When We Know What We Don't Know: Uncertainty, Ignorance and Speculation in the UK Television Coverage of Airplane Disasters

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the media deal with absent information by examining representations of uncertainty, ignorance and speculation in the UK television coverage of airplane disasters. Drawing on thematic and discourse analyses, the article argues that there is a development over time whereby two phases can be discerned: (1) the (initial) ignorance phase and (2) the epilogue phase. The former describes coverage that contains an absence of information. The findings show that the reporting in this phase draws on modality and speculation to counterbalance the absence of information regarding the airplane disasters. The epilogue phase factually concludes what happened and brings a form of resolution to the incidents. As a result, information is presented with more certainty than in the ignorance phase. These findings have implications for journalism studies more generally because they refine our understandings about the development of media coverage on events and situate the concepts of uncertainty, ignorance and speculation at the forefront of the discipline.

INTRODUCTION

The ideals of journalism are "to shine a light, to raise the curtain, to reveal 'the truth.'" (Stocking and Holstein 2015, p. 105). However, this endeavour becomes more complicated when the information available is incomplete or non-existent. Situations where this applies are unexpected events because these incidents set limits to readily available information (Sonnevend 2018). In attempting to reveal the 'truth', journalists become "purveyors" or "agents" of absent information (Stocking and Holstein 2015, p. 105). This is relevant to understandings about the profession because news audiences have a desire for information

that they expect journalism to fulfil (Hart 1996, p. 139). Dunwoody (2018, p. 5), for instance, points out that communicating absent information can reduce the risk of misunderstandings and overestimations and, conversely, increase the "trustworthiness of information".

Given the centrality, this article examines how the media deal with absent information by examining representations of uncertainty, ignorance and speculation in the UK television coverage of airplane disasters. Commercial airplane disasters were selected as case studies because these incidents can be self-contained events which are characterised by an (initial) absence of information that is resolved over time. For the analysis, the coverages of three incidents – Germanwings 4U9525, Metrojet KGL 9268 and EgyptAir MS 804 – were subjected to thematic and discourse analyses in order to make inferences about the thematic and linguistic representation of the concepts. The findings demonstrate that there is a development in the media's representation of absent information over time, which can be discerned into two phases: (1) the (initial) ignorance phase and (2) the epilogue phase. The former refers to coverage that contains an absence of information. In this phase, the media employ several strategies, including the use of modality and speculation, to counterbalance the uncertainty and ignorance imposed by the events. The epilogue phase factually concludes what happened and brings a form of resolution to the incidents. Information in this phase is presented with more certainty than in the ignorance phase. The following sections situate the research in the broader academic field, explain the research design and present the study's findings. By placing the concepts of uncertainty, ignorance and speculation at the forefront of journalism studies and refining knowledge on the temporalities of media coverage on events, the article also makes a significant contribution to the discipline.

UNCERTAINTY, IGNORANCE AND SPECULATION IN JOURNALISM

Journalists utilise the popular principle of asking and answering the 'five W' and 'How' questions to provide a full rundown of events (Hart 1996; Pöttker 2003; Fengler and Ruß-Mohl 2008; Harcup 2009; Harcup 2015). However, journalists are sometimes "confronted with the limits events set to their narratives" (Sonnevend 2018, p. 79). This means that, while there may be an overall demand for information, journalists can be restricted by the boundaries of events to provide it. This is where 'uncertainty' and 'ignorance' come in. The term 'uncertainty' usually describes "ambiguity or ambivalence in a truth claim" (Lehmkuhl and Peters 2016, p. 911). It results from an absence of information and the fact that knowledge about the world and nature is incomplete (Zehr 2000, p. 87; Painter 2013, pp. 11-12). The concept of ignorance feeds into this as it refers to an "absence of knowledge" (Haas and Vogt 2015, p. 17) and, in a broader sense, the very basis of 'uncertainty'.

Some scholars seek a distinction between these concepts. In the context of science and risk, such a separation is perhaps useful as the concept of uncertainty takes on more specific meanings (see Boelle 2020). However, this article takes the stance that uncertainty and ignorance are closely interrelated and often occur simultaneously. As the definitions of the terms suggest, uncertainty is caused by ignorance because the absence of information or knowledge prohibits certainty; while, when one is aware of ignorance or an absence of knowledge, one tends to be unsure or 'uncertain' about the truth.

Researchers disagree about the roles of uncertainty and ignorance in news reporting. Some studies "report an underrepresentation" in journalism (Guenther and Ruhrmann 2016, p. 929) and suggest that claims are not "a typical feature of science journalism" (Zehr 2000, p. 90). Arguably, this is because the concepts dispel newsworthiness (Kitzinger and Reilly 1997, p. 344). However, other studies also highlighted "over-representations [...] or at least frequent mentioning of scientific uncertainty" (Guenther and Ruhrmann 2016, p. 929), which might be due to the commitment of journalism to truth (Simmerling and Janich 2016). Then, some scholars suggest that a news story with uncertainty and ignorance can, indeed, elicit newsworthiness (Stocking and Holstein 1993; Ashe 2013; Guenther and Ruhrmann 2016; Peters and Dunwoody 2016; Simmerling and Janich 2016). Peters and Dunwoody (2016, p. 897), for instance, explain that "a story may be perceived as newsworthy by journalists even if the claim on which the story is based is uncertain, such as in the communication of risk, or if scientific speculation is fascinating [...] (e.g. time travel, particles moving faster as light, parallel universes)".

Irrespective of whether uncertainty and ignorance are 'newsworthy', the concepts are central to journalism because their representations can influence understandings, estimations and the "trustworthiness of information" in audiences (Dunwoody 2018, p. 5). They also open up spaces for incorporating speculation. This is because the media are expected to fill an overall demand and "need for closure" (Durham 1998, p. 113) and end up filling it by drawing on 'theories', 'possibilities' and 'speculation' (Kim and Lee 2008; Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2008; Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger 2018). Wampole (2018) points out:

> One explanation for all this [speculation] is that the acceleration of information flow has heightened our impatience with not knowing. Until the internet's arrival, the "jour," or day, was the primary unit of time by which journalism functioned. But now that the minute, or better, the second, is the new unit of preference, it might be more fitting to change the profession's name to minutalism or secondalism. In the attempt to capture an event just as it happens, or even before it does, the news becomes less factual and more hypothetical. (Wampole 2018)

In the context of journalism, this phenomenon is surprising as speculation "is a form of subjective speech and as such its presence in press content defies the journalist principle of objectivity" (Hudock 2005, p. iii). However, previous research on 'speculation' in and by the media, perhaps given the general incompatibility with journalistic ideals, remains limited (Vincent et al. 1989; Durham 1998; Kim and Lee 2008). Therefore, this article investigates how the media incorporate representations of uncertainty, ignorance and speculation by examining the UK television coverage of airplane disasters. In addition, it investigates if, contrary to the journalistic ideals of 'truth-telling' and 'objectivity', the media draw on speculation as an answer to some of the uncertainty and ignorance.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study focuses on commercial airplane disasters because these incidents are characterised by an (initial) absence of information and generate vast amounts of media coverage (Boelle 2020). More importantly, however, they can be self-contained events where absent information is, in one form or another, resolved over time. Based on this, along with factors such as media attention and recency of occurrence, the following airplane disasters were chosen for analysis:

- **Germanwings flight 4U9525:** On 24 March 2015, the aircraft was on its way from Barcelona to Düsseldorf when the co-pilot, who had previously been diagnosed with suicidal tendencies, prompted the aircraft to descend and crash into the French Alps (Behrend et al. 2015). One hundred and fifty people, including 16 adolescent school pupils from Germany, were on board the airplane (Behrend et al. 2015).
- **Metrojet flight KGL 9268:** On 31 October 2015, the airplane was on route from Sharm el-Sheikh to St Petersburg when a bomb on board caused it to explode over the Sinai desert (Oliphant 2016). The incident was linked to a terrorist attack, killing all 224 people on board (Oliphant 2016)
- **EgyptAir flight MS 804:** On 19 May 2016, the aircraft was travelling from Paris to Cairo when it crashed into the eastern Mediterranean Sea (BBC 2018). The incident is, in all likelihood, caused by a fire in the cockpit which caused the loss of the aircraft's control (BBC 2018). The airplane carried 66 people (BBC 2018).

The case studies were subjected to thematic and discourse analyses. The purpose of the thematic analysis was to identify and organise themes into patterns to allow making inferences about the media's representations of uncertainty, ignorance and speculation (Braun and Clarke 2006). By comparison, the discourse analysis focused on key linguistic

features where needed, including a lexical analysis with an emphasis on modality (Phillips and Jørgensen 2002; Deacon et al. 2007; Hansen and Machin 2013). Attention was paid to words or expressions incorporating the concepts, the subjunctive and conditional mood, modal verbs and words, and the use of questions (Janich and Simmerling 2015, p. 134; Simmerling and Janich 2016, p. 964). This allows understanding the key linguistic features used in the media's construction of uncertainty, ignorance and speculation.

The sample was taken from broadcast news because, according to Ofcom's "News Consumption in the UK" report (2020, p. 7), television is the most-used source of news in the UK (75%). The internet only ranks second (65%), while radio (42%) and print newspapers rank last (35%) (Ofcom 2020, p. 7). The sample included news reports by the main television channels in the UK, i.e. BBC, ITV, Sky, Channel 4 and Channel 5. The analyses focused on the sound bites of the broadcasts – and not the visual elements – because it is foremost through language that abstract concepts such as uncertainty, ignorance and speculation can be represented. The sample was accessed through Box of Broadcasts, using the search terms 'Germanwings', 'Metrojet' and 'EgyptAir'. The sample period is restricted to a year of coverage starting on the day before the incidents. The broad search terms and the long sample period guarantee that most, if not all, broadcasts related to the flights are included in the Box of Broadcasts search. The search retrieved 239 broadcasts. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the broadcasts for each case study and television channel.

TABLE 1: Breakdown of the sample size for each case study and television channel

Case study	BBC	ITV	Sky	Channel 4	Channel 5	Total
Germanwings 9525	69	31	25	10	5	140
Metrojet 9268	13	15	11	1	2	42
EgyptAir 804	36	8	7	3	3	57
Total	118	54	43	14	10	239

The aim of the thematic and discourse analyses was to analyse at least 10% of the broadcasts. This allowed examining the issues in "full context" or detail (Jensen 2002, p. 119) and making more representative statements about the data. A sample of 27 broadcasts was investigated – 17 broadcasts for Germanwings 9525, 10 broadcasts for Metrojet 9268 and 10 broadcasts for EgyptAir 804. This sample was chosen randomly from broadcasts that included elements of uncertainty and ignorance as these elements are crucial for the objective of this study. The following sections present the findings. The research shows that the media's

representation of absent information takes place in the form of a development over time which can be discerned into two phases of coverage, an (initial) ignorance phase and an epilogue phase. It also establishes that the news media, contrary to ideals of 'truth-telling' and 'objectivity', commonly draw on speculation as an answer to some of the uncertainty and ignorance.

THE IGNORANCE PHASE

The reporting in the (initial) ignorance phase is "confronted with the limits events set to their narratives" (Sonnevend 2018, p. 79). This means that, while there is an overall demand for information about the disasters, the journalist is limited by the events to provide it. As Sonnevend (2018, p. 79) writes, "events set boundaries for journalistic storytelling. Events [...] define *what* and *how* journalists cover, and journalists are desperate to construct [events]". The thematic analysis demonstrated that there are three main areas or topics involved in the representation of uncertainty and ignorance: (1) a general lack of information, (2) the causes of the incidents and (3) the question of resolution.

Claims about the general lack of information are very explicit in acknowledging an overall absence of knowledge. This relates to the literature suggesting that journalism follows "a general journalistic duty of care and commitment to truth" (Simmerling and Janich 2016, p. 965). Lehmkuhl and Peters (2016, p. 910), for instance, argue that journalistic activity "must somehow address the uncertainty of the underlying scientific truth claim" because journalistic representations appeal primarily to the public interest for that "they are viable reconstructions of reality". Examples where such a journalistic approach is employed can be seen in the following:

> ### *Germanwings 9525:*
> [News presenter:] <u>So many questions still to be answered</u>. (BBC News at Six 2015b)
>
> ### *EgyptAir 804:*
> [News correspondent:] The lady [whose daughter was a stewardess] rushed to the airport <u>hoping to get information about what happened to her daughter and what happened to the plane</u>, but <u>she complained about a lack of information</u>. She told me <u>the authorities are telling us nothing at all</u>, they just gave us an emergency number and said they would keep us updated but <u>we don't know anything</u> actually. Just a short while ago, the Minister of Civil Aviation [...] said that <u>all what we know so far is that the plane disappeared</u> (BBC News at One 2016)

Interestingly, these claims of uncertainty and ignorance are often anchored in the present, which means that there is a 'current' absence of information about the events that prohibits journalism from telling the full story. By contrast, the other forms of uncertainty and ignorance – i.e. the causes of the disasters and the question of resolution – venture into the realms of the past and future of the disasters, stating the unknown surrounding the causes ('past') and the outcomes of the investigations ('future') (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016, p. 155). With regards to the causes, this introspection can well remain in the realm of uncertainty and ignorance, where an absence of knowledge is simply pointed out. For instance, the media report:

Metrojet 9268:
[News presenter:] What caused a Russian airliner to break up over Egypt, killing all 224 passengers on board? That's the question facing accident investigators and, so far, there is no sign of a clear answer. (5 News Tonight 2015)

However, some broadcasts also develop the uncertainty and ignorance into the realm of 'speculation' where journalists build up "possible scenarios" (Sonnevend 2018, p. 86). This is established by drawing on externally available evidence and developments in the investigation to establish plausible 'theories' or 'conjectures' about what happened. An example of coverage includes the following:

EgyptAir 804:
[Voice-over:] The clues are still coming in, but no hard evidence of what caused the crash. So, what are the theories? A bomb on board is one possible explanation. If so, who planted it, where, and when? [...] [Voice-over:] Last year it took IS just ten hours before they claimed they blew up a Russian airliner over the Sinai, yet there has been almost no chatter about this incident. So, could the EgyptAir plane have been downed by the crew or a passenger, perhaps a fight in the cockpit? That could explain the violent movements. [...] [Voice-over:] And then there is technical fault. Tonight, data has come to light of smoke alarms going off just before the plane disappeared. That could be accidental or from an explosion. But there won't be any definitive answers unless the cockpit voice recorder can be found beneath the sea, and that could take months. (BBC News 2016c)

At this point, attention needs to be drawn to two points. First, some lines of inquiry in the investigations can be used to propose several potential causes. For instance, the break-up of the Metrojet 9268 aircraft was used to indicate some mechanical or physical impact on the airplane, external activity or structural failure (BBC News at One 2015c; BBC News at Ten

2015b). Similarly, the erratic movements of the EgyptAir 804 incident led to suggestions about an explosion, terrorism, mechanical failure or a crew member or passenger forcing the airplane down (BBC News 2016a; BBC News 2016c). This approach of drawing attention to several potential causes can cause contradictions in the reporting and shows that journalism, despite its ideals to report the 'truth' (Stocking and Holstein 2015, p. 105), may develop inconsistency and perhaps disseminate false information. However, given that there is uncertainty and ignorance involved in any disaster and they thus set limits to the 'truth' of "journalistic narration" (Sonnevend 2018, pp. 76-79), some inconsistency can perhaps be expected. The second point is that any representations of uncertainty, ignorance and speculation draw on linguistic constructions associated with modality. These refer to four aspects:

1. words or expressions which incorporate the concepts (Janich and Simmerling 2015, p. 134; Simmerling and Janich 2016, p. 964)
2. the subjunctive and conditional mood which allow "expressing what is imagined or wished or possible" (Oxford Dictionaries, no date, b)
3. modal verbs and words which are verbs or expressions that "express an idea such as possibility" (Cambridge Dictionary, no date)
4. questions which are, by definition, about "matter[s] requiring resolution" (Oxford Dictionaries, no date, a).

Table 2 provides examples of these features of language and shows how the media use them to point out, emphasise and perhaps even dramatise (initial) uncertainty, ignorance and speculation about the disasters. Moreover, it highlights that different linguistic features and the choice of wording can impact our understanding of certainty by making the possible scenarios sound more or less related, certain and likely to the viewers than they may actually be.

TABLE 2: Linguistic features used to represent uncertainty, ignorance and speculation in the television coverage of Germanwings 9525, Metrojet 9268 and EgyptAir 804

Linguistic features	Germanwings 9525	Metrojet 9268	EgyptAir 804
Words or expressions that invite uncertainty, ignorance and speculation	"No one knows for sure"; "what we don't know"; "possibility"; "they have no idea"; "theory"; "it is still unclear"; "so many questions"; "baffling"; "mystery"; "they still can't explain" (BBC News at One 2015a; BBC News at Six 2015b; BBC News 2015a; BBC News at Ten 2015a; Sky News at Ten 2015a; Channel 4 News 2015)	"there are clues"; "there are no conclusions yet"; "most telling of all"; "all sorts of hints"; "there is still no explanation"; "possible scenarios"; "there are reports"; "no sign of a clear answer"; "it is too early to tell" (BBC News at Ten 2015b; BBC News 2015b; ITV News & Weather 2015a; ITV News & Weather 2015b; 5 News Tonight 2015)	"remains unknown"; "far too early to say"; "lack of information"; "we don't know anything"; "possibility"; "speculation"; "no hard evidence"; "theories"; "the biggest clue so far"; "mystery"; "many unanswered questions" (BBC News at One 2016; BBC News at Six 2016; BBC News 2016c; BBC News 2016d; Sky News Tonight 2016)
Subjunctive and conditional mood	"[News correspondent:] No one knows for sure whether the co-pilot's mental health problems are to blame for what's happened" (BBC News at Ten 2015a)	"[News presenter:] If, and it is a very big 'if', the Russian jet was brought down deliberately, then there will obviously be a hunt for whoever carried out the attack." (Sky News at Ten 2015c)	[Voice-over:] It is still far too early to say why this aircraft vanished. Even if they find it soon, it could be weeks or even months before these families get all the answers. (BBC News at One 2016)
Modal verbs and words	"believe"; "suggest"; "should"; "might"; "may"; "most plausible"; "apparently"; "it looks like"; "appear"; "likely"; "probably"; "could" (BBC News at Six 2015a; BBC News at Six 2015b; BBC News at Ten 2015a; ITV News at Ten & Weather 2015a; ITV News at Ten & Weather 2015b; 5 News at 7 2015)	"could"; "may"; "suggest"; "believe"; "it is becoming clear"; "would"; "might"; "possible" (BBC News at Ten 2015b; BBC News 2015b; BBC News at Six 2016)	"appears"; "seems"; "might"; "could"; "probably"; "believe"; "likely" (BBC News 2016a; BBC News 2016b; BBC News at Six 2016; BBC News 2016d)

Questions	"[News correspondent:] And the central question is this: Why did the plane and its pilot lose contact with air traffic control for at least eight minutes before it finally crashed?" (Channel 4 News 2015)	[Voice-over:] We know the plane left Sharm el-Sheikh for St Petersburg early on Saturday morning and climbed to 31,000 feet. … It came down in an area where Isis-supporting militants are fighting Egyptian military. So, was it a missile strike or a bomb? Or a technical failure or pilot error? (5 News Tonight 2015)	[Voice-over:] The unanswered question remains: Was it terrorism or mechanical failure that brought the plane down? (BBC News 2016c)

The third topic of uncertainty and ignorance – i.e. the question of resolution – debates whether there will be some form of resolution to the incidents and how much time it will take. In comparison to the previous issues, this form of uncertainty and ignorance is exclusively developed in the realm of 'speculation' because it postpones the issues to the future and speculates about the future in general. Therefore, in a theoretical sense, the argument closely relates to the media discourse of the future, which suggests that "news is no longer conceptualized as rooted solely, or even primarily, in present and recent events", but may also orientate itself towards the future by reporting "what is about to happen" (Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger 2015, pp. 1050-1051). The basis of this discourse is always uncertain and hypothetical and supports the findings because, contrary to the ideals of journalism, the reporting becomes "an inherently speculative act" (Neiger 2007, p. 309). Neiger (2007, pp. 311, 313) argues:

> we meet journalists in their full might as creators of texts of 'reality' that has not yet occurred and may never come to be [...] Even if all the actors in the political scene are sure that a certain event is going to happen (a strike, a vote), things can always change at the last moment (Neiger 2007, pp. 311, 313)

The following examples demonstrate the relationship between speculation and the discourse of the future more clearly as they show speculative predictions on the question of the incidents' resolutions. This means that they show "a statement about the future", i.e. a prediction, which describes "a guess, sometimes based on facts or evidence, but not always" (Vocabulary, no date). The previously mentioned linguistic features of modality can also be employed, emphasising the speculative nature of the statements.

Germanwings 9525:
[Voice-over:] <u>It'll take several weeks of work</u> before investigators can be certain about the cause of this crash. (ITV News at Ten & Weather 2015b)

EgyptAir 804:
[Voice-over:] It is still far too early to say why this aircraft vanished, even if they find it soon, <u>it could be weeks or even months before these families get all the answers.</u> (BBC News at One 2016)

Taken together, these findings suggest that journalism employs several strategies when dealing with an absence of knowledge about airplane disasters. These include: (1) statements about missing information where journalists become "purveyors" (Stocking and Holstein 2015, p. 105) of absent information; (2) the use of modality which incorporates uncertainty and ignorance; and (3) the use of speculation. The third aspect is perhaps most relevant for journalism and media studies as it suggests that news outlets can deviate from their idealistic norms of 'truth-telling' and 'objectivity' by engaging in possible 'theories' or 'conjectures' when being confronted by an absence of information that is vital to the news story. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that representations of uncertainty, ignorance and speculation are not bound to temporalities and may instead build on absent information in the 'present', 'past' and 'future' of events. The following section explores coverage discussing the incidents' resolutions.

THE EPILOGUE PHASE
The epilogue phase, a term in reference to Granatt's "The Epilogue" (1999, p. 106), refers to the resolution of the disasters and factually concludes the causes by resolving the main uncertainties about the 'present', 'past' and 'future' of the incidents. This means that the reporting, unlike in the (initial) ignorance phase, can make definitive statements about what happened. To provide evidence, the coverage often relies on definitive data gathered during the course of the disasters, such as the transcriptions of the aircraft's voice-recorders, which helped the investigators reconstruct the course of events and determine the causes of the incidents (BBC News at One 2015b; ITV News at Ten & Weather 2015c). An example includes the following where the Germanwings 9525 reporting mentions a revelation in the investigation, focusing on the reconstruction of events:

Germanwings 9525:
[News presenter:] French air crash investigators say the co-pilot of the crashed Germanwings plane <u>increased its speed during its descent</u>. They say that new

information from the plane's second black box <u>confirms</u> Andreas Lubitz <u>did crash</u> the plane deliberately. (ITV News at Ten & Weather 2015c)

In comparison to previous findings, the language tends to take on an indicative mood, which is "the form that a verb or sentence has when it is stating a fact that can be known" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, no date). In contrast to modality, this is connoted with more certainty and makes the reported causes sound more definitive. Nevertheless, even though the causes of all disasters were identified, the revelation itself opened further realms of uncertainty and ignorance. These, for instance, included the motives of the co-pilot in the Germanwings 9525 incident (Sky News at Ten 2015b) or – as the following example shows – the cause of the fire in the EgyptAir 804 incident (BBC News 2016d):

> ### *EgyptAir 804:*
> [Voice-over:] The fire that downed this plane <u>could have been</u> a malicious attack, <u>but most plane fires are caused by faulty wiring or the air conditioning</u>. <u>And there is another possibility</u>. Laptops, phones, cameras, they all contain powerful lithium batteries, and <u>there have been concerns for some time that they could cause a fire</u>. (BBC News 2016d)

To provide some information about the questions, the media adopt a similar approach to the one in the (initial) ignorance phase, which is to state the new uncertainty and ignorance, to draw on discoveries and evidence, and to use linguistic features of modality. This suggests that the epilogue phase is not a phase of entire resolution but instead closely links to the ignorance phase, where every revelation leads to new questions, leading to new revelations and so on. As Gross and McGoey (2015, p. 1) argue, "[n]ew knowledge always leads to new horizons of what is unknown. [...] new knowledge is never complete knowledge [...] the unknown is not diminished by new discoveries. Quite the contrary: the real, of the unknown is magnified".

CONCLUSION

This article showed how the media incorporate representations of uncertainty, ignorance and speculation in the television coverage of airplane disasters. The findings show that there is a development in the representation of absent information over time, which can be discerned into two phases, an (initial) ignorance phase and an epilogue phase. The former describes coverage that contains an absence of information. In this phase, the media employ several strategies to counterbalance the uncertainty and ignorance imposed by the events. These include: (1) statements about missing information where journalists become

"purveyors" (Stocking and Holstein 2015, p. 105) of absent information, (2) the use of modal linguistic features which incorporate uncertainty and ignorance, and (3) the use of speculation. The third aspect is perhaps most interesting for journalism studies as it suggests that news outlets can deviate from the idealistic norms of 'truth-telling' and 'objectivity' by engaging in possible 'theories' when being confronted by an absence of information. This bears resemblance to ideas of sensationalism, which is often associated with tabloid journalism and hyped-up information to 'sell' news. However, it is important to note that, in contrast to sensationalism, the media's use of speculation does not necessarily question the accuracy of journalism. This can be attributed to the fact that the reporting of the case studies tends to distance itself from the speculative statements by using modal linguistic features which incorporate elements of uncertainty and ignorance that represent statements as mere 'possibilities' rather than 'certain' facts. Correspondingly, speculation ceases as soon as there is a confirmed resolution to the incidents. The article described this as the epilogue phase, which factually concludes what happened. In this phase, information is presented with more certainty than in the (initial) ignorance phase. Nevertheless, the epilogue phase is not a phase of entire resolution as new revelations still lead to new questions, leading to new revelations and so on.

These findings have implications for journalism studies more generally because they situate the concepts of uncertainty, ignorance and speculation at the forefront of the discipline and refine our understandings about the development of media coverage on events. Moreover, they begin to discuss temporalities in coverage, suggesting that representations are not exclusively anchored in the present but may also refer to the unknown of the past and future. Given the centrality of uncertainty, ignorance and – especially – speculation in journalism, future research needs to build on this to examine how the concepts are incorporated in other forms of news, such as political coverage of events. Emphasis also needs to be placed on the prominence of the concepts, their use in the reporting of other media forms and the audience's responses to such coverage.

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