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An Epistemic Role for Opinion Journalism

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According to the informational model, journalism's primary function is to provide the public with information and help it acquire knowledge and understanding. Opinion journalism appears to conflict with this model. Although it constitutes a major part of the news media, its role remains poorly defined, and many view it with suspicion. This article argues that opinion journalism serves an important epistemic function that is integral to the informational model: to facilitate appropriate uncertainty by helping audiences form epistemically valuable attitudes toward unsettled questions of public importance. I examine the multiple societal roles of opinion journalism—including policy advising and facilitating public deliberation—and highlight tensions that can arise in practice between these roles and the role of facilitating appropriate uncertainty. Finally, I suggest that greater transparency about both the epistemic status of the claims discussed in opinion pieces and the purpose of opinion journalism may mitigate these tensions.

An Epistemic Role for Opinion Journalism

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I. INTRODUCTION

According to the *informational* model of journalism, the primary function of journalism in society is epistemic: journalism is a social institution that is supposed to provide people with information (or true beliefs, knowledge, or understanding) about a certain range of important topics.[1] This is understood as journalism's primary *normative* function, i.e., as specifying what journalism should ideally do in society. The informational model of journalism has been widely accepted as the guiding norm for professional American journalism since the early twentieth century.[2] Nowadays it is explicitly endorsed in standard textbooks and guidelines for professional journalism, by media organizations, and in the mission statements of legacy newspapers; see, for instance: 'Our Mission: We seek the truth and help people understand the world'.[3] 'We are the definitive source of news and information through the lens of business, finance, economics and money, global forces that shape the world and are key to understanding it'.[4]

The informational model of journalism also makes common sense. We all need information to make good decisions, or, at least, decisions that enable us to achieve our goals. For instance, if I want to minimize my risk of catching some virus, then I need to know how it spreads, whether there are effective vaccines against it, how it will evolve, etc. If I want to vote for someone who will reduce homelessness in my community, then I need information about the candidates' policy proposals, whether these proposals are effective in reducing homelessness, whether the candidates will

[1] I take the term 'informational model' from Schudson 1981, pp. 89 ff. but use it more broadly here.

[2] See Baker 2001, pp. 154–158 or Schudson 1981; 2001; 2008 for an argument. These norms apply beyond American journalism; see Muhlmann 2008 for a historical comparison with French journalism.

[3] New York Times Company nd.b.

[4] Wall Street Journal nd.a. See also: Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021, p. 7; Society of Professional Journalists 2014; or Washington Post 2021.

fulfill their campaign promises to implement these policies, etc. But we obviously can't get all the information we need by ourselves; most of us don't have the resources or expertise to do so. Thus, social institutions or practices are often needed to distribute knowledge in society. This is precisely where journalism comes in: journalism is one of the most important social institution whose normative function is to bring a certain type of information to the public.[5]

On the informational model, opinion journalism presents a puzzle. According to a widely shared understanding—especially among practitioners and the public, but including among many scholars—opinion journalism, at least prima facie, is neither supposed to, nor does it in practice, primarily serve to inform the public. Opinion journalists are supposed to 'offer a point of view',[6] to 'provide a forum for wide-ranging political, social, personal and whimsical expression and commentary on the issues of the day',[7] or, as the editors of the New York Times (NYT) wrote to inaugurate their op-ed page, they are supposed to be 'stimulating new thought and provoking new discussion on public problems'.[8] Although providing a forum for the expression of different viewpoints and for discussion arguably has epistemic benefits—in particular (and as I discuss in Sections II.B and III.B), true or at least reasonable beliefs are supposed to emerge from rational discussion or from the 'marketplace of ideas'—such epistemic benefits aren't usually explicitly stated as goals of opinion journalism. On the contrary, some people seem to think that newspaper opinions express viewpoints that aren't even truth-evaluable, akin to 'mere matters of opinion' in the sense of the (notoriously confused) fact/opinion distinction.[9] For instance, in a 2018 Pew Research Center report on how people categorize statements from news sources as 'opinion' or 'factual', the authors took 'opinion' statements to differ from factual statements in not having the 'capacity to be proved or disproved by objective evidence'.[10] A resolution on the ethics of journalism adopted by the Council of Europe in 1993 states this clearly: 'opinions are necessarily subjective and therefore cannot and should not be made subject to the criterion of truthfulness'.[11] In addition, the mission of opinion journalism (epistemic or otherwise) is rarely stated with any detail or precision, and when it is stated, it is often clearly contrasted with the

[5] For this type of argument see: Goldman 1999, pp. 340–342; Soysal 2019; Marciel 2023.

[6] Wall Street Journal nd.b.

[7] New York Times Company nd.a.

[8] New York Times 1970.

[9] For a discussion and criticism of this distinction, see Corvino 2015.

[10] Pew Research Center 2018, pp. 3 f.

[11] Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 1993.

informational mission of journalism. For instance, on the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) page meant to explain the difference between their news and opinions, the news section is described with the contrast: 'We provide facts, data and information—not assertions or opinions'.[12] The only positive characterization of the opinion pages, in turn, is 'we also offer a point of view' along with the following quote by the Editorial Page Editor Paul Gigot: 'Our commentary is intended to inform on the issues of the day, with the added purpose of stirring debate and helping readers decide for themselves what they think'.[13] Similarly, in a recent article chairman and publisher of the NYT Arthur Gregg Sulzberger evokes former owner of the NYT Adolph Ochs's vision for opinion 'to invite intelligent discussion from all shades of opinion',[14] and he continues:

> Even though each day's opinion pieces are typically among our most popular journalism and our columnists are among our most trusted voices, we believe opinion is secondary to our primary mission of reporting and should represent only a portion of a healthy news diet.[15]

Thus, according to this widely encountered conception, opinion journalism doesn't appear to fit within the informational model of journalism.[16] Going further, some have argued that the mission of opinion journalism isn't just 'secondary' to the informational mission, but that it is at odds with it. An influential RAND report on 'truth-decay', for instance, places a large part of the blame for the decline of trust in the mass media, along with 'erosion of civil discourse, political paralysis, alienation and disengagement of individuals from political and civic institutions, and uncertainty over national policy', on the increase of opinion and opinion-style journalism.[17] Some polls suggest that audiences themselves see opinion journalism with suspicion and demand the media to focus instead on 'facts, objectivity and fairness'.[18]

As I see it, addressing the puzzle of opinion journalism requires, first, clarifying the functions opinion journalism serves in society—both its normative functions and

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[12] Wall Street Journal nd.b.

[13] Wall Street Journal nd.b.

[14] Ochs 1896.

[15] Sulzberger 2023. See also Sulzberger and Suárez 2024.

[16] This isn't restricted to American journalism; see, e.g., Conseil de Déontologie Journalistique et de Médiation 2021.

[17] Kavanaugh and Rich 2018, p. 302.

[18] JV Consulting 2021. Though Bursztyn et al. (2023) suggest that audiences choose opinion over news even when tasked with learning facts.

its *de facto* functions, i.e., the functions it actually plays in practice. The next step is to evaluate how these functions align with, or diverge from, the informational model of journalism that reflects journalism's dominant self-conception today. This article offers an attempt to address this puzzle. Here, in outline, are my main contentions. I will argue that opinion journalism does have an important epistemic function in society, and one that also fits nicely within the informational model of journalism: namely, the function of facilitating epistemically valuable attitudes toward important questions that aren't settled by the available evidence—in slogan form, the function of *facilitating appropriate uncertainty* (Section II.C). I will argue from the informational model that this is an important normative function for opinion journalism: in other words, that if journalism has the normative function of providing a certain type of information (or knowledge, or understanding) to the public, then opinion journalism (or, at least, some distinctive subset of journalism) should indeed have the function of facilitating appropriate uncertainty in the public. In outline, this is because part of the information we need from journalism concerns complicated questions that aren't settled by the total available evidence. Since the normative goal of journalism in general can be understood as facilitating epistemically valuable attitudes toward important questions, the normative goal of opinion journalism—at least one of them—is then to help readers form such attitudes toward the difficult and unsettled ones.

The function of facilitating appropriate uncertainty isn't clearly articulated or conceptualized in the literature, but, as I will argue, it can make sense of some epistemic functions that are attributed to opinion journalism by some practitioners and scholars (Section II.C). In this sense, facilitating appropriate uncertainty is part of at least some (self-)conception of opinion journalism, even if it doesn't appear in the more widespread one outlined above. Finally, I will suggest that opinion journalism often fails to facilitate appropriate uncertainty in practice, and that this is partly because this function can conflict with its other main de facto functions (Section III). As I will explain, these are the function of advising on policy (Section II.A) and the function of facilitating public deliberation (Section II.B). I will argue that, when done well, policy advising doesn't need to conflict with facilitating appropriate uncertainty, but that in practice, it often does (Section III.A). I will then argue that the ultimate epistemic goal of facilitating public deliberation is (and should be) to facilitate appropriate uncertainty (though it may also have other non-epistemic aims). Thus, in principle, there shouldn't be a conflict between the functions of facilitating appropriate uncertainty and facilitating public deliberation. However, as I will explain, in practice, due to the way opinion journalists go about facilitating public deliberation and due to the nature of their intended audience, facilitating public deliberation can and often does conflict

with facilitating appropriate uncertainty (Section III.B). Thus, the fact that opinion journalism plays so many different roles in society can undermine its important epistemic mission. As I see it, this also contributes to the general confusion about its societal roles and epistemic importance. I will conclude by suggesting that a certain type of transparency—both about the epistemic uncertainty of the questions that opinion journalism addresses and about its societal functions—might help opinion journalism better serve its important epistemic function: it might help opinion journalists navigate potential conflicts between their various functions and help bring out the importance of facilitating appropriate uncertainty (Section IV).

II. THE MANY FUNCTIONS OF OPINION JOURNALISM

My aim in this section is to delineate the different (normative and de facto) functions of opinion journalism. Let me begin with some preliminary clarifications.

The first two concern the scope of the functions (or roles) that I discuss.[19] Firstly, the de facto functions for opinion journalism that I discuss here (I leave open whether they are all also normative) are those that I take to be the main ones ascribed to opinion journalism in the literature from scholars and practitioners, and that can also be inferred from actual opinion pieces. I leave open that there are yet other de facto or normative functions for opinion journalism. In particular, I leave aside discussion of what might be called 'weaponized' opinion journalism, i.e., opinion journalism that describes itself as fitting some ideal, but that in fact aims at something different, such as advancing some ideology or making profit.[20] I also leave open that there are opinion pieces that fit none of the functions I delineate here, and vice-versa; opinion journalism isn't a natural kind, and I am not purporting to be giving necessary and sufficient conditions for it. I will argue that facilitating appropriate uncertainty subsumes the only other clearly epistemic function for opinion journalism that I delineate here. This doesn't mean that it will subsume all its other possible epistemic functions, but that is my suspicion; in other words, I suspect that the function of facilitating appropriate uncertainty is broad and important enough that any other epistemic function it should serve is instrumental for it. I won't explicitly argue for this stronger claim in this article, though my arguments will provide some support for it.

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[19] Throughout I use 'function' and 'role' interchangeably, but others don't, e.g., Kelling and Thomas 2018.

[20] Herman and Chomsky (1988) famously provide an analysis of this kind of weaponized media. See also, e.g., Audi 1990 or Baker 2001.

Secondly, my aim is to delineate only functions that are specific to opinion journalism, and so I set aside functions that are arguably common to all forms of journalism. For instance, in a survey of 117 opinion journalists, Kimberly Kelling and Ryan J. Thomas found that opinion journalists deem the 'monitorial' role of holding powerful leaders accountable to be one of the most applicable to their work.[21] Arguably, the monitorial or 'accountability' function is central to all journalism; some have even argued that it is the most important political function of the press and that '[d]emocracy cannot truly exist if accountability journalism does not'.[22] Although opinion journalism can and often does serve the accountability function of the press, this function doesn't seem specific to it. In particular, paradigmatic examples of accountability journalism—such as the NYT's Pentagon Papers or the Washington Post (WaPo)'s Watergate story—aren't labeled 'opinion' but 'investigative journalism'. Kelling and Thomas themselves hypothesize that it is because the monitorial role is central to the general culture of American journalism that opinion journalists see this role as highly applicable to their work.[23] For these reasons, and although opinion journalism can and often does play an important monitorial function, I set aside the monitorial role in my discussion. For similar reasons, I also set aside the function of entertaining; although this is often discussed and criticized, it clearly isn't a role specific to either journalism or opinion journalism.[24]

Finally, let me make a brief clarification about the kinds of opinion journalism that I will consider. Opinion journalism is found in many different places: in certain segments of traditional newspaper—editorials, opinion columns, op-eds (called 'guest essays' in the NYT since 2021), and letters to the editors—as well as in the majority of the content produced in outlets such as news magazines, television or radio talk shows, blogs, newsletters, or podcasts. My arguments in the article are intended to apply generally, but my examples throughout will primarily be from 'segmented' opinion journalism in mainstream newspapers in the United States.

A. Advise on Policy

One function that is often attributed to opinion journalists is to advise on policy: opinion journalists provide their readers reasons to adopt a specific policy or course of action.[25] At least part of the goal of such pieces seems to be to persuade the readers

[21] Kelling and Thomas 2018, p. 410.

[22] Schudson 2020, p. 34. See also Audi 1990 and Hanitzsch and Vos 2018.

[23] Kelling and Thomas 2018, pp. 403, 413.

[24] See, e.g., Franklin 1997 or Schudson 2020, p. 16 for discussion.

[25] See Jacobs and Townsley 2011, pp. 25–27 or Schudson 2018, pp. 151 f.

to take the course of action in question and thus, indirectly, to have some social or political influence. This function is thus closely related to what is called the 'advocacy' or 'mobilization' function of journalism more generally.[26] As Michael Schudson argues, these functions are associated with the partisan press that dominated US journalism through the nineteenth century, but were later broadly shunned under the informational model, except when explicitly confined to the opinion sections.[27]

Editorials provide good examples of opinion journalism that aims at social and political influence. These are pieces that are standardly signed by the editorial board of the newspaper and that thus represent the views of the newspaper (or the opinion section) as an institution.[28] Editorial endorsements of a candidate before elections, for instance, are usually pieces that are clearly intended to influence readers' voting behavior. They contain arguments and other rhetorical devices meant to urge a particular vote, and they often clearly state the advice or desired outcome of the piece. Some research suggests that editorial endorsements can actually influence the tone and amount of coverage the candidates receive in the other parts of the newspaper, as well as, either directly or indirectly, the readers' votes.[29]

Editorials, but also opinion columns, are also sometimes directly addressed to politicians and other policy makers, who are known to read these opinion pieces. Jacobs and Townsley and Schudson cite Walter Lippmann as a paradigmatic example of a columnist who functioned as a policy advisor; for instance, in his famous series of articles rejecting the Truman Doctrine in 1947.[30] William Safire in the 1990s or Paul Krugman until recently are other famous examples of columnists who often wrote their columns as critical dialogues with policy makers.[31]

Another function that is sometimes attributed to opinion journalism and that I take to be closely related to policy advising and advocacy is the function of providing value (perhaps especially moral) judgments.[32] As Robert Audi notes, it is commonly accepted

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[26] As in, e.g., Schudson 2008, pp. 21–23.

[27] Schudson 2008, pp. 21f.; 2018, ch. 9.

[28] Editorials are often taken to represent the views of the newspaper 'as an institution' (Washington Post nd.); see Firmstone 2019 and Lapidos 2014. But some clarify that editorials only represent the views of their editorial board (New York Times 2018; Kingsbury 2024).

[29] See, e.g., Druckman and Parkin 2005 or Casas et al. 2016.

[30] Jacobs and Townsley 2011, pp. 25–27; Schudson 2018, pp. 151 f.

[31] Jacobs and Townsley 2011, pp. 76 f., 112 f.

[32] I distinguish this from the function of helping people form epistemically valuable attitudes toward complicated questions that might be value-laden; see Section II.C.

that 'reporting should be factual, editorializing evaluative'.[33] The idea that opinion journalism has an evaluative function is also implicit in the common assumptions that all value statements are 'opinions' in the sense of the fact/opinion distinction and that opinion journalism captures 'opinions' in that sense (see Section I). Under these assumptions, value statement in a newspaper belongs in the opinion section.[34] Value statements in opinion journalism sometimes serve to persuade and mobilize readers, and thus, indirectly, to affect social or political change. Nicholas Kristof is a well-known (and sometimes controversial) example of a contemporary opinion columnist who frequently provides both moral evaluations and calls to action, such as in his influential series of columns on starvation, human trafficking, or homelessness. Kristof also often provides advice on philanthropic giving, including in a yearly column on philanthropic holiday gift suggestions.[35] He is explicit that journalism has a moral purpose and that it borders on advocacy: 'It's incumbent on us to [...] try to meet that public desire [to improve public policy], not just to illuminate problems but also to illuminate solutions—to advise people on how they can donate effectively'.[36] As I see it, then, the evaluative function of opinion journalism is sometimes subsumed under the policy advisor function delineated here.

B. Facilitate Public Deliberation

A second role that is often attributed to opinion journalism is to facilitate public deliberation or debate. On a first pass, deliberation is a process for forming beliefs or making decisions that involves the consideration and weighing of different arguments.[37] When done well, deliberation is supposed to have an epistemically valuable outcome; in particular, the deliberator(s) should reach true or otherwise epistemically valuable views as a result of the deliberation. The mechanisms with which group deliberation outputs such epistemic goods arguably include increasing the available information, detecting factual and reasoning errors, increasing the range of possible solutions considered, and making the manipulation of information more difficult.[38] Proponents

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[33] Audi 1990, p. 207.

[34] Schudson (2001, p. 150) describes this as entailed by the 'objectivity norm' of American journalism.

[35] See, e.g., Kristof nd.

[36] Kristof 2024. Opinion journalists qua policy advisors could thus satisfy Siegel's 'public as protagonist' principle (Siegel 2022, p. 250).

[37] For simplicity, I use 'argument' to encompass what is sometimes also called 'reason', 'justification', 'demonstration', etc.

[38] For an overview, see Goodin and Spiekermann 2018, pp. 132–145.

of deliberative theories of democracy have argued that group deliberation can also have non-epistemic benefits, such as increasing tolerance and mutual understanding, helping build community, and increasing public trust.[39]

The media has long and often been described as having an important role in facilitating public deliberation. To take one example, the influential 1947 Hutchins Commission report, which outlines five functions of a free and socially responsible press, identifies the second function of media institutions—after providing information—as that of being a 'forum for the exchange of comment and criticism' and thus 'common carriers of public discussion'.[40] Usually (and as seen in Section I), the function of facilitating public deliberation is attributed specifically to opinion journalism.[41] According to Kelling and Thomas's survey, opinion journalists themselves deem the role of facilitating civic participation and debate to be the most important to their work.[42] There are broadly two senses in which (opinion) journalism is said to facilitate public deliberation: the first is by facilitating 'direct' group deliberation, and the second is through 'mediated' deliberation.

Opinion journalism is said to facilitate direct group deliberation in at least three ways. First, opinion journalism is supposed to provide tools that readers can use when they have small group discussions. For instance, opinion journalists provide information and arguments that can be referenced or deployed in group discussion. As Jacobs and Townsley argue, opinion journalists also provide a 'cultural repertoire' including 'discourses and narratives, scripts and performances' that can facilitate and, in some cases, enable group discussion.[43]

Second, opinion journalism is supposed to generate small group discussions among readers. For instance, Jacobs and Townsley argue that opinion writers become representatives of a view or argument in popular culture and incite strong emotions of 'hate' or 'attachment' to get people to rally behind or against them in debating among themselves.[44]

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[39] For an overview, see Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019, pp. 28–37.

[40] Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947.

[41] Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947, p. 24) mentions that views in a debate can also appear elsewhere in a newspaper. Lasch (1990, p. 72), Baker (2001, p. 148), and Marciel (2025) argue that facilitating deliberation is one of the primary functions of journalism generally.

[42] Kelling and Thomas 2018, p. 410.

[43] Jacobs and Townsley 2011, p. 68. Maia 2012, pt. III provides case studies of how opinion pieces are used in small group discussions.

[44] Jacobs and Townsley 2011, p. 69. Maia (2012, pp. 17–19) notes a similar use of emotion in public deliberation.

Finally, opinion journalism can also serve as a venue for small-group discussions, for instance, among political elites and experts, or between representatives of civil society and political elites.[45] Although these discussions in the written media are typically not face-to-face or conducted in real time, they can still share important features with such paradigmatic discussions. For instance, authors may respond to each other's writings; a piece might be co-authored; or it may present the transcript of live or near-live conversation, possibly conducted online, as in 'The Conversation' feature in the NYT.[46] To the extent that media-facilitated deliberations are 'deliberative' to some degree, the participants can arguably gain whatever benefits are standardly attributed to deliberation. Importantly, however, media-facilitated deliberations have been argued to primarily benefit the audience that witnesses the deliberation. 'Mediated deliberation' encompasses deliberations that have non-participant observers in this sense, and it is the second type of mechanism with which (opinion) journalism is said to promote its deliberative function.

Mediated deliberation is often understood broadly to encompass anything that looks like a discussion or has some 'degree of deliberativeness' and that takes place in the media.[47] In particular, a mediated deliberation doesn't need to take the form of an actual panel, forum, conversation, or exchange between opinion writers; it can refer to the 'pool of arguments' across an entire media system.[48] Perhaps the most distinctive feature of mediated deliberation is that it has an audience that doesn't participate in but merely observes the quasi-deliberation. This audience is supposed to be an important beneficiary of the mediated deliberation; in particular, audience members are 'expected to learn from the rich pool of arguments about important issues of public concern presented to them in mediated deliberation'.[49]

Scholars have proposed different criteria to evaluate the degree of deliberativeness of a media environment, but they usually agree on the following: *use of arguments* (as opposed to mere assertions), *inclusion* (the range of arguments, perspectives, or evidence considered should be appropriately broad, for instance, by including all reasonable arguments or all relevant perspectives), and *responsiveness* (the arguments should engage with one another, for instance, by rebutting another or refining one in light of another,

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[45] Jacobs and Townsley (2011, pp. 65–68) attribute this view to Habermas (1992/1996) and Gurevitch and Blumler (1990).

[46] New York Times, nd.a. Maia (2012) explains the differences between media-facilitated discussions and ordinary small-group discussions.

[47] See: Page 1995, p. 245; Maia 2012, p. 101; or Rinke 2016, p. 1.

[48] See Habermas 2006 and Rinke 2016.

[49] Rinke 2016, p. 10.

etc.).[50] The media has been criticized for failing each of these criteria.[51] In Section III.B, I will argue for an additional criterion, *aggregation*, and suggest that opinion journalism often fails to meet it as well. In any case, opinion journalism seems to hold itself to some of these criteria of deliberativeness. For instance, guidelines for guest opinion writing often present use of arguments as necessary for publishing an opinion piece: 'At its core, an Opinion guest essay provides an argument defined and substantiated with evidence'.[52] Inclusiveness, too, is a guiding principle of many opinion sections; for instance, their stated goal is to offer the most 'wide-ranging' collection of arguments and ideas,[53] and 'provide a diversity of voices and perspectives'.[54] In sum, mediating deliberation appears to be an important self-ascribed function of opinion journalism.[55]

C. Facilitate Appropriate Uncertainty

Finally, opinion journalism is often attributed certain functions that are much more explicitly epistemic. I have in mind the following types of remarks: opinion journalism should 'make sense of events',[56] 'explain the significance of the glut of events',[57] 'make the news more understandable […] to put it into a better frame of reference to show its significance',[58] 'point citizens to a deeper understanding of what [is] really important',[59] 'provide analysis and interpretation', 'provide explanation, background and context of the news', or 'trace causes and predict consequences of events'.[60] WaPo columnist and editor Karen Attiah puts it vividly thus:

> A reporter reports—'Man bites dog'—and that is just the facts, there is no value judgment about it—on the opinion journalism side we might say, 'Man bites dog again, but here's why this matters, or here's why this doesn't matter, or here's why

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[50] For defense of some of these criteria and overview of existing ones see: Wessler 2008; Maia 2012, pp. 106 f.; or Rinke 2016, pp. 6 f.

[51] See, e.g., Maia 2012, pp. 107–115.

[52] New York Times nd.b. See also Washington Post 2022.

[53] New York Times nd.b.

[54] Washington Post 2022. See also Wall Street Journal nd.a.

[55] Interestingly, responsiveness is less prioritized; see New York Times nd.b.

[56] McNair 2008.

[57] Hulteng 1973, p. 11.

[58] Stonecipher 1979, p. 54. These last three are cited in Kelling and Thomas (2018, p. 401).

[59] Jacobs and Townsley 2011, p. 24.

[60] Kelling and Thomas 2018, pp. 402, 406, 407.

> the increased rates of men biting dogs is why our society is about to collapse […]' […] opinion journalists are able to […] build off of that news gathering, and then add judgments, framing, context, illumination, and perhaps push it forward.[61]

As I see it, two types of epistemic roles are implicit in these types of remarks.

The first is a broadly educational role: opinion journalists are supposed to give context or background information that is necessary for understanding the news or its significance. Jacobs and Townsley delineate a similar role of 'the columnist as teacher' and argue that Lippmann often embodied it, for instance, in a series of columns that educated the public about the different branches of the government.[62] This educational function captures part of the remarks above, for instance, that opinion journalists should 'make news more understandable', and 'provide background' or 'context'. However, this educational role doesn't seem specific to opinion journalism. On the informational model, any journalist should include background information or context that is required to come to possess (and perhaps understand) the new information she is trying to convey: for, arguably, the ultimate goal of journalism on the informational model is for the audience to come to possess the information, or, at least, for the information to be comprehensible, and not simply for the information to be written down or archived.[63] Although news pieces sometimes remind readers of the most important background facts required to understand some new piece of information (such as what some regulation says or how some event unfolded in the past), some have criticized the media for too often failing to convey enough relevant background information in reporting, for instance, about the frequencies of extreme events that are reported.[64] Since certain background information is required for many news stories (such as information about the functions of government branches), it would make sense for newspapers or news sites to dedicate a section to it.[65] But opinion sections aren't standardly conceived as primarily educational in this specific sense: usually, to say that something is an 'opinion' suggests that there also are other opinions on the matter, and that at least some of the content discussed isn't 'established fact' or mere 'background information'.

I therefore think that the epistemic role specific to opinion journalism in the remarks above is to 'go beyond the news' and 'push it forward', in the sense of deriving some implications of the news, or attempting to 'predict', 'interpret', 'explain', 'frame',

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[61] Attiah and Nielsen 2021.

[62] Jacobs and Townsley 2011, pp. 26–28.

[63] Soysal (2019) and Marciel (2023) argue for this.

[64] See, e.g., Mohseni et al. 2022, p. 150.

[65] E.g., BBC Bitesize (BBC nd) partly serves this educational role.

or 'evaluate' information given in news reporting. As I see it, this was also central to Lippmann's understanding of the function of opinion journalism, which he elaborates in an address to the National Press Club:

> [W]e correspondents perform an essential service. In some field of interest, we make it our business to find out what is going on under the surface and beyond the horizon, to infer, to deduce, to imagine, and to guess what is going on inside, what this meant yesterday, and what it could mean tomorrow.[66]

I propose to conceptualize this epistemic role more precisely as the role to *facilitate appropriate uncertainty*. Here is what I mean. A vast number of questions of public interest are (epistemically) 'unsettled' in the sense that the total available evidence and arguments don't strongly support any particular answer. The evidence and arguments here are high-quality ones typically gathered and developed by relevant experts, and they are 'available' in the sense that at least the relevant experts are aware of it.[67] There are important unsettled scientific or broadly empirical questions (What are the causes of Alzheimer's disease? Who will win the election? What are the drivers of inflation, and which policies most effectively reduce it?). There are also important unsettled questions about social, political, economic, moral, or philosophical matters (How should foundational political documents or constitutional provisions be interpreted? What principles should guide the allocation of public resources, such as healthcare or education funding? What role does social media play in shaping voter perceptions of political candidates?). Some of these questions will be settled by more evidence. Others might require more careful analysis and examination of the available evidence to draw conclusions from it. Some are extremely complicated, and might only be capable of being 'conditionally settled', for instance, given more precisely defined terms or some set of assumptions about preferences, values, or moral principles.[68] Note that if a question is unsettled in the sense I defined here, this also means, typically, that there is no expert consensus on the question, i.e., it isn't the case that a majority of relevant experts are confident in a particular answer.[69] On the other

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[66] Lippmann 1959.

[67] Considering both evidence and arguments relates to the distinction between 'database' and 'analyst' expertise (Hall 2004).

[68] Whether the pure moral or value principles themselves are up for epistemic evaluation will depend on metaethical commitments; see, e.g., related discussion in Goodin and Spiekermann 2018, pp. 38–45 and Sec. III.A.

[69] For discussion on the relationship between expert consensus and settled questions, see, e.g., Dellsén 2024.

hand, whether there is consensus on an answer in the general population doesn't typically track whether a question is settled in this sense.[70]

What are epistemically valuable attitudes to have toward (the answers to) unsettled questions? While this question is entangled with some longstanding debates in epistemology, I set these complexities aside as my subsequent arguments are by and large unaffected by them.[71] I only make some broadly accepted and commonsensical assumptions. One such assumption is that it would be epistemically valuable to base one's attitudes on the total available evidence, and, in particular, to be only as confident in a particular answer to the unsettled question as the total available evidence warrants. One way to put this more precisely is in terms of credences, where a credence is a degree of belief or confidence; credences are usually given a value in [0, 1], where credence 1 in a proposition represents that the agent has maximal confidence that the proposition is true, and credence 0 represents that the agent has maximal confidence that it is false. One can then say that there is epistemic value in 'proportioning' one's credences to the total available evidence concerning an unsettled question. Consider a toy example. Say that it is unsettled whether Alice has a specific gene *g*, and that the only available evidence is that 6 out of 10 people have *g*. Then, a credence that Alice has *g* that is approximately 0.6 is proportional to the evidence and, even more obviously, credences in this proposition that are approximately 0 or approximately 1 aren't proportional. The idea of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence goes back to Locke and Hume.[72] It is compatible with both internalist and externalist accounts in epistemology.[73] Notice that the total available evidence in question here will most often exceed the evidence available to a given reader of opinion pieces. Thus, my claim isn't that a subject should proportion their credences to the total available evidence, as this might be beyond their capabilities.[74] Rather, my claim is that possessing this evidence and then proportioning their credences to it is (or would be) epistemically valuable to them. The idea that it is

[70] E.g., there is expert but not general consensus that climate change is mainly caused by humans (Lynas et al. 2021; Pew Research Center 2023).

[71] I set aside, e.g.: (1) the debate concerning expert disagreement and deference to experts (e.g., Goldman 2001), also discussed in the context of journalism (e.g., Anderson 2011); (2) the debate concerning whether there are epistemically valuable inquisitive attitudes, as defined in Friedman (2020), also implemented in the context of journalism (e.g., Siegel forthcoming); and (3) metaethical debates (see footnote 68).

[72] Locke 1689, sec. V.xv.5; Hume 1748/1999, sec. x.i.87.

[73] See, e.g.: Williamson 2000, ch. 10; Joyce 2005; Conee and Feldman 2018.

[74] I also set aside whether there are epistemic norms of inquiry (e.g., Flores and Woodward 2023, see also footnote 71).

valuable to proportion one's credences to the total available evidence, rather than to merely one's own current evidence, is usually taken to go back to Carnap.[75] This idea is often supported by arguments from expected (epistemic) utility.[76] It is also in line with the idea that it is epistemically valuable to seek out expert testimony or to gather new evidence.[77] To sum up, and again leaving many subtleties aside, my main claim here is that it is epistemically valuable to proportion one's attitudes in the answers to an unsettled question to the total available evidence—in slogan form, it is epistemically valuable to have *appropriate uncertainty* in the answers to an unsettled question.

The epistemic function for opinion journalism that I am delineating here, then, is to help readers form such appropriate uncertainty toward unsettled questions of public importance, i.e., to *facilitate* appropriate uncertainty. Opinion journalists can do (and, in fact do) a number of things that are instrumental for facilitating appropriate uncertainty.[78] For instance, opinion journalists can present facts or information (including ones reported in the main sections of the news) and explain to what extent these support the various answers to an unsettled question.[79] Opinion journalists can make their readers aware of a potential answer to an unsettled question and help them distribute their credences appropriately.[80] They can make explicit various clarifications or assumptions needed to settle a question, and help readers form appropriate attitudes in the relevant conditional answers. Opinion journalists can also more directly report on the total distribution of evidence and arguments discussed by the relevant experts and explain what overall uncertainty this warrants.[81]

As I see it, attributing the function of facilitating appropriate uncertainty captures many of the remarks from practitioners and scholars above. In particular, as in my

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[75] Carnap 1947.

[76] See, e.g.: Good's Theorem (Good 1967); discussions in Taroni et al. 2024; or an epistemic version of Good's Theorem in Myrvold 2012.

[77] See, e.g., discussions in: Flores and Woodard 2023; Millar 2023; Worsnip forthcoming.

[78] Note that these remain by and large unaffected by my assumptions above, but if one claims that 'inquisitive attitudes' or 'doxastic openness' toward unsettled questions are epistemically valuable, one could add that opinion journalists should instrumentally promote them as well. See, e.g.: Friedman 2013; Ballantyne 2019.

[79] In this sense, opinion journalists can play the role of 'analyst' experts (see footnote 67). For this point see also Hulteng 1973, pp. 3, 12 f..

[80] If one views conscious awareness of such answers as an additional epistemic benefit, then opinion journalism would often also achieve this in facilitating appropriate uncertainty, since journalism typically affects our credences by making propositions explicit in language.

[81] See related Dunwoody 2005 and discussion in Sec. IV.

examples above, questions of public importance about 'prediction', 'interpretation', 'explanation', 'framing', or 'evaluation' are usually unsettled questions in my sense here. Lippmann gives further examples of important unsettled questions the columnist is tasked with investigating. As he says, their answers 'often exist far away and out of sight of any newspaperman', 'in places that the reporter cannot visit', 'may lie in the past', 'may lie inside the head of a public man', or 'in the moving tides of mass opinion, for example about the coming elections'.[82] For Lippmann, the columnist's jobs is to 'deduce', 'calculate', and 'appraise' such facts, 'proposing theories or hypotheses which are then tested by trial and error', given that 'we know something but not everything, and not nearly enough' concerning such important questions.[83] Many opinion pieces concern unsettled questions, and many important unsettled questions of public importance get discussed in opinion pieces (though some are discussed in more detail in more specialized venues, such as of science journalism, and some are also sometimes discussed in the reporting sections). Thus, whether or not opinion journalism in practice often succeeds in facilitating appropriate uncertainty (I suggest not in Section III), the role of facilitating appropriate uncertainty does seem to make sense of some self-conception of the aims of opinion journalism.

Finally, I claim that facilitating appropriate uncertainty is a normative function of opinion journalism, given the informational model. On the informational model, journalism is supposed to provide the public with important information; in particular, information that we need to make good decisions in our lives and community. But some of the information we need concerns unsettled questions. All the examples above and in Section I are of unsettled questions that are important for many of us to have appropriate attitudes about. Many of us need to base our decisions and actions on such questions—actions such as which policies or politicians to support or trust, how to avoid certain diseases, how to prepare for the future, etc. Many unsettled questions are also simply interesting. Thus, if journalism's epistemic goal in general is to help us form epistemically valuable attitudes toward those aspects of the world that are important for or interesting to us, then this should also involve forming epistemically valuable attitudes toward unsettled questions (whatever exactly these attitudes are). On this view, facilitating appropriate uncertainty is simply part of the general epistemic goal of journalism, according to the informational model.

Next, I consider the relationships between the three functions that I delineated here in Section II.

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[82] Lippmann 1959.

[83] Ibid.

III. OVERLAPPING AND CONFLICTING FUNCTIONS

A. Facilitating Appropriate Uncertainty and Policy Advising

Consider, first, the relationship between facilitating appropriate uncertainty and policy advising. Assume that the primary aim of policy advising in opinion journalism is to influence the actions of readers (whether policy makers or members of the public) by influencing their viewpoints. On this assumption, it is clear that policy advising can conflict with facilitating appropriate uncertainty. This follows simply because the attitudes that are most appropriate given the total available evidence and arguments might not be the ones that are most likely to result in a certain action. To take a simple example, if people act at least roughly based on their expected utilities, then it could be that having a slightly higher than appropriate credence that some action will be beneficial will make it more likely that one decides to do it.[84] This can even happen in cases where the policies or actions in question actually promote public good.[85] There can thus be tradeoffs between the aims of affecting policy change, swaying votes, etc., and the aim of facilitating appropriate uncertainty. Many opinion pieces, perhaps most famously written by politicians, have been criticized precisely for exaggerating or downplaying facts to get readers to support or implement certain policies.[86]

On an alternative (and more plausible) understanding, policy advising in opinion journalism, at least when done well, should only aim to influence readers' actions in ways that are compatible with appropriate uncertainty. This is more in line with professional and official norms for medical advice, which dictate that all relevant evidence and uncertainties must be taken into account and that the strength of the advice should be proportional to the level of certainty in the evidence.[87] Some have defended the point of editorial endorsements by describing their function in a similar manner. On this view, endorsements are supposed to provide the information relevant to making a voting decision that the board gets in part through 'endorsement interviews'.[88] Some of it includes information about relevant unsettled questions, such as how the candidates 'would perform in office and whether they have the steadfast ability to execute the

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[84] I set aside other factors that might need to be considered in decision theory, such as risk attitudes; see, e.g., Buchak 2013.

[85] Blessenohl and Sarikaya (2022) consider such cases in the context of scientific policy advice. See also John 2018.

[86] E.g., this fits the NYT's own criticism of Cotton 2020. Jacobs and Townsley (2011, ch. 8) reveal similar criticisms of the opinion coverage of the Iraq war.

[87] See, e.g., the widely used GRADE system (Guyatt et al. 2008).

[88] Kingsbury 2020.

duties of the highest office in the land'.[89] The editorial recommendation is then a kind of aggregate summary of the total relevant evidence and arguments concerning the candidates. On this understanding, editorial endorsements and policy advice more generally would fit within the informational model.

This understanding has to be unpacked further, however. One crucial difference between policy advice in medicine and in journalism is that medical advice is supposed to be 'patient-centered', i.e., the relevant costs and benefits considered are the patient's health outcomes. In contrast, the opinion journalist who gives policy advice about voting, politics, or even the economy might be (and often is) doing so from a background set of values or interests that aren't universal or the readers' own. Indeed, opinion journalism is often understood to proceed from a background set of values or principles, and it is at least implicitly understood that (some of) these values or principles may not be universally or even broadly shared. As Chicago Tribune Opinion Page Editor John McCormick explains: 'Swaying votes is only one reason for endorsing, and arguably not the most important. Every few years, endorsements [...] explain to the world what that publication is, what it advocates, how it thinks, what principles it holds dear'.[90] Besides providing relevant information, then, editorial endorsements outline the news organization's (or its editorial board's) values, and partly bases its recommendation on these. This relates to the evaluative function of opinion journalism discussed in Section II.A: policy advice and advocacy is often done relative to a background set of (moral) values. Some of these are assumed to be (and plausibly are) universal, such as the value of human well-being. But others might not be; they might be values a particular news organization 'holds dear', but another doesn't.

For the same reasons given above, policy advice that proceeds from a background set of values should stay consistent with facilitating appropriate uncertainty, for instance, about questions relevant to which action best achieves or maximizes the background values. But an important issue here is whether the background values themselves are up for epistemic evaluation. Although the fact/opinion distinction, maybe together with the news/opinion distinction, often seem to presuppose that value statements aren't truth-evaluable, this is a widely discussed and contested metaethical thesis.[91] Thus, if an opinion journalist conveys of some epistemically dubious or uncertain value statement (assuming these exist) that it is either

[89] Kingsbury 2024.

[90] Funt 2017. See Attiah 2024 for discussion of similar views.

[91] See Section I and Corvino 2015 for evidence of the former.

epistemically well-established given the total evidence and arguments, or not apt for epistemic evaluation to begin with, then policy advising can once again conflict with facilitating appropriate uncertainty—only this time concerning evaluative questions. This isn't to say that the informational model precludes opinion journalism from ever assuming epistemically uncertain value statements (again, assuming they exist) and giving advice on their basis: in particular, opinion journalists could give policy advice addressed specifically to those who share the values in question, without conveying that these values are universally held, epistemically well-established, or not up for debate (if they aren't). But the worry is that opinion journalism doesn't always clearly convey these important distinctions. For instance, some editorial boards explicitly state their background values, but then go on to include assumptions that arguably aren't mere value statements but depend on difficult and unsettled factual questions. Take, for instance, the 'editorial philosophy' of the WSJ Opinion Section: 'free markets, free people'.[92] On a natural understanding, this statement entails answers to complicated and unsettled factual questions about the economy, the consequences of market regulations, taxation, etc. It thus doesn't seem 'amazing', as former WSJ columnist and editor George Melloan states, that 'those words today are controversial, assailed by a sizable crowd of intellectuals and politicians who, despite American accomplishments, doubt the efficacy of market capitalism'.[93] A parallel point can be made about the NYT's Editorial Board that, among other things, 'has long supported a liberal order of nations in which freedom and progress advance through democracy and capitalism'.[94]

In sum, giving policy advice from background principles that either involve uncertain factual claims, or that are themselves epistemically uncertain value statements, can conflict with facilitating appropriate uncertainty. This is because it can mislead the audience into thinking that these statements aren't uncertain but either well-established or not even up for epistemic evaluation. Facilitating appropriate uncertainty requires being clear about which background assumptions are epistemically uncertain, which are epistemically well-established (including about values or morality), and which aren't even apt for epistemic evaluation—in each case, it also requires being clear whether these assumptions are universally accepted or not. This, of course, is a difficult task. In Section IV, I suggest that transparency about these categories could nonetheless be a useful tool to facilitate appropriate uncertainty.

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[92] Wall Street Journal, nd.c. The WaPo recently stated a shift to a very similar editorial philosophy (Bezos 2025).

[93] Melloan 2017, p. ix.

[94] New York Times 2018.

B. Facilitating Appropriate Uncertainty and Facilitating Public Deliberation

Consider, finally, the relationship between facilitating appropriate uncertainty and facilitating public deliberation. My first claim here is that the ultimate epistemic goal of facilitating public deliberation in opinion journalism should be to facilitate appropriate uncertainty; in other words, opinion journalism should help facilitate (direct or mediated) public deliberation in order to get the general public to have epistemically valuable attitudes toward unsettled questions (in the sense of Section II.C). Consider, first, its implication that the questions about which opinion journalism is supposed to facilitate deliberation are unsettled. There is certainly epistemic value in discussing settled questions, especially ones over which there is no public consensus, for instance, to understand why there is no public consensus.[95] But, just as the educational function discussed in Section II.C, informing the public about why people hold views in conflict with the total evidence doesn't seem specific to opinion journalism (unless that question itself is unsettled). Moreover, and as discussed in Section III.A, it would conflict with facilitating appropriate uncertainty to conflate these categories and mislead the public into thinking that, for instance, a question that is epistemically settled isn't, or vice versa.

Assuming that deliberations facilitated by opinion journalism concern unsettled questions, it does seem plausible that their ultimate epistemic aim is to help the audience form epistemically valuable attitudes toward these questions. As we saw in Section II.B, after (mediated or direct) deliberation, the audience is supposed to learn about the total pool of evidence and (presumably) form attitudes that are appropriate to it. One difference between pursuing the epistemic aim of facilitating public deliberation and the aim of facilitating appropriate uncertainty might be that, for the former, an opinion journalist should also be concerned with advancing the debate and thus with adding new (and, if possible, even conclusive) evidence or arguments to the pool of total available evidence. This is in line with the idea that the ultimate goal of public deliberation is to figure out the truth and that journalism can contribute to this aim; see, for instance: 'When journalism succeeds in illuminating questions and debates [...] it can help society move conversations about these issues toward resolution'.[96] In the following I argue, first, that opinion journalism often isn't the right setting to advance or settle debates of public importance, and, second, that common ways of adding (either

[95] Sulzberger (2023) also makes this point.

[96] Ibid.

old or new) arguments or evidence to a public debate in opinion journalism conflict with facilitating appropriate uncertainty in the general public.

There is an important difference between media-facilitated deliberations and deliberation in paradigm cases of interest to epistemologists. Deliberation that can make progress on unsettled questions is generally conducted among relevant experts. Consider any example of unsettled questions above in Sections I or II.C. Predicting, explaining, and interpreting facts about the economy, science, politics, or society is usually done best among people with relevant expertise, training, and evidence. The 'pool of arguments' in such expert deliberations standardly consists of peer-reviewed articles, books, or conferences, in academia or in the relevant industries. Some opinion pieces are written by experts in their fields, but these usually don't introduce new arguments unknown to other experts; instead, they serve to popularize existing arguments, making them accessible to a general audience. There are, of course, exceptions. In some cases, opinion writers should be considered to be the relevant experts, particularly when interpreting specific political events. Columnists who have spent years covering politics often have deep experience analyzing unfolding events and may have access to insider information that is unavailable to experts in related fields, such as political science.[97] Columnists might also weigh in on issues that haven't been discussed by any other relevant expert because these issues are too recent or local. Moreover, some opinion pieces have directly influenced scholarly discussions.[98] All that being said, opinion pieces don't often significantly advance the total pool of evidence and arguments about important unsettled questions. This is also because opinion pieces are by their nature always in part addressed to a general audience, and thereby can't have the detail, complexity, or length to contribute novel arguments to existing debates. In sum, opinion journalism isn't—and shouldn't be considered as—the place where significant epistemic progress is made on difficult unsettled questions. But it is (and should be) always in part addressed to a non-expert audience that needs information and appropriate uncertainty. This has important implications for how facilitating public debate can conflict with facilitating appropriate uncertainty.

Consider an opinion piece that aims to facilitate public deliberation by adding or repeating an argument in support of a position concerning an unsettled question. Presenting a new argument for a position or presenting new evidence are standard

[97] However, Tetlock (2005) argues that media pundits are particularly unreliable predictors, and attributes it in large part to overconfidence.

[98] Notable examples include Fukuyama 1989 and Coates 2014, each cited thousands of times in the scholarly literature.

ways of contributing to debate among experts, for instance, in academia. But in media-facilitated deliberations, this can conflict with facilitating appropriate credences. This is because of the difference just discussed: In expert deliberations, the intended audience of a piece containing an argument consists of the relevant experts who can be assumed to have a good sense of the relevant total evidence and uncertainty. Participants in expert deliberations keep track of the total pool of evidence and arguments by studying the relevant literature. But general audiences can't be assumed to have a good sense of the total available evidence bearing on a question. They needn't have read all other relevant opinion pieces on the matter (or even any other opinion piece) or have any relevant training to appreciate the uncertainty of the questions discussed. Thus, the general public might be misled in reading an opinion piece if it only gives an incomplete part of the pool of arguments relevant to a question. The public might think, for instance, that the arguments in the piece are the only, or perhaps the strongest, arguments in favor of a position, and thereby form attitudes that are more extreme than appropriate.

Consider an example. In a series of articles in 2021, Krugman gave policy advice in support of Joseph R. Biden's economic rescue plan, and, in doing so, he argued that the plan wouldn't raise inflation to a dangerous degree. In these articles Krugman doesn't mention the uncertainty over whether the rescue plan could be dangerously inflationary. The argument is made in strong and certain terms. Krugman addresses some potential objections (thus partially meeting the criterion of responsiveness from Section II.B), but only to dismiss them quickly and conclude boldly; see, for instance:

> We'll be coming out of the pandemic with inflation still below the Fed's target, and it would do little harm to overshoot that target and run the economy hot, leading to a bit of excess inflation—and a bit is all that would happen, because inflation responds slowly to economic conditions. If the boom gets big enough and goes on long enough that inflation actually starts to look like a concern, the Fed can always rein it in by modestly raising interest rates. [...] So please, don't nitpick this plan.[99]

From reading these pieces, a member of the general public might infer that these are the only relevant objections to these arguments, and thus that there is no uncertainty in the matter. An expert audience, on the other hand, would know that the arguments presented are only a proper subset of the total available evidence, and that the latter doesn't warrant extreme credence in the claim that the rescue plan won't be dangerously inflationary.

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[99] Krugman 2021.

Interestingly, in his contribution to the series 'I was wrong about', where NYT columnists discuss mistakes they made in past writings, Krugman mentions these pieces and notes that the issue he was discussing in them was very complicated:

> Some warned that the package would be dangerously inflationary; others were fairly relaxed. I was Team Relaxed. As it turned out, of course, that was a very bad call. But what, exactly, did I get wrong? Both the initial debate and the way things have played out were more complicated than I suspect most people realize.[100]

My point here is that the intended non-expert audience of an opinion piece shouldn't be expected to know how complicated or uncertain a question is. Part of the problem in these articles was that Krugman was overconfident (he acknowledges that 'the whole experience has been a lesson in humility').[101] But another part of the problem is that Krugman only provided arguments for the claim that the rescue plan won't be dangerously inflationary, without conveying what the total available evidence supports or how unsettled the question is.

Here is another way to put this point. Concerning opinion journalism, Sulzberger says that 'a great opinion section absolutely advances our core journalistic mission of helping people understand the world [...]. It just does so in aggregate, rather than at story level'.[102] The problem I am pointing out is that the intended audiences of opinion pieces might never see the 'aggregate level', and thereby fail to adopt the attitudes that might be appropriate given the aggregate of the total available evidence.[103] The problem in practice is probably even worse: not only do audiences fail to see the total pool of evidence, they only have biased 'selective exposure' to opinion pieces.[104] Therefore, I suggest that *aggregation* is another measure of the deliberativeness of a media environment, insofar as deliberation is also supposed to facilitate appropriate credences in the witness to the mediated deliberation: an opinion piece should 'aggregate' in the sense that it should also convey that the question discussed is unsettled (and, if possible, how unsettled it is) given the 'aggregate level' of the total available evidence, alongside the arguments or evidence that it presents. The value of aggregation is also supported by the idea that it is epistemically valuable to proportion one's attitudes to the *total* available evidence, as discussed in Section II.C. In Section IV, I will briefly discuss the difficult question of what opinion journalists should actually say or write to aggregate in this sense.

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[100] Krugman 2022.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Sulzberger and Suárez 2024.

[103] See similar point in Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947, pp. 118 f.

[104] Kobayashi et al. 2024 is one recent study suggesting this.

Let me observe one last conflict that can arise between facilitating appropriate uncertainty and generating direct deliberation in the sense discussed in Section II.B. This is a simple observation about Jacobs and Townsley's proposal discussed there and others like it: Getting people to debate by making them hate or love a columnist might require oversimplifying one's positions or putting one's arguments more strongly than is warranted by the total available evidence. This is an instance of my point in Section III.A: getting people to act—such as getting them to debate in small groups—might require getting them to have more extreme credences than appropriate. Scholars such as Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj have pointed out how the 'outrage industry' in the opinion media is driven by economic incentives and negatively impacts democratic deliberation.[105] The point here is also continuous with those analyses: the outrage industry—which arguably includes 'compelling narratives' and 'characters' that make passionate pleas in the face of moral outrage[106]—can, and probably often does, also conflict with facilitating appropriate uncertainty, even when it is done to facilitate public deliberation.

IV. CONCLUSION: A CASE FOR TRANSPARENCY

In this article, I delineated an epistemic function for opinion journalism: the function of facilitating appropriate uncertainty toward unsettled questions of public importance. I argued that this is a normative function for opinion journalism, given the informational model. I explained that it makes sense of some epistemic functions attributed to opinion journalism by practitioners and scholars, and of many opinion pieces. I argued that it subsumes the other epistemic function most commonly attributed to opinion journalism, namely, the epistemic component of facilitating public deliberation. Finally, I argued that opinion journalism doesn't always in practice facilitate appropriate uncertainty very well, and that this is partly because this function can conflict with the way opinion journalists actually pursue their other societal functions. I suggested that opinion journalists can avoid some of these conflicts by also conveying the epistemic status of their assumptions and the total available evidence. I didn't speak to what opinion journalists should actually say or write to best facilitate appropriate uncertainty or to convey such information; this is a difficult question bound up with empirical questions about how readers actually respond to different ways of presenting information. I conclude the article with an appropriately tentative suggestion.

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[105] Berry and Sobieraj 2014.

[106] Jacobs and Townsley 2011, pp. 40, 70.

The suggestion is that (opinion) journalists be as transparent as possible about the epistemic status of the claims and questions they discuss. For instance, opinion journalists could explicitly mention the uncertainty of the issues discussed, using expressions of uncertainty and hedges ('this is an unsettled question, and future evidence could shift our understanding', 'one reasonable interpretation is that', etc.). This type of flagging could be done at the level of individual opinion pieces, or at a more general level, for instance, in the general description of the opinion section. When possible, opinion journalists could also use explicit probabilistic language to state the appropriate credences ('*x* percent of experts think that', 'experts believe there is an *x* percent chance that', etc.). This is related to the norm of 'weight-of-evidence reporting' in science communication and journalism: on this view, science journalists are supposed to connect positions in a debate to weights that capture the amount of evidence that supports it.[107] There is no consensus on what exactly one should say to convey the weight of evidence, but the idea that it should be conveyed is similar to the point of aggregation discussed above in Section III.B.

An interdisciplinary review of the empirical literature on communicating uncertainty suggests that it doesn't generally harm trust and that it can even help readers form appropriate uncertainty, but that this depends on the specific language in which uncertainty is communicated.[108] As the authors state, however, the empirical literature on this question is still limited and dispersed.[109] Moreover, it doesn't address opinion pieces specifically and focuses only on communicating uncertainty about science, medicine, and economic statistics. Thus, more empirical work is needed to assess this suggestion.

As we saw, not everything in an opinion section is supposed to concern unsettled questions. Some pieces are in an opinion section merely because they provide moral evaluation, whether or not the (moral) issue is epistemically unsettled. Arguably, some of the most socially important opinion pieces are ones that clearly and unequivocally state morally obvious truths. One can also find many opinion pieces that don't fit any of the functions I delineated in this article. All of this suggests that opinion journalists should also be more transparent about what the epistemic mission of opinion journalism is, and what different opinion pieces contribute (or don't contribute) toward it. It could be that this requires further sub-divisions in the opinion category; for instance, pieces that contribute to facilitating appropriate uncertainty could be in one, moral advice

[107] Dunwoody 2005.

[108] van der Bles et al. 2019. See also more recent Petersen et al. 2021 and Kerr et al. 2022.

[109] van der Bles et al. 2019, p. 2.

and evaluation in another. A suitable version of the category of 'Analysis' used in some newspapers could correspond to the former. For instance, the WaPo defines the Analysis section as: 'Interpretation of the news based on evidence, including data, as well as anticipating how events might unfold based on past events'.[110] Newspapers and commentators disagree over whether Analysis is part of Opinion.[111] Moreover, given my arguments here, the focus of the relevant category shouldn't only be on news or current events, as facilitating appropriate uncertainty can concern any unsettled question of public importance.[112] In any case, something similar to the category of 'analysis' could be designed to focus exclusively on facilitating appropriate uncertainty, while other sub-divisions could take on the other roles of opinion journalism.

Opinion journalism is a major and growing part of the news media, and journalism itself is one of the most important institutions in society. In this article, I sought to clarify opinion journalism's role within the informational model, arguing that it is not just compatible with journalism's core epistemic mission but integral to it. As I see it, if newspapers were more explicit about this function—rather than relying on the brief, unclear, and sometimes even contradictory explanations they currently provide—it might help foster greater trust in opinion journalism and offer a stronger justification for its role in public discourse.

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[110] Washington Post 2024.

[111] In ibid., 'Analysis' is defined under the header 'Opinion', but then, confusingly, 'Opinion' is defined as a separate category right afterwards. See also Hoyt 2008.

[112] See also the quote from Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 1993 in Section I.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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