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A Discursive Turn in Journalism Studies? A Systematic Review of Discourse Analysis in Leading Journalism Journals

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ABSTRACT

Discourse analysis has a long history within journalism studies, representing a key area of theoretical cross-fertilization with linguistics, semiotics, continental philosophy, and political theory. In recent years, discursive approaches have garnered new attention in journalism research through scholarly calls for a “discursive turn” in relation to journalistic roles, boundaries, and institutions and for the study of “metajournalistic discourse”. To map this analytical development and its inter-disciplinary theoretical foundations, this article presents a systematic literature review of discourse analytical studies in five leading journalism journals between 2018 and 2022. Based on a quantitative content analysis of 115 academic articles – in combination with a qualitative close reading – the study finds a theoretical deficit in the application of discourse analysis, with 32 out of 115 studies not engaging with any theoretical literature from major school of discourse analysis. The study also finds limited theoretical diversity among those that reference major schools, with most drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis ($n = 70$) and few engaging with alternatives such as Foucauldian Discourse Analysis ($n = 2$) and (the Essex School of) Discourse Theory ($n = 1$). These findings call for deeper theoretical engagement and more diverse approaches to better understand journalism as a discursively constituted institution and practice.

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Introduction

Discourses and discursivity have been studied extensively in journalism studies, with scholars such as van Dijk (1988), Fairclough (1988, 1995), Bell (1991), and Fowler (1991) pioneering the field in the 1980s and 1990s. Discourse analysis and the so-called news discourse framework have been applied across a wide array of geopolitical contexts to understand the role of news texts, images, and everyday news work in relation to the (re-)production of meaning, power, and ideology in society (Fowler 1991; van Dijk 1988).

In recent years, prominent journalism scholars have called for a “discursive turn” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Van Hout and De Smedt 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch

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2020). This involves studying the journalistic field and institutions as “ontological objects that are discursively constituted” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 118). Within this discursive turn, the theoretical and analytical emphasis is placed on how different actors negotiate journalistic roles, values, and authority through social action. Such an approach brings relationality and contingency to the forefront and guides researchers to study the specific socio-political and institutional contexts in which journalism takes place, rather than designating beforehand what journalism ontologically is or ought to be.

In tandem with calls for a discursive turn in journalism studies, scholars have introduced new conceptual frameworks aimed at capturing the discursive constitution of the journalistic field. One prominent concept is that of *metajournalistic discourse* (Carlson 2016; Villagrán Sánchez and López Pan 2024), encompassing processes of meaning-formation through which journalism as a field is discursively constructed, negotiated, and reproduced. As defined by Carlson (2020), metajournalistic discourse represents “public talk that seeks to define what journalism is and how it ought to work” (p. 377), thus capturing the ways in which different actors (e.g., journalists, audiences, and sources) discursively engage with journalistic roles, norms, and boundaries.

While numerous scholars have engaged with discourse analysis of journalism, few have studied overall trends and implications of this line of research. In this paper, we engage systematically with discourse analysis in journalism studies through a literature review of articles published between 2018 and 2022 in the five highest-ranking journals focusing specifically on journalism (as ranked by SCImago Journal Rank and Scopus). Drawing on quantitative content analysis, we analyze the use of discourse analysis across 115 research articles, mapping the prevalence of different theoretical approaches, methods, sources of data, and topics. Doing so, the article addresses the following research question and sub-questions:

RQ: How does research in leading journalism studies journals engage with discourse analysis?

SQ1: Which schools of discourse analysis are prevalent?

SQ2: Which methods do scholars draw on when applying discourse analysis?

SQ3: Which forms of data and topics do scholars study through discourse analysis?

Overall, the aim of this paper is to systematically examine the use of discourse analysis in leading journalism journals, mapping developments following the 2017 call from Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) for a “discursive turn” (p. 118) within the field.

Theoretical Background

Discourse analysis does not encompass a single theory, nor does it belong to a single academic discipline. Since at least the 1980s, different theoretical and methodological schools of discourse analysis have emerged and consolidated, drawing on overlapping perspectives from structural linguistics, ideology analysis, philosophy of language, and cultural studies (e.g., Keller and Clarke 2018, 63; van Dijk 2011a; Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates 2001). As summarized by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) in their book *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, “all discourse analytical approaches draw on structuralist and poststructuralist language theory, but the approaches vary as to the extent to which the poststructuralist label applies” (p. 6).

Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) designate the following four approaches to discourse analysis as representing significant and distinct schools of thought: (1) Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA), (2) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), (3) (the Essex school of) Discourse Theory (DT), and (4) Discursive Psychology (DP). Each of these have developed into comprehensive research movements, arising out of different academic fields with diverging views of the ontological nature and function of discourses. Disciplinarily, FDA was first developed in the field of continental philosophy, CDA in critical linguistics, DT in political ideology studies, and DP in social psychology.

As a backdrop for our literature review of discourse analytical research in leading journalism journals, we will briefly outline each of these four major schools of discourse analysis in the following. In addition to serving as our theoretical foundation, these schools are also operationalized in our methodological approach, mapping the prevalence of each across the studied literature.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Several contemporary forms of discourse analysis trace back to the theoretical and empirical work of Michel Foucault (1970, 1972), studying the role of language-use and meaning-making in upholding societal power relations and facilitating the reproduction of ideological structures (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 12–13). Theoretically and methodologically, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis can be divided into two phases, the archaeological phase and the genealogical phase (Khan and MacEachen 2021).

In *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault develops a theory of discourses where discourses partake in shaping what is considered acceptable and true within systems of knowledge production and thought. Foucault refers to discourses as historical processes that shape the possibilities and limits of what can be stated or known at a given historical conjuncture (Foucault 1972, 117; Kress 1985, 6–7). Foucault's work extends specific language-use to a wider societal level to make visible how language and symbols materialize in certain practices that shape the behavior of people and communities (Olsson 2010). Consequently, through repetitive statements, dominant rule-based *epistemes* are formed, in which certain forms of knowledge and ways of thinking are accepted whereas other possibilities are omitted as unthinkable, absurd, or impossible (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 13). This is what Foucault designates as discourses in his archaeological approach. In his genealogical phase, Foucault complements this view on discourses by focusing on the relationship between discourses, knowledge, and power (Foucault 1978; Khan and MacEachen 2021, 4). Here, Foucault does not treat discourses only as limiting or restricting but also as enabling, productive, and creative (Foucault 1980, 119). Power is formed through discursive structures and is necessary for meaningful social life and for knowledge to be developed and changed (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 13–14).

Regarding the ontology of discourses, Foucault adopts a weak structuralist position that makes a distinction between discursive and non-discursive phenomena (Marttila 2016, 20). Foucault sees institutions and infrastructures, such as prisons and mental institutions, as the material non-discursive basis that require discursively constituted knowledge, such as criminology and psychology, through which power is wielded over individuals (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 160; Foucault 1977). Foucault's genealogical work then provides an ontological framework to assess the discursive constitution of

subjectivities and group identities where “citizens”, “prisoners”, or “mentally ill” become the objects of knowledge production through which they are controlled (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 14; Khan and MacEachen 2021, 4; Mills 2003, 25).

Foucault’s genealogy has been highly influential in the field of media and communication studies through the work of Stuart Hall who became a prominent figure in theorizing the exercise of discursive power and reproduction of ideologies through cultural representations and circulation of media products (e.g., Bødker 2018; Fiske 1993; Hall 1980, 1997). In the current calls for “discursive turn” in journalism studies (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017) and conceptualization on metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016), Foucault is referenced only cursorily.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Founded within the field of linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) represents “a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research movement” united by a “shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society” (Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak 2011, 357). As with other schools of discourse analysis, CDA does not advance a specific method, but rather shares a theoretical-ontological foundation of analysis. Key to this foundation is a dialectical position towards social reality where the domain of discourses (i.e., text, image, semantics) are separate from – yet interconnected with – non-discursive ontological reality (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

Since its inception in the 1980s, leading scholars of CDA have been studying journalism and its societal role as a meaning-making institution, including in landmark books such as Teun van Dijk’s (1988) *News as Discourse* and Norman Fairclough’s (1995) *Media Discourse*. CDA has been prominent in the development of the so-called “news discourse” framework (see e.g., Fowler 1991; van Dijk 1988), which views the field of journalism as a social institution that not only produces news in specific contexts but also actively shapes and (re-)produces power structures and ideology in the process (Fowler 1991). Thus, the discursivity of news extends to the whole process of news circulation, ranging from news production to reception, rendering news into the conveyor of symbolic and ideologically loaded structures of meaning (Fairclough 1995; see also Bødker 2018). Journalists, journalistic institutions, and members of the public are all operating within a specific context and, thus, news reflect the surrounding society, reproducing certain patterns and points of view while omitting others.

Discourse Theory

Discourse theory (DT) – also called the Essex School of Discourse Theory or Post-Foundational Discourse Theory – refers to the school of discourse analysis first developed by political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their influential book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* ([1985] 2001). Discourse theory distinguishes itself from other schools of discourse analysis by adopting an ontological position from which society and social reality are viewed as discursively structured through and through (Marttila 2016, 202; Van Brussel, Carpentier, and De Cleen 2019, 11). From this position, discursive and non-discursive reality cannot be meaningfully separated (Marttila 2016, 20). As Laclau and Mouffe explain ([1985] 2001, 108):

An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of “natural phenomena” or “expressions of the wrath of God”, depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence.

Discourse theory thus emphasizes the constitutive role of meaning-making processes, urging researchers to study how different aspects of the (discursively constituted) world become open to political struggle, while others become sedimented over time (Laclau 2014). Through discursive struggle, social groups negotiate and reproduce collective identities and subject positions in relation to those of others.

Multiple scholars have operationalized discourse theory and its conceptual vocabulary in the context of journalism. This includes studies of news discourses around activism (Phelan and Shearer 2009), far-right populism (Hatakka 2019), immigration (Pöyhtäri 2014), educational policies (Salter 2019), and fake news (Farkas 2023).

Discursive Psychology

Discursive psychology (DP) was first developed in the 1980s by Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, particularly in the 1987 book *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. Potter and Wetherell (1987) advance what they describe as a “distinctive and novel social psychological approach” (p. 177), emphasizing the importance of language for human thinking, reasoning, communication, and symbolic meaning-making. Psychological research, they argue, tends to neglect the constitutive role of language for human life and, thus, a new discourse analytical framework is needed to “gain a better understanding of social life and social interaction from our study of social texts” (p. 7). Doing so, however, the authors simultaneously emphasize that “we are not linguists attempting to add social awareness to linguistics ... We are social psychologists” (ibid.).

As Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) note, discursive psychology approaches discourse as “‘situated’ language-use in the contexts in which it takes place” (p. 119). This school of discourse analysis is, therefore, more attentive to mundane forms of sociality than, for example, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis or Discourse Theory, which tend to emphasize macro-historical developments. Accordingly, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, 20) argue that discursive psychology is less analytically abstract than other major schools of discourse analysis. The use of discursive psychology has been limited in the context of journalism studies, yet it has attracted some attention in the study of emotions and racial attitudes in journalistic work (Attenborough 2015; Johnson and Goodman 2013).

Taken together, each of the four schools of discourse analysis highlighted by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) overlap and diverge in distinct ways. Emerging out of different academic disciplines, each has evolved into a wide-ranging research movement, which cannot be reduced to a specific method or sets of methods. Following from this, conducting a literature review on discourse analysis in leading journalism journals must account for the diversity of discourse analytical approaches. In the following, we outline our methodological approach for doing so.

Methodology

To establish an archive for the review, we systematically collected articles from the five highest-ranking journals (as ranked by SCImago Journal Rank and Scopus) with a dedicated focus on journalism research. These are: *Digital Journalism*, *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism Practice*, *Journalism*, and *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. While the first three journals are owned by Taylor & Francis (T&F), the latter two are owned by SAGE Publishing. We used the search features on the T&F and SAGE websites to collect all articles from the journals published in volumes between 2018 and 2022 containing the term “discourse analysis”.¹ This represents the five-year period following Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) call for a new “discursive turn” (p. 118) within journalism studies. It should be noted that this sampling strategy does not capture the full breadth of journalism research, since discourse analysis is employed across a wide range of journals. Our focus on the five highest-ranking journals devoted to the subject area is guided both by the aim of mapping leading dedicated journalism scholarship and by practical constraints related to the scope of manual content analysis. As we elaborate in the discussion, future work could fruitfully examine how present findings relate to broader trends.

In total, we collected 214 research publications. After the data collection, articles were excluded from the study that did not meet the following criteria: (a) publications must be research articles (e.g., no commentaries or reviews), (b) articles must explicitly claim to draw on some form of discourse analysis or use “discourse analysis” as a keyword, (c) articles must be published in journal volumes within the studied period (i.e., excluding “online first”). In total, 99 articles were excluded, five based on criterion (a), 51 based on (b), and 43 based on (c), bringing the final sample down to 115 journal articles. Table 1 presents a breakdown of all collected articles across the five studied journals as well as the final sample.

The final sample of 115 articles was coded by both authors based on five variables: (1) *Methodology* (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods); (2) *Type of data* (journalistic content; social media content; speeches; policy documents; interviews; press releases; opinion pieces and op-eds by non-journalists; ethnographic data; reader/user comments on news websites; other); (3) *Source of data* (from news professionals; from other sources) (4) *School of discourse analysis* (FDA; CDA; DT; DP; none of the above; no elaboration); and (5) *Object of analysis* (journalistic roles, norms, and boundaries; established politics; social movements; marginalization and discrimination; technology discourse; scientific discourse; news consumption; journalistic practices and processes; other).

Schools of discourse analysis (i.e., variable 4) were coded based on explicit mentions of the schools or key literature within the schools in the theory or method sections of each article. The categories in variable 5 (object of analysis) were developed inductively by

Table 1. Overview of collected articles and final sample for the literature review.

Journal	Collected articles	Final sample
Journalism	75	43
Journalism Studies	67	47
Journalism Practice	51	17
Digital Journalism	17	6
Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly	4	2
Total	214	115

reading through the material before developing the codebook and engaging in the systematic coding (see Appendix, codebook for the operationalization of the categories). For variables 2 (type of data) and 5 (object of analysis) multiple categories could be selected during coding. To ensure intercoder reliability, both authors independently coded the full sample of 115 articles. The resulting Cohen's Kappa coefficients were 0.793 for *Methodology*, 0.757 for *School of discourse analysis* and 0.949 for *Source of data*. These values meet the recommended benchmarks proposed by Landis and Koch (1977), indicating substantial agreement for the first two variables and almost perfect agreement for the latter. All cases of disagreement were subsequently resolved jointly by the authors.²

After the quantitative coding, the studied material was subjected to a close reading, qualitatively analyzing the ways in which authors of the studied articles describe their theoretical and methodological approaches related to discourse analysis. Combined with the results from the content analysis, this enables a mapping of both general trends and specific theoretical applications and developments in the five highest ranking journalism journals.

Results

Overall, our data shows a slight increase in the use of discourse analysis across the five studied journals between 2018 and 2022. Whereas 23 studies applied discourse analysis in 2018 across the five journals (5.39% of all published articles), 38 studies did so in 2022 (7.69% of all articles). Notably, however, this trend is not linear, as the years 2020 and 2021 saw a temporary decline in the use of discourse analysis (see Table 2). Accordingly, our results do not support a clear conclusion as to whether the studied journalism journals – numerically speaking – are experiencing a “discursive turn”. In the following, we unpack the results of our quantitative content analysis and subsequent qualitative reading, addressing our study's key questions of which schools of discourse analysis are prevalent in the studied journals (SQ1), which methods scholars draw on when applying discourse analysis (SQ2), and which forms of data and topics are studied using discourse analytical approaches (SQ3).

Schools of Discourse Analysis

Addressing the first sub-question – which schools of discourse analysis are prevalent? – most studies in our sample ($n = 70$) draw on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), while other major theoretical schools remain marginal (See Figure 1). The results show that Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) is used only in two articles (see Jiwani and Al-Rawi 2021;

Table 2. The total number of articles published in the five journals and the share of total articles that apply discourse analysis between 2018 and 2022.

	Total number of articles in the five journals	Articles applying discourse analysis	The share of total articles that apply discourse analysis
2018	427	23	5.39%
2019	478	24	5.02%
2020	417	8	1.91%
2021	482	22	4.56%
2022	494	38	7.69%

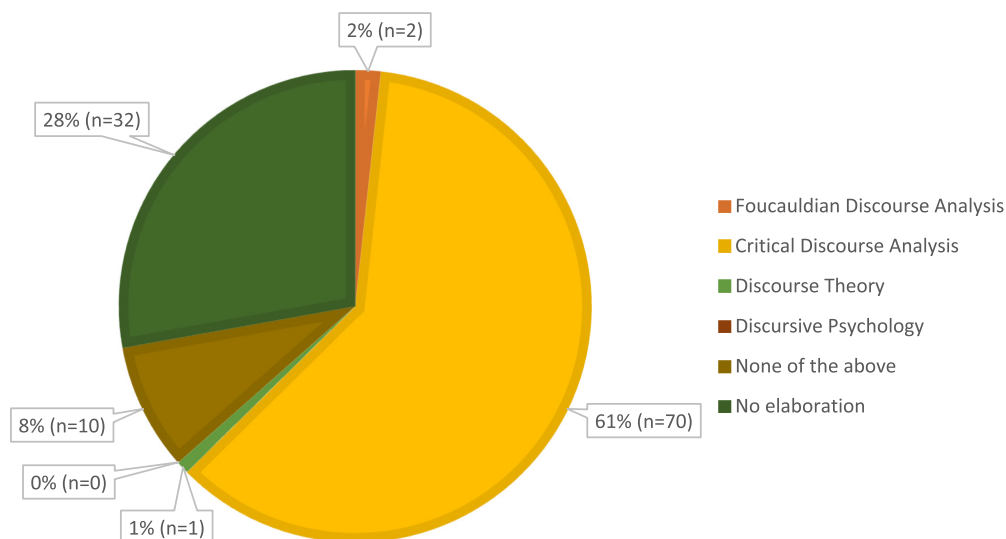


Figure 1. Represented discourse theoretical schools in the 115 reviewed articles.

Parks 2019b), and Discourse Theory (DT) in one article (see Nikolopoulou, Psyllakou, and Demertzis 2022). Discursive Psychology (DP) was not the primary theoretical framework in any study, although three articles did reference DP literature to theorize discourses and discursivity in combination with other discourse analytical schools (see Marciano 2019; Nikolopoulou, Psyllakou, and Demertzis 2022; Thomas 2019). Ten articles were coded in the category “none of the above” as they applied other discourse theoretical approaches, such as Stuart Hall’s notion of a “long preliminary soak” (e.g., Creech and Maddox 2022; Creech and Parks 2022), discourse analysis originating from appraisal theory (e.g., Mugumya 2022), discursive news value analysis (e.g., W. Zhang and Cheung 2022b), and the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (e.g., Bjercknes 2022).

Significantly, the content analysis finds that over a fourth of the studies ($n = 32$) do not elaborate on the applied discourse analytical approach. The authors of these studies merely report that they apply “discourse analysis” (e.g., Parks 2019a; Van Witsen 2020; Zheng and Tandoc 2022), “qualitative discourse analysis” (e.g., Lien, Lee, and Tandoc 2022; Olechowska 2022; Orgeret 2018) or “metajournalistic discourse analysis” (e.g., Finne-man and Thomas 2022; Johnson, Thomas, and Fuzy 2021) without discussing discourses or discursivity in the light of theoretical literature within major discourse analytical schools. Since discourse analysis is not a unified theory or method, this lack of engagement with the theoretical traditions of discourse analysis indicates a theoretical deficit. This deficit is most pronounced in *Journalism Practice*, as 11 out of 17 articles under review do not elaborate on the school of discourse analysis.

Along with discourse analysis, the word “discourse” is also used in several studies without any reference to theoretical literature on discourses (e.g., Are 2021; Orgeret 2018). This is problematic as some articles deal with the discursive constitution of the studied phenomena, such as the discursive “construction of refugee identity” (Wallace 2022), yet do not engage with any of the four major schools of discourse analysis nor discuss how discourses were operationalized in the study or perceived ontologically

altogether (i.e., what discourses are, how they come to be, and how they are conceptualized).

The concepts of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016) and discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2011) were used in several articles to operationalize discourses and to describe the discursivity of journalism as well as to substantiate the application of discourse analysis (see e.g., Finneman and Thomas 2022; Johnson, Thomas, and Fuzy 2021; Porlezza and Arafat 2022; Vos and Thomas 2018). While Carlson (2016) references Foucault in his conceptualization of metajournalistic discourse, multiple articles apply the concept of metajournalistic discourse without connection to any major school of discourse analysis. At the same time, as we will elaborate further in the discussion, there is a tendency to treat discourses *as text* rather than as *relational structures of meaning*.

In articles referencing CDA literature, we found that multiple studies do not explicitly mention CDA nor its conceptual frameworks, referring only to “discourse analysis” or “qualitative discourse analysis” (see e.g., Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022; Rantanen and Kelly 2020; Vos and Thomas 2019; N. Z. Zhang 2022). In combination with the finding that 32 articles do not reference any school of discourse analysis, this supports the conclusion that there is a theoretical deficit in discourse analytical research published in leading journalism journals. The concept of “discourse” often seems to be taken for granted within the studied articles, while discussions related to the nuances embedded in different schools of discourse analysis are often ignored.

Methods

Turning to the second sub-question of our study – which methods do scholars draw on when applying discourse analysis? – the results show that 92 of the 115 articles draw on qualitative methods, while the remaining 23 articles apply a mixed-methods approach (e.g., Åkerlund 2019; Jiwani and Al-Rawi 2021; Olechowska 2022; W. Zhang and Cheung 2022b). Since the “the methods of Discourse Analysis usually tend to be qualitative rather than quantitative” (van Dijk 2011b, 6–7), our results are not unexpected. However, they do indicate a potential for further use of mixed-methods research designs when conducting discourse analytical research on journalism. Such approaches are supported by discourse analytical scholarship, since “qualitative descriptions of specific discursive structures may be perfectly well combined with a quantitative account” (ibid.). Journalism scholarship in the studied journals could, therefore, benefit from combining quantitative and computational methods, such as topic modeling or corpus-linguistic approaches, with qualitative discourse analytical approaches (e.g., W. Zhang and Cheung 2022a; see also Jacobs and Tschötschel 2019).

Forms of data and Topics

Addressing the final sub-question – which forms of data and topics do scholars study through discourse analysis? – the main topics in the reviewed articles were “journalistic roles, norms, and boundaries” ($n = 43$), “established politics” ($n = 26$), and “journalistic practices and processes” ($n = 26$). The predominant focus on journalistic roles, norms, and boundaries in the literature indicates that journalism scholars have picked up on calls for a new “discursive turn” in research on “the link between journalists’ roles and

journalism's identity" (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 118). This is also perceptible through the multiple studies operationalizing the concept of metajournalistic discourse to study journalistic roles, norms, and boundaries (e.g., Creech and Parks 2022; Lamuedra, Martín, and Broullón-Lozano 2019; Porlezza and Arafat 2022).

In terms of the overall types of data, our findings show that 87 reviewed articles solely draw on data from professional journalists (e.g., journalistic content, social media content, interviews), while only 28 draw on data deriving from other sources (e.g., social media content, interviews, opinion pieces and op-eds, speeches, policy documents). This is noteworthy since journalism scholars, such as Carlson (2016), have called for researchers to collect data beyond professional journalism when studying discourses about the profession. The results align with the findings of the systematic literature review by Villagrán Sánchez and López Pan (2024) who note a tendency to use journalist-centric data in the growing number of studies focusing on metajournalistic discourse.

Discussion

Returning to the overall research question – i.e., how does research in leading journalism studied journals engage with discourse analysis? – our study shows that journalism researchers predominantly apply discourse analytical approaches to study journalistic roles, norms, and boundaries (SQ3). This follows calls in the field for a discursive turn (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017).

Across the discourse analytical literature, qualitative methods dominate, with 92 qualitative and 23 mixed-methods studies (SQ2). Most studies operationalize CDA, with few studies engaging with other major schools of discourse analysis (SQ1). Additionally, 32 studies do not reference or mention any major theoretical school of discourse analysis, indicating a lack of theoretical rigor, particularly considering that discourse analysis is not a unified theory or methodological approach. From a discourse analytical perspective, the articles under review tend to treat discourse analysis first and foremost as a method for qualitative textual analysis (i.e., *discourse as text*) rather than as a set of overarching theoretical frameworks for analysing how journalism – in conjunction with other knowledge-producing institutions and gatekeepers – shape and is shaped by structural relations of power and knowledge (i.e., *discourse as relational structures*). By expanding and diversifying the discursive lens and theorizing the discursivity of journalistic institutions in connection to major schools of discourse analysis, leading journalism research could acquire a better understanding of what Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) call “journalism as a discursive institution and journalistic roles as discursively constituted” (129). In the following, we further discuss the implications of these results.

Theoretical and methodological deficit of the current discursive turn

This study shows that discourse analysis in the five leading journalism journals is limited in theoretical and methodological depth and scope, calling for more sustained engagement. By treating discourse analysis primarily as a method, many studies fail to account for the theoretical, methodological, and ontological implications of operationalising different schools of discourse analysis. As such, we argue that, despite recent calls for studying journalism as institutions and roles that are discursively constituted (e.g., through

metajournalistic discourse), there is still a gap in the research as to how existing discourse analytical schools could be operationalized in this context.

As an example, multiple articles under review explore the discursive constitution of journalistic roles, norms, and boundaries through Carlson's concept of metajournalistic discourse while drawing on CDA literature without much elaboration on the theoretical implications of such an approach (see e.g., Perreault and Nölleke 2022; Porlezza and Arafat 2022; Whipple, Graber, and Peña 2022). For instance, CDA's central concept of *order of discourse* – referring to the discursive whole that directs the possibilities and sets the limits for situated language-use and communicative events (Fairclough 1995, 55–68) – is rarely used. As a sensitizing concept, *order of discourse* prompts analysts to make a distinction between *texts* and the wider domain of *discursive practices* that regulates the conditions of their production, reproduction, and distribution. The discursive domain, in turn, is part of a wider field of *social practice* that regulates the relations of power and how practices and institutions are sedimented and materialized (Fairclough 1992, 232–238; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 71–73). Thus, it is through *order of discourse* that the relevance of a particular *text* can be theorized and linked to wider societal contexts and outcomes.

Studying metajournalistic discourse by referring to CDA literature without establishing a clear connection to CDA's foundational frameworks leaves a set of epistemological and methodological questions unanswered. As Carlson (2016) theorizes the central components of metajournalistic discourse as being *actors*, *sites/audiences*, and *themes*, a key question is, how these could be studied through the sensitizing concept of *order of discourse*? How are different *sites* for metajournalistic discourse distinguished from other discursive sites or orders of discourse? Ontological questions follow: Where is metajournalistic discourse situated within the order of discourse? What is the role of *texts* and *discursive practices* in altering or upholding *social practices* that grant (or do not grant) journalism its authority and legitimacy? How is the boundary between discursive and non-discursive theorized (or do scholars even perceive such a boundary to exist overall)? While some of the reviewed studies do employ conceptual frameworks from CDA (e.g., Brennen, Howard, and Nielsen 2022; Trimithiotis 2020), many of the articles apply concepts from journalism studies without establishing clear connections to the applied discourse analytical school in question (e.g., Carlson and Locke 2022; Lugo-Ocando 2022; W. Zhang 2021).

In contrast to CDA, other approaches to discourse analysis, such as DT, could offer contrasting ontological views on journalism as a discursively constituted institution, including the roles of different actors, sites/audiences, and themes. From a discourse theoretical perspective, journalism is fundamentally constituted through discursive struggles of signification and meaning-making (Carpentier and Wimmer 2025, 48–50; Van Brussel, Carpentier, and De Cleen 2019). Theoretically and methodologically, DT's vocabulary could be useful in bridging metajournalistic *actors* and *themes* when assessing, for instance, discourses on veracity and objectivity in journalism (see e.g., Vaarala 2025). The *themes* of the metajournalistic discourse could be theorized as *nodal points* that, in turn, invite news professionals, political actors, and audiences to adopt *subject positions* by accepting certain discursive nodal points as legitimate part of the discourse while excluding other possibilities. Eventually, this establishes particular and competing discourses about the normative role of journalism that divide actors into antagonistic social groups (see e.g., Nikolopoulou, Psyllakou, and Demertzis 2022).

In addition to expanding the theoretical horizon of journalism studies, further engagement with major discourse analytical schools could also sharpen the critical ambitions of the field. As Fairclough (2010) makes clear when introducing CDA, this tradition “is not just descriptive, it is also normative. It addresses social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting and mitigating them” (p. 11). Similarly, as Torfing (2005) notes in relation to DT, “discourse theory *puts power and power struggles at the top of the agenda*” (p. 23, original emphasis). These traditions provide fertile grounds for questioning the role of journalism in (re-)producing structural inequalities as well as pointing towards radical alternatives.

Our aim here is not to prescribe specific discourse analytical approaches or sensitizing concepts but rather to point towards potent theoretical gaps in the current research and literature. With this systematic literature review on the leading journalism journals we encourage journalism scholars to engage further with discourse analytical schools that have been developed outside the field of journalism studies and bring more rigor into the study of the discursive constitution of journalistic institutions, norms, and practices. We also invite scholars to revisit the already developed concepts in journalism studies, such as metajournalistic discourse, in the light of established discourse analytical schools to find new perspectives.

Lack of empirical diversity

Calls for a “discursive turn” and the study of “metajournalistic discourse” in journalism studies coincide with major developments across global media landscapes, in which new actors and digital platforms challenge the legitimacy of journalism (Carlson 2017). This has been prominent not only with the development of new concepts, like metajournalistic discourse, but also in empirical research on how the meaning of journalism is established outside professional journalism by various members of the public (e.g., Dowling, Johnson, and Ekdale 2022; Villagrán Sánchez and López Pan 2024). Despite growing interest towards actors outside professional journalism, only 28 out of 115 articles reviewed for this paper used data that was not produced by professional journalists. This aligns with recent results of a systematic literature review on metajournalistic discourse, finding that non-professional journalists were the object of study only in 27.3% of the reviewed articles (Villagrán Sánchez and López Pan 2024). The same study noted that 88% of the reviewed articles applied discourse analysis or textual analysis.

Since the concept of metajournalistic discourse brings into focus political meaning-making around journalism, we argue that this line of research could benefit from further theoretical and methodological depth and diversification. As laid out above, engaging more thoroughly with discourse analytical foundations would enable a deeper understanding of journalism as a discursively constituted field that is both subject to and the site of political tensions and struggles.

Ways forward for the discursive turn in journalism studies

Building on the conclusions of our review, we want to offer suggestions for journalism scholars in approaching journalism as a discursively constituted field. First, we argue that questions of ontology and epistemology must be brought to the forefront in

contemporary theorizations of journalism. As prominent journalism scholars have called for venturing beyond news discourse and study the discursive constitution of journalistic institutions, norms, and practices (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017), further attention should be placed on explaining how the concept of discourse is operationalized. Moreover, scholars should connect the results of their analysis to existing discourse theoretical schools in order to discuss the ontological status of journalism as a discursively constituted practice and field.

Second, we argue that further engagement with existing discourse analytical schools could allow journalism scholars to acquire new insights on journalism by approaching empirical data in new ways. By applying Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, for example, journalism scholars could perform more nuanced analysis on journalism's epistemology and the relationship between journalism and wider historical structures of knowledge and power (see Prozorov 2019). Discursive Psychology, on the other hand, could diversify the already-abundant *discourse as text* perspective in the studied literature, as this tradition focuses on situational and contextualized language-use (see Abell and Stokoe 1999; Meredith 2021). Such a fine-grained approach could be useful when conducting, for instance, ethnography on metajournalistic discourse in newsrooms, or the role of emotions in producing and consuming journalistic content (Attenborough 2015; see also Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). All in all, diversifying the discourse analytical approaches would enable a more refined view of journalism as a discursively constructed institution and practice; a highly important aim in times of economic, technological, and political upheaval in journalism.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which simultaneously suggest avenues for future research. Our analysis was confined to articles published in five high-ranking journals. While this focus ensured attention to leading outlets dedicated to journalism research, it necessarily excluded relevant scholarship elsewhere. Adopting a wider approach in future research might showcase how engagement with discourse analytical schools varies across the wider field, with some journals displaying more explicit theoretical commitments than others. Overall, our findings underscore the importance of fostering stronger engagement between journalism scholars employing discourse analysis and research published in journals dedicated to discourse analysis, such as *Discourse & Society*, *Critical Discourse Studies*, and *Journal of Language and Politics*.

Notes

1. At first during data collection, we only searched for the time period of our study (2018–2022) through the SAGE and Taylor and Francis (T&F) websites. Later, however, we realized that this approach would not capture all articles published in volumes/issues from the studied period, since the T&F search engine only displays articles based on their publication “online first”. As such, we later expanded our search queries to include prior years (2015–2017), which then enabled us to compile the full sample for our study.
2. Initial disagreement in the case of *School of discourse analysis*, which had the lowest coefficient for Cohen's kappa (0.757), mainly occurred in studies referencing CDA literature but not explicitly mentioning “CDA”. Here, coding varied between “CDA” and “No elaboration”. Studies actively discussing discourses and discursivity in the light of CDA's key literature were eventually coded as “CDA”, whereas studies referencing key literature only once or twice without theorizing discourses and without mentioning CDA were coded as “No elaboration”. In the case of *Methodology* (0.793), all cases of disagreement pertained to the categories “qualitative” and “mixed-methods”, where coders' interpretations diverged on

whether quantitative methods were applied as part of a sampling strategy or as a method of analysis. Disagreements were settled by categorizing studies that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches in the analysis as “mixed-methods”, while categorizing studies applying quantitative methods only as part of a sampling strategy (otherwise using only a qualitative approach) as “qualitative”.

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