation is not just grind. There is a final boss chapter where I answer the research questions, I promise. Moreover, just as in the previous section, if you get tired, feel free to think of these grind chapters as the warp zones in Mario Bros. At any point, you may jump in a green pipe and warp from one chapter to the other as you please. If Mario did it, so can you. After all, while the cases are presented chronologically, they do not depend on one another. So feel free to browse around and read the results in the order that feels best for you. If you are getting curious about how this all ends, you can even jump to the conclusions chapter.

Linearity is for amateurs.
Chapter 6: Case A – The Guardian

This chapter investigates one of the first examples of a news organization using game elements to incentivize user behavior in journalism. In 2009, the Guardian created a crowdsourcing microsite inviting readers to read, classify, and flag documents containing expense reports of British members of parliament. This case is relevant because it involves a well-established quality newspaper deploying a gamification project developed mostly by newsworkers with a non-journalistic professional background. It also exemplifies minimal use of gamification to involve the audience in investigative participation, and it became well-known as a pioneer in crowdsourcing and computational journalism (see Daniel & Flew, 2010; Handler & Ferrer-Conill, 2016).

While the analysis and organization of the case chapters follow the same analytic strategy established in Chapter 5, in this chapter, the goal is to highlight the most relevant findings that are particular to this case. Therefore, I start by contextualizing the case, before analyzing the gamified system. Then I continue by discussing the interviews with the production team and newsworkers who did not participate in the production of the microsite. Finally, I discuss how this case adheres to the institutional logics of journalism and gamification.

Contextualizing the case

The Guardian is a staple of the British ‘quality press.’ Created in 1821 – originally as the Manchester Guardian, with its current name since 1959 – it is part of the media conglomerate Guardian Media Group, owned by the Scott Trust Ltd. As a regular daily newspaper, the Guardian funds its operations by combining several sources of revenue: print sales, print advertising, online advertising, and online paying membership. Although the publication has steadily netted loses during recent years – amassing £69m in losses in 2015 and an almost 8% newspaper circulation decrease in 2017 (Mayhew, 2017) – the intergroup solidarity and financial support of the Scott Trust have kept the publication afloat (Jackson, 2016).

The core principle of the Scott Trust is “to secure the financial and editorial independence of the Guardian in perpetuity: as a quality national newspaper without party affiliation; remaining faithful to its liberal tradition; as a profit-seeking enterprise managed in an efficient and cost-effective manner”
(“The Scott Trust,” 2015, para.3). Despite the pledge to economic independence and autonomy, supported by the trust’s capital, the decline in print sales and advertising revenue have led to cuts of more than 200 jobs in recent years (Martinson, 2016).

The Guardian’s online debut was in 1995, and since then it has evolved and grown. While the paper circulation ranks 21st (Mayhew, 2018), it ranks 2nd in online presence in the UK, with more than nine million monthly visitors (Sweeney, 2016); and is the 4th ranking newspaper website worldwide (“theguardian.com Traffic Statistics,” 2017). Its online strategy has been so successful that, for the first time, in 2017, the ‘Guardian Supporter’ program generated more revenue through reader membership than via advertising (Viner, 2017a).

Despite the current commercial urgencies, the Guardian prides itself on its quality journalism and the loyalty of its readers. According to the current editor-in-chief, Katherine Viner (2017b), the values of the publication are anchored in the legacy that the organization has established for almost 200 years: honesty, integrity, courage, fairness, a sense of duty to the reader, and a sense of duty to the community. In the pursuit of professionalism against market orientation, Viner claims that the Guardian aims “to challenge the economic assumptions of the past three decades, which have extended market values such as competition and self-interest far beyond their natural sphere and seized the public realm. We will explore other principles and avenues through which to organize society for the common good” (Viner, 2017b, para.69). Thus, the journalistic source of authority – elemental categories are italicized for clarity – at the Guardian is rooted in its professional journalism legacy. According to the theoretical propositions, such organizational disposition toward prioritizing the professional logic of journalism over its commercial needs presupposes an implementation of gamification that adheres to the professional logic of journalism. In the following section, I examine the gamified system to investigate whether the use of game elements reflects the organizational vow to uphold journalism traditional norms and values.

Gamification at the Guardian – gamified-system analysis

The Guardian’s first attempt to experiment with participatory strategies needs to be understood in the midst of its digital strategy. In 2009, the creation of the
Guardian’s Datablog established an experimentation playground, using data and visualizations to create stories for the newspaper and the website (Rogers, 2013) as well as exploring options on both computational and data journalism (Daniel & Flew, 2010).

When later that year The Commons published 700,000 individual documents, contained within 5,500 PDF files, covering four years of expenses receipts data of all members of UK’s parliament (“MPs’ expenses,” 2009), the Guardian’s data team saw this as an opportunity to use data to investigate possible misuse of allowances by the MPs. They created the ‘Investigate your MP’s expenses’ gamified microsite that, through a combination of crowdsourcing and gamification, called readers to action to make sense of large amounts of data that could not have been analyzed automatically. In this section, I analyze the gamified system implemented by the Guardian.

**Game-structure and interaction mapping**

The Guardian did not publicize the system as a game but as a ‘valiant effort’ by readers to ‘join’ journalists in investigating the MPs. The joint investigation effort was promoted as a collective journalistic initiative, where power rested in the hands of users. The microsite’s intro page was a call for users to ‘help’ the Guardian review the documents. Within the gamified-system, the gamification source of authority is supporting the organization. However, when it comes to the gamification source of identity, the symbolic practice draws from the ‘Community’ institutional order. The emotional connection as ‘a reader of the Guardian’ is what identified users in the system.

As shown in Figure 3, the system rules were laid out on the microsite homepage. Users were prompted to “1 – Find a document; 2 Decide what kind of thing it is and whether it is interesting; 3 Copy out any individual entries; 4 Make any specific observations about why a claim deserves further scrutiny.” Once readers accepted the terms of participation, they could create an account and gain access to the documents. To start reviewing, a PDF document would be shown in the screen, next to the document, each user could flag documents as “Not interesting,” “Interesting but known,” “Interesting,” and “Investigate this!” as shown in Figure 4. Each reader could search his or her local MP, by entering a postcode or their MP’s name or constituency.
Figure 3 – Homepage of the Investigate your MP’s expenses’ microsite

Users could perform three actions through the gamified system: a) gaining access to documents, b) classifying and annotating the documents – or as the system phrased it ‘extracting the key facts,’ and c) notifying the Guardian’s reporters that some of the documents needed further investigation. These actions were the system’s explicit goal.

There was no direct interaction between newsworkers and users. All the feedback users received was channeled through game elements. However, the gamification basis of norms – the rules of the system – signals the liminal boundary between the gamified system and news production (Carlson & Lewis,
On the one hand, the system had clear rules guiding users on how to act. On the other hand, these rules, proposed by the *Guardian*, incorporate journalistic norms. If users wanted to participate, then they were expected to act like journalists.

The ‘Investigate your MP’s expenses’ microsite was not a highly gamified system (see Werbach & Hunter, 2012 for a reminder on dynamics, mechanics, and components). The main dynamics used in the gamification design tried to establish an emotional connection and provide users with a sense of their progress. Furthermore, the strategy focused on giving users the power to investigate their MPs and being part of the journalistic investigation. Thus, the main game mechanics in the system supported a sense of cooperation with journalists to challenge those in power. Moreover, two secondary mechanics were put into motion in the second iteration of the system: feedback and competition. For users, knowing how many documents the community had gone through was important when moving forward. Similarly, being on top of the leaderboard was a feature that enticed users to continue classifying documents.

There were three game components in the system. First, progress bars served as visual representations of advancement, and also of how much content remained to be checked. The text above the bar showed the total number of documents.
pages of documents, users, pages that had already been reviewed, and pages pending to be reviewed. Amabile and Kramer (2011) showed that by seeing the progress, users become more motivated to complete a task. The collective progress bar can be seen in Figure 3, and the progress bar for each document can be seen in Figure 5.

![Des Browne MP's expenses](image)

**Figure 5 – Investigate your MP’s expenses’ interface for Des Browne MP profile page**

The second game component was a point-like system using votes and line items as an aggregated assessment of user performance over time. These points were used to populate the third component, a leaderboard showcasing the ‘top users.’ The leaderboards rewarded the most active users with a visual representation of their status, highlighting high-performers and incentivizing competitive users to being on top. Thus, the gamification basis of attention lies in the personal reputations of users as the main motivational mechanism.

**Knowledge organization and reach**

Newswriters at the *Guardian* used gamification to gain knowledge rather than disseminate it. The relevant function of the system was in mobilizing users to extract key facts from data sources, by inviting the audience to participate in the journalistic production process. Nevertheless, users could only suggest facts and were never in a position to produce editorial content. The *Guardian* managed to motivate and engage readers in reviewing documents, as a source of labor. Thus, the gamification root metaphor is of games as motivators, rather than as
an empowering tool. Similarly, the gamification source of legitimacy and basis of strategy for the system are achieving the goal and maximizing the goal, respectively. The game components served simply as motivating mechanisms that would make the system more effective. While this may seem exploitative, it is worth pointing out that newsworkers did not collect personal user data and that users may have felt empowered to participate in investigative reporting, review important documents, and potentially exposing MPs’ wrongdoing.

Regarding reach, the gamified system covers only one news item. The Guardian did not seek to gamify the whole website, and the entire gamification strategy was contained within the system’s microsite.

**Game experience and aesthetics**

The game experience afforded by the system was not meant to mimic a game or create a feeling of immersion. In other words, there was no attempt to transform the traditional digital interface through gamification. The innovative aspect of the microsite was to provide space for users to review documents and participate in the investigative process. The reporting interface granted users a degree of agency not usually given to regular news consumers. However, there was little agency offered in the system beyond classifying documents and reporting to the journalists. Beyond that, users had little ability to control the system. The gamification informal control mechanisms resided in the organizational culture.

The system stated that the reviewed items would be analyzed by journalists and that the resulting stories would be published by the Guardian. Yet, this was framed as a cooperative crowdsourced initiative, which placed the gamification symbolic economic system as collective capitalism. Even when user agency was limited, the organization’s discourse highlighted its reciprocal relationship with the audience (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014).

Finally, aesthetics are a good indicator of the emotional target of the system, of the extent of attempts at playfulness, and of the affective response these efforts seek to evoke (Hunicke et al., 2004). Elsewhere, Simon Rogers, one of the creators of the gamified-system claimed that:

... if you make something more like a game, this can really help to engage people. When we did the expenses story a second time, it was much more like a game with individual tasks for people to do. It really helped to give people specific tasks. That made a big difference because I think if you just present
people with the mountain of information to go through and say ‘go through this’ it can be for hard and rather unrewarding work. So I think making it fun was really important. (Rogers, as cited in Bouchart, 2012, p.139)

However, when analyzing the aesthetics of the interface, the game elements were blended with the design of the microsite site, offering little interaction with users. The interface resembled a news site more than a game. The instructions were like commands in a manual, and they did not evoke fun. The gamefulness of the interface was minimal, and the game elements functioned as a motivational device, enticing users to perform the task, based on the emotional connection with the story, and not because it was fun.

**Constructing and implementing gamification at the Guardian**

This section covers the results from the interviews with four members of the team who created the ‘Investigate your MP’s expenses’ microsite, as shown in Table 5. Their account of the production process complements the game-system analysis, as they discuss their identities, the organizational and individual goals, and processes of decision making. Furthermore, I am interested in understanding how they deployed game elements, and how they negotiated the balance of structure and agency in the system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quoted as</th>
<th>Role at the Guardian</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TG01</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>2017-04-18</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG05</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2017-04-10</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG11</td>
<td>Technologist</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>2017-05-01</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG13</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2017-05-06</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The four interviewees had key roles when creating the microsite. In order to keep their identity anonymous, I have given a general definition of their roles at the *Guardian* during the creation of the system. Two of the interviewees no longer work in the organization.

**Negotiating identities**

The ‘Investigate your MP’s expenses’ project ran in two waves, during late 2009 and early 2010. The story was green-lighted by deputy editor Paul Johnson, who had been an instrumental figure in the creation of the Datablog. The new
The production team was composed of journalist Simon Rogers, creator of the *Guardian* Datablog, and three coders. The editorial management passed the implementation responsibilities to technical profiles. Newworkers involved in the production of the 'Investigate your MP’s expenses’ experiment were aware that the microsite required relational work between technical and editorial profiles (Singer, 2003). Their roles were based on the personal expertise of each participant, practically unsupervised by top management. The freedom and status enjoyed by Rogers and his team shows that the journalism informal control mechanism resided in celebrity and specialized professionals who had the power to decide the course of action. Most of the developers had no training in journalism but had experience in prominent tech firms. As one of the main developers of the MPs microsite explained:

I’m a software engineer by trade, but I did an internship in the local newspaper. I was always fascinated by journalism. So when the *Guardian* was looking to start doing data journalism I just jumped in. It was essentially my dream job. I really didn’t get any formal training, but in the *Guardian*, I was partnering with a journalist. So I learned an enormous amount just being around journalists and working with them. (TG11)

Thus, except Rogers, the production team self-identified as developers who had a passion for journalism, and not as journalists who could code. This distinction is important because the *Guardian* structured and organized labor so that developers always worked together with journalists. While developers had the skill sets to code the system and created an interactive interface, journalists made sure journalistic norms and values were maintained in the production process. The negotiation of their identities is articulated and enacted by their role orientation and performance (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). Despite their different backgrounds, their journalism source of identity involved their
association with the institutional identity, producing quality journalism. The root metaphor was the journalistic profession as relational work. This means that the attempt to facilitate collaboration between distinct roles with different skill sets and institutional backgrounds was influenced by the way the Guardian brought journalists and technologists together. As a production editor who was involved in the project recounted:

We have hackadays at the Guardian where the development team and editorial team just get together and formally discuss how everybody can help each other out. (TG13)

As an attempt to modernize and improve technically, the organization welcomed in the newsroom external roles that would interact with journalists. The need for journalists to collaborate with developers resonates with developments across the industry (Appelgren & Nygren, 2014; Parasie & Dagiral, 2013). Their skill and personal expertise was their source of legitimacy. This development signified a transgression of journalistic boundaries, as non-journalists became newsworkers. As Lewis and Usher (2014) discuss, working, collaborating, and learning from each other means that journalism practice was injected with practices rooted in technical professions. The Guardian actively intended to shape journalism as work and practice by making newsworkers with different identities interact. This was reflected in the fact that most projects from the Datablog experimented with technologies that promised to be useful for news production, and thus provided the Guardian with an online advantage.

Organizational goals
As discussed above, the gamified-system goal was to motivate readers to review and classify documents. However, when asked about why the ‘Investigate your MP’s expenses’ microsite was created, respondents discussed a broader scope of goals, predominantly under the umbrella of experimentation. This included experimenting with data and algorithmic power, experimenting with new forms of participation, and experimenting with new forms of audience engagement. Thus, experimentation becomes a precondition to journalistic innovation (Steensen, 2009). Ultimately, the main goal of the microsite was to experiment with new ways that could give the Guardian a competitive advantage in the digital market. As one of the creators of the project explained:
The idea was doing something new. We didn’t know if people would bite. We knew we could deliver the documents, but didn’t know if our readers would find it interesting. Would they want to help us? Would they feel we were taking advantage of them? Would we manage to get good tip-offs from them? We were the first ones to try something like that and it was unchartered territory for all of us. It was mostly trial and error for most of the process. (TG01)

Experimentation was the reason given by newworkers and also by the organizational discourse. The word ‘experiment’ was present in how the Guardian framed the system publicly. The press release advertising the launching of the microsite stated that “this experiment is the latest development in the Guardian’s initiative to open its content to readers” said (“MPs’ expenses,” 2009, para.10). Moreover, the press release claimed that the microsite allowed “members of the public to interact with and analyze the data” (para.2) and to “open up this data to as many people as possible” (para.3). Transparency and participation were a big part of the press release’s rhetoric, vowing to empower the public by “enabling users to fully investigate the documents and track what they – and other users – have found” (“MPs’ expenses,” 2009, para.4). This narrative was supported by the organization, and was also present in the interviews with the development team, as an attempt by the Guardian to attract and entice readers to participate in investigative journalism as a form of engagement. As a head of special projects claims: “we wanted people to get engaged, to feel like for once they had the power to scrutinize their MPs” (TG05). While the gamified-system and the organizational goals did not explicitly match, the narratives put forward by the organization and the development team aligned well. These narratives highlighted experimentation, engagement, and empowerment.

**Professionalism and exploitation**

I asked interviewees to develop the narrative of empowerment because this was an initiative that gave power to the users to participate, but that relied on the work of users to analyze, organize, and make sense of the data. This raises two potential issues, regarding participation and journalistic professionalism, as well as free labor.

First, readers only participated as informants. While they were given the power to engage with the data, they could only inform journalists about their
finding. The power to investigate or publish a story was exerted only by newsworkers, maintaining the role of gatekeepers (see Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2009). The development team made sure that users could only review documents and suggest tip-offs to the editorial team. The power to create and publish editorial content was kept within the newsroom. Thus, the basis of norms and attention was the membership and status in the journalistic profession. Journalists maintained all the editorial power. When asked about this, respondents supported limited participation on the ground of journalistic norms, quality standards, and responsibility. This is consistent with other scholarly work (Singer & Ashman, 2009; Singer et al., 2011). As one of the respondents mentioned:

> We have to be quite careful, because as a journalist you have certain standards and consistent considerations to think about. At the Guardian we’re very careful about the use of information and not to publish anything that you can’t back up that could damage someone’s reputation. Without been checked by an editor there are risks of inaccuracy or being legally damaging to the Guardian. So it’s a work in progress, but still you need an editor who oversees the process. (TG13)

Second, the Guardian used the audience to do journalistic work. Of course, this was voluntary work done by readers, but the crowdsourcing microsite did not ask for random tips; instead, it was a conscious attempt to craft a system that harnessed the work of readers to analyze a large sum of documents. This type of tasks is normally carried out by reporters. Thus, the basis of strategy was a combination of two approaches. First, to increase efficiency in the process of reviewing data by using readers as free labor to cover the documents for the organization. Second, to increase the personal reputation of the Guardian and its employees as pioneers of digital news production. However, this strategy relied on work done by readers, without payment or retribution. Such an approach raises questions of exploitation (Rey, 2012), which was not addressed in the official press release. When asked about the motivation of readers for engaging with the system, one of the developers acknowledged there was a fine line between participation and exploitation, but that in this case, they asked for help for a good cause.
So in terms of like being exploitative, the way I see it really is... it's in everyone's interests to have thorough and great reporting, right? At the same time, as we all know, the business model for great reporting is pretty tricky. The newspaper industry has been shrinking year after year. So on that basis, as a private citizen, I have absolutely no problem with any news organization that wants me to chip in and help. Most people do that because they care about exposing the truth and they care about pushing society forward. You have to be cautious when you ask people to work for free especially if those people who are professionals, who are doing something which actually is within the wheelhouse of things they get paid for. But the flipside, you know, it's kind of a gradient of acceptability. I put asking members of the public to review... to have a look at the expenses of their MPs and help raise through this as quickly as possible, at a very different point from asking people who are paid professionals to invest additional effort for free in helping you monetize and protect a search. (TG11)

The notion of a 'gradient of acceptability' of what a newspaper can ask the readers to do for free seems to be contingent on how worthy the cause is. This is a sentiment that resonates in all the interviews done at the Guardian. In other words, the premise is that good journalism engages users precisely because it is good journalism, and newworkers believe the audience understands this. Incidentally, because readers are not professionals, they can be asked for help without retribution. However, because they are not professionals, they cannot have full participation.

**Fun as an engaging mechanism**

The first iteration of the system was not fully gamified. When the system was revamped for the second version, the developers tried to find avenues to incentivize readers. The solution was more personalization and stronger gamification. As one of the main developers explained:

I mean to be fair though, gamification was not mainstream concept yet, but it was all over the place in the nerdy corners of the internet. And where I used to work before, [tech organization], we knew that you have to get the incentives right. The challenge we had in MPs' Expenses was that it's a big set of documents. How do we make sure that people stay engaged? Because we're going to need a lot... we're going to need people to invest a lot more effort in order to get through these documents. And so the obvious thing to do then was to look at things like leaderboards. Let people sort of have a username and then we could show which people had done the most work. And we gave
people progress bars to see how much they had covered and how much was left. We showed you a picture of your MP at the top. And it was them grinning and looking a bit smug. And so then you had a picture of them grinning at you as you were digging through their expenses. That psychologically encouraged people to do this. (TG11)

There are several aspects to highlight here. First, while the overall narrative of the story depended on the organization culture, the method of implementation depended on the skills and capacity of each group member. The developers’ previous experiences outside of the news industry allowed them to bring in strategies that did not exist in news media at that point. Second, the use of gamification was a mere utility to help ‘psychologically encourage people’ to participate. The question of an enticing fun system is dependent on the design of the system, the game components with which users interact, and the utility developers try to extract from the gamification interface (Hamari et al., 2014; Werbach & Hunter, 2012). At the Guardian, the game elements functioned as motivation mechanisms to incentivize engagement. A journalist explained how they tested the audience:

Interactive stories perform better if it’s the right kind of interactive content. For instance, a quiz, nonsense comedy quiz we find at the Guardian doesn’t perform as well as something with deeper scientific background. We do kind of have an idea of what works and what doesn’t work. Interactive elements definitely work very well for us in the Guardian. And again we constantly try to find new audiences and you have to remember that most people who were reading newspaper printed papers, are older. People that read the Guardian are a lot younger now, you’d be surprised. There is a large part of audience which is under thirty. Most of these people respond to those kinds of slightly more fun ways of approaching a story. You can share these things online a lot easier. (TG01)

A publication’s audience is a factor in decisions about the type of interactivity that has the greatest chance of achieving the goals. News organization perceive newspaper and online audiences as different (Costera Meijer, 2007). Most importantly, they also consider younger audiences are more inclined to fun and game elements. By negotiating the professionalism that the Guardian’s audience expects with a hint of fun interaction, newsworkers saw an opportunity to attract a younger audience.
**Perceived impact of gamification at the *Guardian***

This section covers the data emerging from the interviews with twelve journalists who, while employed by the *Guardian*, were not involved in the creation of the ‘Investigate your MPs expenses’ microsite (Table 6). The aim is to investigate whether journalists who had no ties with the gamified story perceived a change in how the organization or they addressed news production.

*Table 6 – Interviewees who were not involved in the gamified-system at the Guardian*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quoted as</th>
<th>Role at the Guardian</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TG02</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>2017-04-17</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG03</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2017-04-19</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG04</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2017-04-12</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG06</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>2017-04-16</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG07</td>
<td>Data Journalist</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2017-04-25</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG08</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2017-04-19</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG09</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>2017-04-25</td>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG10</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Norwich</td>
<td>2017-04-24</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG12</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2017-05-03</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG14</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2017-05-16</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG15</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>2017-05-17</td>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG16</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2017-05-19</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The newsworkers working at the *Guardian* who agreed to be part of this study knew nothing or little about gamification before the interview. They remembered the story but had either a vague or no recollection of how the system worked. This changed how I approached the interviews. Asking directly whether the use of gamification had any impact on their working practice would have been ineffective if they did not know what it was. When discussing the ‘Investigate your MP’s expense’ microsite, the conversation focused on their impressions on the gamified crowdsourcing initiative, the place of games and entertainment in journalism, and the boundaries of technology and data in journalism practice.

I have organized the data into five major themes. These themes try to capture the most recurrent patterns emerging from the interview data.

**Participation and user engagement**

Interviewees agreed that the microsite deployed by the *Guardian* was an attempt to drive user participation, which was a hot topic in the industry at the
time but has slowly faded (see Karlsson et al., 2015). The design started as a crowdsourcing system, and the developers added the game elements later to increase user engagement. Throughout the interviews, the general sentiment about participation was skepticism. Journalists’ reservations fall into two categories: the extent to which readers should be allowed to participate and the value of their contribution. This narrative is similar to that expressed by the production team. Most newsworkers expressed concerns about the quality of news being jeopardized if readers are allowed in the process, especially if news organizations reward them. An editor claimed:

I don’t even know if this is still true, that 1% of people actually comment versus 99% who just watch. I just think we need to be careful about the wider set of people as well. And with gamification, if the more you consume and the more you comment you get a gold star, then you’ll just have a bunch of gold star people shouting at each other on the website. (TG14)

If news organizations reward users with a very specific type of rewards, then only those who feel enticed by those rewards will engage with the system (i.e. ‘the gold star people’). The remaining users, who do not feel drawn to the rewards, will probably not feel compelled to participate (Manion, 2012).

Not all responses are equally skeptic. An editor proposed a pragmatic view of the participation of users and acknowledged that the ‘transactional’ interaction between journalists and readers may be valuable.

I think that there is a very transactional way to think about audience engagement that I do believe in. People have limited time and you don’t want to waste it, so they should feel like they are gaining something from giving their time and filling out a survey or participating in whatever it is that you want them to participate in. But sometimes rewarding readers can lead to a better story or a bigger audience. Sometimes people just like to have their names on things and it’s completely legitimate to encourage them. (TG02)

The audience engagement’s utility reinforces the notion that sometimes participation happens because it is useful to news organizations. If the purpose of participation is to create better stories or bigger audiences, perhaps it is not about empowerment after all.
Technology, data, and metrics
All interviewees highlighted technology as an enabler of new forms of participation and audience orientation. Respondents view user data and audience metrics as vital for newsworkers to understand how audiences behave and to support editorial choices. As an editor clarified:

The big question is how do we design content for the audience now? Breaking down where the audience is, how they’re generally behaving and how they’re behaving specifically at the time when the content will be given to them. We need that information to know how to present content in a way that they can consume it and have a better use for it. (TG14)

Discussing how these data are used in the newsroom, most interviewees agreed about the importance of the data for editorial decision-making. The decisions are not only about stories to develop, but also about how to present stories optimally according to specific behaviors. A manager explained that:

What we do with our analytics is we understand how to measure a particular behavior or we have sort of softer indicators that we can infer from specific numbers that a specific behavior is going on. The data we get is quite granular, down to the article level. Knowing what are the important behaviors we want to target makes us be more relevant to our readers. (TG09)

This means newsworkers need to figure out how audiences engage with the news so that they can make editorial decisions. That is in line with news organizations’ continued efforts to make news popular and strengthen their audience orientation and popularity (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Nadler, 2016).

Commercial pressure
Similar to the experiences of the production team, the other newsworkers I interviewed did not find commercial pressures to be the main reason for experiment with crowdsourcing and gamification. This is surprising in an industry that is submerged from decades of falling revenues and shrinking working force, and that has traditionally been shaped by commercial pressures (Nielsen, 2016; Ornebring, 2018b). The absence of the economic urgency is conspicuous by its absence in interviews, and hence deserved its theme. Only three interviewees make explicit reference to the commercial situation of the industry to justify the experimentation. As one of the managers mentioned:
I’m not saying the commercial needs were new, but I’d say having loses of 187 million like three years ago made a difference. The *Guardian* works with different hurdles regarding coming up with ideas and ways to work. We started looking at the commercial aspect across the board, and not editorial as much, but for mobile and video and looking at different ways to increase revenue. (TG16)

The acknowledgment of losses at the *Guardian* as a catalyst for experimenting with new ways of making journalism viable suggests that technological experimentation and audience orientation are the primary ways to solve the commercial issues the organization faces. Following an institutional logics perspective (Thornton et al., 2012), the fact that the *Guardian* has historically adhered to professionalism and at the same time is a financially sheltered institution, makes commercial pressure less relevant to its newworkers. Thus, experimenting with technology and finding new ways to connect with the audience serve as attempts to maintain the *Guardian’s* journalistic relevance.

**Serious news and games**

Only a few respondents defended using games as rewards to entice readers to do things. The overarching narrative here is that games are a valid strategy, only if they are not overused, and if they follow the norms and values of journalism. An editor equated this practice to analog loyalty programs:

> If you go to an expensive coffee shop they will mostly still give you a loyalty card. So, the issue here is what are our consumers getting and how do we reward loyalty rather than and worrying about other things. I don’t think rewarding them with games cheapens the experience and I don’t think it’s a bad trick. I think there are other tricks that are worse like galleries that can’t work out how to click on the next picture so they trick you to click on an advert. I think those are worse. I think miss selling the story saying it’s about something that’s not really about is a lot worse morally. (TG08)

The *Guardian* negotiated between using games and rewards to incentivize readership, and ‘morally worse’ strategies, such as clickbait or native advertising. However, accepting games as long as they align with the journalistic norms signals a resistance by newworkers to depart from their occupational ideology, professional culture, and organizational structures (Deuze & Witschge, 2018). This is also present in the general narrative around the ‘serious journalism’ discourse. Even if journalism has a long tradition of mixing hard and soft news,
the newworkers I interviewed felt that a higher proportion of seriousness is the ideal. An editor referred to 'serious news' in the following terms:

Here’s the thing about the seriousness of journalism. I think we need to be very careful with that as well, in terms of the tone of always covering certain stories in a certain way. And we try to cover different stories in different tones as well. In that onslaught of seriousness, obviously a huge amount of stories need to be treated very carefully. But there’s other stuff that doesn’t need to be. Humor is a great way to cut through to an audience. (TG14)

This suggests that newworkers need to combine seriousness and fun according to the type of stories they cover. Newworkers saw humor and games as ways to attract audiences, while still prioritizing ‘traditional serious journalism’ and often referred to mixing entertainment with news as ‘watering down’ journalism. Respondents indicated that gamification should only be used to support the journalistic integrity of the story, which furthered the tradition that news and games can coexist, but should not mix.

Cause of success
In its first 80 hours, the crowdsourcing experiment managed to attract 20,000 readers to review 170,000 documents. This attempt to engage users in a joint investigative journalism initiative mobilized a 56% visitor participation rate (Andersen, 2009). However, the Guardian measured success not only by the number of stories discovered by users (content) or the speed in which they analyzed the data (efficiency), but also by the capacity of the Guardian to mobilize users into participating (reach). Respondents mentioned two main reasons for this success: the story’s context and the type of audience. First, the story was in itself a scandal that made citizens angry. As a journalist phrased it:

(…) this is at a time where there is such deep distrust from the people here towards their current government and even back then, when the original story first broke about using taxpayer’s money to fund their big mansions, or even meals, shortly after the recession in 2008, people went like, how can I put up with this? They felt absolutely within themselves to make their feelings clear. The reason it worked so well online it’s because it wasn’t just a news story. This was like a full-blown scandal. (TG04)

Immersed in a global economic crisis and as inequality increased in British society, the fact that some MPs misused taxpayers’ money was a painful event.
Given the opportunity to help unearth more wrongdoing, many people felt encouraged to engage with the system. Second, interviewees agreed that the Guardian’s audience is particularly active and engaged, and that such an approach might not have worked in a different news organization. Knowing how to engage with the readers was a key factor for the Guardian’s project.

When asked if they thought the game elements helped in the success of the story, most newsworkers agreed. However, it is worth mentioning that gamification was never the first reason interviewees used to explain success. It is possible that some respondents agreed simply because they thought it was what I wanted to hear. Only a few respondents felt that the game elements were instrumental to the success of the microsite. As an editor explained:

Readers love exposure. We often say you can’t answer the phones because it’s just so overwhelming you will spend all day talking to them. Because they know so much, they’re so interested. It’s wonderful but it would delay our work. I don’t know if it’s a Guardian reader enthusiasm or a web enthusiasm or a UK thing or worldwide thing. I don’t know. I can’t answer that but I do know that engaging online is better. And adding a leaderboard to show to the world who contributed the most must have kept them coming. (TG08)

Once more, the importance of the audience, rather than the actual game elements, resonated with newsworkers I interviewed. Knowing the audience, they claimed, is what allowed them to engage effectively with the public. This is one of the pillars of gamification, often misunderstood by the organizations that implement it (Werbach & Hunter, 2012).

**Adherence to institutional logics**

The ‘Investigate your MP’s expenses’ microsite is a reflection of how the organization and newsworkers adhered to the institutional logics of journalism and gamification. The choices the Guardian made when designing the gamified system showed the internal dynamics of the news organization and the individuals who crafted the system. I assessed how these dynamics interact by connecting the elemental categories of both institutional orders to the material and symbolic practices found in the case evidence. The way these practices manifest in each institutional order points to the dominant logic. At the same time, combining these dominant logics creates a logic model close to an ideal type of gamified journalism.
Situating a case within an ideal type is contingent on the time and place of the case, as well as the organization and individuals that produced it. As an institutional logic perspective presumes, categorizing within an ideal type does not mean that a case is always anchored in that ideal type. The interaction of two evolving institutional orders indicates that a case’s adherence to logics and ideal types is fluid and changes over time. Table 7 summarizes the material and symbolic attributes that confirm the way that this case adheres to its specific institutional logics, creating an ideal type of professional-utilitarian journalism gamified system.

Table 7 – Institutional logic ideal types of journalism and gamification at the Guardian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional logic</th>
<th>Journalism - Professional</th>
<th>Gamification - Utilitarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Root Metaphor</td>
<td>Profession as relational work</td>
<td>Games as motivators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Legitimacy</td>
<td>Personal expertise</td>
<td>Achieving the goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Authority</td>
<td>Professional association</td>
<td>Supporting the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Identity</td>
<td>Association with quality of craft</td>
<td>Emotional connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of Norms</td>
<td>Membership in guild &amp; association</td>
<td>Rules of the system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of Attention</td>
<td>Status in profession</td>
<td>Personal reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of Strategy</td>
<td>Increase personal reputation &amp; efficiency</td>
<td>Maximize goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal Control Mechanisms</td>
<td>Celebrity professionals</td>
<td>Organization culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic System</td>
<td>Personal capitalism</td>
<td>Collective capitalism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Guardian implemented a gamified system that carried the signature trait of the organization. Even if experimentation was part of the reason for the Guardian implementing the system, the development team maintained the norms and values of journalism. The role of the user was that of the classifier, but the main news production process fell directly under the responsibility of newsworkers. The Guardian’s adherence to the professional logic of journalism is clear, with the caveat that the system required large numbers of users doing journalistic work for free. This is a good example of how, even in clear-cut cases, there is rarely a complete adherence to a specific ideal type. Organizations and individuals are situated in a context, and within the material and symbolic structure, there is agency at the hand of the team of developers. In this case, those who implemented were not journalists, and therefore there was room for
them to bring in their own experiences and skills. In fact, one of the developers who had the idea of using game mechanics brought it from his previous work at a technology giant.

When it comes to the gamification logic, few examples could show a stricter adherence to the utilitarian logic of gamification. From the start, the Guardian’s attempt to deploy game mechanics in the crowdsourcing system was meant to mobilize and motivate people to achieve its goal. While there are two elemental categories prompting collaboration, there are practically no categories pointing to the hedonic logic of gamification. This may be understood within the theoretical separation of seriousness and fun within news media. The investigative crowdsourcing story aimed to be serious, rather than fun. The gamified elements were bare and unadorned, and were implemented to incentivize users.

**Summary**

The case of the Guardian shows how minimal and almost surgical the implementation of gamification can be. This was an ad-hoc solution to engage users in a crowdsourcing microsite, casually added in the second iteration of the project. Furthermore, it shows the importance of an external set of skills that a key figure can bring to the newsroom. While the microsite invited the readers to participate, their contribution was only as anonymous tipsters who collectively classified a large number of documents. Thus, the users who participated had no say in the editorial content, and their reward came from an affective connection to being part of a watchdog investigative story, and to a sense of progress and status.

Despite this being a case of experimentation with technology, the Guardian carried it out while adhering to the professional logic of journalism. This is mostly because of the strong institutional identity the Guardian carries and the limited commercial pressure it faces. However, project leaders saw gamification as a tool to incentivize behavior, and thus the gamified-system reflected the utilitarian logic of gamification. This is important because the relationship a system attempts to establish with the audience illuminates changes in the rhetorical and structural dynamics between the news organization, the different types of newworkers, and the audience.
Chapter 7: Case B – Bleacher Report

This chapter addresses the second case of this study, Bleacher Report (also referred to as B/R). The special features of this case were that it gamified news production processes and the users of the system were journalists and writers. While readers could see the game elements and a summary of journalists’ achievements and performance statistics, they had no interaction with the system. By analyzing the Bleacher Report, this study examines a variant of gamified journalism that uses game elements to motivate journalists to improve their performance.

The chapter is organized according to the analysis strategy outlined earlier. First, I contextualize the case, then provide a game-system analysis of the gamified-system. Subsequently, I cover the analysis of interviews with a group of managers at B/R who either helped build the system or were close to the creation process. After that, I discuss the results of interviews with newsworkers working at B/R but who did not participate in the creation of the system. The final section maps the way the gamified-system adhered to institutional logics.

Contextualizing the case

The Bleacher Report is an American sports news website founded in 2007 by a group of friends, with noteworthy popularity today – its traffic is ranked 113th in the US and 339th globally, by Alexa.com. While the website covers popular sports in other countries – aiming for global reach – its focus lies on American sports news. As a sports journalism site, B/R tends to be concerned with popular topics (Rowe, 2005), however, as Oates and Pauly, (2007) discuss, sports journalism remains within the journalistic culture, resembling both regarding reporting and ethical issues.

B/R origins followed a start-up model. After the website’s launch in 2008, its funding model relied on venture capital, with four major rounds of funding until 2011 (Lacy, 2011). Moreover, its journalistic approach was also unusual as its production model relied on a citizen journalism model and an open source platform. This implied a website where journalists, writers, and fans could get together and produce content (Ostrow, 2008). An open source network also meant that most contributors were not paid for their content. In the summer
of 2011, *Bleacher Report* introduced the ‘Writer Ranking’ system, advertised to improve the overall quality of content and the writing base performance. The system tracked, measured, and incentivized collaborators’ performance and rewarded them with a combination of physical and digital rewards. After being owned by a small group of investors and their founders, Turner Broadcasting System – a subsidiary of TimeWarner – bought B/R for a reported $175 million in 2012 (Lunden, 2012). The acquisition press release claimed that:

B/R delivers original and entertaining sports editorial content and is a leading sports media destination, delivering over 10 million monthly unique visitors. The company has developed a next-generation publishing model powered by an expanding base of passionate and knowledgeable contributors who deliver high-quality content that readers crave at team and topic level. ("TimeWarner," 2012)

At the time, the open source network had more than 2,000 core contributors, of which a smaller group was paid editorial staff. Even though TimeWarner praised the ‘next-generation publishing model,’ B/R started to shift their strategy toward a writers’ program, slowly abandoning the open source content production model, and adopting what they claim to be a higher quality sports journalism. The open source model and the gamification approach had gathered a patina of unprofessionalism that tarnished B/R’s reputation. The question of journalistic integrity was addressed by Turner’s president David Levy, who had this to say about ‘the old Bleacher Report’ four years after the acquisition.

When we bought it (B/R), it really was a brand. Whether it was really something with complete journalistic integrity, you can debate that one way or another. But we truly saw it as a brand. Turner wasn’t a sports brand. We sort of needed a sports destination brand. (as cited by Shields, 2016)

After the acquisition, Turner required higher standards in journalistic quality and to discontinue the gamified open source model. To accommodate the changes, B/R hired experienced journalists and started offering an ‘Advanced Program in Sports Media’ for aspiring sports journalists. This program was an intensive 12-week training program for early-career sportswriters, trained by experienced sports journalists (Kaufman, 2013) and paid by B/R. The process of de-gamifying started in 2015 and is still ongoing. Three years after the
gamified writers’ program was abandoned, gamified elements can still be found on the website. The Writer Ranking system description is still online, including journalists’ profiles with their achievements, points, and rewards, still visible to readers.

As a news organization, B/R is different from legacy news media in several areas. First, it is an online-only news provider. While in recent years B/R has expanded into video and broadcasting segments for other news providers, its background is online. Second, as a sports journalism website, it can align itself with entertainment more openly. The boundaries between hard and soft news, and seriousness and fun are more blurred in this case than in current events journalism. Finally, the company was founded by four young entrepreneurs with no journalistic education or experience. They followed a startup strategy, self-identified as a tech-company, acquired venture capital, and eventually sold to a larger company. As one of the founders mentioned:

You had to say, “This is about tech.” You always have to begin every venture capital pitch by saying, “Oh, we’re not a media company. This isn’t about advertising. This is about technology.” Which was complete bullshit. But you know what? It got the job done, and you have to live one day at a time. Technology is important to media. It still is, but it wasn’t until about 2010 that we looked in the mirror and said, “Hey, wait a minute. This is a media company. We are a media company.” (Bryan Goldberg, as cited by Shontell, 2017)

Thus, from the very beginning, B/R was guided by the commercial logic of journalism. Except for a small group of paid editors, most of the editorial content was outsourced to aspiring journalists, freelancers, and fans.

**Gamification at Bleacher Report – gamified-system analysis**

The use of gamification at B/R was evident to both journalists and readers because present both in the content management system (CMS) and the website. However, in this particular case, it was only the journalists and writers who were participants in the gamified system. B/R gamified the way that journalists produced news, as well as how they interacted with the organization, their co-workers, and their output. This means that the algorithms shaping the system tracked and quantified journalists’ production patterns; generated and
assessed data about readers' interaction with the content; and finally, displayed a visual representation of the contributors' performances.

**Game-structure and interaction mapping**

When B/R introduced the Writer Ranking system, it explained the game-structure in the following terms:

The Bleacher Report Writer Ranking system is designed to help B/R authors track their career progress relative to their peers in the B/R Writer Program. To that end, B/R recognizes and rewards authorial excellence with two related species of spoils:

- First, writers can accumulate medals and badges for one-time accomplishments, including publishing high-quality articles or winning monthly Top Writer competitions.
- Second, and perhaps even more importantly, writers can accumulate points on the basis of their one-time achievements to advance through a series of hierarchical "reputation" levels, each of which entails access to new perks and heightened prestige.

In sum, B/R's Writer Rankings incentivize behavior consistent with the principles of genuinely "great" sports journalism: Authors are encouraged (1) to do their best work every time they publish and (2) to sustain that effort over the long run. It's by no means an easily-achieved ideal—but then again greatness wouldn't be greatness if it were easy to do. ("Writer Rankings," n.d.)

The rules of the system were simple: as authors published stories, they were rewarded for their effort with points and medals. As authors collected points, they advanced up the organizational hierarchy, which included reputation levels that mimicked traditional editorial positions. The gamified root metaphor was professional progress as the system articulates it through the basis of attention, the author reputation levels. New contributors started on Contributor Level I. There were six ‘author reputation levels:’ Contributor, Correspondent, Analyst, Senior Analyst, Senior Writer, Chief Writer, and Featured Columnist. The first six positions each had three different internal levels. Thus, from a starting position, a writer who accumulated more than 12000 points would level-up eighteen times to reach the top position of Chief Writer III. At that point, the contributor would become a Featured Columnist, a final level with four internal levels. Moreover, reaching higher levels correlated with specific perks for authors. The most important perk was unlocked at the Featured Columnist level.
Columnist level III, and read “An interview for a qualified B/R staff job.” This is relevant because many of the aspiring journalists saw this as a promise to a paid journalist position at B/R. Employment in the firm was the *basis of norms*, as it was the clearest goal for contributors. However, after failing to interview all contributors reaching Featured Columnist III – the system simply couldn’t accommodate all of them – and maintaining the open-source model, B/R gained a reputation as an exploitative media company (for more on this see Schreier, 2014). In January 2014, the Writer Ranking rules changed on B/R’s website, deleting the ‘perks’ associated with each reputation level. Figure 6 shows the ‘author reputation levels’ outline with their associated perks, and the same outline after deleting the ‘perks.’

![Figure 6 – Comparison before and after deleting the 'perks' from the Writer Rankings rules](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Columnist Level</th>
<th>Points Threshold</th>
<th>Perks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Featured Columnist IV</td>
<td>14,000 points</td>
<td>Access to a custom-built, author-specific publishing template for all articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Featured Columnist III</td>
<td>8,000 points</td>
<td>An interview for a qualified B/R staff job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Featured Columnist II</td>
<td>2,000 points</td>
<td>A free B/R Featured Columnist hoodie sweatshirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Featured Columnist I</td>
<td>0 points</td>
<td>Featured placement on B/R Team pages; Eligibility for media interviews and credentials for major events</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Regarding specific system goals, the rules sheet is explicit, specifying that “B/R’s Writer Rankings incentivize behavior with the principles of genuinely ‘great’ sports journalism.” The main activity to be incentivized was producing a regular stream of publishable content. That set up a chain of interactions that were immediately rewarded and reflected in the system. First, the content produced was added to the total statistics generated by the author. Second, all interactions generated by the audience were also tracked: reads, likes, comments, fans (equivalent to followers) were added up. Those numbers were run through the system’s algorithms, and medals and achievements were awarded to each writer, based on this process. Subsequently, after adding these rewards, the system allocated points to authors, the website’s leaderboard – called the Power Grid – was updated, each journalist was assigned a reputation level, and finally, their profiles were updated. Reputation in the system was the source of legitimacy and the individual ranking of journalists according to each category was the source of authority. It is unclear how the perks associated with the reputation levels were triggered. Considering the types of perks, there must have been an administrator who would make sure a newly Correspondent I had access to special video article tools, or that a Featured Columnist I was featured in a B/R Team page and receive credentials for major events.

**Game elements inventory**

B/R’s Writer Ranking system used progressions and relationships as the main game dynamics. Progression is articulated in the game as a way to visualize career advancement and status through the author reputation levels. Relationships introduced the competitive drive, by constantly comparing journalists on leaderboards and in their ranking across the website.

Regarding game mechanics, the system used three. First, feedback was central to the system, giving journalists constant information about their performance, competing journalists, and readers’ reaction to their content. Second, rewards, such as extra points for publishing stories in consecutive days or a top writer medal, visualized progress and status. Third, competition among journalists was essential to establish status in the hierarchical system, and it was the main basis of strategy.
The game components that appeared in the system included:

- **Badges.** Two types of badges were awarded. First, medals for single article metric performance. The medals represented a 1 to 7 scale from Bronze to Diamond. Second, achievement badges for events such as winning competitions, like a debate article.
- **Points.** Points were given for total number of reads, comments or lead stories, and as rewards for various achievements. They were the currency to advance up the hierarchy of author reputation levels.
- **Levels.** These represented the editorial position in the author reputation system. Each position was further divided into ranks.
- **Competitions.** Top Writer competitions were open to all authors covering the various news topics showcased by the network.
- **Leaderboards.** The Power Grid (shown in Table 7) listed top writers according to the number of articles written, article reads, article likes, comment likes, comments received, comments written, and number of fans, which could be filtered both as an aggregated measurement of the whole site, or according to each particular sport.
- Unlocking features. Features were called ‘perks,’ which were associated with advancing author reputation levels. These perks comprised digital features (such as access to a special Author Module displayed on all published articles) and physical privileges (such as credentials for major events or a free B/R Featured Columnist hooded sweatshirt).

These game components were present all over the site and were visible to journalists and audience alike. This was deliberate. Website-wide visibility of actions was the gamification *informal control mechanism*. Figure 7 shows the main leaderboard, the Power Grid. The writer’s profile, as shown in Figure 8 contained the achievement and awards earned by the journalist. This also shows that the gamification *economic system* acts as a type of personal capitalism, with individual gain and advancement as currency within the site.

![Figure 8 – Nick Dimengo’s profile page at Bleacher Report](image)

**Knowledge organization and reach**

This *B/R* gamified system incentivized the creation of content rather than consuming it. The open source model and the reward scheme prioritized content quantity over quality. Game elements were not implemented as a storytelling technique or to gamify editorial content. However, the interviews with
the creators of the system show that key features – the way that the gamified production system promoted a quick turnaround and was dependent on readers’ metrics – had an impact in the quality and topics of the stories published. The journalistic norms and values, and to some extent integrity, were secondary during the early years of the company.

Regarding reach, the B/R gamified system was a website-wide system. This means that it applied to the entire website. It gathered data from all the stories and articles that were published, and all the subsequent metrics newsworkers and readers generated. All authors were included in the system.

**Game experience and aesthetics**

While the system did not attempt to reformulate the activity of writing, it did attempt to shape the experience of being a journalist in a news organization. Game elements dominated the publishing and writing experience, visualizing how journalists progressed in the company. The game components mediated author recognition, visibility, access, and reputation. The fact that B/R is a sports news website facilitated a more openly game-like and competitive approach. In this sense, B/R managed to create an innovative form of publishing experience, transforming traditional models by adding digital rewards. The system attempted to provide a playful and immersive experience. The game-like interface of each author’s profile page signified his or her status within the network by displaying medals, reputation, ranks, and achievement as a part of the experience of writing for B/R. The sources of identity in the gamified system combined satisfying the author’s ego with establishing a reputation for the author.

This gamified news production model failed to meet journalistic integrity and labor standards for a news organization of the scale and ambitions of B/R, and therefore it was later abandoned in favor of a more professionalized model.

**Constructing and implementing gamification at Bleacher Report**

Finding respondents at Bleacher Report was particularly difficult. At one point one of the respondents mentioned that employees had been advised not to accept my interview request. I assumed that since B/R had received criticism for its gamification system, its leaders would be cautious about discussing the topic publicly. To circumvent this issue, I approached B/R employees who were not
located in the main offices, in San Francisco. That is why of all the interviewees from B/R, few were in San Francisco. Members of the board of directors and chief executives of the organizations ignored or declined the invitation to participate in the study. However, I still managed to interview two vice presidents and two senior managers. Two of them had helped establish the Writer Ranking and Writer Program. The other two knew firsthand how the system was created and functioned, and how the de-gamification process was planned. Incidentally, these interviewees did not request anonymity, and at times it is difficult to conceal their identities due to their specific tasks, but I kept them anonymous, just as with all other participants in the study. Table 8 offers a list of the interviewees.

Table 8 – Interviewees who produced the gamified-system at Bleacher Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quoted as</th>
<th>Role at Bleacher Report</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BR05</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>2016-08-24</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR06</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>2016-08-26</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR10</td>
<td>Senior Manager</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>2016-09-09</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR13</td>
<td>Senior Manager</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>2017-04-17</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These interviewees focused on the role of the creators of the gamified system of the organization, and also how the organization shaped the system. The themes emerging from these interviews are the identity of the people involved in the formation of the company, the organizational goals, and the criticism that B/R received for its open source and gamification model, and the decision to abandon the system and start a process of de-gamification. Despite several attempts to discuss the specifics of the system regarding game elements, the conversations quickly returned to business models, journalistic practice, and ethical considerations. Thus, while the open source and gamification models are widely covered in the interviews, game elements are only referred to as abstract markers of the overall goal of the system. This may be because none of the interviewees self-identified as an expert or a champion of gamification, or because it proved to be problematic and it was discontinued.

**Established identities**

The identities of Bleacher Report’s founders had an impact in how B/R operated. As one of the vice presidents commented: “we weren’t founded by journalists, we were founded by businesspeople. Not to say that they didn’t have journalistic
interests, but it wasn’t like someone with 20 years of sports journalism experience started the company” (BR06). This is relevant because, as Picard (2014) proposes, start-up news organizations are a growing part of an emerging news ecosystem. These media companies infuse new business models and invoke start-up culture in the newsroom.

Of the four B/R management respondents, only one self-identifies as a journalist. Two of them had backgrounds in journalism, and the other two had media and business profiles, specialized in technical responsibilities. Their drive for working at Bleacher Report was their love for sports, and their interest to combine their unique expertise in media companies and sports content. While their journalistic sources of identity were technology and sports, they had extensive experience in the media industry as content programmers, social media and analytics strategists, and public relations.

After a long career as a journalist and an editor, a respondent joined Bleacher Report with the task to structure and manage the Writer Program. He explained what the intent of the program was:

They called it the Writer Program, but what it meant as “give us your email address and start writing.” There was literally no bar of entry beyond the email address. I think eventually what happened was they were publishing hundreds and hundreds of articles per day, and they were able to cover topics that nobody else was getting to. Even if the quality was terrible, they were able to build a huge audience because of the volume of content. Eventually, they ran into a ceiling where the advertisers said, “You know, your stuff is so bad we’re not going to put our logo next year.” So B/R started looking for someone to manage this big group of unpaid unprofessional writers to teach them and help them improve their work. That’s how I got in. I was setting up educational materials, feedback programs, and things like that to help people improve their writing. I couldn’t reach out individually to 600 people, but there certainly was an opportunity for anyone who was willing to sort of taking the extra steps. (BR13)

After the first year of existence, the open source model of B/R managed to capture a large group of aspiring journalists, who created large amounts of content. These writers were not professional or experienced journalists, and the content they created had almost no editorial quality filters. Thus, B/R failed to impose a set of journalistic standards, which triggered the loss of advertisers. Only then, management hired an experienced journalist to teach them the
basics of journalistic writing. This shows that the basis for implementing journalistic standards was a set of commercial considerations.

**Organizational goals**

When discussing the goals of the Writer Ranking program, there is a bit of confusion between the goals of B/R as an organization, and what was the goal with the open source and gamified systems. A senior manager explained that “the first and foremost goal for Bleacher Report is to provide really great content for its users and audience” (BR10), which after investigating the gamified-system, seems to be inaccurate. A vice president discussed how B/R approached an open source model.

From the very beginning, there were two reasons for Bleacher Report. Number one, to give aspiring journalists a platform to stand on and say, “I could start my own blog and reach a hundred people, or I could join the Bleacher Report network and reach tens of thousands, and ultimately hundreds of thousands and millions, of people.” Number two was to provide access to the longtail of teams and topics that people care about. Fundamentally, that’s a volume game where if you think about the supply and demand marketplace of sports content online, there was a real disconnect. The demand was a lot higher than the supply. (BR06)

This narrative discusses the service B/R offered to writers and audiences within the business discourse of supply and demand. B/R provided an audience to journalists and offered content to audiences. The basis of strategy was increasing the size of the company. However, the explicit goals of Writer Program system are barely addressed by the interviewees. It is only in brief comments that a respondent clarifies the main organizational goal of the system: creating and capturing as much content as possible. The journalistic root metaphor was a transactional volume of content to establish an audience. “The rationale is that two articles are better than one, ten are better than nine. So let’s just get as much content into this system as we possibly can, and then we figure out what to do with it” (BR06) explained a vice president. A senior manager spoke about the clash of goals and dynamics between teaching journalism to writers and how the gamified system worked:

The whole thing clashed with what I wanted to do in trying to raise the quality. The points and all that stuff, it was all about quantity, which was the
original business model. Publish as many pieces as you possibly can, so, volume business. It continued to be a volume business even as they started to raise the quality, so that was an internal struggle that went beyond the system. Businesswise, it was two competing impulses, not unique to Bleacher Report. I mean, any commercial journalism operation deals with that struggle, quality versus commerciality, and there’s different people pulling for different things. (BR13)

It is not surprising that the respondent with a journalistic background made the explicit mention of tensions between commercial urges and quality journalism aspirations. This is, of course, an issue present in most news organizations (Hamilton, 2004; Hanitzsch, 2007). Due to its start-up origins, B/R had its top management as the source of authority and its market position as its source of legitimacy. Management prioritized volume and quantification over quality because the system was created with the commercial logic in mind. All game elements and rewards incentivized quantity and metrics, rather than a news quality. When the time came to incorporate quality control, it became difficult because the goal of the system was to increase quantity of content. The institutional culture infused its influence in the operation (Lowrey & Gade, 2011) and it was difficult to change the course.

**Criticism and Reputation**

During the interviews, I sensed a resistance to discuss issues related to the gamified system. I asked interviewees what they thought about the criticism B/R received. This gave the respondents the space to discuss and unpack some of the main issues of the Writer Ranking system. A senior manager made the following claim.

I think all those criticisms are fair, because Bleacher Report started as an open-source platform. Its goal was not to be a credible, predominant media company. It was a place for people to come and write and for fans to get content created on a team that wasn’t necessarily being covered in mainstream media. (BR10)

B/R was willing to give up credibility in favor of more content. Inviting aspiring to create without being paid brought more criticism for their allegedly exploitative practices. A senior manager had this to say about claims of exploitation:
Yes, that was a problem. As we were paying more and more people and we kept the unpaid program flowing, I felt like we’re doing all these things to try to motivate people to do what we want them to do. It started to become a little bit silly. We could have tried to motivate them by paying them. That’s what I wanted to do and it’s like, “We’re spending a lot of money working on this system and redesigning it and tweaking it, why don’t we just take that money and pay the writers?” I was in favor of getting rid of the unpaid program and just paying everybody even if it was a nominal amount much earlier than we did. I think we kept the unpaid program for far too long. I think there are also some ethical issues started to arise where we were no longer a struggling startup trying to get on our feet, we were a successful business that had been purchased by a giant multinational corporation and we’re still asking people to work for free on this straight-out basis. I think it came more from momentum and inertia rather than evil impulse, but I think it went on too long. (BR13)

Perhaps the fact that the old model was eventually abandoned made it easier to accept its flaws, but this reflection raises the issue of inertia and organizational culture in journalism (Thorén, 2014). At the time, B/R was a startup, struggling for quick content and funds, and when the organization had become successful, it was difficult to change its culture and commit to a different strategy. It also confirms one of the arguments of this study that often news organizations adopt technology as the to-go solution against change. The issue of quality generated questions about trust and authority. A senior manager explained:

Well, the problems of the previous model – it’s a different game. Because when I think of journalism and where I’m getting my news, I wouldn’t think to go to a place where it’s necessarily citizen journalists. You want to go to somebody that is trained in ethics and reporting. But I understand that for sports, where there’s so much commentary and color and passion behind it, that having these sort of citizen journalists – it was interesting. It was cool. It was different. (BR10)

The negotiation between sports and regular journalism, and between established journalists and citizen journalists articulates once more the professionalization of journalism (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). The issues are not only a matter of innovation, but also about the type of journalism and the authority to make the news. Eventually, to survive as a legitimate news provider, B/R had to switch to a more professionalized model. Its aim in adhering to a professional logic of journalism involved abandoning the model that made B/R
relevant in the first place. This was not a big problem, as the basis of norms of B/R was the organizational interest, and they needed to change to survive.

**Model shift and de-gamification**

When it was acquired by TimeWarner, Bleacher Report started the process to abandon the open source model and started a process of de-gamification of the site, in favor of a more professional model. While respondents claim the focus on rewards ended almost immediately, the website remains heavily gamified and shows no sign of change. When asked about this, one of the VPs responded:

>A lot of our technical infrastructure was built around a world of creating capabilities for thousands of writers to be contributing at one time. So our site, fundamentally, was built for volume. A lot of those game mechanics are sort of baked into that infrastructure, so we're still in a slow process of unwinding that. I think it's a bit misleading if somebody goes to the site for the first time and sees all of these, “Oh, well this person is a level 2 and has this many awards” and all of that. It’s kind of out of line with what we’re aspiring to be. (BR06)

Against the trend of adding game elements, B/R was one of the first media organizations to implement what Wilken (2016) calls ‘de-gamification of services.’ Breaking with the old model meant that many journalists in the middle of the gamified-system, who had spent a lot of time and effort to reach higher in the ranking and achieve some of the perks, had to stop abruptly. When asked about the ‘players’ in the abandoned system, a VP explained:

>Well, the gamification of our writers, it was really very interesting at the time. You know, we had the medals and we had a point system. They were rewards. I think, when we started that, there was a lot of interest and a lot of excitement around getting those rewards and getting those points. But then over time, there’s struggle with maintaining that. There are, you know, business realities that limited the amount of people that we could convert from “Free” to “Paid.” As a business, you can’t, as much as you’d like to, pay everybody. (BR05)

De-gamifying meant not allowing thousands of writers to continue publishing. B/R accepted this as a business decision that proved to be unfortunate for the writers. The informal control mechanisms were rooted in the organizational culture, which established the course of action. B/R worked actively to publicize
the change of approach, as a way to strengthen the brand as a legitimate digital news publication. Interviewees tried to show that the changes in the model made B/R a more credible and reputable news organization. A senior manager phrased it this way:

Number one, I think that paying all of our writers was a really good move. Some of our key hires have helped. They come from really mainstream publications. So, when you see them leave those publications to come to Bleacher Report, I think that that builds credibility. (BR10)

The journalistic aspirations of B/R, both regarding content and brand seemed, to be unattainable with a gamified system that published barely supervised content. Adopting traditional professional journalism norms and values and shedding the games and unpaid staff seemed to reinforce B/R’s new identity as a legitimate news organization (Deuze, 2005). This shows that the symbolic economic system was intellectual capitalism, as the intangible value of B/R was that its leaders understood that beyond the capitalist goals, there was a need to adapt B/R’s organizational culture and human capacity to the relational goals of journalism as a profession.

**Perceived impact of gamification at Bleacher Report**

The case of Bleacher Report served as an early pilot to capture how journalists felt about being subjected to a gamified news production system. My original idea was to conduct semi-structured interviews (the semi-interview guide is outlined in Appendix 3), expecting that all journalists took part in the gamified system. By the time data collection started, in early 2016, the Writer Ranking system had been phased out. The website looked just as it had for almost two years. It was clear, after interviewing a few respondents (BR01, BR02, and BR04), that the semi-structured interview guide was not useful, as the first few interviewees had very different experiences, and some of them had not experienced the full gamified system. I then shifted to in-depth interviews to dig deeper into the different stories respondents shared.

I interviewed ten contributors to the website, all with journalistic backgrounds and different degrees of exposure to the gamified system. None of them were involved in creating the gamified system. Table 9 shows the group of interviewees. It is worth pointing out that the writing community at B/R was
male-dominated, as it can be seen in the all-male Power Grid (Figure 7). This is a common feature in sports journalism (Pedersen, Whisenant, & Schneider, 2003). I requested interviews with five female journalists, but all declined.

Table 9 – Interviewees who were not involved in the gamified-system at Bleacher Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quoted as</th>
<th>Role at Bleacher Report</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BR01</td>
<td>Freelance Journalist</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>2016-02-18</td>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR02</td>
<td>Freelance Journalist</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2016-07-11</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR03</td>
<td>Deputy Editor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>2016-08-31</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR04</td>
<td>Resident Intern</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Minneapolis</td>
<td>2016-06-29</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR07</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>2016-08-19</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR08</td>
<td>Lead Writer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>2016-07-09</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR09</td>
<td>Lead Writer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>2016-08-23</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR11</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>2017-04-07</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR12</td>
<td>Analyst</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>2017-04-02</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR14</td>
<td>Lead Writer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>2017-04-14</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The case of Bleacher Report is peculiar because it places journalists at the center of the gamified system. I have investigated elsewhere (see Ferrer-Conill, 2017) how journalists at B/R internalized the game mechanics, whether they felt motivated by them, and the quantification of news production regarding their performance. The results showed newsworth employees had a short-lived interest in in-game elements, only to be substituted by metrics as a form of motivation. Badges, medals, and the Power Grid kept writers interested for brief periods. However, respondents also hinted that the system had affected their practice. They wrote shorter pieces, so that they could write more frequently. They wrote pieces they thought would generate more buzz in the community, and they slowly made assumptions about journalistic quality according to quantifiable awards and metrics. Moreover, being constrained by a system that constantly tracked and measured performance, and rewarded specific types of behaviors, highlights issues of journalistic autonomy and precarity.

**Autonomy and precarity**

Bleacher Report introduced a hybrid form of immaterial and free labor (Lazzarato, 1996; Terranova, 2000) that resonates with increasing precarity and decreasing autonomy in newswor (Örnebring, 2018b; Sjøvaag, 2013).

The open-source model meant that collaborators could participate willingly, without a contractual obligation – or any remuneration – which
allowed B/R to claim that writers had full autonomy within the system. However, as outlined above, there were certain perks for producing content for B/R with the eventual process of a stable paid position. This placed the system as a hybrid between journalistic playbor and gamification of work (see Ferrer-Conill, 2018). This hybrid design rewarded collaborators and established an affective connection, embedded within the news production system. I often avoid using long quotes from interviews. However, I make an exception here, because the following extract summarizes with remarkable accuracy, the overall sentiment of the interviews. A lead writer shared:

I personally didn’t really connect with the game stuff. I didn’t identify with it very much. I think I was probably older than the typical Bleacher Report writer. I mean, when I came to Bleacher Report, I was 48 years old, so that’s maybe part of why I just didn’t feel any real connection to the gamification. I understood that it was a motivator for some people. I felt like that wouldn’t be a motivator for me. I don’t care about your medals, I don’t care about the points except for the fact that the points at the writing level that you were at did have an effect on how much your piece was promoted. That was the only part of it that was a motivator for me. I got to get to this top level because I understood it was a motivator, but it didn’t really come into the calculation very much for me about why I thought writing for Bleacher Report without pay was a pretty big deal. For me, the deal was getting the platform. You get this backend. As a guy who has done his own blog on WordPress and it was just a giant pain in my ass, and I started with zero people reading it to come into a site that has millions and millions of readers, that has the backend completely taken care of. I just work with the CMS that has legal access to photos, that gives me a professional copyedit, suggests stories to write about, also it offers me if I want it, various levels of education and feedback, I felt like that was a pretty big deal. If I could have that or $50 a piece, I take that. I thought that was really more the deal than the points and all that stuff, but I did understand that for a lot of people, these are a lot of young men, and they’re young men who like sports and they’re very competitive and they respond to that sort of thing. (BR14)

Whether gamification helped motivate users cannot be studied in isolation, but rather as another layer in a multi-layered news production environment. What I mean by multi-layered is that there were many institutional features
converging at B/R that, when combined, set up a distinct news production system that appealed to writers in different ways.

For young aspiring journalists, writing for a large audience about something they cared about was more than enough to justify contributing for free in the open source model. Even at the expense of not being paid, having access to the platform was more than enough motivator. This claim is supported by Kaufman (2012), who argues that having a platform and an audience to aspiring young writers helped to launch some sport news careers. Nevertheless, this production model, in which contributors were unpaid, sparked controversies about the quality of the content on the site and about whether the system relied on an exploitative incentive model (Eskenazi, 2012; Schreier, 2014). Those who did not care for the game elements had to live with them because they were part of the working environment. Furthermore, the relevance of the gamified-system was the perks associated with the achievements and rewards, which some authors considered to be the value of the system. Having more exposure, better access, or an interview for a paid position were the real key motivators of participating in the system.

Regarding autonomy, the Writer Ranking system claimed enhanced autonomy for its users because they could follow their progress. However, the behavioral aspect of gamification and the interview data point to the opposite. In line with the findings of Nygren and colleagues (2015), business objectives, technology orientation, and less stable institutions, led some journalists to believe that the system inhibited their professional autonomy. This was expressed in two ways. First, journalists knew they had to conform to the gamified-system rules to excel. Second, to advance up the author reputation levels, writers had to commit almost exclusively to B/R. Instead of writing for many publications to broaden their portfolio (Deuze, 2007), they focused on B/R so that their scores would be competitive in the system. However, some journalists saw this as a possible advantage that might lead to a better position, almost like a rite of passage for beginners.

It is in the combination of organizational and individual characteristics, and the institutional logics that gamification can be understood. Moreover, even then, the dynamics that game elements generate in a journalistic context are difficult to analyze. A good example of this is how interviewees discuss the success of B/R’s gamified system.
Assessing success

The complexity of interacting institutional orders becomes even more apparent when assessing the success of the Writer Ranking system. This is because to assess success, one must ask for whom and according to what parameters something is successful. Here, I would like to discuss four viewpoints from which to scrutinize success: organizational, individual, gamified-system, and journalistic.

From an organizational standpoint, it is difficult to consider a strategic decision, such as gamification, a success, because it was responsible for devaluing B/R’s reputation and had to be discontinued. However, the organizational goals were to create as much content as possible, with the hope of maximizing the number of readers. During the initial years, the commercial logic of journalism imposed its influence over professionalism. Moreover, it was very successful in that effort – so successful, in fact, that even after all the criticism, TimeWarner bought the company. The acquisition was vital in stopping the system, but at that time, the gamified-system had been a success.

Individual perceptions of success vary depending on their individual goals, but also on the outcome after interacting with the gamified system. Many writers used B/R as a stepping stone to a sports journalism career. As a freelance journalist explained:

B/R was so far ahead of everyone with search engine optimization, and twitter and Facebook, and all this stuff. So, for me personally, I don’t think I ever sat down and thought my ultimate goal was to beat the game. My thought was, if I establish a voice for myself and set myself apart, I am going to be really appealing to both audiences and big media companies. (BR02)

B/R did become a way to reach to a wider audience, and for others it became a place where they would eventually work in a paid position. Others, however, felt B/R took advantage of them. An intern explained that after he managed to complete the gamified system:

That’s when it all went south. I had met all my deadlines, I wrote like a madman, I had hundreds of thousands of reads, collected all my points, and when I reached the final level, I requested the interview. Then they told me they were sorry, but that they didn’t have positions. I felt cheated. (BR04)
From the perspective of the gamified-system, it is difficult to argue for the lack of success. Even if most interviews downplayed the influence of the system, most interviewees agreed that in the beginning, it was an important factor. Moreover, it did so by designing an intricate and game-like publishing scheme. The system’s goal was for journalists to write content that is frequent and popular. And that is what it achieved. But leaving quality out of the goals eventually led to the collapse of the system.

From the perspective of journalism, the question is tricky. The commercial logic is intrinsic to journalism as the professional logic, and depending on the institutional context, one cannot survive with the other. Focusing on the commercial logic meant that B/R succeeded commercially, to the point that a large media conglomerate bought it. However, only tending to the commercial strategy jeopardized B/R’s professional reputation. Much like the ‘new journalism’ in the late 19th century, once its commercial needs were satisfied, B/R was in a situation in which it had to switch its institutional focus toward professionalization.

Adherence to institutional logics

When trying to assess how Bleacher Report’s internal dynamics adhere to the institutional logics of journalism and gamification, it is worth going back to the elemental categories of both institutional orders of journalism and gamification. From the analysis above, I extracted the symbols and practices that make for the prevalent logics of journalism and gamification, as shown in Table 10. This approach is helpful because it recognizes the fluidity of the models and does not constrain assumptions about causal relationships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional logic</th>
<th>Journalism - Commercial</th>
<th>Gamification - Hedonic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Root Metaphor</td>
<td>Transactional volume</td>
<td>Professional progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Legitimacy</td>
<td>Market position</td>
<td>Reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Authority</td>
<td>Top management</td>
<td>Individual ranking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Identity</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Ego-satisfaction &amp; reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of Norms</td>
<td>Organizational interest</td>
<td>Employment in firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of Attention</td>
<td>Status in hierarchy</td>
<td>Author reputation levels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is clear that Bleacher Report’s organizational culture influenced the Writer Ranking system. Before its acquisition by Turner, B/R’s journalistic efforts were guided by a commercial logic. B/R made attempts and efforts to raise the level of quality and credibility of its content. However, those attempts emerged once the risk of losing advertisers threatened commercial viability. B/R’s organizational efforts, which manifested in authors’ actions in the gamified system, emphasized quantity and metrics over professionalism and reputation.

At the same time, what B/R managed was to package the utility of a system in the hedonic logic, which prevailed in the implementation of the gamified system. The fact that it was successful despite its problems signals the creation of an experience that attracted thousands of collaborators. Of course, granting aspiring journalists access to an audience was a key component of its success, but the system’s focus on progress and its explicit capacity to unlock perks made this more than a simple attempt to make people do something. Instead, the system mimicked in a game-like manner how a news organization would handle editorial hierarchies in the newsroom.

Summary

Bleacher Report showcases gamification beyond strategies to attract readers or users. Instead, B/R gamified news production. While gamification had an initial impact on the performance of journalists, their perceived effect of the game mechanics fades away eventually, in favor of metrics and analytics as a performance motivator. The rules of the system aim to modify journalists’ practice by promoting and rewarding more frequent production cycles that prioritize reader interaction with the website. Such a constrained production model suggests reduced journalistic autonomy, paired with exploitative and precarious working conditions. Moreover, it suggests poor content quality. This is exemplified by Turner’s request to abandon the open source and gamification approaches in favor of professionalizing the entire workforce and eventually dismantling the gamified system.
Chapter 8: Case C – The *Times of India*

This chapter examines the results of the *Times of India* case, in which the news organization implemented gamification as a loyalty program called Times Points. In this case, the game elements do not focus on a singular story or editorial content. Instead, the gamified layer exists across the website and it focuses on users, their patterns of behavior, and their experiences while visiting the site.

By including the *Times of India* in this study, I aim to cover a gamification strategy that does not aim to redefine the activity of reading or producing news, yet is present throughout the entire site. Thus, this case is an example of a news organization using gamification to aid in its distribution. After contextualizing the case, this chapter presents the results and analysis of the digital artifact game-system the *Times of India* implemented. Then I analyze interviews with five respondents who either helped design the system or currently maintain it, followed by analysis of eight interviews with journalists who work for the *Times of India* but have no explicit involvement in the gamified system. Finally, I discuss how this case adheres to the institutional logics of journalism and gamification.

**Contextualizing the case**

Since its first edition in 1838, the *Times of India* is one of India’s oldest English-language newspaper still in circulation. Owned by the Bennett, Coleman & Co. Ltd. – known as the Times Group – the *Times of India* claims to be the world’s most-read broadsheet English daily, with an average circulation of more than 2.7 million copies in 2017 (“Audit Bureau of Circulation,” 2017). This family-owned media conglomerate publishes 18 paper publications and owns several media outlets. Inspired by the British paper *The Times*, the *Times of India* has pursued a British news-style by employing English editors to set the tone of the publication. From the beginning, the *Times of India* adopted a form of journalism, rooted in professionalism and objectivity.

In 1999, the Times Group launched Times Internet Limited, India’s largest media and entertainment group and the host of the *Times of India*’s online edition. This network is also responsible for hosting 25 different news
websites of different range, focus and language, and another 14 sites devoted to ‘lifestyle and entertainment.’ According to their corporate website, the network “reaches over 232 million unique visitors a month who collectively account for 10.4 billion page views and 10 billion minutes spent across web and mobile, with businesses across news, entertainment, sports, local, e-commerce, classifieds, startup investments, local partnerships, and more” (“Times Internet”, n.d., para. 2). Moreover, its website claims Times Internet “proudly carries with it 175 years of prestige associated with the Times of India Group yet stands independently as a collective of start-ups offering dynamic digital products” (“Times Internet”, n.d., para. 4). Indeed, the paper and online editions of the Times of India are owned by different subsidiaries of the Times Group, and follow different editorial lines. The digital version of the Times of India projects a more modern design than its paper counterpart. For example, the traditional logo of the newspaper, with its tagline ‘Let Truth Prevail’ (a reminder of the normative aspect of legacy journalism) has been replaced by just the Times of India text, followed by a format combining news, multimedia pieces, and entertainment bits.

The Times Group has kept all online publications under the Times Internet, privileging network synergies rather than mirroring its paper editions. Publications share content management systems (CMS), technological infrastructure, and digital strategies. Thus, when Times Internet launched its loyalty program, it did it so across its entire digital portfolio. The operating assumption was that the Times Internet’s start-up mentality would lead the digital Times of India to operate under the influence of the commercial logic.

It is also important to keep in mind that some of the characteristics of the Indian market are relevant to how Times Internet develops technologically. For example, the popularity of mobile devices pushed Times Internet to prioritize user experiences that emphasize mobile use. An editor at the Times of India explained this in the following terms:

What is happening is, most people who are engaging with content online do it on their phone and not on a desktop. Most people in India don’t have a television but they have jumped to smartphones. And this is excellent. Since 2013, phone users in India have more than doubled. (TOI11)
Having an audience with high mobile phone use helped Times Internet to deploy a loyalty program based on gamification and personalized features, as transmedia news consumption becomes more prominent and embedded in everyday life (Jansson & Lindell, 2015).

**Gamification at the Times of India – gamified-system analysis**

Loyalty programs have been important additions to several major news organizations. The *Washington Post* called its ‘reader reward program’ PostPoints. The *Los Angeles Times* had a program called the ScorePoints. The *New York Times* had a loyalty program called TimesPoints, from January 2006 to December 2007 ("New York Times Launches Loyalty Program," 2006).

In 2012, when Times Internet implemented its loyalty program it also used the name Times Points. After six years of operation, this program is active in 19 digital publications, including the digital version of the *Times of India*. The Times Points website defines the program in the following terms:

Times Points is a unique media loyalty program on Times Network that recognizes and rewards its users for the activities they do across its various sites. These activities include sharing and recommending articles, photos & videos and actively contributing reviews & comments. Besides earning points and badges, the most active user gets to feature on the Times Points leaderboard across participating sites. And it doesn’t end here; redeem your points for some exciting gifts. ("Times Points - About us," n.d., para. 2)

This text is revealing in several ways. First, the company acknowledges this is a straightforward loyalty program, which is the gamification root metaphor. Times Points does not claim that the gamified approach triggers audience empowerment or making news fun. Second, participants of the loyalty program are always addressed as users. The words ‘audience,’ ‘readers,’ or even ‘citizens’ appear nowhere in the text. Third, the system rewards creating or promoting content on the sites. And finally, readers can enjoy benefits beyond the digital rewards by redeeming points for gifts. Rewards and gifts are the sources that legitimate gamification. What makes this a case of gamification of journalism is the fact that Times Points is deployed by a digital news publication and news readers interact with it.
Game-structure and interaction mapping

The Times Points rule system is summarized on the website as: “earn points for engaging with your favorite TIL (Times Internet Ltd.) Network sites and transacting on Times Points Debit Card”, as seen in Figure 9. To explain how the system works, the website breaks the process in four specific steps: 1) registering on the Times Internet Network; 2) performing activities on their partner sites; 3) earning points and unlocking badges; and 4) redeeming points for free gifts. However, the system is more complex and intricate than that, both individually for each user and the scale of the aggregated data. Figure 9 shows a section of the sign-up page, where the system displays the total number of activities performed, badges unlocked, and users engaged, along with the latest three recorded activities. If these figures are correct, and there is no reason to believe they are not, the sheer volume of data created by this system is enormous.

![Earn Points for engaging with your favourite TIL Network sites and transacting on Times Points Debit Card](Image)

Figure 9 – Times Points system’s sign-in page

The loyalty program is transparent about what it aims to achieve: maximizing the number of engaged users. As of spring 2018, Times Points claimed to have 26 million ‘engaged users,’ however, it is unclear what an engaged user is. Most probably is the number of users who signed-up. I did not find a single
respondent who could describe in precise terms what counts as an engaged user. The basis of norms within the system was users’ engagement with the system’s activities.

The types of activities that require system interaction are broadly classified into: a) content consumption such as reading articles, watching videos or photos, and listening to music; b) content creation such as creating articles, writing reviews, and creating playlists; c) sharing content on social networking sites; and d) generating user data, such as adding information to the user profile or paying with the Times Point debit card. The goal of the system is to incentivize users to return to the site as often as possible and perform these activities. The outcomes of these activities are enhanced traffic and richer user data; combined, these outcomes increase the value of advertising on the site and help with internal development and marketing.

**Game elements inventory**

Times Points spans 19 publications. The system uses the same game dynamics and mechanics in all of them. However, there are a few game components that are specific to each publication. Figure 10 shows the set of badges specific to the Times of India.

![Figure 10 – Times Points’ set of badges for the Times of India](image)

Relationship was the overarching game dynamic in the Times Points loyalty program. The system tries to establish a relationship of familiarity and personalization with the audience. It tries to gather as much information about
users to provide them with a better user experience to them that strengthens that relationship and hence their loyalty.

The main game mechanics used in the system are rewards and feedback. The entire system is geared to receiving information about patterns of behavior and enticing them. To motivate readers, the system relies on the mechanism of feedback about how the user is doing, accompanied by rewards readers. Competition, accumulation, and loss aversion are other game mechanics used in the system, articulated through the leaderboards and points that are wasted if they are not used within a year. Accumulation is the *basis of strategy* of the system. Users are expected to acquire points as the system currency. However, the system needs to make sure there is a reason for users to spend resources. Loss aversion is the *informal control mechanism*, as it breaks the cycle of accumulation, as users must spend their points or they will lose them.

The game components used by Times Points are very simple. However, the way the system combines them is more complex. The game components present in the system are:

- **Points.** Most activities use points as a primary rewarding mechanism. Furthermore, other game mechanics such as levels, are based on points. While points accumulate as users interact with the system, there is a time dimension to points. There is a distinction to Lifetime Earnings (total amount of points received in the system) and Total Redeemable Points (points received in the last year and that can be exchanged for gifts).

- **Levels.** Levels are used to place users in different status levels. The system uses the word “status” when assessing users’ levels. These levels show progress in the system, are defined by how many points a user has and are visually represented by badges from Bronze to Diamond.

- **Progress bars.** There are two ways the system uses progress bars. First, they visualize the transition from a level to the next level. Second, status bars visualize the percentage of completeness of a user’s profile.

- **Ranks.** Each user has a unique rank in the system, which is based on that user’s number of points. This is the aggregated ranked against all users in the system, across all publications. Ranks are based on points obtained during the last year, but can be filtered according to publication, day, week, month, and year.
• Leaderboards. Leaderboards are used to visualize users’ status compared to other users. These are based on ranks, which are based on points. The general leaderboard is called the ‘Global Status’, as shown in Figure 11.

• Badges. Times Points uses different badges for each publication. Of the eleven badges that are specific to the Times of India, only the ‘News King’ badge rewards users for interacting with the news. A ‘cheat sheet’ explains how to unlock the badge, as seen in Figure 11. Badges have a gradation in levels (from 1 to 7) based on points.

• Physical gifts. While these are mostly discounts in affiliated third-party companies, they are a motivator for users who find digital rewards less appealing. The basis for redeeming these gifts is the number of points earned in the last year.

In Figure 11, under News King, there is the ‘Cheat sheet’ that explains how to accomplish things in the system. Cheat sheets are important because they are the basis of attention in the system. These sheets articulate how users can acquire specific resources, but also aim to establish a relationship with the audience, as an informal way of offering inside information about how to move forward.

![Figure 11 – News King and Global Status explained in the Times Points system](image)

**Knowledge organization and reach**

One of the key factors of this gamified system is that it runs at a different layer than the editorial content. It gamifies how users interact with that content, but it does not affect the content directly in itself. All user data used by the system is visible in the user dashboard, which is accessible through the website or mobile app, as shown in Figure 12. The dashboard is the gamification source of identity, as it aggregates all the user data that is relevant in the system. The user
status, number points, number of badges unlocked, and the products that can be redeemed are displayed, along with pointers on how to increase each of these rewards.

Figure 12 – User dashboard in the Times Points system

Regarding its reach, Times Points serves the entire *Times of India* website, along with a large part of Times Internet’s digital portfolio. Thus, this gamified system is an organization-wide loyalty program that is not part of the editorial content, but that happens to reward and entice consuming news. The ‘global status’ of users across the entire network is the gamification *source of authority*, as it establishes the rank of users and their loyalty and engagement with Times Internet. Figure 13 shows my dashboard and how is connected to all publications in the group, called here ‘Channels’.

Times Points runs as an independent department within the Times Media Group and it has its own objectives. However, it is implemented on all websites of the group, regardless of their objects. The apparent paradox is that a gamified system that sits at the periphery of the *Times of India* is a core feature of its digital product.

**Game experience and aesthetics**

The narrative behind the Times Points gamified system is simple: join, perform activities, earn points, redeem points, and come back to the site. Other than that, there is no attempt to create an immersive game-like environment or to
transform the activity of news consumption. Times Internet is open about the fact that the system is a loyalty program, which means it places strategic game elements in the website interface as rewards. However, Times Points combines game components and sets arbitrary value and time limits to the point currency in the system. Thus, the gamification economic system is a command economy, in which the exchange system – from points to physical gifts – is controlled by Times Points.

The aesthetics of the interface do not disrupt the function of the news site. Incidentally, since 2014 there has been a redesign process through which the Times Points system has limited its exposure to non-playing users. Increasingly, most components blend in with the rest of the website and are relegated to the user dashboard and the mobile app, instead of being displayed on the main site.

Sometime during 2017, the leaderboard that had been always present on the site, was relegated to the dashboard only. And all the badges and status points connected to users have been moved to the comments section. Since June 2018, the Times Points system has been discontinued for users outside of India. This means that users accessing the service from IPs located outside the country cannot log into the system and, for those users, game components are no longer visible on the Times of India’s website.
Constructing and implementing gamification at the *Times of India*

The process of how the *Times of India* constructed and implemented gamification was much more complex than the other three cases. This is because the system was not developed by the *Times of India*. Instead, Times Points has its own department, within the subsidiary Times Internet. There seem to be no organizational connections between the *Times of India* and Times Points beyond the implementation of the system.

Therefore, to understand gamification at the Indian publication, I had to interview people who did not work for the *Times of India*. Instead, I interviewed five employees of Times Internet in key areas of the Times Points program. Table 11 shows the interviewees for this section.

Table 11 – Interviewees who produced the gamified-system at the *Times of India*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quoted as</th>
<th>Role at Times Internet</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOI03</td>
<td>Product Head</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gurgaon</td>
<td>2016-08-20</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI04</td>
<td>Brand Manager</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gurgaon</td>
<td>2016-07-08</td>
<td>Google Hangouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI05</td>
<td>Senior Technology Officer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Noida</td>
<td>2017-04-10</td>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI10</td>
<td>Analytics Manager</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Noida</td>
<td>2017-04-01</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI12</td>
<td>Product Manager</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>New Delhi</td>
<td>2017-04-17</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lack of involvement of the *Times of India* in the development of the loyalty program that is embedded in their website was something I had not expected when I started this project. Times Points was implemented and deployed by a group of employees who worked within the media conglomerate, but had technical and business roles, and had no contact with the editorial process. This section is divided into four main themes: peripheral identities, organization goals, loyalty and user data, and integration and metrics.

*Peripheral identities*

The creators of the Times Points loyalty program neither self-identified as journalists nor did they self-identify as employees of the *Times of India*. Instead, they saw their role at Times Internet as business developers. Regardless of having a technological, analytical or commercial positions, their role in the organization was the business side and not the editorial side. In fact, they had barely any contact with journalists over at the *Times of India*, as an analytics manager explained:
We don’t regularly contact the editorial department. Editorial is a completely separate group. If they want to get some inputs from analytics, then they can come to us, but it’s a completely different department. (TOI10)

According to the interviewees, the knowledge and analytics created by the Times Points system was used for branding and business development. No direct lines of information were established between Times Points and the Times of India, which is very surprising. Scholarship on the convergence of journalistic roles point to an increasing integration of roles in the newsroom (Larrondo et al., 2016; Singer, 2004). Instead, Times Media Group keeps the organizational structure separated, with clear roles in the corporation. The journalistic root metaphor is the corporation as hierarchy. With this separation, I was interested in how different organizations within the media group decided to integrate the Times Points system. A product manager explained the process in the following terms.

We go to the organizations from the Times Group and try to show them the program’s potential, where the user numbers grow and also come back again and again. Then, once top management approves the integration, we tell them, “this is happening so get ready”. Then we define the activities to reward, we assess how viable it is, and we integrate Times Points on that organization. (TOI12)

Implementing the loyalty program within the Times of India was a decision taken by Times Internet’s top management and deployed by a group of people who not only did not self-identify as journalists, but who prided themselves as being at the forefront of technological media innovation. This means that while top management was source of authority, technology was at the center of their implementation team’s source of identity. They saw themselves as part of a pioneering conglomerate that was pushing India’s internet forward. A project manager at Times Points explained:

If you look at Times Internet as an organization, then you can say we are the building blocks of Indian internet industry. We are the early pioneers and we have a good understanding of the product. We know we’ve probably built of one of the best businesses online. (TOI03)

The distance between the employees at Times Internet and the journalists at the Times of India shows that the first group was peripheral to journalism and
their self-perceived roles barely qualified as newworkers. They were not interested in news. This was clear when they discussed the goals of the gamified system.

Organizational goals

The overarching goal of the Times Points system was user loyalty. More concretely, the system sought to incentivize them to return, engage them with the site, and learn about them. A product manager explained that:

Times Points was more about getting the user involved and engaged in what they were coming to the site for. Times of India is the largest read daily newspaper site in probably all languages over across geographies. So the problem or the challenge was never to get the users, but the challenge was always to identify them and get them engaged more. We wanted to get more details about the users and probably then serve them some kind of a customized and more engaging content. So if users have the habit of reading our paper, we wanted to reward them to be more involved in the process. That’s where this program will came in. (TOI03)

However, a brand manager had a different view of the system’s goal:

Our aim is mostly to get the metrics. As far as the business goals the idea is to get more and more people. So that is obviously the first objective of any company. The second goal, and we all know it comes a close second is to keep the quality. Unfortunately, I must say, there has been criticism about some of the content in the past couple of years, about what is posted online or printed in the paper but that is just the part of the business so we’ll have to do that as well. (TOI04)

Thus, Times Points’ goal was also to learn about users individual, to identify them among other users, and make them interact with the system. Journalistic norms or quality news came after the business objectives. Rewards and personalizing the news experience offered a way to achieve those objectives.

Times Point was presented as a loyalty program. But, importantly, loyalty functioned as a set of metrics and behaviors that would be collected and analyzed by the Times of India. As an analytics manager mentioned:

The Times Points is devised as a loyalty program, and it tracks users based on how frequent they come, how much they read, and what kind of interest they have. What kind of segments they are interested in. It’s completely towards
Loyalty and engagement seemed to be technologically constructed by Times Points analysts, based on patterns of behavior that could be tracked and measured.

**Loyalty and user data**

As I have discussed above, the role of the audience in news production is a recurring topic of discussion in journalism studies (Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2018; Zamith, 2018a). In the case of the *Times of India*, the audience is the customer, not the public. Thus, the newworkers at Times Points conceptualized loyalty and knowledge about the customer as a competitive commercial advantage. A production manager connected gamification and loyalty:

> It is a basic requirement of any business to know who their customers are. So it is important to have this kind of programs. That’s why we chose to have some kind of a loyalty program or a gamification service. We see gamification as a layer on the top of loyalty so that we get to know users and also motivate them to perform certain actions on the site. Loyalty and gamification go hand-in-hand and they layer on top of each other. Gamification without a customer loyalty is going to fail and customer loyalty without any kind of gamification will also fail in the long term. How we want a user to interact with the system is, coming, consuming and giving some kind of a reaction. We want to get some kind of a two-way interaction with the consumer coming to our sites. (TOI03)

The idea of two-way interaction with the user is one that repeats in all cases and is reminiscent of what Lewis and colleagues (2014) call reciprocal journalism. However, in this case, the reciprocal relationship was not between journalists and audiences, but between news organizations and their customers. The *basis of strategy* was to increase the size of the conglomerate. The dialogic communication with the user was outsourced to the gamified system, whose aim was to motivate users to perform activities. Interviewees valued loyalty through interactivity and for making users return to the site. In their narratives, informing the public or any other journalistic goals were not central features in the system. A project manager clarified this:
We want to establish a relationship with the mass of youngsters and the general audience. We need to know about every interest they have in different news because then, we can target them more effectively. If they interact and engage with the site, we can convert them into returning users. (TOI12)

The system used gamification as a tool to track and analyze behavior, and to generate habits among users. Respondents seemed to believe that the loyalty program was not just about clicks, but about understanding users. An analytics manager pointed out that:

This is a long-term project, and we try to learn about every user. It’s different from day-to-day activities, and behavior. It’s a long project. And you devise it to understand the loyalty of a particular user. We work towards that only. (TOI10)

Integration and metrics
The integration of Times Points in the Times of India was a process overseen centrally by Times Internet employees. Most rewards need to be understood through an economic balance between business objectives and expected user behavior. The informal control mechanism is the organization culture and its strong hierarchical disposition. The negotiations for how to reward different activities in each Times Points integration came down to detailed estimates about potential revenue. An example of this was given by a project manager.

Let’s say I propose my manager to give each user five times the number of points for reading an article in Times of India. He might say that this is too much to give, what is the reason behind so many points, what is the potential number of users and what is the type of revenue for that. So we have to do lots of calculations about how many users will we attract and how much revenue are making through adds so that we are able to make enough revenue and at the same time giving all the points. So we negotiate with top management about the details to make sure the site will get more revenue as well as we will get more engagement. (TOI12)

There are two main points to unpack here. First, the complexity in calculating how much ‘loyalty’ is worth. These calculations were made based on metrics provided by the system, and the goal was to increase revenue and engagement at the same time. However, much engagement, without the right amount of revenue, may cause a loss to the organization. Second, the relevance of top
management was crucial in making decisions about the right balance of rewards vis-à-vis potential revenue. Moreover, interviewees claimed Times Points did not affect content, but instead the interactions between users and content.

This narrative supported the separation of business and editorial departments. The viability of the newspaper is for businesspeople. Quality journalism is for the newsroom. While there are many accounts showing that this separation is disappearing (Coddington, 2015; Ferrer-Conill, 2016b), this narrative of separation is well represented in this case. According to the interviewees, the integration process did not interfere with the content of each publication. A project manager explained this in the following way:

The journalism part is something that is not being influenced by Times Points. Of course we have to make sure that the site is connected and that users get points for reading the news. So our work is to get the loop in, that people get their points and rewards according to the news that are out there. But Times Points will not influence what is the story, or what does it say. (TOI12)

This interviewee’s perception was that, because Times Points is layered on top of the Times of India’s interface without the intervention of journalists, it had no direct effect on the editorial content. Thus, the decision making process is also divided. Editorial decisions are made by journalists in the newsroom, and business and technical decisions are made elsewhere in the media group. It is unclear if the perception of separation is real or not in practice, but it helps establish a degree of legitimacy over editorial content. At the same time, it shows the lack of autonomy regarding how technology and business decisions impact the journalistic product. Moreover, because these decisions converge and affect the interface, it is possible that when users received rewards for fulfilling activities, the metrics showed audience content preferences, which in turn would influence the newsroom to favor that type of content in future stories. Nevertheless, within the Times Groups, a managerial capitalism served as the organizational economic system, in which a top-down approach places managers as central agents of power. In the interviewees, nothing suggested that gamification was led by individual efforts. Change at Times Internet was directed from the top.
Perceived impact of gamification at the *Times of India*

Recruiting newworkers from the *Times of India* to participate in this study was the most challenging. The first group of potential respondents I approached responded with something along the lines of “I am not the right person for this, I know nothing about gamification.” After this unsuccessful first approach, I rephrased my request to incorporate, in addition to gamification, challenges to user engagement, data, and technology in digital journalism as parts of the discussion. This turned out to be a much more successful strategy, and I understood the reasons for the negative responses I had received as soon as I started interviewing these group of newworkers.

The newworkers working at the *Times of India* whom I interviewed had similar backgrounds. All interviewees self-identified as journalists and had an education in journalism. Only two of them worked just for the print version. The other six had extensive experience with the digital outlet of the *Times of India*. Table 12 shows the list of newworkers interviewed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quoted as</th>
<th>Role at Times of India</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOI01</td>
<td>Content Officer</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Noida</td>
<td>2016-07-10</td>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI02</td>
<td>Assistant Editor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>New Delhi</td>
<td>2016-07-09</td>
<td>Google Hangouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI06</td>
<td>Assistant Editor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kolkata</td>
<td>2016-09-02</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI07</td>
<td>National Features Editor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>New Delhi</td>
<td>2017-04-05</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI08</td>
<td>Senior Copy Editor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>New Delhi</td>
<td>2016-08-31</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI09</td>
<td>Senior Assistant Editor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>New Delhi</td>
<td>2016-08-29</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI11</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Noida</td>
<td>2017-05-05</td>
<td>Google Hangouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI13</td>
<td>Assistant Editor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>New Delhi</td>
<td>2017-05-19</td>
<td>Google Hangouts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most questions directly about gamification were met with vagueness or a lack of interest. Indeed, most interviewees did not know much if anything about gamification, and only had limited knowledge of how the loyalty program worked. I assumed that because the decision to implement Times Points was made by another company within the conglomerate, and newworkers at the *Times of India* had no managing power over it, they did not pay attention to it. This assumption is supported by how interviewees referred to both organizations. A content officer reflected about Times Points and *Times of India* separation in the following terms:
I guess Times Points is organizing all the data. And it is a way to keep the audience captured, not to lose them. If you give some prizes, and if you get some points and if you give them badges, then definitely most of them would like to remain active with that news group or entertainment group, so I guess it is just that way. However, I am not into the technicalities. Every department, and every site, not only Times of India has different ways of working. Times Points people work in a different ways, we do not know their technicalities. (TOI01)

Interviewees at the Times of India saw the loyalty program and the employees at Times Points as something external, imposed on them. The integration process was not a collaborative initiative but a strategic move. Gamification was seen by newsworkers as a technical add-on happening at the periphery of the Times of India. However, in the organizational structure, the basis of norms resided in the employment in the firm and the basis of attention was their status in the hierarchy. Their roles as journalists granted them power in the newsroom, but took the power away from them when decisions on technical solutions had to be implemented.

Gamification? What gamification?

Interviewees generally avoided discussing gamification. They were open to discuss the loyalty program, but most did not see a connection between the concept of gamification and the loyalty program. However, even at the loyalty program level, the degree of knowledge about it was low. An assistant editor, working only for the print edition, did not know the Times Points system even existed, but had this to say about it:

Really I am not familiar with it at all. After you sent me that first email, I googled Times Points and I saw what kind of stuff it is. I am nearly 50 years old, so I am a little different with these kinds of things, you know. That’s my age coming in between. I believe something is colliding here now. This is a huge corporation, right? And it has costs. They give us a good salary, very good salary by Indian standards and they have to make huge offices and the overall cost is huge. So somebody has to pay for that, you know. Otherwise we lose our job, as simple as that. The big question here is how much can you corporate journalism? In that compulsion to earn money what are we compromising? When you give points for sharing something, and when I know that if I share 50 stories and I will get a set of bed sheets, which costs
100 rupees. What I will do, why should I even get to read what is there. I will just share it, you know. (TOI06)

Two insights can be extracted from this statement. First, an organization the scale of Times Internet has a commercial drive that might be at odds with the professional goals of journalism. To what extent can journalism align itself with corporate goals without having to compromise its values? This is an acknowledgment of the dualism of opposing journalistic logics (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). Second, it highlights the skepticism over what the system rewards and why. If the reward is in sharing, then there is no need for reading; it is enough to complete the activity. Consuming the news may be a secondary goal.

Not all views on the loyalty program were negative. In fact, interviewees were more positive than negative when describing the system and its goals. The needs of modern journalism to attract users seems to be the most common justification for an approach like Times Points, despite the game elements. An assistant editor explained:

I would say it’s a positive strategy. That gives a platform to readers to express their opinions. But those badges, crowns, points seem a bit childish. If I have something to say, I will do it, point or no point. Besides, if we don’t give good reading stuff to readers, publications will die in spite of digital reach. It is content, content, content, and nothing else. These systems do two things, to get more clicks, and to get more engagement. Now it does not add value to get clicks. But it’s important for digital advert revenue. The more clicks you can show, the more you can charge. (TOI02)

Newsworkers were aware of the need to sustain the publication economically, and if such a system helped increase revenue, they tended to see it as a positive development. However, in their role as content creators, newsworkers prioritized making content that enticed the audience, instead of points and badges. Moreover, they saw the loyalty program as something separate from the content and their practice. A senior copy editor made the following point:

I don’t focus on these points because I think it is related to the advertisement department. But, yeah, it is good for engaging people on the website. When they comment on any story they get points, when they write in a blog on the website, they get more points. That increases interactivity and engagement between the website and the user. But from our end, we don’t know what they click on, what they like or not, and we don’t interact with the website.
So it has little meaning when you are writing a piece. It’s out of our hands. (TOI08)

All respondents thought they were not affected by the system, and that this was not a concern to them, especially for those who work predominantly in print: “Yeah it’s really not a problem. I mean the game is not really relevant in my work-related area and in print. So it’s not my area of concern” (TOI09). In this case, not even data and metrics from the loyalty program seemed to make a difference. An editor claimed:

I don’t need to access to any particular data in loyalty program because the loyalty program is primarily used to see when readers comment or read a story. But data on signed users doesn’t directly influence my leadership writing my stories. I don’t particularly need access to the real-time data of Times Points. But I do get daily, weekly, and monthly reports. (TOI11)

Finally, it is worth discussing how an assistant editor made sense of the *Times of India*’s application of gamification in the context of India, and why she thought gamification may be catching on in that country.

What I understand from it that was for any big brand the challenge is to retain loyalty for the next 20-30 years at the time when technology is moving so fast. So, if we are using game techniques and loyalty programs may be because India is also a very young demographic. The new target is an urban English reader between 20 and 35. They want things fast, they want to win things, and they want vouchers for this and that. These are the future readers 20 years out, these are going to be the people in their 40-50s. So, I think they are trying to latch on the younger crowd through all these things. (TOI13)

While the interviewee considers that this is a specific characteristic for the Indian markets, the underlying idea – an attempt to capture new, younger audiences that will be the future news readers – resonates in the three cases in which the audience is the main target of gamification.

*Journalistic quality*

The issue of journalistic quality and the importance of content were contentious themes in the interviews. The idea that what should be engaging is the content often appears in the interviews. An editor explained:

I think what ultimately engages people is good content that is relevant to them, content they are looking for. No amount of loyalty points will be given
if you don’t make people seek out for a good content. Especially when they can’t find the content that they are looking for, then they go to social media.
The game is perhaps not the primary reason why they come to us. (TOI11)

However, interviewees expressed concerns about the dwindling quality of the Times of India’s content. The general feeling was that the publication was undergoing a slow transition towards entertainment and quantification. And that trend was seen by respondents as the reason pushing the Times of India towards implementing gamification. An assistant editor claimed that:

Times of India’s trend is going towards sensationalism and also towards taking over social media whether they have relevant content or not. Reporters are asked to break stories regularly on Twitter. So it’s about quantity over quality. And all stories that come up are not story worthy. I don’t think we would’ve had the loyalty program in 2009. (TOI02)

The division between print and digital was also an important point for respondents. Respondents thought the print edition had better quality than the digital outlet. Perhaps the two formats carry different traditions that could explain the loyalty program. An assistant editor said:

They are two divisions actually. The E-paper, which is basically a duplicate of what comes out in the broadsheet also has some of the news published in the print paper uploaded. Editorials, features, updates etc., but not all of them are published. But as far as I know, as far as I have seen, there is a difference. I feel both of them (newspaper and digital) are not very good quality, but I feel that the website is very scarttered. (TOI06)

Interviewees saw the print version under control of journalists, and therefore more professional and higher quality. They lacked the autonomy to run the website like the paper edition because the departments were separated and there was a strong influence by technologists on the web. They associated the lack of autonomy in the digital format with less professionalism because the web was not in their control. However, while respondents considered print and digital to be two different entities, they recognized that, somehow, the engagement generated by the Times Points may spill over the print version. As a content officer explained:
Even if things change, and Times Point is just digital, you can see in the digital Times of India network that this is the way to attract audience, and that will help keep them engaged with Times of India and its subsidiaries. (TOI01)

This respondent considered Time Points a viable option to engage audiences. However, beyond the (dis)connection between paper and digital editions, the emerging narrative was that interviewees did not believe that gamification had an impact on journalistic practice at the Times of India, but that it may be important for the commercial aspect of the organization. Moreover, most newsworkers were unaware of the Times Points program and its functionality. The fact that it is run externally by Times Internet did not help newsworkers feel that the system was a part of their work. However, they saw the loyalty program as a necessary initiative to attract new sources of revenue, because the source of legitimacy was the company’s position in the market.

Adherence to institutional logics

Assigning Times of India’s adherence to the institutional logics of journalism and gamification is arguably simpler than in the other cases. The apparently clear-cut alignment may stem from the fact that the gamification system was created by an external department, detached from the Times of India. Seeing how the Times Points is implemented across 19 digital publications and that the creators and implementers are business and technical people with no apparent collaboration with journalists already questions the primacy of journalistic professional norms and values. The data suggest that there is a separation between the editorial content and the gamified system, only connected by user behavior. Table 13 summarizes the combined elemental categories of both institutional orders.

With very few exceptions, all the symbolic attributes signaling adherence to specific institutional logics point to the ideal types outlined in Chapter 4. From the identities of the people involved in its creation and implementation – the technical and business employees working in a different subsidiary – to the type of goals and ways that the game mechanics were conceptualized, the gamification of the Times of India adhered to the commercial logic of journalism. The developing team did not prioritize any normative or professional aspects of journalism. The organizational culture and corporative hierarchy prioritized business objectives.
As similar clear-cut result is found in the gamification institutional logic. There was no attempt to transform the process of reading the news. Developers placed all efforts on making users do activities that would lead to keep them coming back. Loyalty was the utility Times Internet sought to get out of the Times Points gamified system. Thus, in the case of the Times of India the prevalent gamification institutional logic is the utilitarian logic.

**Summary**

At the Times of India, findings show that gamification can also operate on a separate level than the editorial content. In this case, the game mechanics and the news coexisted in the interface but had very little to do with one and another. Furthermore, not only there was minimal interaction between the loyalty program and the news, but there was also minimal contact between the editorial staff of the publication and the creators and developers of the Times Points program. Gamification here served as a motivator for users to return and generate metrics and sentiment data. Journalists at the Times of India barely noticed any effects, because they had no interaction with the system. However, perhaps due to distance, their overall approach to gamification was positive. They saw it as a tool with the potential to engage young audiences.
Chapter 9: Case D – Al Jazeera

This chapter presents the results and analysis of the fourth case. It is presented last simply because the gamification it examines was the last of all four to be implemented.

*Al Jazeera’s* Pirate Fishing is one of the most heavily gamified news stories out there. The way the interface displayed the game elements created a highly immersive storytelling technique that rested upon transmedia content and interactive features. The gamified system was enclosed in a single story and aimed to make an impact on the ways users interact with the news. Such a game-intensive case fits this study because it uses gamification on a large scale, and also because it provides a transformed news experience for audiences. In an attempt to offer a maximum variance approach, this final case is a fitting complement to show a wide array of gamified implementations in news media.

To analyze the case, I follow a similar analytical strategy to that used in previous chapters. I start by offering a context of the case and how the news organization deployed the gamified system. Then I discuss the results of interviews conducted with the producers of the story, followed by the results of the interviews with nine newsworkers who were not involved in the gamification project. The chapter concludes with an assessment of how the case adheres to journalism and gamification logics.

**Contextualizing the case**

Aiming to fill the void left by the closure of the BBC’s Arabic-language channel due to a feud with Saudi Arabia, *Al Jazeera* began operations in 1996. Funded by the ruling Emir of Qatar, the new media organization employed several journalists who had been working at the BBC, bringing with them the BBC’s norms and values (“Why Al Jazeera is under threat,” 2017). Owned by the Qatari government, *Al Jazeera* can be considered a state-owned public service broadcaster situated in the Middle-East.

Spurred by the abolition of media censorship in Qatar between 1995 and 1998, *Al Jazeera* quickly became one of the largest and most influential news organizations in the Arab world. Such an increase in scale generated extensive scholarly interest (see Bahry, 2001; Miles, 2005; Seib, 2005, 2008). In 2006, *Al Jazeera* launched *Al Jazeera English*, to compensate for the lack of English
reporting based in the Middle East. As Powers (2012) describes, the enterprise aimed to become a global news entity, predominantly funded by the Qatari royal family, and not expecting to become profitable in the near-term. I agree with Usher (2013) when she claims that the apparent lack of economic pressure, among other things, makes Al Jazeera a fertile ground for research. In a study in which the tensions between the commercial and professional logics of journalism are a central aspect, Al Jazeera’s minimal commercial urges may have had an impact on how it has produced.

After twelve years, Al Jazeera English is a highly decentralized and international operation, employing many anglophone journalists or newsworkers who had experience in western news organizations. Its global aim is clearly described in its institutional statement:

The network’s news channels and platforms have an extensive newsgathering reach with over eighty bureaus across all the continents of the world. Al Jazeera’s in-depth global approach to journalism, allied with a commitment to giving ‘voice to the voiceless’, has won it numerous awards and plaudits over the years. (“Al Jazeera - About,” n.d.)

The ‘voice to the voiceless’ motto reflects Al Jazeera’s aim to be considered a credible alternative to traditional western media. The organization claims their coverage is universal. Its origins in the Arab world helped set its editorial focus, while its journalistic background rooted in the Anglo-Saxon journalistic tradition established objectivity, autonomy, and credibility as professional aspirations. Moreover, the lack of economic pressures on Al Jazeera facilitates its goal to fulfill the professional logic of journalism.

**Gamification at Al Jazeera – gamified-system analysis**

The transition to digital media has afforded journalism with new ways to reach and interact with audiences. For the past decade, multimedia and interactive projects have reformulated how digital journalism operates (Deuze, 2004; Thurman & Lupton, 2008), dedicating special attention to storytelling techniques that may capture the audience (Dowling & Vogan, 2015). In 2014, Al Jazeera’s senior reporter Juliana Ruhfus transformed her documentary film Pirate Fishing into an interactive online news story that was both innovative and illustrative of the investigative journalism process. With the help of Altera
Studio, an Italian digital media company, Ruhfus created a multimedia gamified story, using game elements as an immersive user experience. *Al Jazeera* hosted the web documentary on a separate site that is still available online. An introductory site for Pirate Fishing sums it up:

Al Jazeera is launching a ground-breaking interactive web game that allows the gamer to learn how to expose the multi-million dollar illegal fishing trade affecting West Africa’s poorest people. In the interactive investigation tool developed by Italy’s Altera Studio team, gamers can become an Al Jazeera journalist, gathering evidence, and notes, and build a case to report on the environmental crime of illegal fishing in Sierra Leone, a crime stealing a precious protein source for millions. The tool highlights the investigative journalism process of evidence-collection, fact-checking and note-taking. (“Al Jazeera’s ground-breaking gamification of current affairs,” 2014)

The Pirate Fishing story embodied the multimodality of digital long-form journalism (Hiippala, 2017), and it did so by combining audio, video, text, maps, and interactivity into one digital artifact, visually detached from the rest of *Al Jazeera’s* content. The web documentary tried to mimic the process of journalistic investigation. The gamification *root metaphor* was the professional experience of being an investigative reporter. The use of the words ‘evidence-collection,’ ‘fact checking’ and ‘investigative journalism process’ invoked journalistic norms that were infused throughout the site. In the story, users were in charge of investigating by themselves in an interactive and immersive storytelling technique. Thus, the gamification *source of legitimacy* was the immersion in the story.

**Game-structure and interaction mapping**

The entry point to the story simulated an email from the commissioning editor of *Al Jazeera* with an assignment request. Figure 14 shows the home page to the Pirate Fishing site. The message read:

Hi there. Can you join an investigation into the multimillion-dollar illegal fishing trade? If you and the team can manage to track down one of the ‘pirate trawlers’ that operate illegally in Sierra Leone’s waters, I will run the story. Sierra Leone is one of the poorest nations in the world. Its waters contain some of the richest fish stocks, but pirate trawlers are stealing the country’s wealth and depriving its people of an essential food source. Can you fly to
Sherbro Island in Sierra Leone and help our reporter and her team in their investigation?

Figure 14 – Homepage of the Pirate Fishing story

After accepting the assignment, the user received the instructions of the gamified system. Thus, fulfilling the assignment was the gamification basis of norms. The storyline followed the stereotypical narrative of investigative journalism. Starting as a junior researcher, users had to watch clips, read text bits, analyze maps, and interact with the system. By interacting with the content, users earned points that helped increase their status. Moreover, users could classify and file different clues as evidence, notes, or background information in a virtual notebook. Interaction was how the system tracked user behavior, but it also was the basis of strategy for users. The more they interacted with the system the better they performed. During the story, collecting and classifying evidence served as the gamification basis of attention. Users who filed the media correctly were awarded points and badges that would also promote users’ positions and allow them to advance through the different stages of production. These instructions can be seen in Figure 15.

The entire story was divided into four stages, which could be covered without completing all the tasks or even going up in user status. The four main stages took place in different locations: 1) Sherbro Island Delta: Investigate illegal fishing; 2) Freetown: Contact the authorities; 3) Freetown: Discover the identity of the pirate trawler; and 4) The ocean: Board the pirate trawler.
Advancing in the stages meant also advancing in the journalistic status, which was the informal control mechanism in the system.

Figure 15 – Instructions for the Pirate Fishing story

Pirate Fishing excelled in its interactive narrative. From beginning to end, the system addressed users as though they were members of the investigative team. It was not only game components, but also automated messages from Juliana and other journalists who reached out to share information. Thus, being a member of the investigative team was the source of authority. The microsite did not require users to create an account; the site only prompted the consumption of information. It was possible to share the piece, but there were no rewards for sharing on social media.

As opposed to the previous cases, Pirate Fishing had an end. After completing all four stages, users received a congratulatory message with a summary of the impact of the investigation. This confirms that the gamification source of identity was rooted in the self-satisfaction of being part of investigative journalism that had a visible impact in society.

Congratulations! You’ve done excellent work and will get a promotion, but more importantly, following your investigation the Ocean 3 was fined $155,000 by the Sierra Leonean authorities. And that made a real difference!
In the 12 months after the ship was fined, the entire fleet of around 10 South Korean pirate trawlers stayed out of Sierra Leonean waters.

This account corroborates that the main goal of the gamified system was to inform the audience. The amount of content used in the system is staggering, and the game elements were designed to entice users to consume the content.

**Game elements inventory**

Of the four cases examined in this study, Pirate Fishing was the most game-like. Its capacity to become an immersive story contributed to its gamefulness without necessarily using many game elements. The system was a closed artifact hosted on a separate microsite. The goal was to consume the story from beginning to end, and the game elements sought to keep users engaged with the story.

The main game dynamic the system used was the narrative. The story was divided into four stages and 32 steps that users needed to cover. Steps represented micro-milestones in the narrative, comprising watching videos, reading messages, or changing the scenery. The secondary dynamic was progress, represented both in stages and in steps. The steps also acted as a countdown from the start to the end of the story.

![Figure 16 – Pirate Fishing’s gamified interface](image)

Four game mechanics supported the system: feedback, rewards, resources, and challenge. First, as users advanced in the story, they encountered feedback from...
the interface and from other members of the team. Second, as they interacted with the interface and consumed content, they received points and badges as rewards. Third, the notebook contained a collection of resources that users had to collect. Finally, the entire assignment was presented as a challenge that needed to be solved by the user.

Figure 16 shows a part of the interface but fails to give a full representation of its full immersion and complexity. Throughout the game interface, video, music, image, and text converge in a well-structured and lengthy story. These are the identifiable game elements in the system:

- Levels. Represented here by stages and steps, there were four stages in Pirate Fishing. Moreover, to complete the entire story, users needed to complete 32 steps. Levels represented an advancement in the story.
- Points. The system awarded ‘Investigation points’ to users who correctly classified information in the notebook or collected badges. Adding points was the mechanism by which users increased their status.
- Progress bars. While there were several mechanics indicating users’ progress in the story, a single progress bar showed how much content was left to reach the next stage.
- Ranks. The rank was called status and represented the users’ status in the story, from ‘Junior researcher’ to ‘Senior reporter.’ Ranks were different from levels because the game-system could be completed without increasing status, but not without moving to the next level.
- Badges. There were six badges: activist, city explorer, corruption investigation, ship spotter, technology expert, and undercover specialist. Users received them as they completed extra tasks.
- Collections. Users could collect different pieces of evidence, notes, and background items in their notebook. These were not achievements, but collections. Collections are different from badges in that the latter are visual representations of an achievement, and the former involve collecting a finite number of items.

From all the cases, this was the only one not using competition as a game mechanic. There was no visual feedback from other users participating, no leaderboards, and no other social graph. The user’s journey is what mattered.
That placed the symbolic economic system as personal capitalism, as the narrative was geared for personal advancement.

**Knowledge organization and reach**

Al Jazeera’s gamified system incentivized consuming content rather than creating it. Pirate Fishing was gamified at a single-story level. There is other gamified content produced by Al Jazeera English, but it does not share the same mechanics, storyline, or aesthetics. And the vast majority of content at Al Jazeera is not gamified at all.

Since Pirate Fishing used gamification as a storytelling technique, the editorial content was embedded in a multimodal interactive interface. The interface differed so much from regular news items that the project had to be hosted outside the regular content management system. For the most part, content comprised short video clips, text, maps, and visual clues. While it was possible to complete all four stages without watching all the films or reading all the text, all the steps that were connected to content that told a part of the story.

**Game experience and aesthetics**

A simple look at Pirate Fishing revealed a storytelling technique that was substantially different from traditional journalistic content. The design was immersive and gameful, looking more like a game than regular news.

The main attempt was to produce a game-like experience based on immersion. The background music and users’ ability to use a full-window mode maximized the sensory elements of the interface. Users were meant to interact with the content and gain the experience of being part of an investigation. The only dynamic that resembled a regular digital news article was vertical scrolling to navigate the story.

Within the system, users were free to engage with all the elements of the interface. While the story followed a linear trajectory, users still could decide how much they wanted to engage with the different game mechanics. It was not necessary to interact with all the mechanics to complete the story, affording a sense of user agency and autonomy.

Such an immersive approach signified an open attempt to transform the act of consuming the news. However, the gamified system also placed users in the position of reporters. Thus, the entire interface tried to evoke an emotional
response of importance and transcendence, especially when considering the relevance and difficulty of the story’s topic.

**Constructing and implementing gamification at Al Jazeera**

*Al Jazeera* has an innovation policy that resides partly within top management but is also open to journalists who want to pursue innovative approaches. This is in line with Usher’s (2013) findings that journalists’ perceptions of the financial stability of *Al Jazeera* had an impact on how the newsroom adopted innovation. On the one hand, the organization does not feel pressured to find technological solutions at a similar rate as for-profit organizations. On the other hand, the organization’s decentralized approach toward innovation allows individual newsworkers to take the initiative.

The Pirate Fishing story was spearheaded by one journalist who had the drive to turn a 50-minute documentary into a gamified web story. In this section, I present the results of interviews I conducted with four newsworkers who were influential in the production of the system, as seen in Table 14. None of these interviewees requested anonymity, and at least two of them are identifiable. Still, I opted to anonymize their names for consistency.

*Table 14 – Interviewees who produced the gamified system at Al Jazeera*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quoted as</th>
<th>Role at Al Jazeera</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AJ01</td>
<td>Senior Presenter</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2016-03-08</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ02</td>
<td>Creative Director</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>2016-03-12</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ03</td>
<td>Executive Producer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2016-03-18</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ04</td>
<td>Web Producer</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Doha</td>
<td>2016-07-03</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The four respondents were eager to participate in the study and to discuss the project. I interpret their enthusiasm as a result of their emotional connection and personal involvement with the story, developed as they turned it from an idea to a functioning gamified news story.

**Complementing identities**

All four interviewees self-identified as journalists. Even the creative director of the project, who did not work at *Al Jazeera*, had a background in journalism and documentary film. Most decisions were handled by a key celebrity journalist, establishing the informal control mechanisms. She had the vision of
the product and she shaped the regular production process to suit the project’s needs. However, for a project that was spearheaded by one journalist, one of the most relevant themes from the interviews was the importance of team dynamics in the production of each news piece. Each played their roles, but all understood and rooted for the story to be successful. The creative director had this to say:

We were lucky they (Al Jazeera) had an open mind to try something new, to get new audiences to explore, a new way to get to younger people. We are a very indy company, we are very strange. And we think that syncretism, if I may say so, is a big value. So a lot of the people who work with us they have different skills, in different fields. We think this is a value. So the gaming was in the project from the very beginning. It changed the shape during the project, and the ideas were from Juliana and from me. I think it has been really teamwork. (AJ02)

Syncretism is a fitting word that symbolizes how people with different roles within and outside the organization, and often with different journalistic ideas worked together. Thus, the root metaphor is the journalistic profession as relational work. A senior presenter recalls the importance of other profiles during the project, for example, when pitching the story the executive producer’s enthusiasm was crucial:

I was really lucky. I mean it was the right time, right place. I happened to pitch the story to a visionary person who liked the story and went for it. Without that executive producer, the story would not have been possible. (AJ01)

When asked about why he greenlighted the project, that executive producer commented on the merits of the story:

I came from television and filmmaking and then I went into running the Al Jazeera web. I love film video and documentaries, so I got the visual potential of it instantly. And maybe if I had been a web tech guy maybe it wouldn’t have clicked. But it was such a visual concept that made it easier for me to think this was really exciting and doable. I kept thinking “wow that’s amazing” so I was really up for experimenting, taking risks. We were starting to do quite a lot around data journalism and infographics and I was really interested in what we could do and how we could take the news alphabet and make it different. At the time this came along it kind of fit with the pattern of what I was looking to do with the website and make a mark. (AJ03)
This respondent had a suitable background for the project and said that someone with a more technically-oriented background might not have picked up such a visual storytelling project. Moreover, the notion of experimentation and risk-taking surfaced in interviews. The executive producer explicitly mentioned that he wanted to make a mark and to transform how journalism could be presented. This suggests that the *basis of strategy* for those involved in the production of the story was increasing personal reputation and that the symbolic *economic system* established during the production process was personal capitalism.

A web producer of the story shared a similar narrative. All the departments involved worked in concert to produce the story and to push forward something new and unique as Pirate Fishing:

> I had experience in documentary journalism. When Juliana came to Doha, specifically for this project, I connected her to the three departments that were involved in making this. That was the programming department, the online department, and the interactive department. The programming department usually doesn’t talk to those other departments, so it was really important just connecting the humans. And getting people in a room and talking about how to avail this project which was as a total first for Al Jazeera. We had never done anything like this before. And everyone was really on board with it. There wasn’t any convincing to do. Everyone was really behind Juliana on the project. (AJ04)

Departments that had few points of connection, including an external team in Italy, pulled together because they were creating something innovative and something they believed it. While individually, their personal expertise was their *source of legitimacy*, it was their association with quality journalism that provided them with a *source of identity*. It was a conscious attempt to complement and converge skills for that specific purpose. Once again, the convergence of new workers with different backgrounds in the newsroom was vital in the production process (Larrondo et al., 2016; Singer, 2004).

**Organizational goals**

Each new worker involved in Pirate Fishing had a personal goal in the creative process. However, there were three overarching organizational goals shared by all. First, experimenting with new ways to present journalistic content, a feature that resonates with the previous cases. As a creative director explained:
From my point of view, this has been total experimentation, and I really liked that it was an organic process of production. It has been very stressful, very difficult and in some moments very frustrating. But extremely rewarding in the end. (AJ02)

Second, creating a storytelling technique that could both entertain and engage readers while maintaining journalistic quality. A news organization that asserts its place in the industry as a quality journalism operation often connects the goal of technological innovation to normative aspects of journalism. A web producer made the following statement:

I started working with the programming department to bring the project into Al Jazeera and working with our technical partners in the interactive office trying to figure out, number one, how can we make this projects meet the editorial standards. I have just my experience with the Al Jazeera project, but I can imagine how different it could have for different organizations. Personally, I am really proud to have been a part of gamification of news where the journalism was so solid, and I think the end game was the journalism. (AJ04)

Even at the individual level, the importance of organizational goals is present in interviewees’ narratives. In a different news organization, maybe the prevalence of journalism over technology and game elements would not have been a priority. Thus, their source of authority was their collective professional association to journalistic norms promoted by Al Jazeera.

Finally, the third goal was to attract new, younger audiences who may feel more engaged with a game-like story. As a senior presenter clarified:

We’re basically gamifying current affairs. Investigative journalism can be seen as quite high-brow, whereas ‘gamification’ can open it up to a new generation of digital-savvy journalists. It’s important for us to push the boundaries and explore new ways to reach audiences. The game highlights how news stories are created, and the benchmarks needed to qualify your reporting. We’ve been encouraged by the response so far. (AJ01)

In the exploration to reach younger audience also emerged the dichotomy of seriousness versus entertaining news, and to what extent gamifying the news transgressed the boundaries between journalism and games (Ferrer-Conill & Karlsson, 2015).
Gameful storytelling

Finding the right angle to gamify storytelling was a big hurdle. Aware of the problem of merging games with news, the team had to negotiate how game-like Pirate Fishing could be. As an executive producer mentioned:

I think because games are a work of make-believe and news is so serious, you have to really explain the element of gamification. It took me a while to get my head around it and to understand the boundaries of the game versus journalism. People associate games as something not to be taken terribly seriously. So, there’s a bit of translation to be done, isn’t it, to explain why the elements of gamification can promote the story and how they can draw in more engagement. I think it would have never worked with short-term hard news. It’s got to be long-standing issues because it takes so long to build. And you don’t want to get out of date too quickly because of the cost of investment. (AJ03)

A similar discussion about how to make a gameful experience fit within journalism appeared when the team tested the story with a group of journalism students, who had issues marrying games and news. A creative director recalled the experience:

When we tested the prototype with journalism students, they were very skeptical about the gamification part. They thought we were trying to make a serious thing, less serious. Trying to ruin journalism. And we needed a long discussion to make them understand that we were trying to do something else. So we got the scrolling storytelling, which works because users are used to this kind of a user experience. But if you want, you can go deeper, and you can play. I have to say that from Al Jazeera we had to follow very close instructions, like keeping the linear sequence of events. That was an artistic limit. (AJ02)

Perhaps students thought this approach might ‘ruin journalism’ because they were being instructed on how journalism ‘should be.’ Journalism students tend to favor the professional values and attitudes of established ‘quality’ professional journalism (Mellado et al., 2013) and consider the value of ‘entertainment journalism’ as the weakest dimension of journalism as they establish their professional identity (Nygren & Stigbrand, 2014). The production team’s efforts to test the pilot using journalism students suggests that the basis of norms was anchored in the membership of journalism as a profession. Those who were studying to become journalists voiced their reservation that gamification could
violate journalistic norms. Eventually, finding a formula combining old things – scrolling – with new things – game elements – seemed to work. It is also important how the involvement of \textit{Al Jazeera} made an impact in the creative process, which the interviewee considered an ‘artistic limitation’ because it presents an attempt by \textit{Al Jazeera} to fit the storytelling to the needs of an organizational journalistic style.

Additionally, interviewees reflected on whether all topics can or should be gamified, and self-reflected on how successful they were in their gamification efforts. A senior presenter commented:

\begin{quote}
Whatever topic you take and whatever format you tell the story in, you have to do so with respect. You’ve got to be humble as a journalist. But I think the discussion that’s most important at the moment is, what formats do we have to tell serious stories in? A news story as a format. A documentary as a format. And a game can become a format. And how much do you engage with the people whose story you tell? I think we should have thought about gamification much earlier, before shooting the documentary. Thinking about how we were helping people through the process. But we came to it late so I think the gamified elements aren’t as honed as they could be. (AJ01)
\end{quote}

This self-reflection shows that the newsworkers involved in the production of Pirate Fishing are also involved in the process of negotiating how to gamify a news story and how to make it more engaging and successful.

### Industry recognition as success

Assessing whether the story was a success was “a difficult question because we don’t have all the metrics and so we don’t know exactly how it worked” (AJ02). Even in an organization such as \textit{Al Jazeera}, editors attempt to assess journalistic success through metrics and analytics (Tandoc, 2015; Usher, 2013). Some metrics pointed in the right direction, as a senior presented shared:

\begin{quote}
One of the interesting things is that over 80% of visitors to the Pirate Fishing website had never before been on an Al Jazeera website. So that worked, we did attract new users. The engagement wasn’t as long as we wanted to be. I think it was around four minutes or something. So you know, obviously we were hoping for more. But I think there was also sort of my sense. It is not empirical. This is a more general observation, is that we had a lot of excitement on Twitter and so on in the beginning. So I would imagine that in the beginning, we got a lot of clicks but not that much time spent online
\end{quote}
and engagement. Later, we were super happy that it was starting to be used in schools and then everybody has to watch it to the end. (AJ01)

Because journalistic integrity and user engagement had been the goals, the lack of actionable metrics made it difficult to assess the story’s success. But some valuable stats stood out: users spent four times more time on the site and 80% of users were new visitors.

More than these numbers, the real sense of success for the story can in the shape of recognition among other news organizations. Awards and buzz were separate success markers that placed Al Jazeera as a pioneer in storytelling, something that the news organization quickly embraced. An executive producer had this to say:

Al Jazeera is not monetized in any shape or form so it’s a total luxury that you can afford to commission things and not worry about making a profit. In that case, you’d want it to get industry recognition, you’d want to be seen as being an innovator in this space of digital media, and you’d hope it would draw traffic. And Pirate Fishing has taken up awards, and it’s getting noticed, and you’d hope it would be successful in those terms. And I think once you’ve done one then you know what it costs, how to do it and, perhaps the second time around it’d be easier and a bit cheaper and a little bit more sophisticated and sleeker. Because you’ve learned a lot of lessons. (AJ03)

Most importantly, the success assessment conducted by the production team was a qualitative assessment of how well the story addressed the journalistic aspirations of Al Jazeera. At some point all four interviewees voiced a similar feeling, which was perhaps best captured by a web producer:

To check the story’s success, it could be really easy to just sit in front of the computer screen and watch as the quick numbers go up. But I think that’s the wrong way to look at it. I think success is the comprehension of the story and the way if it was successfully delivered to the audience. Anyone who doubts whether or not the gamification of current affairs can be successful can only look at what Juliana did because journalism is where it should really start. I wasn’t convinced when I heard it was gamification of current affairs. What convinced me was the journalism. I think it has to be true and in the purest sense, journalistic. That’s what it all boils down to, being true to Al Jazeera’s standards as well. Juliana did not embrace entertainment to draw more traffic. Everything about that project was in line with the organization’s values. (AJ04)
What is relevant here is that beyond the metrics, newsworthakers recognized the success of a gamified news story based on journalistic norms, established by newsworthakers, the organizations, and the industry. It is, of course, more difficult and subjective to assess, and carries the issue of the authority journalists have in defining what is good journalism. But it defies the trend towards a metric-oriented journalism. Therefore, the status in the profession was the basis of attention when assessing Pirate Fishing.

**Perceived impact of gamification at Al Jazeera**

The group of *Al Jazeera* newsworthakers I interviewed who had no connection to Pirate Fishing were reflective of the dynamics between technology, innovation, and different professional roles in the newsroom.

Just as in the other cases, those who were not involved in the production process perceived little or no impact of gamification in their production process or journalism in general. Instead, they considered gamification as the result of a wider technological trend and an attempt to find new ways to engage audiences with news content. Moreover, the overall response toward gamification was positive, especially as a new way to attract younger audiences. Table 15 summarizes the interviewees, all of whom worked for *Al Jazeera English* except AJ05, who worked for regular *Al Jazeera*, and AJ10 for *Al Jazeera Balkans*.

**Table 15 – Interviewees who were not involved in the gamified-system at Al Jazeera**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quoted as</th>
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<th>Gender</th>
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<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview method</th>
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<td>AJ05</td>
<td>Interactive Producer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Doha</td>
<td>2017-04-10</td>
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<tr>
<td>AJ06</td>
<td>Senior Producer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>2017-04-19</td>
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<tr>
<td>AJ07</td>
<td>News Editor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Doha</td>
<td>2017-04-25</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ08</td>
<td>Correspondent</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>2017-04-22</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ09</td>
<td>Deputy Editor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Doha</td>
<td>2017-05-01</td>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ10</td>
<td>News Editor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sarajevo</td>
<td>2017-04-20</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ11</td>
<td>Social Media Lead</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Doha</td>
<td>2017-05-03</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ12</td>
<td>News Editor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Doha</td>
<td>2017-05-01</td>
<td>Skype</td>
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<tr>
<td>AJ13</td>
<td>Data Journalist</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Doha</td>
<td>2017-07-03</td>
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</table>

Three themes stand out from these conversations: autonomy and innovation, audience orientation, and engagement.
Autonomy and innovation

According to the interviewees, *Al Jazeera* operated with a double-sided framework of journalistic autonomy and innovation. On the one hand, newsworkers had complete autonomy to pursue their ideas and were encouraged to seek innovative ways to communicate the news (Usher, 2013). On the other hand, because the organization did not have explicit guidelines for how to find innovative production processes, all innovations had to be assessed by editorial staff. A senior producer explained:

Most things that happen in Al-Jazeera are not institutionalized. If someone eventually realizes that gamification is the way to go, then we will go in that direction. Some of my old colleagues from social media are working on a number of things, trying to find innovations that we can put to use. This is great but usually leads to problems. They would come up with these cool things, but their editorial background is not strong, so sometimes we cannot use them because of editorial limitations. And then, there is a disconnect between those guys and the people who have to use those technologies, which means the editorial team might not know how to use whatever they come up with. (AJ06)

Journalistic autonomy in producing innovative solutions was constrained by the editorial line of *Al Jazeera* and by newsworkers’ technical capacities. This was not only a feature at the central office. Regional offices followed a similar approach to innovation, as a news editor at *Al Jazeera Balkans* confirmed:

We try to implement ideas from our network first. Something specific for Al Jazeera Balkans, because we’re working in specific conditions. It’s not the same, working here in Sarajevo and Belgrade than in Doha or London. If we need to find a new solution or someone has an idea for innovation we put together a specific team, possibly a collaboration between our technical people and news people in Bosnia. Sometimes we need help from the technical people in the headquarters in Doha. (AJ10)

The editorial and technical camps were still divided in the newsroom, but their autonomy to look for innovative answers to individual problems made the need to collaborate more pressing. This is a recurring issue in newsrooms (De Maeyer et al., 2015; Larondo et al., 2016). The cultural ridges among newsworkers required a ‘forced collaboration’ to ensure every story met editorial standards. A news editor illustrated this divide:
These are completely new ways to play around with new stories. And mostly, here at Al Jazeera, comes from our Interactives team, which we refer to as the Bat Cave, which is basically a bunch of nerds sitting in the back of the building who are extremely smart and technically-gifted and come up with all these great interactives and infographics and all the weird tools. Every morning, at ten o’clock we have an editorial meeting, and they chip in with ideas of how we can visualize certain stories. But it’s always a two-way street. For the longest time, they have tried to get a designated editor inside the team of technical guys because they feel they need editorial guidance before they can put some things together. (AJ07)

The ‘two-way street’ concept is illustrative of a dynamic that is often more complex than how it is described in the literature. During the interviews, the focus was often on the technical skills journalists need in the modern newsroom. Here, technical newworkers also required editorial skills to meet journalistic standards. This means that, even if newworkers had the autonomy to innovate, they still were bound to certain technical and editorial guidelines. Moreover, they were constrained by what they believed the audience wanted.

**Audience orientation**

The case of *Al Jazeera* counters the dominant idea that commercial urgency leads to audience orientation. Instead, *Al Jazeera* sees its audience as a way to establish its own relevance and legitimacy. Additionally, newworkers use new technology to learn about their audience. A social media lead clarified:

> Organizations would be wise to learn about what keeps audiences. I find a lot of the time people focus so much on their story that they forget about who will actually want to read it. They’ll say, “Well, the story is great.” They don’t realize that now you have to do more, like incentivizing people. Making a story fun and interactive really helps and sets people apart. It’s clear, looking at the data that the audience doesn’t always want dry, serious journalism. They want to learn in different ways, and if you are not thinking about your reader or your viewer, I don’t understand why you work in this business. Ultimately, you know, everyone on my team is audience-centered. (AJ11)

Providing the audience with relevant content is as important as packaging that content in an engaging way. Data functioned as a way to visualize what the audience wanted and to establish a relationship with them (Zamith, 2018b). Connecting with the public in a way that is meaningful characterized *Al Jazeera* as a news organization that stands for its audience.
However, audience orientation did not mean losing track of journalism’s role in society. A news editor made the following distinction:

So we have a good idea of what our audience is after. But it’s, of course, not the only thing we look at. We don’t shy away from bringing up stories that might not be popular with a large audience. For example, I think we are the only large international news organization that has been leading with stories that come out of South Sudan. We jumped in a big black hole there. And we have discussions about how we can make stories more appealing to readers all the time, of course. But we fill the void that other news organizations won’t cover, and that’s who we are. (AJ07)

The balance between knowing what the audience wanted and Al Jazeera’s goal of informing the audience was in constant negotiation and was platform dependent. An interactive producer explained how Al Jazeera tried to make the website more relevant, by introducing some forms of entertainment:

One or two years ago our official website was only news and no entertainment. But our website audience compared to the network or even social media was 12 times lower. So we changed the publishing strategy adapting to technological revolution and the massive adoption of mobile. We felt we needed to attract the audience to join our website. So we started focusing on entertainment for some news which makes our audience interested in coming back more often. (AJ05)

Understanding different platforms and media made a big difference on how to publish stories and interact with the audience. However, not all interviewees shared the idea of entertaining the audience. Especially those with editorial roles disagreed with this approach. Instead, they felt audience engagement was more desirable than audience entertainment.

Engagement

For an organization like Al Jazeera, audience orientation is not predominantly driven by commercial pressure. When asked about why it is important to listen to the audience, most newsworkers responded that it is so that they can increase engagement. This what a deputy editor had to say:

We are looking for new ways of engagement. There’s a lot of interesting ideas coming out of our Interactives department all the time. We need to engage people in a way that you can’t do through text alone. We think about what is
the latest new technology, how can we leverage it for a specific story? Are there different ways we can engage readers with some of these techniques? I think, absolutely it’s worth exploring these new technologies. (AJ09)

Interviewees said they sensed that increasing engagement was important for their work, but often lacked suggestions from editors explaining why it was so important - especially considering they claimed traffic was not something they found decisive. When asked further about why engagement was important, the same deputy editor clarified:

As much as some people might love the newspaper era, those days are over. I mean, young people growing up today, they are engaging with stories in a totally different way than we did growing up. We need to find ways to engage them without sacrificing the journalistic value of what we’re doing. Even something as simple as a digital quiz is a way to engage someone in the news. Then we can see if they actually learned things from the stories they’re reading. And people like quizzes, they like to do well. They like to win games. You know, I certainly wouldn’t want to see traditional journalism in, like, long-form reads, and really, hard-hitting reporting replaced by this kind of thing, but I think certainly there’s room for a mix of both kinds of journalism, for sure. (AJ09)

This is a clear call for combining serious journalism and entertainment journalism. Even in a news organization without strong commercial urges and that prides itself in its professionalism, the narrative of news seriousness is being challenged. For as much as journalism is often described as being in flux, the importance of engagement comes from an expected, more serious change. Engaging with the audience online should be a palliative strategy when paper no longer exists. Even for a major news network whose main format is broadcasting, the idea that technology is shaping news consumption makes the need to establish new relationships with the audience. In this context, news engagement exists not as part of an effort to be commercially viable, but instead to make Al Jazeera relevant. Without a caring audience, journalism has no impact, no relevance.

However, desperately trying to entice the audience to like stories might be an issue for news organizations that seek to maintain high journalistic quality. Does the fight for audience engagement endanger good journalism? When asked about whether there is an internal conscious negotiation between journalism and audience, a correspondent argued that:
I don’t really negotiate that hard with myself. I just follow the rules of accuracy and objective reporting that I’ve been taught, that journalists around the world are taught. And I just tell the story in that way. I try to find interesting people to feature in my story because I think that’s a huge part of keeping an audience interested and keeping them engaged. The foundation of journalism is that people are interested in people. That’s how I try to make journalism more interesting and accessible to your average audience. But at the end of the day, it’s not like trying to feed people Brussels sprouts. I mean, they’re not going to eat it just because it’s good for them. So I try to make it interesting to consume the news, to be informed and aware of what’s going on in the world around them. But it’s a partnership. They have to be willing to be informed and aware. They also have to make the effort to be informed. (AJ08)

Few comments carried such a strong normative view of journalism, but most interviews had a similar feeling. Finding ways to engage with the audience should not come at the price of good journalism. Moreover, Al Jazeera’s relationship with the audience suggests that the audiences have ‘to make an effort to be informed.’ This hints a reciprocal relationship with the audience, as a form of participation without editorial access (cf. Lewis et al., 2014).

It is not a surprise that the most normative newworkers worked for the most professionally-oriented news organization in the study, and the one with the least commercial pressure. The institutional logics tend to align at all levels. Adherence to logics does not happen in a vacuum and organizations, and the individuals that populate them tend to congregate in groups (Friedland, 2012; Thornton et al., 2012). In other words, newworkers who adhere to the professional logic of journalism will gravitate towards Al Jazeera. At the same time, Al Jazeera will hire newworkers who gravitate towards a similar understanding of journalism.

**Adherence to institutional logics**

The adherence to institutional logics in the case of Al Jazeera is straightforward. The organization’s background and the newworkers who work there have a specific view of what journalism is, rooted in professionalism and public service. Furthermore, combining the vision of one journalist and a production team with different expertise made of Pirate Fishing a case that adheres to well-
defined institutional logics. The combined elemental categories of both institutional orders are summarized in Table 16.

Table 16 – Institutional logic ideal types of journalism and gamification at Al Jazeera

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Institutional logic</th>
<th>Journalism - Professional</th>
<th>Gamification - Hedonic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Root Metaphor</td>
<td>Profession as relational work</td>
<td>Professional experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sources of Legitimacy</td>
<td>Personal expertise</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
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<td>Sources of Authority</td>
<td>Professional association</td>
<td>Member of the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Identity</td>
<td>Association with quality of craft</td>
<td>Ego-satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of Norms</td>
<td>Membership in guild &amp; association</td>
<td>Fulfilling assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of Attention</td>
<td>Status in profession</td>
<td>Collecting evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of Strategy</td>
<td>Increase personal reputation</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
</tr>
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<td>Informal Control</td>
<td>Celebrity professionals</td>
<td>Journalistic status</td>
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<td>Economic System</td>
<td>Personal capitalism</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The newsworkers involved in creating the gamified system were advocates of traditional investigative journalism and wanted to find innovative and engaging ways to tell a story to new audiences. Furthermore, the organization, through its historical context and its economic stability adopted the professional values and attitudes of journalism. Even when considering the use of metrics, and leaning toward audience orientation, newsworkers framed the relationship with the audience as a dual benefit for both journalism and the audience. Newsworkers understood the need for gamification as a way to innovate, strengthen Al Jazeera’s relationship with the audience, and maintain its relevance in the future. Therefore, this is a clear case of adherence to the professional logic of journalism.

The gamified system is highly game-like and uses game elements as a transformation of news consumption as an activity. The goal of the story is to immerse users in an interactive investigation and for them to experience how investigative reporting works. There are no attempts to gather data from users or generate traffic. Thus in this case, the prevailing logic of gamification is the hedonic logic. The interface tries to appeal to a new generation of audiences who find games engaging.
Summary

The findings emerging from the *Al Jazeera* case show how the effort of one single journalist can imprint journalism values into a gamified system. Here, gamification is adopted as a storytelling technique in which the purpose is to nudge users to consume and play with the content. Metrics and sentiment data were of no interest to the developers of Pirate Fishing, and instead, the story focused on how to properly communicate investigative reporting through a narrative that mimicked a game. One of the creators claimed that the story managed to attract users who are not usual visitors of *Al Jazeera*, and that those users stayed longer on the site than in regular news items. However, *Al Jazeera* considered success the awards they received. In this case, the recognition they received by the industry and the institutional knowledge acquired through the implementation process were the measurement of success, as the economic pressures were marginal.

*Al Jazeera* called this story the ‘gamification of current affairs.’ It exemplified an effort of merging fun and seriousness, as the topic being gamified is neither entertainment or light-hearted. This case was crafted to enhance user experience and to modify the way users consume news articles.
Chapter 10: Cross-case examination

In previous chapters, I analyzed single cases to illuminate the gamification of journalism through their contextual characteristics. This chapter investigates all four cases as a whole and presents the results of the final analytic technique, the ‘cross-case synthesis’ (Yin, 2014). With the cross-case examination I aim to solve three problems inherent in multiple case studies: a) too much focus on the uniqueness and special characteristics of each case, b) difficulty of comparing cases anchored in different contexts, and c) trying to answer the research questions through single studies, instead of trying to understand a phenomenon through a multiple case as the unit of analysis. What this study gains with this final analytical step is taking a step back and looking at gamified journalism as a unit of analysis, instead of multiple accounts of loosely related cases.

To do so, I employ two synthesis methods. First, I use cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to facilitate a comparison of commonalities and differences emerging from the single cases. Through this process, I de-contextualize the data so that cases can be compared individually without focusing on their contexts. Second, I use thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) to identify, analyze, and report patterns across the cases. Combining two synthesis methods allows for a higher degree of analytic precision and an aggregated assessment of the findings. Both synthesis methods cope well with diverse types of evidence, follow a process of constructing interpretations, and are particularly useful for theory building (Cruzes, Dybå, Runeson, and Höst, 2015). Through this process, I can deepen my explanation of gamified journalism as a phenomenon across multiple contexts.

Commonalities and differences – cross-case analysis

Within their individual uniqueness, there are significant commonalities and differences between cases. To organize the relevant data across cases, I make use of the replication logic adopted in the design of the study (Yin, 2014). The results are organized and presented following the Four A’s heuristic proposed by Lewis and Westlund (2015): actors, actants, audiences, and activities.

A cross-case analysis attempts going beyond the aggregation of data and simply summarizing similarities and differences (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
The goal here is to carefully address the complex configuration of processes within the cases.

In conversation with the Four A’s heuristic, I made decisions about theme clustering by categorizing different entities and attributes into the four categories, based on the codes created in the single cases. In this process, I used a pattern-coding level strategy by converging data into more complex levels. Returning to Alvesson’s (2011) ‘reflexive pragmatism,’ there is not a unified solution for conducting qualitative clustering, so I clustered the most relevant or discussed themes that represent all four cases as a whole. This is a highly subjective process, and given how intertwined some evidence sources are, some entities could be categorized in multiple clusters.

To present the cross-case analysis, I follow Miles and Huberman’s (1994) use of case-level cluster matrices. Each cluster is illustrated by two tables. First, a clustered summary of its sub-clusters, with a description and an illustration of the sub-clusters. Second, a case-level matrix for how each case fits the sub-clusters. These tables help produce and visualize the generic narratives of individual cases but also establish the dynamics cutting across them.

**Actors**

The theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of actors – individual newsworkers and news organizations – when assessing media content and institutional choice (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Thornton et al., 2012). This is why in this study, I included journalists, technologists, and businesspeople (Lewis & Westlund, 2015). In the four cases analyzed, the data support this organizational configuration. There are two main clusters regarding actors: news organizations and newsworkers. The characteristics and context of each of these actors are decisive aspects of how actors implement gamification.

**News organizations**

Historically, the way a news organization is positioned in the journalistic field has had a great impact on how the news organization and its employees operate. The organizational background, structure, and market orientation tend to define news organizations as journalistic actors (Conboy, 2004; Reese, 2007; Ryfe, 2006). Similarly, the internal journalistic culture (Usher, 2013) and the specific contextual characteristics play an important role in how a news organization and its newsworkers adhere to different institutional logics.
(Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Under the cluster of news organizations, I present the contextual characteristics that are most relevant to the cases in question. These characteristics are divided into the following sub-clusters: organizational background, journalistic culture, organizational structure, and commercial orientation. Table 17 shows a clustered summary for journalism context.

Table 17 – Clustered summary table for news organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-clusters</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational background</td>
<td>Historical background of the news organization</td>
<td>“proudly carries with it 175 years of prestige associated with the Times of India Group yet stands independently as a collective of start-ups offering dynamic digital products” (Times Internet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalistic culture</td>
<td>Predominant journalistic culture</td>
<td>“Whether it was really something with complete journalistic integrity, you can debate that one way or another. But we truly saw it as a brand” (David Levy about Bleacher Report)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational structure</td>
<td>Journalistic autonomy within the organization</td>
<td>“Al Jazeera is a decentralized company. We have little strategic constraints and a team that is ambitious enough can do practically whatever they want” (AJ05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial orientation</td>
<td>Commercial vs professional prevalence</td>
<td>“(core principle) to secure the financial and editorial independence of the Guardian in perpetuity” (The Guardian)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These sub-clusters represent different ways the data referring to the journalism context of each case becomes relevant to the implementation of gamification. Table 18 shows the case-level cluster matrix for journalism context.

Table 18 – Case-level cluster matrix for news organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Organizational background</th>
<th>Journalistic culture</th>
<th>Organizational structure</th>
<th>Market orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Legacy media</td>
<td>Investigative</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleacher/Report</td>
<td>Digital media</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>Open-source</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times of India</td>
<td>Legacy media</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Jazeera</td>
<td>Public broadcast</td>
<td>Civic</td>
<td>De-centralized</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is no surprise that the contextual components of each case are diverse, and it is because the selection of cases was informed by the theoretical framework and followed maximum variation. However, such a diverse set of cases exemplifies an obvious, yet important aspect. Gamification is a model that has emerged in a wide variety of organizations, set in different locations, organizational backgrounds, and funding models.
One of the aims of this study is to adopt an exploratory approach that surveys how gamification is adopted in the field. This first step shows that gamification is not adopted only by entertainment media or digital-only news organizations. Legacy media, such as the *Guardian*, carrying an institutional background anchored in watchdog and investigative journalism, have the flexibility to incorporate gamification.

The fact that gamification can be found in a broad type of news organizations can be understood through two overlapping lenses. The first is institutional dynamics. An isomorphic convergence of digital journalism, combined with audience dynamics and technological change, push news organizations to follow institutional and industry trends (Lowrey, 2011). In this sense, if the institution of journalism experiments with gamification, then it is probably that a wide variety of news organizations adopt it. But this does not mean that all gamified stories look the same. Each news organization inserts variance according to its institutional characteristics. Second, at the same time, gamification is expanding across institutional orders, carrying its own institutional logics (Fuchs, 2014), spurred by technological advancement and video game culture (Zackariasson, 2016). As more processes of daily life become gamified, the process of expansion appeals to a wider set of industries and services.

**Newworkers**

While actor involvement manifested differently across cases, it played a pivotal role in how gamification was adopted in each case. Structural and organizational constraints shaped the agency with which individual actors could perform. Three elements are most relevant when thinking about actors: identities (including their professional backgrounds) of the creators of gamification; their position within or outside the news organization; and the target group who interact with the gamified system (called here ‘the players’). Table 19 shows the sub-clusters for newworkers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-clusters</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Journalists or non-journalists</td>
<td>None of the original team who created Bleacher/Report were journalists. They were a combination of businesspeople and technologists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Internal or external actors</td>
<td>Times of India’s loyalty program was created entirely by another organization, part of the same media group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The players are those who interact with the gamified system. The Guardian tried to engage the public into participating in the MP’s expense microsite.

It should be pointed out that the first sub-cluster uses a binary understanding of newsworker depending on their identity being a journalist or not. Since it is difficult to pinpoint when a newsworker is or is not a journalist, I take their self-identification as a way to demarcate their professional affiliation. This particular identification does not only shape their knowledge and practice but usually shapes their understanding of how journalism operates (Singer, 2003), and how the newsroom is organized.

In the case-level cluster matrix for newsworkers, shown in Table 20, it is easy to see that the two cases with a more professional-oriented understanding of journalism are the only ones with journalists in their group of gamification creators. It also shows that none of the cases has a team of creators comprised only of journalists. These two dynamics can be explained by the fact that organizations with professional journalistic aspirations tend to include journalists in their processes. Moreover, most journalists do not have the skills required to create a gamified system, and therefore, non-journalists are bound to be included in the process.

Table 20 – Case-level cluster matrix for newsworkers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>The players</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Combination of journalists and non-journalists</td>
<td>Internal team</td>
<td>Audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleacher/Report</td>
<td>Non-journalists</td>
<td>Internal team</td>
<td>Journalists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times of India</td>
<td>Non-journalists</td>
<td>External team</td>
<td>Audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Jazeera</td>
<td>Combination of journalists and non-journalists</td>
<td>Combination of internal and external team</td>
<td>Audience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fact that the cases that incorporated journalists were single story cases needs further clarification. Journalists lead the initiative and are invested in the story they are working on, and because it is not part of an organizational strategy, they keep the gamified strategy to serve the needs of the story. For example, in the case of the Guardian, a lead developer who had learned about gamification at his previous job in a technology corporation, is the one who had the idea to implement game elements to entice the public into participating. In the case of Al Jazeera, a single journalist hired an external design studio that created the
actual system. It appears that for cases in which gamification extends to the entire system, what is required is a management-led strategy, and since they are detached from specific stories, no actual journalists were involved.

The combination of internal and external actors does not seem to follow a discernible pattern. However, all external teams were formed entirely by non-journalists. In the case of Al Jazeera, they collaborated tightly with the lead journalist. But in the case of the Times of India, no journalists were involved. I have classified the Times of India’s implementation team as external because it belongs to a separate company, Times Points. However, Times Points is owned by the same media conglomerate. Also noteworthy is the fact that Bleacher Report, once it started receiving criticism for the quality of its content, they decided to bring in a journalist to improve the journalistic quality of the content created through the gamified system.

Finally, the players of the gamified systems tend to be the audience, because, most often, the goal is to engage the public with the news. However, the relevance of the B/R case lies in the fact that the players were journalists. This is important because it counters the notion that gamification is a mechanism to engage the audience, and instead, it is a mechanism to entice a group of people to achieve a particular task or goal.

**Actants**

Gamified systems, as digital artifacts used by news organizations, are the ‘technological actants’ analyzed in this dissertation. As Lewis and Westlund (2015) propose, in this study I consider actants as “socially constructed to suit journalistic, commercial, and technological purposes within news organizations” (p.6). However, while gamified systems are enmeshed with the implementation goals of the designers and producers who create them, it is their game-like aspirations that also exert an influence to those interacting with the systems. Here these two sub-clusters – implementation goals and game-like aspirations – are the recurrent themes across the cases.

**Implementation goals**

One of the main issues of assessing whether gamification is successful comes from the fact that in a gamified system, there are various goals and objectives, and often they have not been properly defined by their creators (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). A similar process occurs within news production,
which is not surprising, as journalists often have goals that diverge from those of their editors and managers (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). However, social and technological goals converged within the gamified system. I have identified four major goals – organizational, creator, system, and game goals – that often point in different directions when gamifying news, as shown in table 21.

Table 21 – Clustered summary table for implementation goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-clusters</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>Overarching goal of adopting gamification</td>
<td>“This experiment is the latest development in the Guardian’s initiative to open its content to readers” (MP’s expenses, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creator’s goal</td>
<td>Specific goal of the team of creators</td>
<td>“the rationale is that two articles are better than one, (...) let’s just get as much content into this system as we possibly can, and then we figure out what to do with it” (BR06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System goal</td>
<td>The activity the system tries to enforce</td>
<td>“This is a long-term project, and we try to learn about the user (…) It’s a long project. And you devise it to understand the loyalty of a particular user” (TOI10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game goal</td>
<td>The goal to achieve in the goal</td>
<td>“gamers learn how to conduct an investigation report on environmental crimes, collecting evidence and fact-checking” (Al Jazeera, 2014)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clustering data on goals and objectives has proven to be problematic at various levels. First, most of the narratives collected come from the producers themselves, and when they talk about goals it is not easy to assess whether they are internalizing an organizational goal or are expressing their own. Asking journalists for what they thought a successful gamified story seemed to help distinguish personal from organizational goals, as the personal ones usually were emphasized much more when framing them as a success. Second, organizational goals tend to be found in documents that explain how the system is supposed to work. This does not necessarily have to match what the organization wants to get out of deploying gamification. Third, system and game goals are different concepts, but difficult to untangle. For example, a system goal is often the activity that gamification wants to enact, such as sharing or liking. The game goal, while connected to the system goal, might be to collect as many points as possible. These differences can be seen in table 22, which shows the case-level cluster matrix for implementation goals. It is worth pointing out that these are the explicit goals I could identify. Different interviewees proposed different goals, such as ‘engaging the audience,’ which is a recurring and overarching goal, but is mostly implicit in three of the cases.
Table 22 – Case-level cluster matrix for implementation goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Organizational goal</th>
<th>Producers’ goal</th>
<th>System goal</th>
<th>Game goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Experimentation</td>
<td>Analyze documents</td>
<td>News item specific</td>
<td>Analyze all documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleacher/Report</td>
<td>Content creation</td>
<td>Content creation</td>
<td>Content production volume &amp; frequency</td>
<td>Become Featured Columnist IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times of India</td>
<td>Generate traffic</td>
<td>Sentiment data</td>
<td>Generate site activity</td>
<td>Collect most points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Jazeera</td>
<td>Experimentation</td>
<td>Engage a new type of audience</td>
<td>Consume content</td>
<td>Become Senior Reporter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from the fact that the engagement goal is problematic in itself (as will be discussed shortly), the goals displayed in table 22 attempt to capture concrete and explicit goals. Similarly, in all cases, interviewees expressed the organizational goal of experimentation at some point. However, in the case of the Times of India and Bleacher Report, this organizational goal seemed to be much stronger than at the Guardian and Al Jazeera.

The reason for this could be connected with the fact that the Times of India and B/R gamified their entire website, and it is much more difficult to do so without a clear objective, other than just experimenting. Experimentation is much easier when you only gamify one story at a time. Another important point to raise is that, as pointed out above, most organizational goals do not match with the producer’s goals. The fact that in the case of B/R these two goals were the same is simply because the team of producers also had management profiles, establishing and implementing goals at both levels.

**Game-like aspirations**

Beyond the implementation goals, every gamification strategy requires adjusting how much the system resembles a game. This relates to the hedonic logic of gamification and the overall meaningful transformation the activity that has been gamified (Nicholson, 2015). The game-like aspirations can be examined through the degree of complexity regarding the combination of different game elements, the degree of immersion, the game dynamics guiding the system, and the game components being deployed. Table 23 offers a clustered summary of game-like aspirations.
Table 23 – Clustered summary table for game-like aspirations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-clusters</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gamification complexity</td>
<td>Degree of complexity of the gamified system</td>
<td>Times of India combines game components at several levels, spanning across multiple publications, with a temporal component, that are redeemable for physical rewards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immersion</td>
<td>Degree of immersion intent of the gamified system</td>
<td>“We really tried to make it look like a game. We wanted to feel like you were playing a video game, but while getting involved in the story” (AJ02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game dynamics</td>
<td>Prevalent game dynamics used</td>
<td>“I can always check how the other writers are doing and I know how much is left for me to pass them (...) that pushes me to write better” (BR08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game components</td>
<td>Prevalent game components used</td>
<td>“We’re going to need people to invest a lot more effort in order to get through these documents. And so the obvious thing to do then was to look at things like leaderboards” (TG11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worth noting that game-like aspirations do not only refer to the aesthetics of the interface. A gamified system could be completely based on a game dynamic such as competition, but then have game dynamics blending with native design cues (Hunicke et al., 2004).

The game-like aspirations cluster is possibly the most subjective of all. Finding the point at which the level of complexity transitions from low to moderate, and from moderate to high is a judgment call. I considered the number of game mechanics and the many interactions between them. From a relatively low complexity offered by the Guardian to the highly complex system employed by the Times of India, I placed the cases along a continuum. A similar issue occurs with game dynamics and game components. I convey the prevalent item for each sub-cluster, as shown in table 24.

Table 24 – Case-level cluster matrix for game-like aspirations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Gamification complexity</th>
<th>Immersion</th>
<th>Game dynamics</th>
<th>Game components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Progress</td>
<td>Progress bar &amp; leaderboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleacher/Report</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate/High</td>
<td>Status &amp; Competition</td>
<td>Points, badges, &amp; levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times of India</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Jazeera</td>
<td>Moderate/High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Levels &amp; collections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is easy to establish that for the Times of India, points are the prevalent game components, despite having many more game elements. However, for the
Guardian, it is difficult to decide whether the progress bar or the leaderboard was more prevalent. Both components attempted to entice a user to continue reviewing documents.

Thus, to make these decisions, I have taken into account an entire gamified system and how each component forms part of a larger puzzle. This is relevant because a well-designed gamification system does the same. The game components need to match the game dynamics, and these, in turn, need to match the goals of the processes being gamified (Deterding, 2014; Deterding, Sicart, et al., 2011).

**Audiences**

In a gamified news system, the role of the audience is often that of the user, the participant, or the generator of metrics. This dissertation has not investigated empirically the interactions of audiences as players, but the notion of the imagined audience is still relevant in institutional news production processes. Newsmakers and news organizations attempt to establish and strengthen their relationships, and therefore they try to create a system that generates the right affective dynamics.

**Affective dynamics**

A big part of why gamification works is the affective connection it attempts to establish with its users. The affective turn in which digital media is embedded (Athanasiou et al., 2009; Clough & Halley, 2007) pushes news organizations to explore emotionality and affective mechanisms that resonate with a new type of affective publics (Jenkins, 2006; Papacharissi, 2015a; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016). This is not inherently good or bad, but technological advancement and the economic implications of collecting and selling sentiment data make the affective dynamics particularly sensitive (Andrejevic, 2011). Table 25 summarizes the sub-clusters of the affective dynamics identified across the cases.

**Table 25 – Clustered summary table for affective dynamics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-clusters</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Emotional concept with which to connect</td>
<td>“Investigative journalism can be seen as quite high-brow, whereas ‘gamification’ can open it up to a new generation of digital-savvy journalists” (AJ01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Actual mechanism to connect</td>
<td>“I mean, sometimes people just like to have their names on things and that’s a completely legitimate part of human nature to encourage them” (TG02)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 25 summarizes the sub-clusters of the affective dynamics identified across the cases.
While sentiment data and ‘spreadability’ (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) are well-established concepts, the difference between affective connections and affective mechanisms may need further clarification. The affective connection is the general emotional linkage that the gamified system is trying to create between the system and the user. For example, in the case of the Guardian, most interviewees had a clear idea of their audience. It is irrelevant whether the imagined audience (Litt, 2012) reflects the actual audience. What matters is that the producers of the gamified system tried to match what they thought would emotionally entice their users. Thus, the proud proponents of watchdog journalism at the Guardian tried to engage with their audience by proposing them to become investigative journalists for a day. The affective mechanism, on the other hand, is the method by which they try to enact the connection. Continuing the case of the Guardian, the affective mechanism was participation. Inviting users to be part of the investigating team became the mechanism by which the affective connection was established. Table 26 shows the case-level cluster matrix for affective dynamics.

Table 26 – Case-level cluster matrix for affective dynamics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Affective connection</th>
<th>Affective mechanism</th>
<th>Sentiment data</th>
<th>Spreadability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Watchdog journalism</td>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes, via Data blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleacher/Report</td>
<td>Journalism aspirations</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Connects user sentiment data to journalists</td>
<td>Yes, via community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times of India</td>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>News habit</td>
<td>As much as possible</td>
<td>Yes, via game mechanics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Jazeera</td>
<td>New formats</td>
<td>Playful storytelling</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes, alternative affordance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two points worth noting come forth here. First, the Guardian and Al Jazeera, do not collect sentiment data in their gamified systems. There are a few possible explanations for this. Their experimentation goal and their journalistic context
prevent them from using sentiment data, a practice that exploits user privacy. They establish their activity as journalistic, and not as user data broker. Furthermore, the fact that they only have gamified single stories may mean that the quantity of sentiment data they can collect is minimal. Bleacher/Report and the Times of India are more commercially driven and have website-wide gamification strategies, which makes collecting sentiment data part of their respective strategies.

Second, all four cases are keen on spreadability. This implies partly outsourcing the news distribution to the users via social media, but this is a practice that has been incorporated and normalized in digital media, and therefore is not seen by newsworkers as a damaging strategy.

Activities
When Lewis and Westlund (2015) discuss ‘activities’, they refer to two different yet important processes. The first is the five news production stages identified by Domingo and colleagues (2008): access and observation, selection/filtering, processing/editing, distribution, and interpretation. I identified a clustered theme related to the journalistic process that is being gamified, based on Domingo and colleagues’ stages. The second process involves the routines and practices that newsworkers carry out while producing the news. While I did not investigate production practices, I inquired whether newsworkers perceived that gamification had some impact on their practice and the way they worked.

Journalism process
While I have studied these cases from a production perspective, they are also embedded in different stages in the news cycle: access and observation, selection/filtering, processing/editing, distribution, and interpretation. Moreover, Robinson (2011) clarifies that the notion of journalism as a process is experienced differently by newsworkers (internally) and the public (externally). This means that there are two different gamified internal and external processes in the same story, depending on how and when the producer or the user experience them. Furthermore, gamification has the capacity of being integrated across an entire site or simply connected to a single story, with varying degrees of organizational involvement. Table 27 offers a summary of the sub-clusters identified at the journalism process level.
Table 27 – Clustered summary table for journalism process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-clusters</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gamified internal process</td>
<td>What stage in news production is gamified</td>
<td>“The MPs expense microsite actually gamified information gathering and outsourced it to the public. The news reporting was done by the Guardian” (TG13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gamified external process</td>
<td>When do users experience gamification</td>
<td>“We used gamification as a storytelling technique, so that is what the users see. It is how they engage and consume the news” (AJ04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gamification reach</td>
<td>News specific or system-wide</td>
<td>“At that moment the entire site was gamified. All the pieces written had rewards, and that was shown to our readers throughout the site to make it relevant for authors” (BR06)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The way how gamification is implemented along the production process is also diverse across the cases. This can be seen in Table 28, displaying the case-level matrix for the journalism process cluster. In the internal process of news production does not often match the external experience of gamification. This is not coincidental and shows that gamification in itself is not a process of news production. Instead, it is a tool that can target different stages in the news production process. It all depends on how the implementing team chooses to adopt gamification.

For example, at the Guardian, the Datablog team had all the documents but needed to extract the relevant information from those documents. At this point, they decided to implement a microsite that would employ gamification to bring together users to analyze the data. Users were told they were included in an investigative initiative, accessing and observing the data, but would not have the opportunity to do any processing. For journalists, what was gamified was the process of selection/filtering.

Table 28 – Case-level cluster matrix for journalism process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Gamified internal process</th>
<th>Gamified external process</th>
<th>Gamification reach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Selection/Filtering</td>
<td>Access and observation</td>
<td>News item specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleacher/Report</td>
<td>Processing/Editing</td>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td>Across news website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times of India</td>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>Across media group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Jazeera</td>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>News item specific</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the same time, gamifying a moment within the news production process implies a parallel production process, in which the gamified system needs to be created and implemented. However, these processes are parallel and do not
necessarily converge. This is clearly exemplified by the fact that the reach of a gamification strategy not only can be applied to a single news item, but it can be implemented across an entire site, or as in the case of the *Times of India*, to several digital publications within an entire media group conglomerate.

**Perceived impact on journalism**

The notion of perceived impact refers to how newsworth workers claim that gamification has impacted journalism at three levels: practice, content, and news interface. The boundaries between journalism practice and news content, and news content and news interface are fuzzy and difficult to demarcate (Domingo et al., 2008). For example, the illustration provided for the sub-cluster "On practice" shows the interconnection between practice and content. The system enticed journalists to produce more often, and that leads to shorter pieces. Modifying practice potentially modifies content.

I focus on perceived impact because I do not have empirical data to claim actual change in practice and content. I rely on newsworth workers’ perceptions on whether gamification has brought or could bring change to journalism. Table 29 shows the three major sub-clusters emerging on the theme of perceived change.

*Table 29 – Clustered summary table for perceived impact*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-clusters</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On practice</td>
<td>Opinions on perceived impact of practice.</td>
<td>“The rewards are an added bonus, but the only difference they made is that I started writing shorter pieces almost every day, because I get more points if I publish more often” (BR09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On content</td>
<td>Opinions on perceived impact on content.</td>
<td>“If you focus on the storytelling and spend the efforts there, then you don’t have to worry too much about the content. Just make the experience compelling and it will work” (AJ03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the interface</td>
<td>Opinions on perceived impact on the interface.</td>
<td>“We knew if we made a site that was easy to use and engaging, lots of users would like to participate. It was so out of the ordinary, that we had to host it outside of the regular CMS” (TG02)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another difficulty when assessing perceived change across different cases and multiple interviewees is to account for various points of views at different intensities. Table 30 presents the case-level cluster matrix for perceived impact. I have used low, medium and high perceived impact as a scale, to show the overall response. However, this is a highly subjective assessment and does not have a clear separation between low and medium, and medium and high. These
results should be taken as an overview of the overall sentiment in the interview data.

Table 30 – Case-level cluster matrix for perceived impact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>On practice</th>
<th>On content</th>
<th>On the interface</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleacher/Report</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times of India</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Jazeera</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ranging from respondents who say gamification has no impact on their practice or content, but that has major implications for how news organizations address the audience, to interviewees who think that gamification changes almost everything, the perceived impact of gamification on journalism is highly atomized and contended. This makes the analysis less definitive, but still there are a few noteworthy points to make. First, Bleacher Report is the only case in which newsworkers perceived an impact on all three elements. This is because B/R gamified news production in itself, which means that the activity that they wanted to change was practice itself. That had an impact on content, to the point that the organization received criticism for its low standards. Placing all journalists in a ranking – the ‘Power grid’ – and having writer profiles also made interfaces very different. The two news organizations that decided for a less immersive – more utilitarian – type of gamification saw low impact on practice and content, and medium impact on the interface. This is probably because an external team (for the Times of India) and a group of mostly technologists (for the Guardian) created the systems. Since the utilitarian logic of gamification was the dominant one, no major changes in the interfaces were made in either case. I categorized Al Jazeera as ‘medium’ impact for practice and content because, while the producing team saw a very high impact on how they worked, their activities, and routines, other newsworkers perceived very low impact. However, the interviewees also saw that the interface was completely different from typical news items, which means that they perceive a high impact on the interface of the story.
Patterns across cases – thematic synthesis

The second method of the cross-case examination is the thematic synthesis, as outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008). As a way to complement the cross-case synthesis, in which commonalities and differences were highlighted, the thematic synthesis becomes a tool to bridge descriptive to analytical themes. I use thematic synthesis as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns emerging across all four cases. Furthermore, this synthesis lays the foundation for theory building that is anchored in the empirical data analyzed in the cases.

While the rationale for synthesis requires that the findings within the cases be de-contextualized, the analytical exercise consists of recognizing patterns in data that can be transferred across contexts. At this point, I look at themes that may explicate the phenomenon of gamification in news media beyond specific contextual constraints, as these have been accounted for in previous steps. Accordingly, two of the three steps of thematic synthesis are addressed at previous stages: coding text and developing descriptive themes. It is the third stage, generating analytical themes, that constitutes the translation of concepts between cases through the application of the theoretical framework.

Just as in previous stages of this study, the issue of subjectivity and lack of transparency are possible drawbacks of thematic synthesis (Dixon-Woods, Agarwal, Jones, Young, & Sutton, 2005). However, as Cruzes et al. (2015) claim, combined with a more systematic synthesis method like cross-case analysis, thematic synthesis can provide a robust way of constructing higher-order thematic categories. This means that the themes identified in the final stage of the analytical strategy are explicit mechanisms for interrogating the descriptive synthesis, by situating it within the theoretical framework beyond what single cases can explain.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, in an attempt to maintain a clear separation between the data-driven descriptive themes discussed so far and the analytical themes discussed here, I argue that the following five themes go beyond the data of single cases, and attempt to form a complex representation of the cases as a whole. These may not be the only themes lurking in the data, but in the way they relate to one another, they embody the main and recurrent issues at which my interpretations of the data point. First, I present the semantic themes, which are the themes that are explicitly mentioned in the data in the
interviews or are present in the features of the gamified systems. Second, I introduce the latent themes, which represent underlying patterns that I interpret across the data, even if they were not explicit in the data. The semantic themes are ‘Tackling change,’ ‘Experimenting with technology,’ and the ‘Articulation of engagement.’ The latent themes are “Commercialization and journalistic relevance’ and the ‘Negotiation of time.’

**Tackling change**
Change is present across most of the empirical material. The narratives constructed by journalists, editors, managers, and technologists are infused in a vision that journalism and the world around it are in flux, and so their product must adapt to those changes. Their perception of internal and external change enacts processes of change within news organizations. In other words, journalists’ perceptions of change breeds change. I am not implying here that measurable change is occurring in journalism as a field, but rather that interviewees support the adoption of gamification via a discourse of change.

A preoccupation with novelty is nothing new in journalism scholarship or practice. In fact, an infatuation with change has been present throughout journalism’s history (Conboy, 2004; Schudson, 1997). This may even be a trend that news organizations are forced to navigate as the sense of change may be a larger trend across social institutions just as the ‘Hierarchical model of influences’ and the ‘Institutional logics perspective’ point to (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Thornton et al., 2012). Deuze (2008) claims that “media, as social institutions, do not escape the sense of accelerated, unsettling change permeating liquid modern life, and it is exactly this notion of volatile, uncertain (global and local) flux that professional journalism fails to come to terms with” (p. 856).

I interpret the sense of change present in the data through this prism. This is primarily because interviewees see the use of gamification as a partial and potential solution to change. From changing production models (open source at Bleacher Report) to changing practices (crowdsourcing at the Guardian), or from changing audiences (younger and uninterested readers at Al Jazeera) to competing media services (social media and digital games at the Times of India), interviewees frame the prevalent narrative as a reaction to change but at the same time as an attempt to find a remedy for the impending perpetuation of
change. Instead of technological determinism, the ways that news organizations adopt gamification seem to respond to a change determinism. With this I mean that the change news organizations perceive triggers the need to react with more change. Newsworkers perceive these waves of change to be inevitable; they cannot be averted and they need to be addressed. Change – the outcome of which is still unclear – generates more change to accommodate the future. Thus, the way that news media is adopting gamification can be considered both reactive and proactive. However, Curran (2009) claims that “for most news organizations, ‘future-proofing’ strategies are, therefore, tentative, experimental, defensive and evolutionary, rather than revolutionary” (p. 40). On the one hand, experimenting with a technological actant such as gamification might be considered a reactive move against societal changes; on the other hand, it could be considered a future-proofing strategy to accommodate further changes.

**Experimenting with technology**

When discussing technological advancement in journalism, Phillips (2018) argues that “(w)ith each change there has been a period of experimentation, and an exhilarating sense of freedom as new forms and possibilities for wider participation are explored and tested, followed by a period of consolidation and closure as new income streams are developed to support the technology” (p. 322). Therefore, it is expected that news organizations will experiment with technology in journalism, even when they associate experimentation to a processes of change.

The technological contingency of gamification emerges in different ways across the cases. The primary overarching view on gamification as a technological actant is the need to experiment with it. This reinforces the notion of a reactive and proactive stance to change and as a future-proofing agent. Most interviewees concurred that experimenting with gamification helped them understand how to improve and become better in its implementation, but also to establish processes and routines that make it more cost-effective to implement in the future.

Moreover, gamification re-articulates the notion of journalism as a technological sandbox. As different technologies (e.g., tracking technologies, metrics, and analytics) converge in gamification and data visualization, news
organizations choose to adopt gamification to experiment with a tool that has been successful outside of news media. As Conboy (2010) claims, “technological changes in journalism have always been incorporated within journalism’s existing practices rather than the technologies themselves leading them forwards as a result of their innovative impetus” (p. 415). However, in the case of gamification, news organizations seem to fail to drive technological innovation that is connected to a specific practice, and instead they experiment with gamification in the hopes of finding a solution to various issues. For some news organizations, reaching out in search of younger audiences is the reason they toy with gamification. For others, it simply is a loyalty program to keep audiences coming. There is very little engagement between the news organizations and the gamified systems they deploy. This is what Escribano (2012) calls ‘technological gamification’ (pp. 206-7) as it is driven by technological innovation rather than inherent suitability.

This can be seen across the cases on numerous occasions. At the *Guardian*, when the crowdsourcing initiative did not meet the expectations in its first iteration, they included game mechanics as an enticing reward to engage the readers. A similar dynamic can be seen at the *Times of India*, where no journalists had a prevalent role in deploying the system. The outlier here is *Al Jazeera*, whose implementation team engaged cautiously in trying to understand gamification as a medium on which journalism could operate.

This can hardly be interpreted as technological determinism. The centrality of technology as a driving force of journalistic change is not present in the cases. Instead, the predominant narrative acknowledges a multi-faceted set of influences pushing news organizations to adopt a technology, mostly because it seems to work in other fields. If anything, in all its complexity, the adoption of gamification by news organizations shows a set of attempts to engage with audiences. However, how newsworkers and news organizations articulate the concept of engagement seems to have shifted.

**Articulation of engagement**

The term ‘engagement’ has a predominant role in the data across all four cases. Its recurring appearance is shrouded with an almost fickle quality that quickly re-articulates old debates about journalism’s role in civic engagement (see Bennett, Freelon, Hussain, & Wells, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009) into new debates
about engagement as a form of interactivity and user behavior (see Ksiazek, Limor, & Lessard, 2016; Napoli, 2011; O’Brien & Toms, 2010).

The champions of gamification often portray engagement as the goal that justifies and promotes gamification. Especially for journalists whose participation in a gamified system was minimal, they justify adopting it as if the goal of contemporary journalism is to engage the public, and gamification may be the way to achieve that goal. This is even more salient in the case of the Times of India’s respondents. It appears that knowing less about gamification made journalists assume it was an optimal solution to engage new audiences, as a reward for their media use.

The analysis here is concerned with two emerging dynamics. The first is the fact that most participants seem to equate gamification with an increment of engagement. The second is the apparent fuzzy and ‘elusive’ ways, as Nelson (2018) suggests, in which newsworkers understand engagement. This is important because while these journalists may be referring to engaging with the news, to becoming informed, to widening the public exposed to news media, the truth is that gamification only manages to capture certain patterns of behavior, most of which have little to do with news. Furthermore, as the results show, while some notion of engagement is the proposed reason to gamify the news, the actual goals and objectives are diverse in each case. The disconnect between journalists’ justifications for gamification and the reasons why management gamified the news show that newsworkers often misunderstand how gamification operates and what are the potential outcomes for journalism, both as an industry and as a field of study. Moreover, news organizations’ use of gamification and their attempts to engage with audiences exemplify and make explicit the internal set of drivers within news organizations, from giving in to commercialization and popularization, to establishing their own relevance.

**Commercial and journalistic relevance**

I had expected themes of crisis and commercial urgency to be dominant in the data. However, while some interviewees raised those topics, they were by no means predominant themes across all four cases. My interpretation is twofold: first, organizations without strong economic constraints can establish narratives of change connected to relevance and connection with the audience (Heikkilä et al., 2010). Second, the embedded separation of commercial and
professional logics may make journalists feel unprofessional if they frame their decisions through commercial narratives. Thus, commercialization and striving for journalistic relevance are not a semantic theme from the data, but a latent one.

I suggest that this theme supports the dynamics behind the previous semantic themes – the need to tackle change, to experiment with technology, and to engage the audience – because their ultimate objective is to establish their societal relevance.

Traditionally, the value of journalism has been explained through two prisms. Those who have commercial urges need to assert their relevance through economic viability (Nielsen, 2016) and those supported by public funds need to assert their relevance through professionalism (Waisbord, 2013a) and their place in society (Costera Meijer, 2001). However, the underlying mechanism by which news organizations explain their existence is their societal relevance (Peters & Broersma, 2013). The four cases studied in this dissertation exemplify that news organizations and newsworkers are – probably unknowingly – fighting to establish a new way to assert their relevance beyond the notion of a ‘business with a public purpose.’ I believe what we see here is what Heikkilä and colleagues (2010) call ‘a quest for added value’ (p.282) beyond the institutional and market value of journalism. Instead, at the interaction of the professional and commercial logics of journalism – through the prism of gamification – news organizations try to assert their relevance by fostering a public connection between the audience and the public world. This may also explain why most narratives in the interviews revolved around establishing a relationship with the audience, rather than regaining commercial and professional authority.

This is important for two reasons. First, while news organizations are still analytically separated by their commercial and professional adherence, they all share a need to find their journalistic relevance in the audience. So, while commercial and professional aspirations are not sought after by all news organizations, they all seek audience relevance. In this study, they do so by integrating gamification. This is because they see audience recognition as the validation to their commercial and professional needs. Second, this points to an even more constrained journalistic autonomy. Beyond business objectives and
technological innovation (Nygren et al., 2015), now newswokers have to understand, cure, and satisfy the public’s needs to maintain their relevance.

The convergence of commercial, professional, and audience orientation has accelerated in recent years (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). However, how these elements converge at the same time and how time is negotiated has not been addressed. The issue of time is more complex than I anticipated.

**Negotiation of time**

The temporal component of gamified journalism occupies five dimensions. First and foremost is the time period in which it has been possible to apply gamification to journalism. The confluence of technological innovation and normalized video game culture (Zackariasson, 2016) on the one side, and a return to a more popular and entertainment-oriented forms of journalism after six decades of serious ‘quality’ journalism (Costera Meijer, 2001) on the other. Admittedly, this is entwined with change and technology. The time when these factors converge, facilitating the irruption of gamified initiatives within journalism appears to be now. This presents a critical juncture where news organizations and newswokers can choose to either keep news and games separated or merge them. The newswokers interviewed in this study overwhelmingly agree that there is a need to attract new readers and that mixing news and games seems like a timely and promising opportunity.

A second temporal dimension, from a production perspective, is the time it takes to create a gamified news item. This dimension is particularly important in digital journalism, where the production cycle often follows an accelerated pace (Boczkowski, 2010). The implementation time is contingent upon the reach and complexity of the system. The different approaches covered across the cases exemplify the difficulty assessing how much time, as a resource, is needed to gamify journalism. From the relative simple, “quick and dirty” (TG03) approach at the Guardian to the months of preparation and adjustment at Al Jazeera, all the way through “living projects” that coexist in a constant iterative development process, such as the cases of Bleacher Report and the Times of India.

The issue of constant development connects to the third dimension of time: the dynamic and changing nature of digital news over time. What Karlsson (2012) calls the liquidity of online news can be applied to gamified news systems in which an “erratic, continuous, participatory, multimodal and
interconnected process that is producing content according to journalistic principles” (p. 388) is contingent on an ever-changing process. This results in gamification systems that change over time, not only because they visualize real-time behavior data, but also because in some cases, such as Bleacher Report and the Times of India, the rules of the game and the mechanics employed also change. This has wide implications for practitioners and users at the same time, and also for researchers. The case of Bleacher Report is a clear example. In the three years in which the Writer Ranking program was active, the system changed so much that writers had different experiences with the system depending on when they interacted with it. Furthermore, once the program was discontinued (which in itself carried a temporal component), the website maintained the gamified aesthetic, which meant that while journalists stopped interacting with a gamified system, readers experienced content through the achievements of journalists. As I discussed in the methods chapter, this apparent disconnect made my study of Bleacher Report much more difficult.

The fourth temporal dimension is connected to the fluid nature of gamified news. The time subjected to the narrative of the story, the one in which the user was submerged, is also an important finding emerging in the data. The creators of these gamified systems used time as a discursive and narrative resource that needs to be accounted for when analyzing the system (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014). Across the cases, interviewees often used the word ‘progress’ or ‘advancement’ as an equivalent to the ‘player’s path.’ All four cases showed that the designers had the notion of time in mind, more or less explicitly. For users, this meant advancing levels, completing stages, and enjoying more rewards. This is why progress bars and points were so prominent in these gamified systems. They attempted to entice repetition, to prompt users to return to the system and to create a pattern of use or habit.

And finally, the fifth temporal dimension, connected to progress in the system, is the immediacy of interactive feedback loops. As the system tracks user behavior, various processes are placed in motion. On the user’s end, real-time visualization of that behavior reinforces actions that are rewarded and discourages those that are not, effectively shaping news consumption. At the same time, since different interactions lead to different user experiences, these interactive feedback loops create a personalization of news experience. This can be seen in all four cases but is perhaps most apparent at the Times of India, where
a personal dashboard keeps the user updated with the entire news experience, and reminded of all the rewards and their respective perks accumulated. On the newsworkers’ end, similar real-time feedback is provided in the form of metrics and analytics. Whether aggregated or granular, news organizations put this feedback to use to define user engagement and make decisions according to patterns of user behavior presented by the analytics system (Tandoc, 2015; Usher, 2013).

Conclusion

The cross-case examination presents findings that emerge across the cases. Here is where I trace the main findings of the phenomenon of gamified journalism as a whole. While several findings can be highlighted, I want to raise here what I believe are the three key findings. First, I found that across the cases, news organizations and newsworkers frame gamification as a reaction to change, a result of technological experimentation, and a way to foster audience engagement. However, interviewees showed difficulty explaining what has changed, and therefore their narratives lacked precision on how to address it. Among interviewees, the predominant narrative revolves around technological change, both outside and inside the newsroom, and a failure to attract and maintain news readers. Therefore, newsworkers see experimenting with gamification as an investment.

Second, news organizations implement gamification with a guiding goal to be accomplished. Goals are different for each news organization and newsworker, with varying degrees of clarity and precision, but they appear to be largely connected to commercial needs and the professional aspirations of each institutional actor. This means that often the overarching goal falls onto a continuum between increasing commercial viability on one end, and being able to present the news in a more informative and compelling way to new audiences. Thinking of the commercial and the professional as a continuum is reflected in the literature, as it represents the binary approach to commercial versus professional. Moreover, this kind of thinking can be identified in the data. However, I believe that a dichotomous understanding of commercial versus professional goals underplays the potential of a professionally-driven news product that is commercially viable simply by the fact that it is compelling and informative. Another important feature regarding goals is that the goals set by
news organization do not necessarily match the goals framed within the
gamified system. Here I argue that while news organizations may deploy
gamification with an objective in mind, it seldom mirrors the goal of the
gamified system. The goal of the game is enticing users to achieve the
organizational goal. For example, at Bleacher Report the organizational goals
were to create as much content as possible, as quickly as possible, and as cheaply
as possible. However, within the game, the goal was pushing players to have the
highest level possible and be ranked as high as possible in the system. While it
could be argued that this apparent disconnect between the goals of a gamified
system is well understood by audiences, this form of reward substitution (Ariely,
Bracha, & Meier, 2009) highlights issues of transparency and privacy that may
be entirely misunderstood by both audiences and newsworkers. Except for a few
key figures, news organizations and newsworkers have little understanding of
how gamification operates and how they used it.
Congratulations, Reader 1! You have reached the final stage. Overcoming the grind is no easy feat. Only committed readers (or those who have found the warp-zones, symbolized here by skipping chapters) reach this point. I should reward you. Sadly, both on paper and as a PDF, this dissertation remains incapable of interacting with you. But if it could, ah if it could, it would make it clear that you are close to fulfilling its main goal, to assure that you read it. If we could see a progress bar in the top right corner of this page, it would be almost full. It would show how much you covered and how little it remains to the end, enticing you to keep reading so that you complete this final chapter.

What about other rewards? Well, I know my readers. After a lengthy section of findings, there is nothing more rewarding than reaching the end. No awards or achievements are needed other than the feeling of wrapping up this dissertation with a final discussion and concluding remarks. It is the experience of completion and discovery that drives you. And just like any final boss that is worth its pixels, it is in the process of beating it that players experience peak enjoyment. This section will fulfill that role, proposing a response to the research questions, discussing what gamification means for the organizations studied (and also for journalism in general), and proposing a research agenda for the future.

By this point, you probably know what is going on, both within the study and these short intermissions you and I have been sharing at the start of each section. The study points to the gamification of journalism, as a result, larger societal trends combined with the interplay of both journalism and gamification’s guiding institutional logics. The intermissions meant an out-of-genre experience geared to build a closer relationship between you and me, Reader 1, and to entice you to continue reading, just like a cheap analog gamified system powered by algorithms made out of dead trees. And because you are reading these words, it seems that it worked. I know you are probably asking yourself: did I use these intermissions to further my own agenda or did I do it for your own sake, Reader 1?

You will need to keep reading to find out. You are almost there.
Chapter 11: The space of gamified journalism

The overarching purpose of this study was to explore and understand how news organizations and newworkers use gamification on digital news websites and to understand the process of implementation. Specifically, this dissertation departed with four concrete aims: a) explore how gamification has been introduced in journalistic contexts, specifically within digital news media; b) understand why news organizations and newworkers chose to adopt gamification; c) discuss how newworkers make sense of their own choices when implementing gamification and how, in their view, gamification affects news production; and d) conceptualize the interplay of gamification and journalism’s logics and examine how this interplay may shape how gamification looks when applied by a news organization.

This multiple case study matters for its broader discussion about how news media introduce innovative elements that try to make journalism more popular and entertaining. In a time when journalism faces threats related to its commercial viability and its social relevance, it is important to understand how the evolution of contemporary digital journalism is contingent on how news organizations and newworkers adhere to its institutional logics. Moreover, through the lens of gamification, this study suggests that journalism is influenced not only by its institutional logics, but also by the logics of interacting institutions transgressing the boundaries of journalism. I investigated how journalistic logics interact with gamification logics and how they are responsible for shaping the contours of journalism, its boundary markers, and interactions between both institutions. I argued that that, while the adherence to the professional and commercial logics of journalism is vital to understanding news organizations and their content, it is only a part of the equation. The way that the logics of neighbouring institutions exert their power in journalism is equally important to understand news media. As institutional boundaries collapse, the autonomy and legitimacy of journalism decrease.

This chapter is organized into five parts: first, a reflection trying to make sense of the gamification of journalism, taking stock of the theoretical propositions and responding to the research questions that guided this study; second, a proposal of a theoretical model by which gamified journalism can be examined; third, a discussion of the potential benefits and dangers of gamifying
journalism; fourth, a consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of the study and a recommendation for future research; and finally, a set of concluding remarks.

**Making sense of the gamification of journalism**

This study presented an in-depth exploration of the introduction of gamification in digital news media. By using a qualitative multiple case study, I have looked at unique forms of gamified journalism and outlined a series of commonalities and differences, as well as a set of patterns emerging across the four cases.

The results show that the influence of institutional logics goes beyond the interaction between logics residing within the institution of journalism. When news organizations adopt external elements carrying logics belonging to different institutional orders, such as gamification, they create a space in which the entanglements of internal and external logics have the capacity to shape news media. Moreover, how news organizations and newworkers adhere to these logics is contingent on the actors, actants, and audiences participating in institutional news production, and manifested through the symbolic and material activities during various production stages (Lewis & Westlund, 2015). Thus, these external logics need to be accounted for when trying to make sense of how journalism operates across institutional boundaries. Journalism studies adopting a new institutional and logics perspective (Deuze, 2009; Lewis, 2012; Örnebring, 2016b; Ryfe, 2017; Westlund, 2017) often address how these logics operate within journalism. However, this study suggests that when institutional boundaries become blurred, neighboring institutions such as gamification inject their own logics which exert their influence in decision-making.

Understanding separate arrays of logics interacting could help to better account for the erosion of path dependencies and facilitate critical junctures, like introducing game elements in journalism. This explains why Al Jazeera, with a passionate advocate for journalism and limited economic concerns, could lean toward the professional logic of journalism and the hedonic logic of gamification. That combination of internal and external logics meant that the ultimate goal in Al Jazeera’s gamified story was consuming all the content through an immersive and playful interface. It also explains why the Times of India, more commercially-oriented and who left the design of its gamification
system to a separate marketing organization within the media group, adopted the commercial logic of journalism and the utilitarian logic of gamification. This array of logics materialized in an interface the goal of which was only collecting affective data and motivating users to return to the site.

In sum, these findings establish the main argument of this dissertation: the material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which news organizations and newsworkers chose to adopt gamification are contingent on the interplay of a socially and historically constructed context, and on a structural, normative, and symbolic adherence to the dominant logics of journalism and gamification.

More concretely, these findings support the theoretical propositions posed at the end of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. It is time to go back and discuss the theoretical propositions in light of the findings.

**Theoretical reappraisal**

The theoretical framework adopted media sociology, a sociotechnical approach, and new institutional theory to explicate the phenomenon of gamifying the news. Reflecting on the theoretical discussion and synthesis, this study offered two sets of theoretical propositions. After reviewing the empirical investigation and analyzing the results, I assess whether the theoretical propositions held true across the cases.

The first set of theoretical propositions, based in media sociology, was successful in explaining the sociotechnical underpinnings of gamification (see Chapter 3). The dual view of journalism as entertainment and journalism as information is still how journalists understand journalism. Because they consider entertainment to be less professional, they see gamification as less professional. However, as a reaction to internal and external change, other newsworkers – technologists and businesspeople – push technological experimentation and transgress the boundaries of journalism’s norms and values. In an attempt to gain their relevance among younger generations, news organizations assume that approaches like gamification can help attract and establish new relationships with younger audiences.

There are three major deviations from the first set of theoretical propositions. First, the push for gamification is not always spearheaded by technologists and businesspeople. At the Guardian and Al Jazeera, it was
journalists who were keen on the technology and championed it in their respective news organizations. Second, gamification is not exclusively deployed toward the audience. It can be applied to any behavior a news organization wants to entice. At Bleacher Report, it was newsworkers who were the gamified system’s users. And third, while journalists predominantly thought gamification as a form of entertainment that could be a threat to professional journalism, many interviewees thought it could be beneficial to journalism, as a form to attract new, younger, audiences.

The second set of propositions, even if they derive from institutional theory – and not media theory – also explained the results across cases (see Chapter 4). Both journalism and gamification carried a dominant set of logics and the historical context of news organizations, the personal identity of newsworkers, and the different set of goals pointed to which dominant logic each actor adhered. At the same time, how actors adhered to logics shaped how gamification was integrated in the news production process. Moreover, it is through the interaction of logics that we can see overlapping and blurring boundaries that further complicate how news media integrate gamification. While the propositions suggested that logics do not exclude each other and that they operate along a continuum, most interviewees see professionalism as a logic opposed to commercialism. Autonomy and legitimacy seem to be the mechanism by which newsworkers make this separation. Even when newsworkers saw gamification as a positive addition to journalism, it was ‘as a way to pay for good journalism.’ Only a few respondents genuinely saw gamification as a way to achieve both logics of journalism. Also, gamification, as the external element, seems to have less explanatory power than journalism. This could be because as the ‘transgressor,’ gamification is explained through journalistic terms, and therefore has less relevance. It could also be because gamification is an informal institution that is less present in everyday journalistic practice.

Overall, while the findings are in line with the ‘Hierarchical model of influences’ by Shoemaker and Reese (2014) and the ‘Institutional logics perspective’ by Thornton and colleagues (2012), they further complicate the apparent increasing transgression of institutional boundaries between journalism and gamification. As soon as news media introduce game elements, their inherent logics also permeate the institutional boundaries and exert their
influence on journalism. These two theoretical approaches explicate the complexity of interactions informing journalistic action within clearly demarcated hierarchical and institutional orders. However, I believe they partly fail to account for the degree of entanglement between and across institutional orders and how these entanglements can be instrumental in shaping how news organizations and newsworkers adhere to specific logics. The sociotechnical heuristic proposed by Lewis and Westlund (2015) – the Four A’s – helps address this issue, as it accounts the possibility for having actors, actants, and audiences operating under different institutional orders, shaping their activities.

On the one hand, for example, when the Guardian opted to enhance the crowdsourcing microsite with game mechanics, it was because a developer from a different industry proposed bridging the gap between news and games. His decision was anchored in material practices foreign to newswork but was shaped by the symbolic norms of journalism’s professional logics. This is not just a case of friction between two neighboring institutional orders; instead it was the enactment of agency by actors who operate within the structure of the journalistic institution, but who do so with an external institutional mindset.

On the other hand, when Bleacher Report used gamification to fuel an open source news media start-up, these entanglements functioned in reverse, and the lack of journalistic norms and values led newsworkers to reject the entire operation through the lens of professionalism. Here the friction was so salient that B/R had to discard the gamification approach entirely to survive as a credible news producer. In this case, gamification was pushed out by B/R, both as a material and symbolic pledge to fully operate within the confines of the journalistic institution.

In light of the empirical results and the theoretical reappraisal, it is time to concretize the findings of the study by answering the four research questions guiding this study.

**Answering the research questions**

This study began by proposing four research questions. Here I propose four answers.
Gamification of journalism manifests in different forms across a diverse pool of news organizations. Diversity is not only subjected to the type of game elements used to entice users to achieve a particular task, but also to organizational context, implementation goals, affective dynamics, game-like aspirations, and journalism process. These are the components of a kaleidoscopic practice. Therefore, how news organizations make use of gamification in their digital news websites is different across the board, but follows three overarching characteristics.

First, the process by which news organizations and newsmakers implement gamification follows a similar pattern. First, they identify the goal the system should achieve. The goals chosen are contingent on the degree individual and organizational adherence to the institutional logics of journalism (Thornton et al., 2012). After identifying a goal to be achieved, or behavior to be enticed, a small group of key actors is assembled and is responsible for designing the system. Due to the specific skills required to create a gamified system — editorial, technical, and commercial — the producing team often includes different actor roles. In this study, all four teams of producers include technical profiles in some capacity. This is not the case for editorial roles. In two of the cases (Bleacher Report and The Times of India), there were no journalists involved in the production and implementation of the systems. The necessity to relinquish part of the implementation control by journalists has an impact on how gamification is adopted and the combination of game elements used, as non-journalist actors tend to adhere less to the professional norms of journalism (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Here is where the first boundary transgression occurs, as newsmakers (who are not necessarily journalists) bring their own symbolic and material practices to the production process (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).

Second, game elements are implemented both at the news item level and the website level, targeting both the audience and newsmakers. Their complexity and game-like aspirations vary depending on the organizational and adherence to gamification institutional logics. For example, the Guardian opted for minimal use of gamification in a standalone microsite. This almost surgical
use of gamification contrasts with how Al Jazeera completely transformed the way it told the Pirate Fishing story. Its gamified interface was an attempt to immerse users in the story, filled with game elements and aesthetics that enhance interactivity.

Moreover, within the wide range of game components that can be identified, points, badges, and leaderboards are by far the most common game components. This is a feature of gamification that is present in most industries where gamification is adopted (Werbach & Hunter, 2012; Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). This is the point at which the second boundary transgression occurs, as the game elements are embedded in journalism processes, introducing gamification logic into journalism. The traditional separation between crosswords and other games in newspapers and news collapses as gamification makes its way into editorial processes.

Third, their temporal aspect is multidimensional. I want to highlight two dimensions. From the production perspective, how long it takes to create the gamified system affects both its complexity and its cost. A rich and intricate gamified system requires ample resources, which questions the viability of the approach. From the perspective of the product, time is predominantly associated with the reach of the gamified system. If a news organization gamifies a single story, the importance of the temporal dimension depends on the time it takes to consume the story, as in the case of Al Jazeera and the Guardian. Moreover, a single story has a limited shelf life which means that the system will be relevant for as long as the story being gamified remains in the spotlight. If the gamified system involves the entire site, like at the Times of India and Bleacher Report, then the notion of time revolves around the interactions of users with the entire system and has a much longer shelf life. In a way, being present across an entire site means that gamification is more intrusive than gamifying a single story. However, this also means that the gamified system will be used for a longer time and will be relevant to all users.

The diverse ways news organizations make use of gamification could be summarized as an effort that a) involves a team with skills that are predominantly technical; b) makes use various game elements in a single story or an entire site; c) entices a specific set of behaviors from users; d) and that is affected by the amount of time to implement. It is worth pointing out that the specific characteristics of how gamification is implemented by news
organizations in each case are highly dependent on the goals of gamifying the news and the way in which these news organizations and newsworkers adhere to dominant logics of journalism and gamification. Thus, the overall production process, procedural narrative, and expected user experience are highly contingent to the reasons for gamifying the news (as investigated by RQ2) and whether newsworkers perceive any effects of this on news production (as investigated by RQ3).

RQ2: Why do news organizations and individual journalists use gamification approaches in their stories and/or on their news websites?

Similar to the answer of RQ1, the ‘why’ question points to a diverse set of reasons. However, the range of motivations driving news organization and newsworkers to adopt gamified strategies in their digital outlets is narrower. While the celebratory rhetoric on gamification claims that gamification empowers users by allowing them to have fun and transforming activities into playful interventions (Paharia, 2013; Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011), this is seldom the reason why organizations in most industries invest in gamification (Conway, 2014; DeWinter & Kocurek, 2014; Fuchs, 2014). In the case of journalism, however, most narratives supporting the gamification of journalism are framed by a need to attract an audience. This is in line with the literature on the entertainment and popular aspirations of journalism (Costera Meijer, 2001; Nadler, 2016) and the increasing audience-orientation of journalism production (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018).

In my investigation, I found that news organizations and newsworkers often have a vague or almost serendipitous understanding of how gamification operates and what it can achieve. Its implementation in journalism has different reasons at different levels. At the macro-level, Zackariasson (2016) points out that the only reason why gamification has found such an exceptional acceptance is that of technological advancement and the normalization of video game culture. Additionally, based on the ‘Hierarchical model of influences’ (Reese, 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), I propose that news organizations, after almost two decades in which social systems, social institutions, media organizations, routine practices, and individuals have influenced news media to break the path dependency of keeping serious news and games separate, and
have reached a critical juncture in which they can adopt gamification to mix journalism and games. Beyond technology and video game culture, the economic crisis and dwindling readership numbers have ignited the need for experimentation with solutions to the changes that newworkers see happening in journalism. For example, when new media competitors, such as Buzzfeed or the Huffington Post, successfully applied gamification and adopted a more popular journalism without an apparent loss of trust by the public, they legitimated the exploration of gamification by legacy news media, as a way to attract new audiences who seek affective connections with their media use (Papacharissi, 2015a, 2015b). In a trend towards entertainment, institutional isomorphism pushes news media outlets to welcome gamification as another technological actant in the mix of solutions to abate the dominance of digital news models.

At the meso-level, each organization tries to utilize games according to its needs. From attracting new audiences to controlling journalistic production, the overall motivation for gamifying their sites is achieving a specific goal. At this level, news organizations appear to have a clearer vision of why they use gamification. Here different objectives tend to coexist. For example, the Guardian tried to mobilize readers into a form of watchdog participatory journalism. They also wanted to optimize their crowdsourcing microsite. Bleacher Report wanted to create as much content as possible, as quickly as possible, and as cheaply as possible. At the same time, they also wanted to portray their website as a competitive environment that related to professional sports. The Times of India hoped to learn as much as possible from their readers, generate as much traffic as possible on the site, and with luck, establishing a new habit of newsreading. And finally, Al Jazeera had a conscious plan for attracting a different, younger audience, while establishing itself as a pioneer in digital news storytelling.

At the micro-level, every gamified system entices users to conduct specific behaviors. These explicit tasks manifest what each system actively tries to achieve. At this level, closely analyzing the game components deployed in the system and the activities they reward allows me to challenge the organizational rhetoric against the symbolic and material practices news organizations and newworkers want to promote or prevent. This is in line with the propositions of the ‘Institutional logics perspective’ (Thornton et al., 2012). Scrutiny over
the game elements embedded in gamified systems sheds light on the institutional logics to which organizations and individuals adhere. For example, while the *Guardian* claims it wants to empower users by letting them participate in investigative reporting, the actual tasks they promote are reviewing, classifying, and notifying documents. While it may be true that newsworkers thought that crowdsourcing could be a source of empowerment, the implementation of a progress bar and a leaderboard posed as rewards for users’ efforts during the tedious and time-consuming selection and filtering process. At the same time, the system kept out of the processing and editing stage. The team used the scale of the audience to shorten and cheapen the investigation process.

Similarly, when *Bleacher Report* claimed that it wanted to empower writers in their ‘careers to the top,’ the rewards for their work privileged fast-paced and continuous publishing of content that engaged the audience. Nowhere in the system was there a reward for quality, veracity, or objectivity. Instead, the journalistic value was measured through shares, likes, and comments. Similarly, the *Times of India* rewarded users for returning to the site frequently, generating metrics, and providing their personal data. The ultimate goal of the system was to collect sentiment data, rather than informing the public. With this, I do not imply that the *Times of India* fails to inform its readers, but rather that its use of gamification did not aim to accomplish that goal. *Al Jazeera’s* system rewarded playing with the interface and consuming content. There were no alternative behaviors targeted by the system.

In sum, news organizations and newsworkers gamify their news outlets because they perceive change and believe that gamification may help them achieve their goals, as an innovative tool that has been successful before. Those goals may relate to the general strategy of the publication, like strengthening the relationship with the audience or creating production patterns in the workforce. However, in the detail of the rewarding mechanism is where research can ascertain the material tasks that drive their gamified systems.

If one of the reasons behind the gamification of journalism is a reaction to the changes perceived by newsworkers, its implementation may have the power to change journalistic processes as well. However, whether there is an impact or not, newsworkers may or may not perceive that impact. This is what RQ3 aims to illuminate.
RQ3: *How do newsworkers perceive gamification affects the news production process?*

The answer to this research question is divided into two parts to accommodate the two separate sample groups. The first group of interviewees comprised newsworkers who participated in creating the gamified systems. Interviewees within this group seemed to support what I referred to as 'change determinism' or, in other words, change driven as a result of the change that newsworkers perceived was already taking place. These newsworkers perceived gamification almost as a result of changes within journalism. Audience orientation and technological change allowed for gamification to emerge within journalism. At the same time, newsworkers perceived gamification to be a source of change in the way they work. Journalists’ intensive collaboration with technologists, as well as delegating part of the emotional and affective dynamics to the gamified system means that news production was different than usual. In the case of the *Guardian*, the entire process of gathering evidence was outsourced to the readers, motivating them with game elements. Thus, newsworkers coded the microsite, uploaded all the documents, and processed all the tips users generated while classifying the data. In the case of *Al Jazeera*, Pirate Fishing was created in a way that was significantly different from typical journalistic practice. As a novel form of storytelling, much of the work was focused on the design and evoking the right emotional response, rather than curating the content. Thus, for this group of interviewees, gamification has an important effect on news production, shifting the focus toward interfaces, user behavior, and affective responses, rather than on editorial content.

The second group of newsworkers was not involved in the creation of gamified systems. It is perhaps obvious that they perceived little to no change in journalism production due to gamification. Several newsworkers at the *Guardian* and the *Times of India* were unaware of gamification happening in their digital news outlets. Because they were not aware of gamification, they did not perceive change in their news production due to gamification. Furthermore, most interviewees saw gamification as a way to attract more and younger audiences. Rather than considering gamification as a part of the production process, it is perceived by newsworkers as a gimmick experienced by the audience during the consumption of news. The number of interviewees who
perceived gamification as something negative for journalism was very low, and their claims were typically framed by the discussion of serious news versus entertainment.

A notable exception to this is the case of Bleacher Report, in which news production itself is the object of gamification. This case is interesting because at B/R there is a strong sense of change in practice, because the gamified system rewards their performance, awarding publishing frequency and generating reader buzz, rather than quality content. Journalists became the players of the system and could feel first hand whether gamification changed their practice. However, the effects perceived by journalists took place in the early stages of the system and fairly quickly were substituted by the emotional effects of metrics and analytics. The gamified system at B/R showcases a unique take on gamification of news, but it is probably the strongest indicator that gamification could have an impact on journalism, in one way or another. B/R’s gamified system eventually was discontinued among criticism of writers exploitation and unprofessional and low-quality content.

In sum, newsworkers who are close to the creation of the gamified system perceive a greater effect in news production. The most commonly recurring changes relate to the focus in journalistic practice, shifting from content to a more audience-oriented task, such as storytelling or enticing behavior. Newsworkers who are not close to gamification tend to perceive no effects in the news production process, but they tend to believe it may broaden the number of readers. For those newsworkers who became the players in the case of B/R, gamification was explicitly build to shape their patterns of news production. Following Sjøvaag’s (2013) proposition, this means that algorithmically rewarding patterns of production pushes journalists to produce under the explicit rules of the institutional apparatus, effectively reducing their autonomy.

It is worth pointing out that in this study, I did not collect any empirical material indicating causal effects between the use of gamification and changes in journalism. Various studies show that the dynamics of news production are affected by organizational, socioeconomic, and technological changes surrounding the newsroom (Boczkowski, 2010; Czarniawska, 2011; McNair, 1998). However, the potential for change is assessed here through how
newsworkers perceived gamification affected their production process. These perceived effects and actual effects differ in that the former relate to the way newsworkers feel and therefore do not imply actual change. The latter relate to actual change, which in turn may or may not be perceived by newsworkers.

The ‘how, why and with what perceived effect’ questions relate to the interaction of game elements and journalism. The boundary transgression creates the space in which the logics of journalism and gamification interact. The underlying forces resulting from news organizations and newsworkers’ adherence to those logics is responsible for how gamified systems are designed to operate and look the way they do. The next research question addresses this issue.

**RQ4: How does the boundary transgression between news and games enact the interplay of their respective institutional logics?**

Understanding journalism as an institution implies that it operates under several distinctive internal logics (Örnebring, 2016b; Ryfe, 2006). According to Thornton and colleagues (2012) these logics represent norms and values, routines and practices, as well as identities and behaviors guiding organizational and individual interactions. This study focused on the commercial and professional logics as the dominant logics of the journalistic institution (Hanitzsch, 2007), and the hedonic and utilitarian logics as the dominant logics of gamification (Hamari, 2013).

As soon as news organizations embrace gamified systems within their operations, the boundaries between journalism and gamification collapse and their respective logics clash in an effort to establish a guiding set of principles that organize decisions and sense-making. These logics compete for dominance, often undermining each other, and setting a foundation for interaction. Thus, it is in the interplay of journalism’s norms and values with the objectives and strategies of gamification that material and symbolic practices are enacted by a news organization and its employees. How news organizations and newsworkers adhere to institutional logics defines and shapes how a gamified news system will be designed and implemented.

When the professional and commercial logics of journalism and the hedonic and utilitarian logics of gamification exert their power, they do so within a space of gamified journalism. In this space, demarcated by the
interaction of all four logics, practically all gamified news systems could be placed and analyzed. Depending on which are the dominant logics to which they adhere, each case can be located, expecting to showcase material and symbolic practices that carry and exhibit traits of said logics. For example, when Bleacher Report gave preference to creating more content with limited vetting to pursue commercial success, it positioned itself within the commercial logic of journalism. At the same time, when it intended to reinvent the experience of career advancement within a news organization by turning it into a game-like process, it adhered to the hedonic logic of gamification.

Similarly, when the Guardian encouraged its audience to participate in an investigative watchdog journalism story, it operated within the professional logic of journalism. However, the gamified system only included a few simple game components, the only role of which was to reward users to classify and report digital documents. Thus, it used game mechanics for their utilitarian value, rather than for their hedonic capacities.

In sum, the space of gamified journalism represents a news organization’s adherence to and the interplay of institutional logics of journalism and gamification. This is how the interplay of logics exerts its power over gamified news systems. Moreover, this is manifested in the way gamification was applied, a reflection of the news organization’s take on journalistic norms and values, and the objective and strategies of implementing gamification.

In the next section, I propose a theoretical model that aims to conceptualize the ‘Space of gamified journalism’ as a unified model that helps visualize and explicate how news organizations adopt and implement different forms of gamification.

**Constructing and unpacking the ‘Space of gamified journalism’**

The vast literature about the driving forces of journalism often points to a few well-established dynamics. From a normative perspective, journalism’s ‘first allegiance is to the truth’ (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007) and to informing the public to act as citizens (Costera Meijer, 2001). Such an account of journalism is further complicated by journalism’s commercial nature (Hamilton, 2004; Nielsen, 2016), or even its capacity to establish narratives, influence public opinion, and maybe most critically, serve as a political mouthpiece (Herman & Chomsky, 2002; McChesney, 2003). Narratives about the nature of journalism
can be substantiated by examples from the multiple of cultures of journalism that exist in the industry (Hanitzsch, 2007; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). Journalism embodies a multifaceted existence, from both the perspective of purpose and the perspective of practice.

Conceptualizing journalism as an institution allows scholars to think of these multifaceted characteristics of journalism as logics that fight for dominance, setting off internal dynamics and forces that shape how news organizations and journalists produce the news. In other words, journalistic actors operate within a common framework, material and symbolic norms, values, and practices. This framework sets the structure by which journalism is constrained and is one of the reasons why news operations have similar traits and institutional evolution. Adhering to the institutional logics affords news organizations and newsworkers the agency to fulfill their understanding of what journalism is and should be. Institutional logics interact with each other, often in tension, competing for prevalence and primacy. However, they can also reinforce each other and coexist within the institution. The dynamics guiding institutional logics are complex and contingent on the historical context of the institution, the organization, and the individual as a whole (Thornton et al., 2012).

Gamification follows a similar pattern. All gamified systems operate within the same structure, yet they can look and perform very differently. This is because the dynamics that rule the interaction of gamification logics allow news organizations and journalists to adopt gamification in the way that best fits their institutional adherence.

In this dissertation, I chose professionalism and commercialism as the predominant logics within the institution of journalism. There are other logics exerting power within the institution – e.g., technological, participatory, and algorithmic – but they are not the dominant ones. In gamification, I chose the utilitarian and hedonic logics as the two forces that shape how gamification is deployed. Returning to Thornton and Ocasio (1999), considering institutional logics as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (p. 804) explains the way that news
organizations and journalists adhere to these logics, and how gamification is implemented on news websites.

If these logics establish the structure in which news organizations and newsworth

work operate when implementing gamification, this means that their course of action must remain within the structural bounds. The interplay of logics creates a two-dimensional space in which gamified journalism examples can be placed. When I use the term ‘space,’ I do not refer to the physical spatial dimension of gamified journalism, but rather to the constructed space created by the interplay of the four logics. Figure 17 shows the ‘Space of gamified journalism’ where we can locate gamified journalism systems.

The model is bound by the Y-axis, the journalism dimension, and the X-axis, the dimension of gamification. These dimensions are a continuum on which each end represents a dominant logic. As discussed above, each end of the continuum is one of the logics, because they exert power on organizations and
individuals. They do not exclude each other. Therefore, a gamified system in the middle of a continuum of logics would mean that the logics are balanced when news organizations and newworkers make decisions.

Each quadrant represents two dominant logics. A case is located in a quadrant depending on how it adheres to each logic, along the continuum of each dimension. The position can be closer to the edges of the space, which would imply a more dominant logic, or toward the center, which would suggest a balance between two logics. Quadrants are divided by a dotted line to visualize that quadrants are not locked and that cases can bridge quadrants if their dominant logics change. This is because a news organization’s adherence to logics is set in a context and a time, which means that the position of a gamified system within the space can move as time passes or the context changes. Thus, a position within the space is not necessarily stationary and may shift if the system changes.

This model proposes a metaphorical space where cases of gamified journalism can be mapped and understood. Considering that most gamification consultants portray gamification as ‘a possible solution,’ this model simplifies the analysis of gamified journalism systems by using dominant logics as the points of reference.

**Cross-case adherence to institutional logics**

The cases investigated in this study showed the four different combinations of adherence to institutional logics. I assume the diversity is a result of the maximum variance approach when selecting the cases. Table 31 shows a cross-case comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Journalism logics</th>
<th>Gamification logics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Professional logic</td>
<td>Utilitarian logic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleacher/Report</td>
<td>Commercial logic</td>
<td>Hedonic logic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times of India</td>
<td>Commercial logic</td>
<td>Utilitarian logic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Jazeera</td>
<td>Professional logic</td>
<td>Hedonic logic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As I argued in the results chapters, I associated systems’ adherence to each logic through how news organizations deployed their gamified systems and how the systems functioned. Following Thornton and colleagues’ (2012) institutional
order ideal-types, I assigned each case’s elements to their symbolic and material practice for each logic, which pointed to the dominant logic of the four gamified systems.

While the four cases can be placed in different quadrants of the space, their position within the quadrants responds to my interpretation of how dominant the different logics were at the time of implementation. However, if the context of the case of the design of the systems changed, an arrow represents shifting position within the space and points to where the system moved. Figure 18 shows an estimation of where each case operated in the space of gamified journalism.

![Figure 18 – Positioning the four cases in the ‘Space of gamified journalism’](image)

Positioning each case is not always easy. For example, the MP’s expense story at the *Guardian* adhered to the utilitarian logic of journalism, so it is located close to the utilitarian logic end of the gamification logic continuum. However, regarding journalism logic, the dominance of the professional logic was not as
strong, and therefore, the case can be situated closer to the middle of the journalism dimension.

Similarly, the gamified systems at the Times of India and Bleacher Report adhered almost exclusively to the commercial logic of journalism. However, their systems’ adherence to the gamification logic differed. The Times of India took a utilitarian approach, but still made a personalized app, and therefore it does not sit at the end of the utilitarian logic. Bleacher Report instead chose a hedonic approach, but did not entirely discard the utilitarian aspect, either. Therefore, these cases appear close to the center of the gamification continuum. My interpretation of Al Jazeera’s Pirate Fishing position is easier to assess. It adhered to the professional logic of journalism and the hedonic logic of gamification, and therefore, it is located on the top right corner of the model.

Movement across the space occurs when news organizations modify a system to veer toward a different logic. For example, during the second iteration of the Guardian’s gamified system, the team in charge of the game added the progress bars and leaderboards to entice more users. The system became more game-like, and therefore there was a transition toward the hedonic logic of gamification, even though the change was not big enough to shift the dominant logic. The arrow shows the movement in the space. The ‘X’ in Figure 18 represents the position of the system when the microsite was removed.

Moving in the space is more difficult for news item specific systems, like Pirate Fishing at Al Jazeera, simply because, after publication, the system was not changed. Instead, the loyalty program Times Points has changed steadily since its creation, making the game mechanics less apparent and immersive, which suggests movement further toward the utilitarian logic of gamification. Finally, Bleacher Report, after sparking criticism both inside and outside the organization, and after being acquired by Turner, veered toward a less immersive gamified system that had to consider journalistic professionalism. Game components slowly stopped being part of the production process, and a journalist taught editorial norms and values to writers in the system. Thus, from a commercial and hedonic position, the system transitioned toward the center as it tried to be less hedonic and more professional. However, in the case of B/R, the system had already fulfilled its purpose and the attempts to save it by adjusting it to the needs of the organization, rendered it useless and
problematic, and eventually, they dismantled the program. The 'X' in Figure 18 represents where the system was when it was canceled. *Al Jazeera* and the *Times of India* have no 'X' because they are still accessible online and therefore they could still change and move in the space.

This theoretical model, just like the Four A’s, serves as a heuristic for understanding the internal dynamics of gamified journalism. However, it is not suited to predict the outcome of gamifying the news. The reason for this is that each case carries its own set of characteristics that could influence the course of the system. For example, when *Bleacher Report* succeeded in creating so much content for almost no cost thanks to its gamified system, this output ran against the professional logic of journalism. However, despite the bad reputation the system gave *B/R*, the company was bought by a big media conglomerate that pushed for dismantling the gamified system and pursuing more professional journalism. Short-term and long-term effects of gamification are almost impossible to predict for all cases. However, through the development of the cases studied in this dissertation, scholarly work on gamification and journalism, there is room for a discussion on the potential benefits and dangers of gamifying the news.

**Potential benefits and dangers of gamifying the news**

Reflecting on the potential outcomes of gamifying the news combines what has been discussed in this dissertation and a projection on likely future outcomes. This discussion builds toward a hypothesis of the potential benefits and dangers of integrating gamification in news media for newworkers and news organizations, journalism, audiences, and society as a whole. In a time when on the one hand news media is questioned, polarized, and attacked, and on the other hand there is an alarming increase of disinformation and information pollution with the potential of swinging public opinion, it is fitting to ponder about the future and ask what all of this means. Much is at stake.

In a broad sense, gamification’s goal is to create, strengthen or modify human behavior. The news organizations studied in this dissertation used gamification to entice readers to help classify and find newsworthy information in documents; to motivate journalists to create as much content as possible and enhance their performance; to gather users’ sentiment data and cement their loyalty; and to create a better storytelling technique that would capture the
attention of new audiences. This is only within the sample of the study, and therefore, it is not an exhaustive list of news organizations’ goals for using gamification. There are as many possible uses for gamification as there are behaviors within news media that may be targeted. To achieve their goals, gamified systems rely on game elements, interactive interfaces, and algorithmic power. This means that users need to be surveilled constantly to track their behavior and to interact with interfaces purposely designed to generate emotional responses, which may be problematic in its initial design.

Reinforcing trends, igniting change
For newworkers, news organizations, and journalism, gamification extends several ongoing trends that already exist (with or without gamification). First is the apparent necessity to fight change with change. Dwindling circulation and revenue figures, uninterested younger audiences, and new media competitors could have been addressed by reinforcing what made journalism unique in the past (e.g., objectivity, autonomy, facticity, and civic responsibility). Instead, news organizations meet these changes by exploring new approaches that prioritize establishing new practices, new business models, and new journalistic values. It is evolutionary, slow-paced change, but it is change determinism nonetheless.

Second, it strengthens the ongoing audience-orientation of news organizations, a trend that can be seen as a ramification of the popularization of the press, but also of the increasing reliance on audience metrics as a mean to learn as much about the audience so that news organizations can publish content they think will be well-received by their audiences.

Third, it furthers journalism’s fascination with technology and investing in technical solutions to address problems that are not necessarily technical. Incidentally, having algorithmic and technical solutions that automate processes increases journalists’ loss of autonomy – relative to that of other newworkers – in news organizations. As other roles – such as technologists, managers, and businesspeople – become more instrumental in deciding which technologies hit the newsroom, journalists suffer reduced work and decision-making power.

The issue of autonomy is also exacerbated by the fourth trend, the continuous blurring of journalistic boundaries. One of the most significant
characteristics of the gamification of journalism is that the boundary between games and journalism is often transgressed. This allows distinct external institutional logics to pour over journalism and interact with news media's internal logics, actively re-shaping journalism. The change of journalism by external forces further decreases newsworkers’ autonomy, as they have less power to define and assert what news is.

Gamifying the news also means bridging some older conceptions of journalism and the ignition of new trends. First and foremost, gamification questions the serious-versus-fun dichotomy that permeated journalism for the most of the twentieth century. While entertainment has always been a part of the journalistic genre, gamifying hard news such as illegal fishing in a developing country, hacking of a government in a war-ridden country, or the election of a Pope, suggests that game elements have found a way into current affairs and high-quality journalism. Second, gamification redefines the personalization of news. This trend is not based solely on gamification, but as the creation of personal profiles for news consumers continue to thrive, gamification becomes the ideal tool for news organizations to use data collected about users and make consuming the news a more personalized experience. Finally, gamification reformulates how news organizations try to modify and reward specific human behaviors. This is more important than it seems because regardless of whether it is a digital or a physical reward, it means news organizations can target behaviors they want to foster, both in the audience and in their workforce. Moreover, it is an algorithmic and automated technological actant that supports these efforts. This development opens a new era for behavior manipulation and metrics as the new epistemology of journalism.

Potential dangers

Of course, this shift carries several potential dangers. For newsworkers, gamification heightens the potential for precarious and exploitative working conditions. The case of Bleacher Report showcases that gamification has the potential to shape editorial content. This is done by targeting and measuring newsworkers’ performance, assessing and rewarding it automatically through surveilling technologies and following a pre-defined set of rules. It also means journalists’ loss of autonomy as new roles gain even more relevance in the newsroom. News organizations risk adhering even more to the commercial logic
of journalism. Target and measurable behaviors tend to align much better with economic targets than with professional norms that are more difficult to measure. They also risk falling into full audience-orientation, becoming an information catering service that only feeds users what they want to consume.

For journalism, as a social institution, the danger is to fall into a pattern of banalization, appropriating the entertaining aura of games, and devaluing the notion of journalistic professionalism and importance. Being perceived as an industry that sold the core values of journalism to entertainment media could signify the final loss of the authority that has kept journalism socially relevant and respected for over a hundred years. Furthermore, if the gamified layer does not suit the experience that news wants to convey, there is a risk of adopting a completely gratuitous set of game elements poorly implemented that take the focus away from what matters, the news. Returning to Costera Meijer’s (2007) ‘paradox of popularity,’ if news organizations become entertaining enough to become popular, they may lose popularity because audiences might not see them as relevant news.

For audiences, gamifying the news may generate risks of exploitation, either by manipulating their reading choices through game elements or by monetizing content and data they generate while interacting with the system. This could pose a serious privacy risk. At a societal level, a strong investment in gamification can turn game elements and interfaces into the central aspect of journalism, relegating news to a secondary role. Making society used to being rewarded for everything is a terrible potential outcome, but not even close to the failure of informing the public to be able to function as citizens actively.

These are only some of the potential dangers of gamifying journalism, and while they may not materialize, they still raise serious concerns that should invite news organizations and newsworkers to be vigilant. At the same time, it should also be acknowledged that there are potential benefits, based on the promises and findings in the literature on gamification.

**Potential benefits**

There are two common narratives news organizations use to support gamifying journalism. The first is that it will attract new, younger audiences engage them in news consumption. The second is that if it becomes successful, it will pay for
good journalism. These are potentially beneficial outcomes that are possible to materialize.

There are, however, other potential benefits. For newsworkers, relying on a gamified system to attract the audience could mean that the focus of the work could be on other processes of news production. Even more, just as the *Guardian* did, engaging users to participate in news production could take part of the workload off newsworkers’ shoulders. Similarly, news organizations could establish more meaningful relationships with audiences, creating a more attractive and enticing set of experiences for users. Indeed, gamification also has the potential to increase readership loyalty and boost brand recognition, consequentially raising the marketing value of the service, which could lead to a profitable business model. This assumption is based on two premises: on the one hand, a more engaged community of users remains longer on the site, visits more often, and interacts more with the service, making it a much more attractive service for advertisers; on the other hand, games have achieved substantial profit with services that are free to play while offering virtual goods (Quah, 2002) that can be purchased by the player. Such a monetizing model allows for dynamic pricing schemes that can encompass carefully timed events. If games have achieved such successful business models by offering their main content for free (Dymek, 2012), it should also be within the grasp of the news industry to do the same.

For journalism, targeting behaviors that promote the norms and values of good journalism would be a good start. For example, creating an interface and a storytelling technique that is truly engaging, can not only offer an entertaining and enriching news experience in itself, but can also produce an interface that motivates users to read. Furthermore, if only the interface is gamified, then editorial content could be delivered intact, without being affected by gamified strategies.

For audiences and society, making quality journalism an enjoyable daily habit, means not only satisfied readers but also better-informed citizens. Thus, a gamified news service has the potential to engage users – particularly youth – to read the news, to inform themselves, and most importantly, to consume news while creating a habit out of it. Whether this leads to a more democratic and civic society willing to participate in the public debate is a discussion that exceeds the ambitions of this dissertation, but it is an ideal that resonates with
the professional logic of journalism. If journalism is to continue to uphold its democratic and civic function, it would be helpful if, while the boundary between news and entertainment remains as solid as possible in editorial content, the boundary between games and news slowly collapses when it comes to interface and storytelling. This could be done by keeping editorial content and digital interface as independent from each other as possible.

These potential outcomes remain imaginary, partly suggested by the results of this study, partly impossible to accurately measure. Further studies should try to ascertain how likely these potential outcomes are to materialize. In the following section, I present the contributions of this dissertation, discuss the limitations of the study, and propose an agenda for future research.

Contributions, limitations, and future research

This multiple case study examined the gamification of journalism as a phenomenon occurring at the convergence of two overarching social trends. From journalism’s perspective, the use of gamification is situated in the overarching shift toward entertainment, popularization, and audience orientation of news media. This shift hopes for a way to tackle the many challenges of contemporary journalism and supports what newworkers perceive as the primacy of technology as a way to solve those challenges. From the perspective of gamification, journalism is yet another context in which persuasive technology can be deployed commercially, with the promise of fun and engagement.

This dissertation is one of the first in-depth studies on the use of gamification by news organizations. Its value lies in the specific empirical findings on gamified journalism systems, but also for what it represents in the larger trends in digital journalism. Against this backdrop, this dissertation contributes to journalism and gamification scholarship both in theory and methodology. Moreover, I propose a few practical implications for practitioners.

Theoretical contributions

This study is supported by theories anchored in media sociology, a sociotechnical approach to institutional news production, and an institutional logics perspective. Merging these theories into a conceptual framework that engages with journalism and gamification is the first theoretical contribution.
While new institutional approaches (see Lowrey, 2011; Ryfe, 2006; 2017) and studies using the notion of logics (see Deuze, 2005; Lewis, 2012; Westlund, 2017) are not foreign to journalism studies, adopting an institutional logics perspective at the interplay of two overlapping institutional orders is not common in either journalism or gamification research.

Furthermore, few have engaged with the use of games and play in journalism production (see Dozier & Rice, 1984; Glasser, 1982; Stephenson, 1964). Conceptualizing gamification as an institution that exerts a force across institutional orders and social domains is a novel approach. This conceptual step allows me to understand the introduction of gamification in journalism as a transgression and collapse of the boundary markers that historically have kept news and games separate.

A second theoretical contribution is the inclusion of external logics of journalism as an influence that collides with the conceptual narrative. Here I answer Ryfe’s call (2017) for a more nuanced understanding of how journalism’s institutional dynamics operate in light of external institutional orders, highlighting how ideal types of institutional orders are replicated and re-shaped when these institutions interact.

Finally, the third theoretical contribution is the proposal of a conceptual space of gamified journalism model, in which the two dominant logics of journalism and the two dominant logics of gamification form a space in which gamified news systems can be situated. By introducing case-specific adherence to institutional logics and comparing them to their ideal-types for each guiding logic, this study establishes a novel model to understand and analyze how news organizations adopt gamification strategies and why they operate the way they do.

Methodological contributions

According to Gunter (2000), qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews and case studies are common when scholars try to explore and understand new phenomena. This is the basic methodological route I followed. However, two method deviations might be considered methodological contributions to research.

First, multiple case studies often follow two distinct approaches. This can mean either looking at the single cases as the unit of analysis and focusing on
the uniqueness of single cases (Ekberg, 2017) or focusing on the analytical synthesis and analyzing multiple cases together, as a single case (Aitamurto, 2016). While I have opted for four diverse case studies, I made an analytical choice of conducting individual analyses of the cases and a complementary cross-case examination in which I look at the cases as part of a phenomenon that can be considered the unit of analysis. Such a multilayered approach produces a nuanced set of findings and analysis that can understand the dynamics that operate within the cases and across cases.

Second, there are no perfect methods for analyzing gamification, and existing methods are even less optimal when studying gamified news systems. In this dissertation, I adopted the relevant markers of games analysis and combined them with alternative methods used to describe gamified products. This way I created and employed a qualitative game-system analysis, in which I could examine specific instances in isolation, but within the frame of news. This new method may be helpful for other researchers who may want to analyze specific gamified systems within news media.

**Practical implications**

Beyond theoretical and methodological considerations, this dissertation has implications for practice, providing an increased understanding of how gamification operates within the confines of news media.

Current research suggests that the normative commitments of traditional journalism sit in tension with the commercial needs of news organizations (Nielsen, 2016), on the one hand; and that the promises of fun and empowerment of gamification clashes with the inherent need to accomplish a specific task (Fuchs, 2015; Hamari, 2013), on the other hand. Moreover, we understand the importance of technologists in generating news media innovation (Nielsen, 2012) and also that they carry different normative understandings of what journalism is supposed to be (Singer, 2003).

This study reinforces these notions, but also calls for deeper involvement from newsworkers. When journalists are not part of the driving force introducing gamification, it is probable that the commercial logic becomes the dominant guiding force of a gamified news system. Furthermore, unless a journalist has a very technical background, without the help of a technical team, a gamified system is not viable. However, the more journalists and news
organizations allow forces external to journalism to take decisions, the more journalists' autonomy weakens. Because approaches that blatantly prioritize the commercial logic of journalism often draw criticism, it may be relevant to balance how adherence to the logics is perceived by the audience. The reason for this is, if journalism loses its autonomy, but also loses its credibility (by looking like a game), it may further damage its already battered social relevance.

Thus, practitioners eager to use gamification on their news websites should consider a stronger and more cohesive collaboration between technical and editorial profiles. Similarly, news organizations should not outsource gamification to a third party without an extensive vetting process by an experienced journalist.

At the same time, establishing a different set of goals from journalism and gamification perspectives may help acknowledge their distinct internal dynamics and reflect on how these dynamics interact with each other and how they inherently affect the final product. Whether the goal is experimentation, attracting new users, or industry recognition, news organizations need to understand that users make sense of the system through their experiences with the system.

Finally, as gamified systems become more pervasive, the public should gain an understanding of how organizations and businesses use game elements to reward specific behavior so that users can be more vigilant against attempts to nudge or manipulate the public. Therefore, if news organizations are transparent in the intent of their gamified systems, this may lead to greater acceptance and better interaction with users. If learning about the audience is the goal, then starting with the gamified system and its metrics means that the audience is unknown before making the gamified system. Instead, gamified systems require to already know the target users so that the gamified processes can engage and reward them in the most appropriate way.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. The most important limitation stems from the broad nature of gamification as a practice and as institution. Even with a narrow account for what I considered gamification in this study, there is still room for confusion to those unfamiliar with its practice. Considering that the gamification of news is a relatively new
development, I decided to study different prominent cases existing in the field. Moreover, I used a maximum variation approach to select those cases so that they could better exemplify the broad spectrum of gamification. Still, it is clear that these cases do not represent the entire phenomenon of gamified news.

This leads to the second limitation, which connects theory and the methodological choices. Gamification carries its own vocabulary, complete with some concepts that are fuzzy. Game mechanics, game aesthetics or even immersion spark debate among games scholars. Journalists’ understandings of these concepts are often limited and contextual, based on their own experiences. This is particularly true for journalists who did not participate in creating any of the gamified systems. The fact that I conducted interviews via Skype (or a similar software) did not simplify this complexity. During the interviews, I made a special effort to introduce and explain the most relevant concepts, often using alternative narratives to clarify my questions. Similarly, I made greater efforts during the coding and analysis of interview data, to make sure I presented the interviewees’ points of views as accurately as possible.

The third limitation refers to the larger claims for which this study argues. While qualitative multiple case studies are of great value to investigate new phenomena in-depth with the aim of establishing a better of understanding of the underlying dynamics that shape said phenomenon, they have no generalizing power from the sample to an entire population (Yin, 2014). Thus, instead of aiming for statistical generalization, I used a multiple case study to exemplify a practice and a set of theoretical constructs, which still carry an explanatory power that can be extrapolated theoretically, not empirically. This type of analytical generalization still provides enough room for valuable research, as the qualitative approach accounts for a richer understanding of particular instances of the object of study.

Finally, I want to point out that while the audience is on the periphery of this dissertation, it is only an imagined audience, imagined mostly by journalists and news organizations. This is almost an inevitable narrative. Gamification is not necessarily aimed at audiences – as the case of Bleacher Report shows – but in the majority of cases, it is. Whether it is to reward their loyalty or transform the way they read the news, the gamification of journalism has the audience as the main player. And yet this study gathered no empirical data regarding audiences. This means that the success or effects of gamification cannot be
assessed here. The larger claims for enhancing engagement by the public remain equally unanswered by journalists, news organizations, and this study. Of course, these weaknesses point to the need for further research.

**An agenda for future research**

The inquiry of gamified journalism has only begun. There are plenty of avenues ahead for fruitful research: empirical, theoretical, and methodological.

Empirically, this study investigated the gamification of journalism from the perspective of production. The logical next step is to investigate this phenomenon from the perspective of reception. How do audiences react to and engage with gamified journalism? Has gamification any impact on the way audiences consume the news? Such an investigation could focus on material effects, such as time on site, understanding of the content, the frequency of newsreading, and also more symbolic features such as credibility, authority, and trust. Experimental approaches combined with focus groups could better illuminate the audience dimension of gamification, one that is still largely understudied. These type of studies are already done in gamification research (see Fitz-Walter et al., 2011; Hamari, 2015; McCallum, 2012) and of course in journalism studies (see Cole & Greer, 2013; Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2018; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). Engaging with this literature could help add an important piece of this puzzle, and establish whether the grand claims of gamification deliver the goods in journalism contexts.

The second line of research should expand the focus to wider content analysis. How big a phenomenon is gamified journalism? What type of approaches and systems are more common? Do some types of news organization make more use of gamification than other types? Can the space of gamified journalism be put into practice when analyzing a broader number of gamified news systems? A broader content analysis (both quantitative and qualitative) could provide better answers to these questions. Furthermore, it could open new lines of inquiry toward interjecting trajectories with other types of journalism, such as data journalism, or whether the claims for an entertainment bias vis-à-vis serious journalism are true. Engaging with the work of De Maeyer and colleagues (2015); Lewis, Zamith, and Hermida (2013) or Westlund (2015), but focusing on gamification, could provide a better understanding of the scope of gamification in journalism.
Finally, the third line of inquiry should critically assess the place of gamification within the larger audience-orientation trend in which news producers seem to be entrenched (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). Often presented as a method for increasing audience engagement, gamification makes use of algorithmic processes and relies on metrics and analytics to sustain and inform editorial judgment. I believe this creates opportunities for journalism studies based on the search for engagement. However, news organizations are shifting from notions of civic engagement to metrics of engagement without considering the significant change this has for the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of journalism. Technical solutions that measure engagement only provide technical understandings of engagement, which cannot fully account for civic engagement. Engaging with a new strand of scholarly work (see Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018; Nelson, 2018; Petre, 2018; Zamith, 2018b) could situate gamification within a new form of technical and automated form of audience assessment and how they engage with the news.

Theoretically, this dissertation adopted a sociotechnical and a new institutional theory approach. However, a large portion of gamification scholarship focuses on behavioral and psychological theoretical approaches. Looking at gamification from the perspective of theories such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) or behavioral economics (see the work of Ariely, 2011; and Ariely et al., 2009) may be fruitful to understand how the motivational mechanisms of gamification interact with the motivational mechanisms of journalism.

Moreover, delving into the technological aspect of gamification, drawing from Science and Technology Studies scholarship, like Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) could provide a useful way to understand gamified systems as actants that exert their agency across journalistic networks. Drawing from Human-Computer Interaction and Artificial Intelligence, framing gamification within the framework of human-machine communication (Guzman, 2016) could help scholars understand how gamified systems act as digital agents that execute communicative processes with the audience, outsourced by news organizations. Finally, drawing from digital labor scholarship (Scholz, 2013), looking at gamification regarding labor dynamics or as agents of change could lead to much-needed theoretical work on the precariousness of journalists or the ‘change determinism’ that can spread across newsrooms.
Methodologically, this study has relied on interviews and gamified-system analyses to collect data. Experimental studies to measure effects on audiences and ethnographic work to measure how gamification is embedded in journalistic practice are sites of necessary work to be able to understand causal dynamics of gamified journalism that have not been approached in this study.

Finally, beyond the concerns on gamification, there are several routes to explore within journalism studies. The first involves studying the epistemological and ontological implications for journalism when institutional boundaries become blurred. Who has the power to establish news values? Who can define what constitutes news? This also has implications for journalistic autonomy and the legitimacy of journalists and news organizations over news production. If external practices make it to the newsroom, how do journalists reorganize their working practices and maintain their relevance? And finally, after boundary transgression, if journalism adopts something external, is there something internal that is lost? What part of journalism is expelled to make room for the new addition? Or how does journalism shapes a transgressing institution? If this study is any indication, control and decision-making over the final product is the first place to find journalistic erosion.

**Concluding remarks**

When I started my doctoral education five years ago, I believed journalism needed to be saved and that gamification was one way to do this. The democratic duty of news media, combined with the power of gamification to empower and motivate users were, surely, promising experimentation grounds. My initial position in the space of gamified journalism was anchored in the professional and hedonic ends of the logics continuum. My thinking has evolved since then. I learned that many forms of journalism justify and legitimate their existence through a delicate balance between commercial imperatives and societal aspirations. News media’s relevance in society depends on this balance. I also learned that for every gamified system that aims to turn a boring activity into something engaging, empowering, and fun, there is another gamified system that only uses game elements to push users to perform a set of behaviors. My newfound skepticism pushed me toward the center of the space.

It was not until I studied them in combination that I realized it is in the interaction of journalism and gamification when things get complex and
interesting. The assumptions of how these two institutions operate in isolation come tumbling down when they interact with each other. As soon as the institutional boundaries are transgressed, the usual lenses through which we tend to address journalism and gamification start showing the cracks. For example, interviewees who did not know about gamification quickly acknowledged that if this model managed to engage the audience, then it was a positive development. Their lack of awareness about how gamification operates and how it is being used in their news organizations shows a decreased autonomy in decision making about journalistic practice. Their assumption that ‘if gamification attracts audiences, then it is good for journalism’ is a sign that in the fight for relevance, anything goes, even if the associated benefits and dangers for the future of journalism are unclear.

Other technology-driven approaches have followed a similar trend. News organizations’ use of analytics to inform editorial decisions excluded journalists from much of the data not long ago (Petre, 2015), only to become normalized within the newsroom in recent years (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). An even more polarizing development, native advertising, has managed to bring down the wall that once claimed to separate editorial and commercial content (Coddington, 2015; Ferrer-Conill, 2016b). While professionalism demarcates and legitimizes journalism, a gamified system that solely adheres to professionalism will face challenges to survive beyond public service spheres. At the same time, a gamified solution that only caters to the commercial logic may face backlash from the industry and readers. However, a combination of both may find a place within the interactive toolbox of digital news media.

In a broader sense, this study situates gamification as yet another dynamic within larger external social processes that impact journalism. Maybe it is time that journalism scholarship turns its gaze away from journalism itself. It may seem counter-intuitive, but if the boundaries and contours of journalism are shaped by external forces, studying those forces may bring a better understanding of how journalism negotiates its own existence. Curran (2009) claims that “the threat to journalism is under-investment and that’s the same across all platforms. There are no shortcuts: the future of news, depends on imagination and independence, but above all, on investment – in technology, in resources and, especially on journalists themselves” (p. 50). However, the fight for journalistic independence is as old as journalism itself. It is in the
external transgressors of journalistic boundaries that we find the past of journalism, and it is where we will find the future of journalism.

Finally, I would like to propose that within the institutional structure, there is agency. For every action there are consequences. How news media push for integrating gamification will generate an outcome. For example, at the same time news organizations rush to gain new audiences, they may be pushing older audiences away. In an attempt to gain relevance, it is unclear if they are diluting their legitimacy. The problem of gamification, like many other sugar pills, is that it promises unrealistic solutions by framing engagement in a simplistic way. Evoking an imagined audience through the metrics and playful narratives of a gamified system may easily backfire if the ultimate goal is to inform the public to act as citizens in a democratic society. Old questions of public and civic engagement are still relevant, but I believe there is a need to keep pushing the boundaries of journalism studies beyond journalism studies. Journalism cannot operate in a vacuum and is bound by its neighboring social institutions. How news media engages and interacts with the world will impact journalism and its future. The role journalism will play in society in coming decades is still unknown. We need to unlock the next level to find out.
You have reached the end, Reader 1. Well done. I feel I have congratulated you so much along the road that it would be patronizing to do it once more. I knew you would make it to the end – lie – and that you would enjoy it – also a lie.

These brief intermissions have helped me draw parallels between reading a dissertation and a gamified system. How would the assessment of institutional logics play out here? I suppose a professional logic would require that I have proven that I can conduct a solid piece of research that contributes to the field. The commercial logic would imply that after completing five years of doctoral education, I get to search for work that, legend has it, pays better than stocking shelves at your average warehouse. The utilitarian logic would remind us that the objective of this exercise is to earn a Ph.D. and move through the echelons of academia, either as a rite of passage or as the longest hazing process imaginable. Finally, the hedonic logic would try to make this piece of work enjoyable both for the writer and for you, Reader 1.

In the interplay of these logics, the dreamy ‘me’ hopes that this was a well-balanced study and that in the space of gamified dissertations, this one hit the bullseye.

And while it has been a pleasure to cheer you on during this long read, I understand why people prefer to leave the work to algorithms and automated process. Doing it manually, without metrics and data, is exhausting.

Finally, as this dissertation concludes, it is fitting that after this epilogue there is a lengthy list of references, just like the closing credits of a completed video game. The scrolling (or passing the pages) will be manual, but it is still fitting because it feels like those who are listed helped create this mildly gamified dissertation. However, unlike gamified systems, I do not necessarily recommend that you read this text over and over again. There will be more texts. After all, I just outlined an entire agenda for future research. And those texts will not write themselves.

Fin.
References


257


260


Paharia, R. (2010, February). *Driving user behavior with game dynamics and behavioral economics*. Presented at the seminar on People, computers, and design, Stanford University.


## Appendix 1 – List of interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quoted as</th>
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<th>Role</th>
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<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
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Appendix 2 – Interview request and consent agreement

Requesting participation followed a two-step process. First I sent LinkedIn contact requests to all potential interviewees. Second, I contacted all who accepted the invitation via email and LinkedIn messaging to request an interview. This is an email request sample that I used during data collection.

Dear [name],

I hope this email finds you well.

I am a Ph.D. candidate at Karlstad University, Sweden. I am studying the ways digital journalism is shaping journalism and how data and gamification are used by major news organizations. [news organization] is one of my case studies due to its unique and innovative use of gamification.

In case you wonder who I am, here’s my academic profile: https://www.kau.se/en/researchers/raul-ferrer-conill

As [organizational position] at [news organization] it would be extremely helpful (and interesting) to hear your opinion about how digital journalism uses different incentives to engage users. If you would be so kind to give me an interview, we could find a time that is most convenient for you. I have a flexible schedule.

Interviews usually take about 45 minutes. Skype works best, but I can use any other system you might want to use. While I don’t ask sensitive questions, all participants will be anonymized and you can withdraw from the study at any time you want.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please let me know when we could arrange an interview and what is the best method to reach you is. Thank you for your time. I really look forward to hearing from you.

All the best!

/Raul Ferrer Conill

I approached those who agreed to participate via Skype, Google Hangouts, WhatsApp, or phone. In the first minutes of the conversation, I requested consent from the interviewee. I first offered a broader explanation of the study and asked the following three questions:

- This study is voluntary. Do you accept to participate in the study?
- Is it OK with you if I record this conversation for transcription and analysis?
- Is it OK with you if I use the content of this conversation for the study?

I then informed the interviewees that their identities would be anonymized and that they could withdraw from the study at any moment. All interviewees accepted these terms and were recorded in audio giving their consent.
# Appendix 3 – Semi-structured interview guide (pilot)

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<th>Overarching themes</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Possible Probes (follow up questions)</th>
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<td><strong>Current working characteristics of the interviewee</strong></td>
<td>Could you do a brief presentation of yourself? In which industry do you currently work? How would you describe your job?</td>
<td>How many years have you been doing this line of work? Is writing your main occupation?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you consider yourself a journalist?</td>
<td>Do you have formal training as a journalist?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you work for various publications?</td>
<td>What is the publication that you usually work for the most?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Are you a syndicated writer?</td>
<td>How many publications can publish the same article? Do you have a specialty?</td>
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<td><strong>Characteristics of the employment at B/R</strong></td>
<td>What is your employment situation with B/R?</td>
<td>Do you have a contract with them or are you freelance?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How long have you been contributing at the Bleacher Report?</td>
<td>What made you decide to contribute there?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Did you ever take their &quot;Advanced Program in Sports Media&quot;?</td>
<td>Do you know how the program works?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal views on the B/R</strong></td>
<td>Do you think the Bleacher Report is special in any way?</td>
<td>What makes you say that?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How would you rate the overall quality of the content of the site?</td>
<td>How would you rank it regarding popularity?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you think most contributors are professionals or are there people who do this as a hobby?</td>
<td>Do you know or are your friends with any other contributors?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As an employer, are you satisfied with B/R?</td>
<td>How do they compare with other organizations in your field of work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would you consider applying for a permanent position there?</td>
<td>Why not?</td>
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<td><strong>About the B/R Writer Ranking System</strong></td>
<td>In your own words, how would you describe the B/R Writer Ranking System?</td>
<td>Was it in place when you started working with B/R? Did it play any role in you wanting to work with B/R?</td>
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<td>Is it easy to understand? Was it explained to you when you started? Do you consider it to be fun?</td>
<td>What are your thoughts on programs that are meant to incentivize your performance?</td>
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<td>Do you know any other site that rewards writers in a similar way?</td>
<td>Do you think this is going to be a trend?</td>
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<td><strong>Own experiences with the B/R Writer Ranking System</strong></td>
<td>&quot;Read the Writer’s Ranking Pitch&quot; What do you think? Does it motivate you in any way?</td>
<td>Is there any specific feature that motivates you the most? Do you feel any pressure to perform?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you remember what your writer rank is?</td>
<td>How long did it take you to reach that level? How did it make you feel</td>
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<td>B/R Writer Ranking System and the journalistic values</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>You receive points per number of articles, number of reads, number of comments and so on. Do you feel it is a good measure to quantify journalistic performance?</td>
<td>Do you think that linking quality to metrics is accurate?</td>
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<td>Have you ever felt that your writing is influenced by the metrics?</td>
<td>Do you choose topics that might bring more readers or make more comments to get more points?</td>
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<td>Does seeing your performance or progress motivate you in any way?</td>
<td>Has your motivation changed over time? How often do you check your profile?</td>
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<td>Do you think the quality of the writing is affected by openly displaying metrics?</td>
<td>How so?</td>
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<th>B/R and gamification in general</th>
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<td>Has your B/R profile helped you to support your career outside of B/R?</td>
<td>Do you use it all outside of B/R?</td>
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<td>What do you think about automatic rewards to motivate people?</td>
<td>Is it different in a working context?</td>
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<td>Do you react at all to the fact that you are constantly quantified?</td>
<td>Do you think is unfair that others may have more likes and reads but may have fewer quality articles?</td>
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<td>In your own words, what do you think is most positive about the gamified system?</td>
<td>And the negative aspects?</td>
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<td>Do you think it motivates people in the long term?</td>
<td>Do you feel it has made your job more enjoyable or fun?</td>
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<td>Is there anything you would add or change from the B/R system?</td>
<td>Would you like other publishers would follow a similar format?</td>
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<td>Other than the rewards, what motivates you?</td>
<td>Anything else you’d like to mention?</td>
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Appendix 4 – General in-depth interview guide

The interviews comprise two distinct groups of interviewees in four different cases. This means eight different context settings to consider for every interview. Therefore, there is not one single interview guide for all participants. In this appendix, I present a general interview guide with the battery of questions that covered general topics across interviews and specific questions for different participants. Thus, these questions are not the exhaustive list of questions asked during all the interviews and are not presented in chronological order. Instead, I organize them here as I operationalized them according to the Four A’s heuristic (Lewis & Westlund, 2005).

The actors in this study are the newsworkers and the news organizations for which they work. The personal background of the newsworkers and how they understand journalism is important to carry the background they have and their place in the newsroom (Nygren, 2014; Singer, 2003). For news organizations, their historical background, as well as their approach to quality journalism is important in how they innovate and use technology (Steensen, 2009; Usher, 2013).

**Personal background and journalistic identity**

- Could you talk a little about your background?
- Do you have a background in journalism?
- Would you consider yourself a journalist?
- What is your experience in the news industry?
- How long have you worked for [news organization]?

**Organizational background**

- What attracted you to [news organization]?
- What do you think sets [news organization] apart from other news organizations?
- From your perspective, how would you describe the journalistic characteristics of [news organization]?
- Would you consider [news organization] to be an innovative environment?
• Who is responsible for innovation at [news organization]?
• Would you consider [news organization] a workplace where you have to use technology?
• What is your opinion about how [news organization] uses technology?
• How do you think your colleagues feel about technological use at [news organization]?

I conceptualized gamification as institution and also as the primary technological actant in this study. Data, interfaces, and game elements, among others, are individual factors that play an important role in gamification and how users interact with it (Werbach & Hunter, 2012).

The questions about gamification were different depending on the group I interviewed.

Gamified-systems producers

• Why do you think [news organization] decided to integrate gamification into their digital platform?
• Can you explain how the gamified system worked, in your own words?
• What was [news organization]’s goal with the gamified system? Do you think you achieved that goal?
• Who was involved in the production process? What are their backgrounds?
• Did you have prior knowledge about gamification? How did you learn about it?
• What was the goal you wanted to achieve with the gamified system? Do you think you achieved that goal?
• How do you measure the success/failure of the experience?
• Did you have access to the data or metrics the system produced?
• What were the things that went smoothly when producing the system?
• What were the challenges you had when producing the system?
• Looking back, are there things you would have done differently?
• What did you learn from the experience?

Newworkers who did not produce gamified systems
• Why do you think [news organization] decided to integrate gamification into their digital platform? What do you think they tried to achieve?
• Can you explain, in your own words how the gamified system worked?
• Do you know who produced the system?
• What is your opinion about gamifying the news?
• What are the potential benefits of using gamification in journalism?
• What are the potential dangers of using gamification in journalism?
• Do you know whether there has been any outcome? Was it a success? Was it a failure? How do you measure that?
• In your opinion, do you think gamification has had any impact on how the industry sees [news organization]?
• Do you think there is a future for gamification in journalism?

Newsworkers who were users of gamification (Bleacher Report)

• Why do you think Bleacher Report decided to integrate gamification into their digital platform? What do you think they tried to achieve?
• Can you explain, in your own words, how the gamified system worked?
• Looking back, how did you feel when you were interacting with the system?
• Did you ever receive monetary compensation from Bleacher Report?
• There has been criticism about Writer’s Raking system being exploitative and one of the reasons that content was considered bad quality. What would you say to those critics?
• Did it impact you in any positive or negative way? Did it empower you or motivate you to produce more? Did you feel exploited?
• What were the game elements that you experienced as more effective?
• Did it bother you to be placed in a Power Grid? Did you mind readers saw your rank in the organization?
• Did you have any capacity to decide how the system worked? Did you have access to the data/metrics the system generated?
• Why do you think Bleacher Report discontinued the system?
• If any, what do you think were the highs and lows of the gamified system?
• Would you have changed anything about the system?
Would you participate in a similar system again?

While the empirical material about audiences in this study is only articulated through the notion of the imagined audience (Litt, 2012), the role of the audience in the gamification of journalism is crucial. Not only because often gamification is viewed by practitioners and scholars as a way to engage the audience (García-Ortega & García-Avilés, 2018b), but also because the reaction by the audience to gamified news can weaken or strengthen news media’s legitimacy and authority (Ferrer-Conill & Karlsson, 2015).

The questions about gamification were different depending on the group I interviewed.

**Audience orientation and participation**

- Is there a reason for including what the audience wants in the decision-making process of news production?
- Do you think the audience wants engaging with game elements when they read the news?
- Do you think the audience needs extra rewards or motivation to consume news?
- How do you know what the audience wants?
- When you hear “participating audience,” what does it mean to you? Participating in what and to what extent should they participate?
- Do you think news organizations should encourage audience participation?

**Audience reception**

- How do you think the audience reacts to gamified interfaces? Would all audiences react the same way, or is it specific to [news organization]?
- Do you have any data or metrics that support how audiences react to the gamified system?
- Do you think the audience of [news organization] likes gamification?
- Who is your target audience? Why do you think people like/dislike gamification?
- What game elements do you think they would engage with the most? Are there any game elements do you think they would dislike?
• Do you think there are segments of the audience that might find gamification annoying or patronizing?
• Have you ever assessed the outcomes of attracting new audiences that feel enticed by gamification, but losing an established audience who feel alienated by gamification?
• Do you think gamification could decrease the reputation of [news organization]?

Finally, the activities referred to the symbolic and material journalistic practices of newsworkers (Lewis & Westlund, 2015). While I did not have ethnographic data from their everyday working practices, the respondents’ accounts for how they organized the working processes was detailed enough that I could assess how gamification has impacted their work. I was also interested in how they saw the change in practice might have impacted how journalism might be perceived by the public.

Impact on their practice

• To what extent would you say that your role as a journalist has changed or remained the same because of the gamification approach? If so, how?
• Often gamification implies journalists, technologists, and businesspeople working together. Was it this way in your case? Was it easy to work in such a group? Do you feel your knowledge benefited the group? How so? Do you feel the rest of the team contributed to the production process? How so?
• Do you think a group with such diverse competence produces news with the same degree of journalistic quality than an editorial team only comprised of journalists?
• Looking back, do you feel you had to give up some degree of control (autonomy) over the content? Regarding quality, do you think gamification may have some impact on the quality of the final product?
• Do you think all content can be gamified? Are there any limits to what can be gamified in journalism?

Impact on how journalism is perceived by the public eye

• Journalism often presents itself as serious. Do you think integrating gamification challenges the notion that the news can’t be fun? To you, would that be a positive or negative development?
• Do you think integrating gamification can decrease or increase the relevance of journalism? What about credibility and trust? Could gamification have an impact on how credible and trustworthy a news organization is?

• Is there any way you foresee that this new approach could help [news organization] economically? Do you think [news organization] monetizes gamification in any way? And if so, do you think the public may feel “played” (pun intended), and react negatively?

• Finally, if you had to judge from your own experience, is gamification a trend that will stay in the news industry or is it just a fad? Is there anything you would like to see gamified in journalism?
Gamifying the news

Would you read more news if you could earn points, win badges, unlock content, or level up? Would a journalist write more often to be on top of a leaderboard?

Various digital newspapers have integrated gamification as a way to incentivize user behavior with game elements. However, the ways news organizations use gamification and the behaviors they target are not homogenous. This dissertation studied four news organizations – the Guardian, Bleacher Report, the Times of India, and Al Jazeera – that use gamification in surprisingly different ways. From giving incentives and rewards to their readers, to crafting new storytelling techniques. From creating a system where journalists are the players, to calling the readers to participate in a crowdsourcing investigative initiative. The results suggest that a complex interplay between the professional and commercial logics of journalism and the hedonic and utilitarian logics of gamification shapes the implementation of gamified systems.

But, is it all fun and games, or are there other concerns about how news organizations and newsworkers are gamifying the news?
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