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David Cheruiyot
Criticising Journalism

Popular Media Criticism in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Today, in a variety of digital spaces, many critics and criticisms of the media exist side by side with journalistic actors and content. This dissertation explores the complex relationships between criticisms and actors who define journalistic practice and accountability of the media. The main theoretical argument is that scholars thinking about the ways journalistic actors legitimise criticisms should consider the discursive positioning of the critic (motives and expectations), the evaluative issues (subjects of criticism), corrective (re)action (what journalists do after criticism) and finally, the digital resource (the input of digital technologies and their logics). To interrogate this theoretical proposition, the study employs qualitative interviews with 57 respondents—journalists, media accountability agents and critics—in Kenya and South Africa, and offers a comparison of the two contexts.

The results show that for journalists to navigate critical discourses in a digital discursive ecology, they a.) identify the most prominent critics in digital spaces, who play an expository role – acting as interpreters to discourses and buffer against incivility, and b.) they mostly employ delegitimising activities that mark professional boundary work in digital spaces, for example, through blocking offensive criticisms and actors from their personal spaces. The digital discursive ecology in which these discourses exists present tensions to professionalism that challenge journalistic authority. Journalists are pushed to conform to the logics of digital spaces, and further social actors online impose their norms on journalistic discourse. In general, the findings show journalistic ambivalence towards digital media critics, as well as a measured engagement with criticisms considered legitimate. There is a nascent discursive struggle among journalists and critics in digital spaces, whose results are overt or subtle corrective (re)actions among journalists that suggest transformed practice. This research contributes to the field of journalism by providing nuance to configurations that exist between journalistic actors and digital media critics as a result of the constant production of metajournalistic discourse in digital spaces today.

Keywords: Digital media criticism, journalistic practice, media accountability metajournalistic discourse
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# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................i
Acknowledgements.....................................................................................i
Table of Contents......................................................................................... v
List of Tables and Figures.............................................................................. ix

**PART I: Introduction** .............................................................................. 1

Chapter 1. (Popular) talk about journalism.............................................. 1
  The media and criticism today.................................................................2
  Research problem ....................................................................................5
  Aim of the study .......................................................................................8
  Research scope .........................................................................................10
  Significance of the study .........................................................................12
  Dissertation outline ...............................................................................13

Chapter 2. Literature review ..................................................................... 15
  Media criticism studies: An overview ....................................................16
  Criticism: Meaning and practice .........................................................17
    *Functions of criticism* ........................................................................20
  Categories of criticism ...........................................................................22
  The critics of the media ..........................................................................26
  The digital sites of criticism ...................................................................29
  Criticism in digital spaces ......................................................................33
  The take-away .........................................................................................35

Chapter 3. Theoretical framework ............................................................. 37
  Evaluating journalistic practice ..............................................................38
    *Bad (and good) journalism* .............................................................39
  Critical actors in criticism ......................................................................41
    *Journalists and critics as audiences* ..................................................41
    *Accountability: Oversight in journalism* ..........................................43
  Journalistic responses to criticisms .......................................................46
| Discourses in digital media criticism | .................................................. 48 |
| Public and journalistic discourse | .................................................. 49 |
| Metajournalistic discourse | .................................................. 51 |
| Legitimate digital discourses | .................................................. 53 |
| Digital discursive ecology | .................................................. 55 |
| Digital discursive outcome | .................................................. 58 |
| Dimensions of discursive outcome | .................................................. 60 |
| The take-away | .................................................. 63 |

**Chapter 4. Method and context** .................................................. 65

- Rationale for qualitative study .................................................. 65
  - Contextual comparative approach .................................................. 66
- In-depth interviews .................................................. 70
- Data collection .................................................. 72
- Analysis of data .................................................. 78
- Reliability and validity .................................................. 79
- Challenges and ethical considerations .................................................. 80
- The context of the study .................................................. 82
  - Media and criticism in South Africa .................................................. 84
  - Media and criticism in Kenya .................................................. 88
  - The take-away .................................................. 91

**PART II: Findings & Analysis** .................................................. 93

**Chapter 5. Who’s the digital media critic?** .................................................. 95

- Describing the critics .................................................. 95
  - The insider-outsider position .................................................. 96
- Motives of critics .................................................. 102
  - Transforming journalism? .................................................. 103
  - Personal interests .................................................. 106
- Discursive positions of critics .................................................. 108
- Expectations of critics .................................................. 114
- Expository role of the critic .................................................. 117
  - The expositor in comparative context .................................................. 119
  - The take-away .................................................. 120
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 6. The sins of journalism</th>
<th>123</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects of criticism</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form and content</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual journalist</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The organisation</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The institution</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital metajournalistic discourse</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand and secondary discourses</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual comparison of criticisms</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The take-away</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 7. ‘No criticism is good criticism’</th>
<th>153</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journalists’ reactions to criticism</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative reactions</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive reactions</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies of journalistic responses</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital discursive resistances</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reflexivity</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The take-away</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 8. A matter of corrections</th>
<th>173</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legitimisation of digital criticisms</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of digital criticism</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributes of good criticism</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation of criticism</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification of (re)actions</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The take-away</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 9. Digitality of criticism</th>
<th>191</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suitability of digital platforms</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the ‘digital’ in criticism</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital discursive strategies</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delegitimising the digital</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Wendy Wyatt’s three levels of criticism. .......................................................... 50
Figure 2: The three types of discourses in a digital discursive ecology. ...................... 55
Figure 3: The five dimensions that explain the digital discursive outcome. ............. 60
Figure 4: Anton Harber runs the media-critical blog, ‘The Harbinger’. ...................... 87
Figure 5: Gado’s caricature of media executives, the President and his deputy..... 89
Figure 6: Veteran journalist Albert Gachiri’s media-critical blog. ......................... 91
Figure 7: The dimensions of digital media criticism in a discursive ecology........... 93
Figure 8: The three types of discourses in a digital discursive ecology. ............... 211

Table 1. Cooper’s typology of media criticism in the blogosphere ......................... 23
Table 2: Subjects of digital media criticism in Kenya and South Africa ............. 149
PART I: Introduction

“Qualified women abound, so why is your expert panel all men?” The question was put to Kenya’s mainstream media in an opinion article of the *Daily Nation* online. In the article, the writer, Nanjira Sambuli (2016), criticised the prevalence of all-male panels on local TV. Sambuli then asked her readers to express their views about the ‘manels’ with the hashtag, #SayNoToManelsKE, on social networks. A community of Twitter users, KOT (Kenyans on Twitter) responded, and soon the hashtag became popular. Twitter users posted and shared comments or screenshots of men-only panels on Kenyan TV talk shows to ‘shame’ journalists over manels. To put her call into action, Sambuli and fellow social media influencer, Ory Okolloh, created a searchable database of “female experts” in Kenya on an open-access spreadsheet online. The two appealed to women to sign up and share their contacts so journalists could reach them when organising panels.

I draw on the manel campaign to illustrate the phenomenon of digital media criticism. Such ‘talk’ about the media and journalism is part of the digital reality today, with multiplicity of platform use and diverse set of voices represented. The mass media offer a set of targets of “advocatory gatekeeping pressure” (Carlson 2017, 175) from audiences or users of networked digital platforms.

During the manel campaign, users of social networks challenged professional and institutional culture. By extension, the hashtag campaign depicted a socio-political debate about the place of women in society with implications and relevance to discourses beyond legacy news organisations and the Kenyan context. Further, as I will discuss later, such a media-critical campaign shows the discursive space of

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1 A notable manel campaign had preceded Nanjira’s. Finnish scholar Saara Särmä’s parody images of manels at global events that were shared via Tumblr (allmalepanels.tumblr.com) went viral in 2015.
2 The Twitter users have distinguished themselves as an ‘imagined community’ of critics who occasionally agree on common targets such as international news media or local politicians (Nyahola 2019, Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019).
3 As at July 31, 2019, there were 384 female experts registered on the site: http://bit.ly/SayNoTo-ManelsKE.
journalism in the digital age is today broad and cuts across boundaries of professional and journalistic cultures.

This dissertation examines the ways digital media criticism contributes to journalism. I refer to the criticisms online as digital media criticism, criticisms of the mainstream media in a variety of formats and platforms and generated by users in digital spaces (to be discussed further in the next chapter). They could be sites of macro-criticism (perpetual evaluative texts with more visibility online) or ‘mundane criticism’ – short commentaries that accompany news text on a variety of platforms (Carlson 2016a). The special focus of the study is the perceived influence of digital media critics and their criticisms of mainstream news organisations. The research traces and interrogates the place of digital media criticism in journalism and its attendant metajournalistic discourse emerging within the context of accountability as a norm and practice.

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4 In this dissertation, the ‘digital age’ refers to the period of ubiquitous digital technologies, their diverse functionalities and widespread use that define today’s mediatised life.

5 The concept ‘mainstream media’ will be used in this study to refer to legacy or tradition news media organisations. The media being referred to in this study constitute the traditional print and broadcast news media with a wide audience base, but also with online media platforms, which are accessible to a wide variety of audiences.

6 Used here to mean, ‘narratives about journalism’ (Carlson 2017).
Chapter 1. (Popular) talk about journalism

Criticism of the legacy news media has a long history (as will be discussed in the next section) and many criticisms of the media exist offline, but criticisms of the mainstream media in digital spaces raise critical questions over journalistic practice and authority today, questions that are yet to be examined by broad empirical studies. Amid the ‘upheaval’ in journalism today, a period described as a post-factual era—marked by the spread of “fake news”, alternative journalistic actors like citizen journalists and fact-checkers, and the delegitimising rhetoric of populists—it is imperative to re-examine journalism’s struggle for discursive authority on digital space. With the ‘perpetual crises’ and anxiety over the future of journalism today (marked by among other things, disruptive technologies, falling revenues and waning trust), there is a persistent contest over the journalism’s claim to an "epistemic authority" (Gieryn 1999, Carlson and Peifer 2013). Subsequently, journalism scholars are increasingly acknowledging the significance of metajournalistic discourse in “shaping journalism as a cultural practice” (Alexander, Breese, and Luengo 2016, 150, Carlson 2017). It is on this basis that this study recognises that the sites of evaluation of journalism practice and discourses involving journalistic and non-journalistic actors are pertinent in broadening our understanding of journalism and accountability.

While the activity of criticising the media has a long history, its importance and effectiveness are often tied to the relational antagonism between journalists as professionals on one side and non-journalistic actors on the other. Yet the study of discourses about journalism generated by among others, media critics, can provide more nuanced perspectives about the state of journalism today, what audiences consider as good or accountable journalism.

---

7 “Fake news” refers to news with intent to deceive (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2017).
8 US President Donald Trump and his supporters have used the tag “fake news” on social networks to criticise the mainstream media over perceived or imagined failures (see Lee and Quealy 2019).
9 The crises include a host of developments—institutional, ideological and industrial—that have contributed to the decline in journalism leading to attempts and discourses on ways to cope, including the consequent rise of new forms of journalism such as algorithmic and data journalism. See, for example, (Alexander, Breese, and Luengo 2016).
One of the questions in the discourse of accountability or ‘watching the watchdog’ is whether journalism practice can live up to the professional standards and quality defined and articulated by a variety of actors in and outside the newsroom (Brown 1974, Dicken-Garcia 1989). Often the discussion revolves around norms and rules that journalistic actors use to evaluate and legitimise the practice. Journalism scholars further acknowledge that the transformation of the practice is subject to a variety of factors such as political economy, professional cultures and technology. In particular, the discussion of current trends in journalism places prominence on the transformation of legacy news organisations that is a result of digital media and their participatory potential (Allan 2006, Bruns 2005, Deuze, Bruns, and Neuberger 2007, Domingo 2008, Hermida and Thurman 2008, Robinson 2007, Singer 2011).

This dissertation focuses on criticism of news journalism crafted, performed and shared on digital spaces and its attendant journalistic responses—mediated or not. Moreover, this dissertation lays out popular (or most visible) critics online as an integral part of a metajournalistic discourse – actors who construct and reconstruct fluid imaginations and realities about journalism today.

To understand media criticism and its narratives about journalism, it is necessary to interrogate what discourses in digital spaces portend for journalistic practice in a given context. The focus of this study therefore is ‘popular media criticism’ or publicly shared criticism existing in digital spaces and from a variety of sources such as audiences, citizen journalists, academics, cultural or social critics or users of social networks.

The media and criticism today

The media are the principal agents of criticism in a democracy; they provide platforms for discourses about society and politics and they are critics by themselves, and thus create the expectation that they would similarly welcome criticisms from external actors (Carey 1974, Jensen 1990, Wyatt 2007). Their critical democratic role is perhaps the reason that history is replete with scholarly lament over the insufficiency and quality of press criticism in liberal democracies (Carey 1974, Marzolf 1991, Brown 1974, Snyder, Kelley, and Smillie 1995). However, when rife, media criticism is mostly in the forms of anti-press rhetoric,
uncivil comments and personal attacks that are ‘pollutant’ to deliberative democracy (Lemert 1989, cf. Hayes 2008).

Again, populism today has spawned cynicism of journalism, anti-press rhetoric and even attacks on legacy news media and journalists. Political actors, radical right-wing movements and social commentators have popularised narratives disparaging the news media (Mazzoleni 2008, Esser, Stepinska, and Hopmann 2016, Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2018), through delegitimising labels such as “fake news”, “liar press”, “enemy of the people” or “meat wrappers” (Lee and Quealy 2019, Trump 2018, Standard 2015, Beiler and Kiesler 2018). Further, the spread of political misinformation and hate speech in some countries has raised questions about credibility and trust in news journalism with possible implications to journalistic autonomy (Singer 2007, Almgren 2017). Existing studies show that journalists are concerned with trust (Bratich 2004) and, to earn and promote it, give the impression that they are receptive to change and can peer-regulate (Bishop 2016, Frank 2003). However, journalists and news organisations still fall short of these expectations of their accountability.

Although the push for a more accountable media mostly emanates from the political elite in power, citizens’ frustration has been growing over the failure of key public institutions such as the government and the fourth estate (Bernier 2013, Lauk and Kuś 2012). Today, accusations of the media in the 1940s that resulted in the creation of the Hutchins Commission—to address media criticism over ‘irresponsible’ journalism—have only worsened with power that media organisations have amassed through media concentration (Bagdikian 2000, Leigh 1947, McChesney 2000). As in the 1940s, private media organisations seek to protect their commercial interests, often to the detriment of professionalism, freedom of expression and diversity. The quest for profits has weakened the watchdog role of the media, spurred sensationalism of news, led to diminishing plurality and a decline in

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10 In his regular tweets, American president Donald Trump has referred to sections of the US mainstream media as “enemies of the people”.

11 Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta has occasionally mocked newspapers with the catchphrase in Swahili, “gazeti ni ya kufunga nyama”, loosely translated as, “dailies are only as good as meat wrappers” (context: Kenyan retail butchers often use newspapers in meat packaging).
quality journalism, all recipes for ‘irresponsible’ journalism (McQuail 2003, Schultz 1998).

Relatedly, the dwindling economic fortunes in a precarious period has meant that media organisations have had to lower production costs through layoffs (Barnhurst 2011, Fengler 2008). The job cuts have resulted in poor fact-checking and editing, some of the causes of “hilariously worrisome” mistakes in the press (Silverman 2007, xv). Further, the economic crises have prompted news organisations to avoid the costs of public editors, principal agents of media accountability (Wyatt 2018). The phasing out of the news ombudspersons role in some newsrooms (Ferrucci 2018b) increasingly hurts internal accountability practices and news media’s relationship with audiences, thus leading to further criticism of journalism.

Scholarly discourses about journalistic performance proclaim a “crisis of media credibility” owing to the numerous journalistic errors and poor standards of reporting (Pritchard 2000, 187). Ultimately, eroded accountability and credibility, as well as frequent errors, are the reasons for increased criticism of the mainstream media on digital space. Media accountability studies have therefore recently proposed regulatory reforms to identify the alternative oversight role of digital publics (see Cooper 2006, Hayes 2008, Pole, Gulyás, and Rehkopf 2012, Joseph 2011).

Further, governments and the public criticise traditional regulatory framework such as the press council over perceived failure to promote accountable journalism. For example, the Leveson inquiry in the UK that investigated the phone hacking scandal at the News of the World owned by the global conglomerate, News Corp—in 2011, revealed the ineffectiveness of the UK’s Press Complaints Commission in light of cases of misconduct of journalists and unethical operations of the newspaper (Leveson 2012).

In response to cases of journalistic ‘irresponsibility’ (see Hodges 1986), governments impose co-and statutory forms of media regulation. Further, as a response to declining quality in journalistic practice, press/news councils and independent media watchdogs are

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12 Owing to the attention the phone hacking scandal received globally, press councils received more pressure from governments to reform [see, for instance, the case of southern Africa in Duncan (2014)].
diversifying media accountability systems. Alternatives include watchblogs (e.g. the Media Council of Kenya’s Media Observer13) which are interactive spaces for digital publics to participate in media monitoring. The incorporation of such mechanisms implies a growing appreciation of criticism of journalistic practice on digital space.

Lastly, in the digital age, we have witnessed the “flattening of the hierarchical relationship that previously existed between readers and journalists” (Hanitzsch 2007a, 688). Previously, the public relied on newsroom-controlled platforms, in the form of letters to the editor or radio call-in programmes that were a preserve of a few privileged voices (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002). Today, digitalisation has democratised public platforms, with media organisations losing control and access to non-elitist voices (Wahl-Jorgensen 2010). There is therefore need to place digitality at the centre of the study of criticism especially in relation to how it transforms the journalist-critic relationship, and by extension news production.

**Research problem**

The theoretical puzzle of this study is how media criticism as metajournalistic discourse today is legitimised into journalistic discourse, and how it shapes the understanding of accountability as a norm and practice. To ventilate on the rationale of this study, I will discuss here several theoretical perspectives.

First, normative theories argue for media criticism as a constituent of a vision of ‘reformed’ journalistic practice (Wyatt 2007, Schudson 1995). The transformative perspective of media criticism has taken precedence, even though existing studies are unclear on how discourse about journalism—particularly in digital spaces— influences journalistic practice. While normative theories extol the discursive power of media criticism and its transformative nature (Wyatt 2007, Hayes 2008), there is inadequate research into how practising journalists react to criticisms. If critics constitute a significant part of ‘talk’ about journalism and the narratives (Carlson 2017) they produce are to have any transformative value to journalism, it is important to interrogate the reception of journalists to this discourse.

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13 See: http://www.mediaobserver.co.ke/
Second, studying media criticism is part of essential studies into how journalism is understood today, i.e. as a product of a discursive struggle among a variety of journalistic and non-journalistic actors (Carlson 2017, 6). At stake is how journalists remain relevant as an occupational group despite the variety of actors on digital space, claiming relevance and expertise (Anderson 2013). There is an assertion that the ‘future of journalism’ lies in journalism maintaining its ‘social relevance’ (Steensen 2018). One of the greatest threats to journalism’s social relevance is today’s ‘epistemic crisis’ (Steensen 2018). Scholars often describe journalism as being in an epistemic struggle, as it constantly defends its position as a producer of knowledge (Ekström 2002). Schudson and Anderson (2009) define this struggle as an “attempt to forge a journalistic jurisdiction out of the link between their everyday work and their heavily qualified claim to possess a form of professionalised knowledge” (88).

The jurisdictional struggles in journalism need to be broadened to encompass the holistic arena of journalistic and non-journalistic actors and their dispositions. Most studies focus on journalists and their audiences as critics. However, critics on digital space may not necessarily be news audiences but still participate in discourses about journalism. In addition, there is a group that has remained at the periphery in the study of journalistic struggle to defend its authority – media accountability agents such as media council officials and public editors. These agents and journalists are interdependent. As accountability promoters, these agents legitimise their functions through institutionalised oversight role of the media. For their part, journalists legitimise their professionalism, i.e. their fidelity to the norm of accountability by acknowledging the centrality of the agents in journalistic practice.

Third, media accountability agents’ authority in oversight comes into question in “moments of journalistic failure” (see Carlson 2018). Media criticism from public sources largely involves ‘accounts of journalistic failure’ (Carlson 2018, Jensen 1990). Scholars have called for explanations and conceptualisation of these failures in the studies and practice of journalism studies (Carlson 2018, Wahl-Jorgensen 2017). Media criticism today, particularly in digital spaces, represents a diverse compilation of journalistic failures, and thus there is a need to track and interrogate how these criticisms shape journalism. As an
evaluative and feedback practice, media criticism is at the core of journalism practice, but has remained at the periphery of critical journalism studies. It is not often appreciated that media criticism is the bedrock of studies in the field of journalism. Yet it is the perceptions or actual failings of journalism to perform its normative functions or the digression from journalistic norms and values that inspire studies into ways of understanding journalism, ‘reforming’ it or imagining the ‘future of journalism’. Mainstreaming criticism of journalism in the field requires an examination of the media criticism practices.

Fourth, with today’s networked digital platforms, there is a heterogeneity of voices from within and outside news discourse (Carlson 2017, 164, 2009). Journalists are “only one set of voices in a complicated rhetorical environment” (Carlson 2017, 164). Critics occupy a paradoxical position as both reinforcers of cultural authority in knowledge production by adopting media logics to critique and delegitimise journalism in pointing out its faults and failures. Of importance in assessing journalistic authority in light of boundary works and (de)legitimation of journalism (Carlson and Lewis 2015, Waisbord 2013), are critics—scholarly or popular. The critics’ positioning in journalism has attracted debate about their role, particularly in journalism ‘reform’ projects of the 21st Century, or in other words, ways to revive and uphold journalistic authority (see Vos 2018). Put in the context of today’s ‘journalism reform’ projects/agenda—that has persistently explored a variety of ways of transforming journalism (see among others, Alexander, Breese, and Luengo 2016, Allan 2013, Heinderyckx and Vos 2016, Peters and Broersma 2016, Waisbord 2013)—studying the place of media critics today is imperative.

Fifth, while publicly shared criticisms of the mainstream media are not new (see Goldstein 1989, Lippmann 1920), the digitalisation of criticism, the timely nature of feedback to journalists, as well as its ubiquity, makes the study of metajournalistic discourse significant today. The reason is that there are possible consequences and challenges to professional autonomy and institutional culture that have implications on news production today. Placed within discourses of citizen journalism, participatory journalism and debates on ‘watching the watchdog’, digital media criticism offers an array of perspectives
into understanding journalistic autonomy, accountability and professionalism.

The discourses of boundary control argue, for example, how journalism and blogging “encroach on each other’s jurisdictional areas” (Lowrey 2006, 477). As non-journalistic actors therefore, scholars see media-critical bloggers as citizen journalists or “in-betweeners” (Ahva 2016) who commit ‘random acts of journalism’ (Holt and Karlsson 2015). Notwithstanding blogs’ pivotal role in journalistic debates, the blogging practice of re-enacting journalism implicitly critiques traditional news-making practice by underlining the inadequacies of its truth-telling mission (Graves 2015).

Lastly, through digital media platforms, critics of news media hold journalists against values they profess such as “honesty, independence, and serving self-governance” (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, Vos 2018, 8, Vos, Craft, and Ashley 2012). Recent studies consider criticism of traditional journalism as a robust mechanism of journalistic accountability, particularly critiques on blogs today (Fengler et al. 2014). Critics raise “legitimate” journalistic issues (Cooper 2006), and their criticisms potentially make news workers accountable to journalistic norms and rules (Pole, Gulyás, and Rehkopf 2012, Joseph 2011, Powell and Jempson 2014). However, media criticism studies have rarely addressed journalists’ perceptions of media critique in assessing the effectiveness of criticism as an instrument of journalistic accountability. Besides, a theory of effective and legitimate criticism is urgently needed to understand how criticism influences journalistic practice. In the same vein, existing studies of media criticism take the normative perspective, foregrounding the claim that criticism from external factors is “good” for journalism and it is supposed to improve journalism (Carey 1974, Hayes 2008). Scholars have not interrogated this positivist perspective beyond anecdotal evidence and normative prescriptions. This study therefore offers an empirical and theoretical perspective of the link between media criticism and journalistic accountability.

**Aim of the study**

The overarching aim of this dissertation is to examine the implications that media criticism, as produced and disseminated in digital spaces, has on journalism. The study examines how journalistic actors
negotiate digital media criticism of mainstream news organisations, while interrogating how critics assess and impose their vision journalistic practice.

Journalistic practice is the subject of public discourse on digital spaces from a variety of actors, ranging from scholars to everyday audiences of news14 content. Critics subject legacy news media to constant scrutiny and public commentary that is shared with news audiences and professionals in digital spaces. Criticisms can be short and instantaneous on social networks or long commentaries on blogs with analytical and reflexive content. Some are specific prescriptions of ‘good practice’ and ‘standards’ in journalism and users of digital platforms provoke journalists to engage in ‘dialogue’ or ‘conversations’ with audiences (Carey 1974, Feighery 2011). Others are trolls, irrelevant chatter, insults or comments that are “crude, bigoted or just vile” (Gardiner et al. 2016). Treating media criticism as metajournalistic discourse through which journalism is “rethought, circulated, and contested” (Carlson 2016b, 363) offers richer contextualisation and broadens the discursive framework through which media criticism in any given context can be understood. Further, metajournalistic discourse offers nuance to previous analytical approaches to media criticism, among them autonomy defence and boundary control (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, Domingo and Heinonen 2008b, Vos 2011), media accountability and media policy (Fengler et al. 2014), public sphere (Cooper 2006, Wyatt 2007), participation and civic engagement (Kaun 2014), media ethics (Borden and Tew 2007), media history (von Krogh 2009), and public relations (Feighery 2011).

To understand media criticism and its narratives about journalism, it is necessary to interrogate what it portends for journalistic discourse and actors involved. The principal targets of criticism—practising journalists—are best placed to evaluate their own interaction with the criticisms, to offer an account of their responses in the form of action or inaction related to their conduct, behaviour or performance. The other journalistic actors, media accountability agents, are strategically

14 News here refers specifically to content originally from legacy media organisations (traditional news producers) that use text, images or video to relay current events.
placed to evaluate, but defend the media through institutionalised practices. For their part, media critics exploit, expose or even explicate deficiencies of journalism (Lowrey 2006, Regan 2003) that result, for example, from economic decline, falling credibility, the fragmentation of audiences or a fast-changing news cycle.

This study therefore investigates the practice of criticisms, the actors involved—journalistic and non-journalistic—and particularly its implication to news journalism. The particular focus is on actors criticising the legacy news practice, and subsequently how they produce metajournalistic discourse. To that end, the following questions therefore guide this study:

**RQ1.** How do critics position themselves in a discursive framework of criticism in digital spaces, and what do they aim to achieve?

**RQ2.** What discourses do digital media critics generate in digital spaces regarding journalistic practice in a comparative context?

**RQ3.** How do journalistic actors legitimise and delegitimise criticism in digital spaces?

**RQ4.** How does metajournalistic discourse through digital media criticism influence journalistic practice?

These research questions will be discussed in Chapter 3: Theoretical framework. At this point, it is important at this point to lay out the areas of focus and limits of this study.

**Research scope**

First, this study focuses on digital platforms that provide space for production and dissemination of critical content about the mainstream media. Further, it refers to generalised accounts of journalism failures and faults that both journalistic and non-journalistic actors raise. Existing media criticism studies tend to be medium-specific (spaces with critical content), text-based and event-driven. The approaches however overlook the complexity of digital platforms which define both production and consumption of criticism. Digital platforms are diverse in terms of audiences, affordances and norms (Carlson and Lewis 2018, 33), contributing towards networked discourse roping in an array of journalistic and non-journalistic actors. For example, the #SayNoTo-ManelsKE case mentioned at the beginning of this chapter showed the
way discourse of manels circulated through a variety of digital platforms and actors. The growth and the expansions of “self-produced media” (Croteau 2006) has also meant the entry of a variety of participants in the practice of criticism of the media, that include non-consumers of media, experts in non-journalistic fields to peripheral actors in journalism such as bloggers and fact-checkers.

I should note that I acknowledge the comment sections of online news platforms—frequently studied venues for media-critical content—as alternative spaces of metajournalistic discourse. However, user comments’ spaces are often highly regulated. Even when they sell the comments sections as ‘open’ (Hermida 2011a, 180), media organisations still moderate content to varying extents, and in some cases have shut down the spaces over ‘participatory fatigue’ (Porlezza 2019). This study therefore considers digital platforms such as social networks as possible open spaces for criticism of a wide range of unrestricted discourses, while also serving a central role in news work today.

The affordances of interactivity, interconnectedness and sharing\(^5\) present discourses of journalism with both currency and potency in reinforcing (or even weakening) narratives of journalism. Further, the digitality of criticism (owing to a diversity of actors and audiences) implies a nuanced understanding of journalistic practice, whose discourses on digital space are not necessarily defined by national borders, time or even politics. While I do not intend to study digital technologies as used by both journalistic and non-journalistic actors, I believe it is important to understanding their added input of digitality, especially in building and reinforcing discourses.

While the platforms are discussed in general terms, the selection of digital media critics in the empirical data is based on journalists’ referrals (see Chapter 4: Method and Context). The approach best supports my theoretical proposition of digital discursive outcome as a way to understand legitimate media criticism (to be discussed in Chapter 3).

\(^5\) Sharing is understood here to be actions which entail individual referral of news content originally generated by legacy news (Kiimpel, Karnowski, and Keyling 2015, 2).
Second, to understand the phenomenon of digital media criticism of journalistic practice, I employ a contextual comparative approach of Kenya and South Africa. The choice of the two journalistic contexts will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4 (Method and Context). Through the choice of the two nations, I respond to frequent calls in journalism studies (see, for example, Hanitzsch 2018, Wasserman and de Beer 2009) to expand research to understudied regions as a means to reassess or broaden common theoretical explanations and counteract common universalist claims from the Global North.

Additionally, in this study I consider that journalistic practice, regardless of national context, shares professional, institutional and technological similarities. I also take the view that cultural or national contexts of journalistic practices are rich and unique, and can inform our conceptual and theoretical understanding in journalism studies.

While context is important in showing cross-national comparisons, I employ journalistic practice as the ‘main frame of reference’, an approach that allows for closer focus and better appreciation of journalism without the baggage of political systems (Josephi 2012). Journalistic practice is an alternative to the ‘media systems’ approach that plays up the profession’s close association with “political form of democracy” (Josephi 2012, 474). A media systems approach emphasises specificities of geographical locations “based on absences” of, for example, press freedom, democracy (Willems 2014a, 18) or even digital technologies. Also, there is a tendency for studies that take the media systems approach to exoticise phenomena in least-studied parts of the world such as in Sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Mbembe 2001, Willems 2014b). To evade such pitfalls and focus directly on the phenomenon of digital media criticism, I therefore take the ‘journalistic practice’ approach. Journalism scholars have made calls for such an approach in order to ‘de-couple’ journalism and democracy because tying the two confines the field to narrow perspectives, based mostly on Anglo-American terms (Josephi 2013, Zelizer 2012).

**Significance of the study**

As mentioned previously, the aim of this research is to develop an understanding of digital media criticism as a form of metajournalistic discourse. This study therefore contributes to knowledge about criticism and critics of journalistic practice and their role in the
understanding of journalism and what it should be (defining, for example, quality journalism from a critic’s perspective).

Overall, this research aims to make a contribution in the following seven areas that are critical in theory and practice of journalism:

1) explain digital media criticism as a form of metajournalistic discourse;
2) broaden the understanding of the role of digital media critics and their motivations for criticising the media;
3) expand literature and understanding of media criticism as a form of journalistic accountability;
4) broaden the understanding of discourses of journalistic practice in digital spaces;
5) offer a theoretical proposition to explain how criticism is legitimised through discourses in digital spaces and how this feed into journalistic practice;
6) provide insights into how journalists negotiate and define ‘legitimate criticism’;
7) offer contextual and comparative nuances of digital media criticism of journalistic practice (through the contextual comparisons of Kenya and South Africa).

Dissertation outline

This chapter has introduced the study by motivating the rationale for the study and outlining the aim. In Chapter 2, the Literature review discusses the background of media criticism studies, the criticism of journalism in the digital age and identifies the research gaps in understanding digital media criticism. Chapter 3 grounds the study in scholarly discourses about journalism and discursive theories such as Carlson’s (2016, 2017) theory of metajournalistic discourse. In Chapter 4, I discuss the research design based on contextual comparative approach and qualitative interviews. Here I also present journalistic and media criticism landscapes of Kenya and South Africa. The empirical discussions begin with Chapter 5, presenting results of digital media critics in Kenya and South Africa, their nature, motives for criticising the media in digital spaces and discursive positioning. Chapter 6 presents findings about journalistic issues raised by media critics, journalists and media accountability agents and how the all merge in a discursive ecology. In Chapter 7, the focus is on journalistic
responses to criticisms and how critics’ defences constitute a discursive struggle in a digital discursive ecology. Chapter 8 examines how journalistic actors legitimise media criticism in digital spaces and constructs an idea of ‘good’ criticism. Chapter 9 presents findings about the contribution of digitalisation to metajournalistic discourse. Here I discuss digitality and its significance to the (de)legitimisation of criticism. In Chapter 10, I delve into the theoretical proposition of discursive outcome as a way to understand the critical purchase of digital media criticism. Here I also review the discursive outcome from the prism of accountability as a norm and practice. The last is Chapter 11, which highlights major findings, discusses the contribution of the study, and offers future direction for research on digital media criticism.
Chapter 2. Literature review

This chapter situates the study in the scholarly discourses of criticism and the media. It begins with an overview of media criticism as an evaluative practice within the context of media and criticism studies. The chapter then provides a background of media criticism discourses that relate to media and journalism. In the parts that follow, the chapter explores debates about criticism of journalism with a special focus on the diverse nature of media criticism. In the last part, I discuss the place of media criticism of journalism in the digital age and then call to attention the current research gaps.

My interest in media criticism is driven by the growth of online debates on journalism practice. Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and comments sections of news pages, are common platforms on which users criticise the news media and journalists. To give a few examples, there are numerous media-critical blogs such as Germany’s Bild Blog\(^6\), News Busters\(^7\) in the US, and Tabloid Watch\(^8\) in the UK. In Kenya and South Africa, the following are common media-critical blogs, also known for their consistency in criticism of the media: Journalism DryCleaner\(^9\), Media Critic Kenya\(^20\), TV with Thinus\(^21\) and The Harbinger\(^22\), Musings on the Media\(^23\). On social networks, a variety of hashtags such as #SayNoToManelsKE (mentioned in the previous chapter) and #KeMediaFailure\(^24\) have been used to criticised media failings in news coverage and editorial judgement. Other hashtags originating from Kenya have gained a global audience, for example, #SomeoneTellCNN\(^25\) on Twitter (see Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019) and #SomeoneTellNYTimes\(^26\). The capacity, dedication and expertise of digital publics in evaluating

\(^6\) https://bildblog.de/
\(^7\) https://www.newsbusters.org/
\(^8\) http://tabloid-watch.blogspot.com/
\(^9\) http://agachiri.blogspot.com/
\(^10\) https://mediacritickenya.com
\(^11\) http://teevetee.blogspot.com/
\(^12\) http://www.theharbinger.co.za/wordpress/category/1/ 
\(^13\) http://blogs.webberwentzel.com/
\(^14\) Hashtag used to criticise the coverage of a terrorist attack on a shopping mall in Nairobi in 2013.
\(^15\) World trending hashtag used to criticise CNN over President Obama’s tour of Kenya in July 2015.
\(^16\) One of the hashtags used in January 2019 to criticise New York Times for publishing a graphic image of victims of a terror attack in Kenya.
journalistic content, fact-checking or exposing journalistic deviances can sometimes match that of the traditional media accountability mechanisms such as news/press councils (Fengler et al. 2014). Some scholars argue that audiences have a significant role as ‘watchers of the watchdog’ (Cooper 2006) or the ‘fifth estate’ (Hayes 2008).

As a subject of research, media criticism has a long history particularly in the US (Marzolf 1991, Snyder, Kelley, and Smillie 1995). However, globally, the rise of news websites, blogs and social media has spotlighted media criticism in other national contexts. Criticisms on the digital platforms range from expert analytical content (common with watchblogs like the German Bild Blog) to trolls on comments sections of news websites and zingers on Twitter and Facebook. Other critics have been media scholars mostly in critical studies (see, for example, Bounds and Jagmohan 2008), journalism reviews (such as Columbia Journalism Review) as well as professional organisations such as Accuracy in Media (AIM) and Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR). There are also other institutionalised sources of criticism from the press, such as ombudsmen and press/news councils.

**Media criticism studies: An overview**

Media criticism is associated with the process of 'modernising' the media, particularly in the free market through sustaining the debate on the quality and performance of the media (Lemert 1989, Marzolf 1991). Media criticism of early 20th Century in the US provided the basis for the creation of the Hutchins commission of the 1940s, while at the same time informing the proceedings that were critical in charting a future for a reformed media (Blanchard 1998). In the end, the role of

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27 Dicken-Garcia (1989) suggests the earliest works on media criticism emerged in the 17th Century, while the first book dedicated to criticism was published in Britain in 1811. The book, written by James Savage, was titled, *An Account of the London Newspapers, and of the Manner in Which They Are Conducted.*

28 Critics identified as 'prominent' in American media criticism studies include: Journalist A.J. Liebling, who became well-known in 20th Century through his column, the ‘Wayward Press’; Ben Bagdikian (described by James Carey (1974) as the best of the 70s); Steven Brill, who published a critical magazine *Brill’s Content* in the late 90s; Craig Silverman, who popularised his media-critical website, *Regret the Error,* that culminated to the writing of a book with a similar title and; Jon Stewart, who from 1999 to 2015 hosted the *Daily Show,* which sought to keep American news networks accountable (Painter and Hodges 2010b, Borden and Tew 2007).
citizen criticism was a component that the Hutchins Commission's report of 1947 identified as critical for media accountability. The proposal on criticism became a foundation for scholarship and policy drive towards the creation of bodies representing citizens in monitoring the media such as the press councils (McIntyre 1987b).

Judged by the content of criticism, the main concerns of media critics are often the quality of news, impartiality of journalists, and commercialisation, which these critics consider the main ‘pollutant’ of quality media (Marzolf 1991). Many critics argue that media criticism is responsible for the reforms on the practice of journalism that have seen, improved standards and the development of numerous mechanisms for keeping the media accountable (Bertrand 2000, 2003, Marzolf 1991).

Crucial in the development of a ‘critical community’ (Carey 1974) is freedom of speech and this explains why press criticism has thrived in the US for a long time, according to Marzolf (1991). Other factors responsible for the growth of a ‘critical community’ often mentioned are: a declining quality of media; a more educated and media literate public, and; the rise of commercialisation of the press and the digital networked technologies which have increased the media reach and given audiences more platforms for participation (Fengler et al. 2014, Holt and von Krogh 2010, Carlson 2017, Kaun 2014, Bertrand 2000).

**Criticism: Meaning and practice**

As stated in Chapter 1, I take criticism in this study to mean an expression of judgement or evaluative statements that pinpoint the faults of a journalistic actor, his/her actions or the media as an outlet or institution. The expression of disapproval and judgement is a fundamental part of criticism (Carroll 2009). Yet criticism is also a product of feedback, mostly from audiences. Not all feedback from news audiences is criticism. For example, praise expresses approval even though it bears an evaluative element. The question then is, is any other feedback important and necessary to study? The answer is in the affirmative. However, criticism is an aspect of an evaluative process, and in journalism it has defined the complex relationship between the audience as the critic and the journalist, an important perspective in this study (to be discussed further in the next chapter).
Of note here is that criticism (also in the visual arts, film or music) has remained contentious especially in relation to its meaning—the question whether the element of evaluation should define it (Frey 2015). Further, the trepidation over its dearth and slow death (owing to its meaning and creation) is the subject of lament in a variety of criticism studies (see McDonald 2007, Brown 1974, Carey 1974).

History shows that criticism gradually moved from the domains of experts into the sphere of the masses. In the process it lost some of its flair, or in the words of Gans (1999), experienced a “dumbing down” (cf. Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/1997). Enter the internet and it democratised digital technologies, leading to de-elitisation of criticism (Frey and Sayad 2015). The variety of digital platforms and their affordances shaped the form, tone style, and even the length of critiques (for example, the 280-limit of tweets) further heightening fears over the decline of ‘professional’ criticism following the entry of ‘amateur pundits’ such as bloggers. However, as Frey (2015) argues, cynics underplay the fact that the democratisation of digital space has broadened audience participation and avenues of criticism. Here it is important to note that even with the democratisation of digital spaces, participation is unequal and unrepresentative (Bird 2011) and often, only select voices gain much visibility on social networks (Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019).

The concept of media criticism is defined in various ways in existing studies, perhaps because the criticism of the media takes different forms ranging from those that are academic to angry rants. Wyatt (2007) argues that media criticism involves making ‘non-cynical’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the news media in abiding by the universal journalistic principles such as accuracy, impartiality or fairness. Wyatt is inspired by Carey (1974) description of media criticism as “the ongoing exchange of debate among members of the press and between the press and its audience over the role and performance of the press in a democratic society” (Wyatt 2007, 7).

It is important at this stage to acknowledge the difference between popular and scholarly criticism. Scholarly criticism in media studies has been a subject of seminal works by among others, Naom Chomsky, Pierre Bourdieu, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. This kind of media criticism “deals with conflicts, structural inequities, ideological implications and negative moral consequences of media, as a part of
modern culture and society” (Holt and von Krogh 2010, 288). Ultimately, the criticism contributes to an intellectual discourse, which normatively speaking is aimed at enlightening society but also to stimulate different debates on a range of actions, policies, or are just fresh ways of thinking about media and culture.

However, media criticism that seeks a constant engagement with media professionals on daily journalism practice is different. 'Popular media criticism' (Brown 1974, Carlson 2016b) is widely circulated and directly addresses the media as it exists and operates at a given time even if critics are academics, politicians, governments, audiences or journalists themselves. Several studies have explored media criticism that seeks interaction with media professionals (for example, Carey 1974, Fengler 2003, Goldstein 1989, Hayes 2008, Cooper 2006, Marzolf 1991, Brown 1974, Lemert 1989, Wyatt 2007, Svensson 2015).

Scholars have argued that media criticism is an indisputable element of a democratic culture (Carey 1974, Hayes 2008, Brown 1974, Cooper 2006). Carey (1974) argues that democracy and criticism are “indissolubly connected” (229). In an ideal world, participatory democracy ensures that the centres of power in a society which constitute governments, corporations and the Fourth Estate, are open to criticism. The media serve as the “professional critic” operating on behalf of the people as it provides the platform through which citizens can critique the political elite and hence prevent abuse of power (Dennis, Romm, and Ottaway 1990b, 231-232). Carey argues that, as a watchdog for society, the media should be ready to be criticised.

Media criticism serves as a bulwark for a stronger press and better democracy. Moreover, criticism improves journalistic standards and develops a ‘critical community’ of active audiences (Carey 1974, Wyatt 2007, Hayes 2008, Brown 1974). Indeed, as the ‘professional critic’, the media is expected to tolerate and even promote consistent media criticism (Feighery 2011, von Krogh 2009). The media provides a platform for the exercise and proliferation of criticism and is expected to cultivate it through, for example, media literacy initiatives (Carey 1974, Brown 1974, Vraga, Tully, and Rojas 2009). Inevitably, therefore, there exists a symbiotic relationship between the media and audience as regards media criticism. It is excepted that the audience will form the biggest bloc of critics while the media itself will be the main audience of the criticism from all quarters – whether from citizens,
governments or private corporations. To develop the ‘profession’ of criticism further, Carey (1974) argues that the media should make its criticism accessible to the public. The normative expectations that I have discussed have formed the perspectives for the study of media criticism as we will see in the next section.

**Functions of criticism**

Media criticism’s democratic function is critical in understanding its role in journalism. This democratic role requires further elaboration. Criticism is a constituent of deliberation and it is acknowledged that apart from a free and functioning media, journalism needs a “strong critical tradition” (Carey 1974, 231). Marzolf (1991) argues there is “need for robust public debate on journalistic performance... in order to keep the press alive and in turn to keep democracy healthy” (205). As active participants in a deliberative democracy and in a public sphere, critics of the media, for example bloggers, have emerged collectively as a formidable institution in playing the oversight role (Pole, Gulyás, and Rehkopf 2012, Cooper 2006, Powell and Jempson 2014). The critics have therefore been referred as representatives of the ‘fifth estate’ (Hayes 2008) and ‘watchers of the watchdog’ (Cooper 2006), also implying their critical function as agents of media accountability.

By extension, democratisation of digital spaces exemplifies loss of control by elitist media to a wider audience thus challenging a centre of power. Criticism ensures the power of the media is “wielded wisely” (Wyatt 2007, 23, Marzolf 1991) as it provides a way “to control without controlling” (Brown 1974, 6), a role that can be summarised as monitorial. As a ‘monitorial citizen’ (Graves 2017), the critic’s participation in public life is fundamental, but also in the oversight of the Fourth Estate.

The scrutiny function of criticism goes beyond making news media organisations and journalists accountable. Criticism of the media both inspires and sets good journalism as aspirational. In describing critics as ‘civilizing agents’, Marzolf (1991) observes that “critics act as a conscience, nagging the press to live up to higher standards, ideals and moral behaviors” (5). In the history of journalism in the 20th Century, the modernising effect of criticism has resulted into reforms that include institutionalisation of accountability mechanisms such as press
councils and ombudspersons (Pickard 2010, McIntyre 1987a, Blanchard 1998). In journalism and accountability studies, however, there is a contestation over normative criticism that has not been resolved, the question whether criticism influences journalists and the practice.

The oversight role of critics or their function as “agents of regulation” of journalism (Wyatt 2007, 149-150) is worth exploring here. Media criticism serves as an “alternative to press regulation” and it symbolises presence of a space for evaluating media performance and quality (Wyatt 2007, 18, Cooper 2006, Fengler et al. 2014), hence critics play the role of appraisers. While critics are not exposed to inner workings and the politics of the newsrooms, they have a bird’s eye view of the practice mainly through consumption of media products.

Relatedly, there is the view that critics are agents of change—societal and journalistic. Media criticism studies that take the social change approach (Kaun 2014, Svensson 2015, Wyatt 2007) consider critics’ agency in their performative role as citizens. Media critics who converge in ‘social movements’ not only question journalism and its professional culture, but news media’s social responsibility. Take the case of criticism campaigns such #SayNoToManelsKe (mentioned in Chapter 1) that criticises the marginalisation of women in the media and society. The cumulative action of criticising the media, for instance via hashtag campaigns (Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019), gives power to criticisms that seek change in journalism and professional practice (Berry and Theobald 2006). At the same time, criticism via hashtag questions the media’s responsibility towards gender equality by ensuring women are represented in talk shows.

Wyatt (2007) articulates the political role of the critics well. Critics are constituent of a debate, involving two participants: the media and the public. Debate is a function of political deliberation, and in media terms what is highlighted here is the mediation role of critics. More importantly, this mediation role implies critics, who are constituent of the audience, are beholden to an audience of their own in digital spaces. Wyatt’s thesis also echoes the view of criticism as a ‘conversation’ (Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg 1994, Brown 1974). Critics, taken as citizens here, are participants in a conversation about what journalism is really about (Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg 1994). The participants in the dialogue about journalism are collectively
representatives as they “serve as stand-ins for the public in their discourses with the press” (Wyatt 2007, 144).

In the wider discursive framework of criticism and its role in the public sphere and discourses about the media (the focus of the next chapter), the role of the narrative of criticism is key. Criticism is part of human nature, woven into conversation and interactions, and is deeply embedded in the interpretative practices of journalism products. Criticism has to be about “intelligibility and accountability of individual narratives and how those interact with the narratives of the practice of journalism and the larger community” (Lambeth and Aucoin 1993, 71).

The other important role of media critics is that of serving as interpreters of journalism conventions, decisions and news process (Snyder, Kelley, and Smillie 1995, 18). Critics are constituent of “interpretive communities” (Zelizer 1993) whose role in journalism is in producing metajournalistic discourse—narratives of journalism (Carlson 2016b, 2017). Relatedly, critics function as “guides to the media landscape” on behalf of audiences (Snyder, Kelley, and Smillie 1995, 10, cf. Wyatt 2007) and in an age of information glut, this is critical. In addition, critics’ contribution to media literacy (Kaun 2014, Wyatt 2007), is important when they are guides and interpreters of journalism. However, media critics are also creators and transmitters of ‘counter-discourses’. The discourses from peripheral actors in journalism (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018) such as fact-checkers or ‘radical media’ both legitimise and delegitimise traditional practice. These actors do so by offering reinforcing and ‘competitive’ discourses (Atton 2010, Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018, Carlson 2009).

It is important to state here that critics’ roles are not always positive. Uncivil statements, personalised attacks and threats all fall in the category of pollutants of the public sphere, however much they also symbolise the functions of free speech in democracies (Santana 2013, Reader 2012, Hayes 2008).

**Categories of criticism**

Having looked at the role of criticism, I will now turn to the content of media criticism. According to critics, journalism suffers from a plethora of failings, and these require ample space. But it is important to note that, although the issues are largely similar across journalistic cultures, the differences have to do with context and time. Further
issues raised by criticism mostly touch on the media as an institution, the news content, the practice of journalism and the news practitioners themselves. According to von Krogh and Svensson (2017), three forms of ‘positive’ criticisms of journalism are common: Efficiency-focused (focused on quality and standards of journalism): interest-based (proposal based on needs/interests of the critics) and cultural/philosophical criticism dwells on complex and broader issues relating to media and society (148).

In his study of media-critical blogs, Cooper (2006), asserts that as “journalistic outsiders”, critics’ analysis “can be of value to the reasoned and constructive public discussion of issues and events” (22). Cooper proposes a typology for assessing bloggers’ media criticism (see Table 1 below) based on normative journalistic principles. The typology constitutes four categories of media criticisms: accuracy, framing, agenda setting/gate keeping, journalistic practices (Cooper 2006, 18-19).

Table 1. Cooper’s typology of media criticism in the blogosphere

| Accuracy               | Fact-checking Descriptions |
|                       | Fidelity to Quotations     |
|                       | Authenticity of Documents  |
|                       | Interpretation of Statistics or Scientific Studies |
|                       | Trustworthiness of Memes   |
| Framing               | Disputing the Frame        |
|                       | Reframing a Set of Facts  |
|                       | Contextualizing            |
| Agenda-Setting/Gatekeeping | Questioning the News Judgement |
|                       | Setting an Alternative Agenda |
| Journalistic Practices | Newsgathering              |
|                       | Writing and Editing        |
|                       | Error Correction           |

Although the typology provides helpful ways for assessing whether issues raised by media critics communicate to journalists, Cooper’s typology does not offer a holistic understanding of journalistic faults and
failures. Beyond principles that define journalistic practice are deficiencies of journalistic professionalism (Waisbord 2013). Further, beyond the lenses of the journalistic principles offered by Cooper is the element of appropriation and (re)interpretation, where media critics reframe the news coverage and recreate narratives that position them as alternative sources of content related to the original story (see Carlson 2016a).

Critics view the media as performing the function of ‘social control’ (Brown 1974) because if it is not challenged it can become complacent and aloof from the public, an accusation often targeting commercial media. Criticism questions the standards of journalism as it points out the fallacies and errors of journalism, that stir news practitioners to either legitimise their work or conform to the demands of the audience.

Criticism does not have to offer remedy or correction, but should generally inspire consciousness and deliberation about journalistic standards (Brown 1974). According to Dicken-Garcia (1989), journalistic standards, are, “rules governing journalistic practices” (5). Scholars argue for high standards or ‘journalistic excellence’ (see Ivor 2009) if the media is to be seen to serve its democratic role. What is essential in understanding journalistic standards is what a society considers to be the role of the media and in turn, the role journalism plays in a particular period. When critics raise issues about the media, they often relate to standards and quality, but criticism of the media is also composed of some subjective views or idealistic propositions of what journalism should be. Further, in criticising journalism, the motive can be the need to genuinely improve the practice, but could also be for the entertainment value derived from it as in the case of political comedy programmes that make fun of news conventions through imitating journalism (see, for example, Borden and Tew 2007, Painter and Hodges 2010a, Doona 2016).

To capture the diversity of criticism of journalism, I offer broad dimensions that can be useful in categorising varieties of criticism of journalism. They are based on common targets of criticism. They are: form and content, Individual journalist, organisation, institution and ideology.

Form and content
Criticisms that address form and content evaluate text, images and video produced by the media. Form and content also include the nuts
and bolts of journalism, the elements that Cooper’s (2006) typology outlines (accuracy, framing, agenda-setting/gatekeeping and journalistic practices that refer to methods of news production). Writing and editing of news, for instance, are concerns for journalists and trainers (Hicks et al. 2016), and likewise the critics. Journalistic styles also fall under this category. Examples of journalistic styles include adversarial types of journalism such as ‘attack journalism’, which focus on negative aspects of news subjects (Sabato 1991). Critics are also concerned with the explanations journalists give about news conventions, for example, news anchor’s ad lib that sometimes degenerates into news commentary raising questions about objectivity.

*Individual journalist*
Criticisms whose subject is an individual address the professional or practising journalist. For example, this could involve the personal attributes of a journalist based on physique, age, gender or the journalistic skills possessed by one such as in news interviewing. These criticisms also extend to adherence to professional norms and rules of journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001) as well as ethics.

*The organisation (outlet)*
These are criticisms that target a specific news media outlet. They refer to organisational issues such as editorial policy, news or organisational culture. An outlet’s political stance is often a staple of media critics (Snyder, Kelley, and Smillie 1995). For example, among other criticisms is that American Fox News stands for a conservative agenda of the Republican party, while the Swedish far-right newspaper, *Nya Tider*, promotes an anti-immigrant agenda. Public service media such as the South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) often face criticisms for mismanagement and promoting the agenda of the ruling party, the African National Congress or ANC (see Harber 2014).

*The institution*
This refers to the media in general (sometimes addressed as the Press or the Fourth Estate). Here *the media*, as used in most criticisms mostly refers to organisations or outlets collectively, technology used by news media organisations and professionalism of journalists. Criticisms of the media as an institution suggest the media’s
positioning in politics and government influences the quality of journalism.

**Ideology**
This refers to the more abstract ideas about how the media position itself in relation to the social, cultural and political environment in which it operates. Criticisms of ideology refer to the general idea about the function of the media in society (Wyatt 2018, 2), its influences and how it is perceived in relation to political ideals or belief. For example, some scholars accuse the media of serving a capitalistic agenda and thus contributing to a decay in democracy (see McChesney 1999).

**The critics of the media**
Normative media criticism prescribes a transformative role for media critics, even though their legitimacy is contested based on the nature of their criticism of legacy news media (to be expanded in the next chapter). Critics call out unethical behaviour of journalists or ‘pollutant mistakes’ in media content (see, for example, Silverman 2007), but also serve as a ‘conscience’ of higher moral and professional ideals (Christians, Ferré, and Fackler 1993, 140, Marzolf 1991, 5). Yet the role of the critic has not been interrogated to provide a clear understanding of how the nature of actors in journalism (i.e. journalists and media accountability agents) shapes the criticism and subsequently how they influence journalistic reception and legitimisation.

Critics of the media vary from those with a background in media studies or journalism practice to politicians or policy-makers, to audiences who rarely even consume media products. Their criticisms can be disseminated in journal articles, books, newspaper and magazine columns, media review shows, social media or blogs.

There is a tradition of studying ‘single high-profile’ media critics (Fengler 2001). They constitute a defined group of popular critics with substantial public presence—as influencers in public and social sphere—and consequently, their criticisms are shared widely (Goldstein 1989). There is, however, a downside to an empirical focus on this visible group, as this “tends to reinforce both the elitist value of a press ideal and the popular value of a democratic, open society” (Marzolf 1991, 2).
To be able to understand the variety of critics of critics of journalism, I therefore propose a categorisation based on the following five dimensions: Expertise, strategies, reach, platforms and agenda.

**Expertise**
Expertise refers to the skills (intellectual or professional) that critics possess. Expertise also has to do with understanding of journalistic practice. The expert critic could be a veteran, former or practising journalist and therefore understands the “business” of journalism (Lemert, 1989). There are, for example, critics who engage in critical and intellectual debate about the media. According to Wyatt (2007), the 'scholar-critic' or meta critic “understands the history of the press, the attitudes and values that have led to its development, its conventions, and its openness to innovation as well as its points of resistance to change” (p. 160). One example is the Frankfurt School’s Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1997), who in their critical text, Dialectic of Enlightenment, deride the media’s role in massification and commodification of culture. Other experts are part of watchdog groups include journalists’ association, forums, networks of international organisations such as Accuracy in Media (AIM) and Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (Fair). They can have general missions aimed at inculcating accountability among journalists and news media organisations.

**Reach**
Reach refers to the wider scope of influence the critic has and hence the spread of one’s criticisms. There are critics whose opinions and views about the media most often have a wide reach and potency because of their social and political status, for example, politicians or celebrities. While they are opinion shapers, their criticisms also wield influence on institutions and citizenry. Politicians are inconsistent in the criticism of the media in digital spaces. However, their criticism has influence and may resonate with larger constituents, has implications on the brand of the media as it reaches more people, stirs more criticism and may influence policy and law regarding the media. In comparison, scholars’ criticisms typically do not attract much attention even though they generate “useful criticism” (Snyder, Kelley, and Smillie 1995, 3).
**Strategies**

These are methods or formats that critics employ in their criticism. Scholars’ greatest contributions come in their assessment of media performance, which entails objective ways to measure effectiveness of the media (McQuail 2008). Lemert’s (1974) seminal work on “empirical criticism” offers techniques that entails scholarly processes and tools in the assessment of media performance. In the digital era, critics use several strategies, such as citizen journalist blogs that adopt journalistic styles and formats. Other critics are activists that run watch-blogs such as German *BildBlog* (mentioned earlier) or American *News Busters*. This category also captures the activist approaches taken by rising fact-checking and data journalism organisations such as Full Fact, PolitiFact or Code for Africa. An example is Media Monitoring Africa in South Africa, which analyses South African broadcast and print media regularly to detect unethical, illegal or unfair reporting on children.

**Platforms**

These are digital spaces that critics use to post their criticism. There are groups of critics who dedicate time and effort to write media commentaries on blogs, produce videos of media reviews on YouTube or fact-check the media. Critics could write a letter to the editor or comment on social media platforms when, for instance, they are offended by certain coverage by the media or a specific news report. Others produce popular literature that criticise the media, such as Nick Davies (2008) who reveals the effects of ‘churnalism’ in the book, *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media* or Kenya’s veteran journalist Philip Ochieng’s (1992) book, *I Accuse the Press*, that analyses the poor performance of the press in the country’s clamour for democracy in the 80s and 90s.

**Agenda**

These are missions that drive criticism of the media, which may be explicit or implicit in critical text. Institutionalised watchdog groups

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29 https://www.newsbusters.org/
such as journalists’ association, forums, networks of international organisations such as Accuracy in Media (AIM) and Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (Fair) are explicit about their agenda to keep the media responsible or accountable. Politicians criticizing journalists are often suspicious of them (Brants et al. 2009) and the political ideologies they hold (Ladd 2012), and these shape the nature of their criticisms. Politicians’ criticisms may threaten press freedom, have a chilling effect on journalists or may merely reinforce public apathy or hostility against the media. President Donald Trump, for example, constantly criticizes the US media by referring to his detractors as “fake news” media (Lee and Quealy 2019) as a way to delegitimize their liberal viewpoints.

The digital sites of criticism

The uptake of digital technologies is a consequence of low ‘entry barriers’ (Benkler 2006) and the appeal of the ‘effective networked power’ (Couldry 2014). Digital technologies have expanded the capacity for ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1991) to connect and engage. Collectively, users in digital spaces contribute to conversations online based on their varied expertise, knowledge or interests (Jenkins 2006). While the communities online engage in knowledge acquisition and sharing, they also collaboratively build and promote the profile of a “monitory citizen” (Jenkins 2006, 219).

Even with a favourable view of digital technologies’ capacity to transform media and democratic participation, Jenkins (2006) underscores the ways these technologies challenge concentration of power, for instance, the corporate media through reinforcing the oversight capacity of citizens. To Jenkins (2006), the digital input lies in “allowing people to play with power on a micro level” (239). Thus, digital platforms give voice to those who did not have means of inclusion before, especially marginalised groups (Gillmor 2004).

However, there is a “utopian rhetoric” over digital platform’s capacity to revolutionise the public sphere (Papacharissi 2002, 9). In reality, digital spaces still remain a reserve of the elite, owing to disparities in use when it comes to gender, education, age and class (Hindman 2009). Further, critics often express scepticism toward new forms of collectivism and the ways social media platforms reinforce collective action. Couldry (2014), for example, argues against the hype
of ‘collective intelligence’ (Jenkins 2006) and its benefits. According to Couldry, “we have had to look much harder to find examples of long-term processes of policy-building that have emerged through digital networks” (617). Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier (2007) also note that collective activist action need a good combination of online as well as offline forms of action.

I will now focus on media criticism and sites of its performance on digital space. First, it is important to note that digital platforms present a complexity in terms of user participation, consumption and technology. To understand their input better, I focus on the most common platforms for media criticism and point out three fundamental features that are pertinent for digital media criticism: Connectivity (networking function and multiplicity of platforms), sharing and interactivity.

Some of the most notable forms of media-critical activities of audiences online are recognised in studies that focus on user comments—mostly on news digital spaces of mainstream media organisations (Wolfgang 2018, Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, Vos, Craft, and Ashley 2012, Singer 2011). Participatory journalism studies anticipated a collaborative venture that would define the relationship between the audience and journalists through an array of platforms such as online news websites and micro-blogging sites. Audiences’ most remarkable input came from User Generated Content (UGC), mostly at the post-publication ‘interpretative stage’ (Singer 2011). Readers’ comments on news webpages were “open and unfettered” (Hermida 2011a, 180) even as legacy news media sought a modicum of control through instilling traditional norms and values of journalism on citizen journalism platforms (Hermida 2009). Challenges that came with UGC included incivility (Reader 2012) and trolling (Wolfgang 2018). Over time, Social Networking Sites (SNSs or social networks as I will herein refer to them) expanded the magnitude and range of UGC.

**Social networks**

The major social networks for most users are Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Google+, Pinterest, Snapchat and Viber (Newman et al. 2016). Consumption of media content is high on these sites, while in particular, majority of young adults have been shown to consume media content more through social
networks (Pew 2010). I pinpoint the consumption of news through social networks because it is the common root of critical comments about journalism. On the one hand, consumption of news from traditional news media such as newspapers and TV has declined (Pew 2012). On the other hand, legacy news media have deployed social networks to increase the reach of their news, as well as stimulate audience engagement (Mills and Plangger 2015), due to a variety of affordances they provide.

While social networks stand out as principle sites for criticism practice, they are also discursive spaces of news that are enhanced through the affordance of sharing (Carlson 2016a). Sharing entails referrals of text, images or videos of content from legacy news media. Individual users can give others access to news content through social media by reposting a news link, liking, retweeting, favouriting, replying or commenting and tagging. The aim of the various referral techniques on social networks is to increase reach and audience engagement (Dwyer and Martin 2017). Retweets, for example, are “reactive acts in response to a comment and a gauge of popularity” (Highfield 2015, 2714). Retweets provide a suitable indicator of visibility of posts on Twitter, while also constituting a “conversational ecology” where participants tackle a subject (boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2010, 1).

There are also other ways of increasing the reach of content on social media, such as the use of humour. Humour—in form of parodies, memes or text and images—provides content for repurposing and sharing across networks of followers. Humour on social media has a ‘spreadable’ attribute that can spur creativity, interactivity and participation on social networks (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). There is also the potential that the networks will create ‘real communities’ out of common activities and the connections between users (Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev 2011, 204).

In general, sharing can be attributed to self-serving, altruistic and social motives of users (Kümpel, Karnowski, and Keyling 2015). Self-serving reasons entail seeking fellow users’ approval or finding relief through entertainment; social motives are about connecting and interacting with fellow users, and; altruistic reasons have to do with contributing to spread of useful information (Kümpel, Karnowski, and Keyling 2015, 6). Some scholars have argued that altruism is the key driver for sharing among users on social media (Holton et al. 2014).
Empirical studies show the “altruistic democratizers” (Kümpel, Karnowski, and Keyling 2015, 9) on social networks as active participants in sharing information, particularly news, that could be considered an asset for political deliberation (boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2010).

From these motives, there are two possible implications for media criticism. The notion of altruistic missions by users of digital spaces implies both active political and media participation (Carpentier 2011), despite the caveat placed on techno-determinism in technology and audience studies (Papacharissi 2002, Bird 2011, Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2007). Second, and more important in relation to media criticism studies, users on digital platforms are actively involved in sharing media content, and by extension the behaviour on social networks involves the process of making meaning of media content.

Blogs

Blogs have gathered interest in media criticism studies owing to their “self-appointed role as watchdogs of the watchdogs” (Singer 2007, 89). In most cases, bloggers tend to be more explicit, with some even carving out a niche for themselves as media critics, such as ‘Media Critic Kenya’ which proclaims its mission to watch “deeds and misdeeds” of journalists.

Although predictions of the adversarial nature of blogs were strong in the earlier days (Jenkins 2006), the collaborative input to news production has gained new scholarly attention in participatory journalism. There is “co-dependency” between journalists and bloggers (Davis 2008). Blogs blur journalists-audience boundaries (Singer 2007) as a result of lowering of barriers to entry.

Although journalists and bloggers both agree on truth (and not truth-seeking strategies), they both have conflicting perceptions as to the norm of accountability with news workers preferring peer regulation and blogs opting for public criticism (Singer 2007, 79). Users instead value blogs for being “opinionated, analytical, independent, and personal” (Johnson and Kaye 2004, 633). Cooper (2006) suggests that media-critical bloggers capacity and expertise to

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30 https://mediacritickenya.com/about/
evaluate journalism points to a maturation of blogs as ‘social institutions’. He argues that the organisational capacity of citizen critics and their voluntary participation infuse media criticism with a capacity for effectiveness than “structures created through the deliberate exercise of power” (Cooper 2006, 302) such as press councils.

From the assessment of blogs and social networks therefore, we can surmise that criticism on digital platforms presents a complexity in terms of participation, consumption and technology. These are a set of attributes that define digital technologies: they are open because barriers to entry are low; there is minimum control on digital space; they allow for networked interactivity; they ensure increased reach of actors and content; and they facilitate collectivist discourses.

**Criticism in digital spaces**

What therefore can be the input of digital platforms to criticism? The democratic offerings for audience engagement was hailed in the early years of the internet, along with capacity for the transformation of news production (Pavlik 2001). Studies of user-generated comments attest to the early optimism over audience participation through the open ‘floodgates’ of feedback to legacy news organisations (Singer 2011). Over time, more critical approaches of digital technologies have questioned the hype surrounding the nature and impact of audience participation in journalism because of persistent inequalities (see, for example, Bird 2011). However, digital technologies have lowered barriers of entry, subsequently expanding the avenues for criticism.

Media criticism studies show that digital technologies present little choice to journalists, except to capitulate to scrutiny and a deluge of criticism from non-journalistic actors (Powell and Jempson 2014, Joseph 2011, Pole, Gulyás, and Rehkopf 2012, Bernier 2013). No single set of actors—journalistic or non-journalistic—hold sway over common discourses about the media through public criticism. In this process, journalistic actors lose their power over the narrative (Kreiss 2018, 29) to the stranglehold of ubiquitous and vocal voices of audiences on digital platforms. The multiplicity of discourse is an inevitable outcome in a networked digital space where, for instance, journalistic faults form part of a global conversation. This was the case when Chinese students created an anti-CNN website to criticise the network over
negative coverage (Reese and Dai 2009) or the example I gave earlier of Kenyans’ use of Twitter, through #SomeoneTellCNN, to berate the network over biased coverage in 2015.

At the same time, traditional critics (for example, the veteran journalists or academic writing for the trade press) have been by competition from citizen journalists with varying capacities to analyse media content and journalism practice. Equally, the established “professional power” through gatekeeping and agenda-setting roles of journalistic actors is contested by non-journalistic actors who take up and perform journalistic roles, such as citizen journalist with blogs (Singer 2007, 82). The contest challenges the professional autonomy of journalists, as they lose grip over journalistic discourse that preserves their jurisdictional control (Singer 2007, Waisbord 2013, Carlson 2015).

Further, journalists have lost their gate-keeping function as they can no longer control the spaces of audience feedback (for example, a critical tweet to a local story is available to users globally to comment on and share across platforms). The public nature of the critique, coupled with interactive technologies that allow for a variety of ways to generate, engage and interact with content (Hermida et al. 2012), means that the narratives of journalism are being reproduced and reinterpreted beyond the control of the news media.

However, audience discourse in digital spaces is diverse and complex. Digital spaces and critical discourses largely claim the dark zone, attracting feelings that critics are toxic, “mean-spirited” and uncivil (Quandt 2018, Carroll 2009). Existing studies highlight the nature of digital platforms as chaotic, negative or unserious, with a cacophony of voices in a variety of platforms that churn out anti-media sentiments through spiteful rhetoric (Beiler and Kiesler 2018, Krämer 2018, Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2018), cyberbullying (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016) or even satire and mockery (Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019). However, there are pockets of serious commentary or intellectual analyses that appreciate the structure and history of the media – critiques that can have more discursive power over journalistic actors (Wyatt 2007).

In light of the nature of discourses on digital space, the understanding criticism within the journalistic field and logics on digital space becomes complex, but at the same time narrow because
journalism is understood within the bounds of the profession (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015). It therefore may be necessary to interrogate more what criticism in digital spaces offers beyond the journalistic discourse (or, in other words, its legitimacy) that defines journalistic practice today.

The take-away

Although journalists monitor media criticism (Joseph 2011, Pole, Gulyás, and Rehkopf 2012), researchers have rarely interrogated the question whether the issues raised by media critics are relevant to journalistic practice. Additionally, research into media criticism has tended to be anecdotal and has focused on the US media landscape (see, for example, Cooper 2006, Hayes 2008). Inadvertently perhaps, the empirical research that attempts to throw light into the possible contribution of media criticism to journalism has been scarce. Studies that investigate the perceptions of journalists of media criticism online were rare at least by the time of starting this project in 2015. However, there are studies that have investigated the analytical potential of citizens based on critical content online (see Cooper 2006, Holt and von Krogh 2010, Spiller and Degen 2012). Others have focused on the impact media criticism could have on journalists’ behaviour (for instance, Pole, Gulyás, and Rehkopf 2012, Eberwein and Porlezza 2014, Joseph 2011, Powell and Jempson 2014). It is worth noting that these studies, which mostly examine the potential new ‘innovations’ in media accountability (Fengler et al. 2014), are still inadequate in interrogating the contribution of the media critics to journalism. No specific studies have assessed the value of criticism on blogs and social media even though scholars have claimed that “the effects are already visible” in traditional journalism (Powell and Jempson 2014, 126).

Yet, popular media critics on social networks and blogs often elicit interesting debates on journalistic performance by pointing out errors in traditional media content or even unethical practices of journalists. It is the reason the discourse on media accountability studies today focus on the question whether citizens could become effective ‘watchers of the watchdog’ through criticism of the journalism profession. MediaAcT—whose research sought to suggest new media policy for Europe—concludes with a strong proposal for the institutionalisation of participatory media accountability online.
through media criticism (Fengler et al. 2014). A study under the same project by Eberwein and Porlezza (2014) shows that countries with 'least developed media accountability practices' have a budding media criticism culture that could complement weak regulatory institutions. However, the assumed transformative contribution of media criticism is yet to be interrogated.

The next chapter will offer a theoretical pathway to understand the implications of digital media criticism to journalistic practice in the digital age.

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31 The comparative MediaAcT study (2011-2012) involved a survey of 1,762 journalists in Germany, France, Italy, Finland, Austria, Switzerland, Poland, the Netherlands, Romania, the UK, Estonia, Spain, Tunisia and Jordan.
Chapter 3. Theoretical framework

This chapter offers a roadmap for a theoretical analysis of the influence of digital media criticism on journalistic practice. The chapter examines how digital media criticism can be understood in the larger framework of traditional media criticism of journalism; how the relationship between media criticism and journalism has been theorised; how existing journalistic and accountability theories can broaden the understanding of digital media criticism; and finally, how these theoretical proposals can enrich scholarly understanding of journalistic criticism.

I argue here that digital media criticism is a discursive outcome of journalism that emerges from the interactions between public, metajournalistic and journalistic discourses. What ultimately represents action, deferred action or mere acknowledgement of changes in journalistic practice is a product of a negotiated outcome that is constructed through a discursive input of journalistic and non-journalistic actors i.e. practising journalists, media accountability agents and critics.

It is important to lay out at the onset my idea of discourse as it is a key concept in this study. I take the everyday meaning of ‘discourse’ as implicit ways of talking about opinions and ideas. This is close to the Foucauldian meaning of discourse as a meeting point of power and knowledge. Foucault (1961/2006) shows discourses have an impact on the structure of society. According to Foucault, discourses make claims to be authoritative over their own sphere of knowledge. Power relationships in society shape thoughts and actions that make individuals act in respect to social order, and often this happens by persuasions.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, existing studies tend to reduce journalism and its influences to narrow journalist-audience relationships, meaning actors beyond the purview of this relationship (such as accountability agents) should be understood in terms of their own relations with journalistic actors. Recent studies taking the discursive perspectives of journalism show that actors within and outside journalism occupy an important role in making meaning about the practice (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, Karlsson and Clerwall 2018a, Carlson 2017). When scholars conceive journalists as “members of a
discursive community” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 8), there are two outcomes: journalism, even with its fluid nature, remains the focal point in any discursive arena; and second, journalists are actors in a constant discursive struggle over what journalism is and what it can be (Carlson 2017). Therefore, in reflecting on the influence of digital media criticism to journalistic practice, the theoretical puzzle of this dissertation can be summarised in two questions: How can the relationships between critics and journalistic actors be explained in a discursive framework of journalism? And, how is criticism on digital space legitimised in journalism practice?

To lay the ground for an explanatory theoretical framework—one that can offer an understanding of the critical link between criticism in the digital age and journalism—I first address the theoretical perspectives to understanding media criticism and then journalistic practice in the digital age.

**Evaluating journalistic practice**

The practice of journalism is associated with news production, encompassing news-gathering, verification, gatekeeping, writing, editing and publishing (Tuchman 1978a). Journalism's duty has remained truth production (Zelizer 2004) and the news practitioner's role is to verify claims through standard procedures of corroboration and cross-referencing (Tuchman, 1978).

However, despite the mission of truth-telling through rigorous verification techniques that are guided by ethical standards and the accountability norm, journalism has often become “the most opaque of industries” (Singer 2005, 179, Karlsson 2011). Further, the precarious financial state of news organisations has undercut quality journalism, leading to a poor fact-checking culture in newsrooms (Alexander, Breese, and Luengo 2016). The fast-changing news cycle and the ever-demanding audiences—who could be citizen journalists—have also weakened journalistic authority. The situation has been worsened by additional pressure from ideologues, political misinformation, delegitimisation of news journalism and popularisation of ‘fake news’ that has brought ‘post-truth journalism’ (Hannan 2016).

Today, journalism practice is ever a site of contestation of ‘epistemic authority’ (Gieryn 1999) as an object of constant criticism. Judged by the content of criticism, the main concern by media critics has been the
quality of news, impartiality of journalists and commercialisation, considered as the main ‘pollutant’ of quality media (Marzolf 1991). Optimists argue that media criticism is responsible for the reforms on the practice of journalism that have seen improved quality. Historical accounts give critics credit for ‘modernising’ the media, particularly in liberal democracies, and sustaining the debate on quality and standards of the media (Lemert 1989, Marzolf 1991, Goldstein 1989, Brown 1974). There is also the expectation that media criticism could serve as a platform for robust debate on any commercial agenda or political spin (Carey 1974), thereby promoting good journalism.

**Bad (and good) journalism**

Bad journalism is often the subject of most criticism of journalism and news organisations, and here I argue they are constituent of discourses about journalism through digital media criticism.

Good and bad journalism are part of a larger whole. The assessment of what is considered bad or poor journalism is based on what a variety of actors individually perceive or imagine as good journalism (Örnebring and Jönsson 2004). It is therefore important to underline here that their relationship is not dichotomous, but rather complex owing to different interpretations of the meaning of the two by both journalistic and non-journalistic actors. Carlson (2017) argues that the legitimising power of media criticism “as a product of preconceived normative assumptions” resides in its capacity to establish a duality, in my case, of the good and bad journalism in the process of arriving at an “acceptable action” (167). Relatedly, Örnebring and Jönsson (2004) argue that “where there are ideals and ideas about good journalism, there is also a discourse about bad journalism” (292).

From a normative perspective, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) note that good journalism meets citizens informational needs in a liberal democracy. They outline key principles of good journalism as follows: independence, inquiry, verification (cf. Baym 2005). Further, in the normative perspective of good journalism, the principle of transparency is desired as one way to demystify and democratise

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32 Their book, The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect, is a practitioners’ treatise.
journalistic functions. However, except in a few cases such as correction of errors, recent studies have shown that transparent actions taken by news organisation do not amount to much in changing audience views about journalism (Karlsson and Clerwall 2018b).

In their audience study of good journalism, Karlsson and Clerwall (2018a) arrive at the following attributes of good journalism, which confirm scholars’ traditional propositions: objectivity, accuracy, ethical and bold journalism, but in a surprising addition, ‘linguistic and aesthetic’ attributes of news such as the use of grammar in the news (1190-1196). To explain this anomaly, they argue that from an audience perspective, the form that news content takes can be of greater value to the public as it is what they can observe (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001). Therefore language, however much it may appear inconsequential, ultimately becomes a factor when it comes to assessing the quality of journalism.

The question then can be asked, where do critics derive their ideas of good journalism (to lead them to propose what is or what journalism can be)? Taking Bourdieu’s field approach, Karlsson and Clerwall (2018a) show that there is a constant construction of meaning among a variety of journalistic and non-journalistic actors (e.g. citizens and the state) as to what can be acceptable or unacceptable within a journalistic doxa—consisting institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical practices (Hanitzsch 2007b). There exist a ‘doxic gap’ when there is a mismatch between the expectations of the public and journalistic actors (Karlsson and Clerwall 2018a).

Other views of good journalism that are audience-centred nuance the professional mission of watchdog journalism. One example is aggression that audiences see as a virtue. For example, in what American journalism calls ‘gotcha journalism’ (Garry 1997), journalists’ aggressive tactics employ court-like cross-examination skills to pin down newsmakers, especially politicians. The public has therefore come to expect such approaches, especially in news interviews. Milder or lukewarm approaches to interviewing imply weak or poor journalism or even bias. The focus for “gotcha journalism” is on the “faux pas” or “embarrassing positions” of a news subject rather than reporting on the facts as they are (Garry 1997, 80), which goes against the journalistic principles of objectivity and fairness.
Audiences’ critical comments online and their perspectives of journalism indicate that they use professional and social norms as lenses to evaluate journalism (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, Karlsson and Clerwall 2018a). Critics’ assessments of good journalism are based on social values such as good judgement or the social moral of telling the truth, which is espoused in journalistic values as well. Thus, according to Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang (2015), critics inadvertently “reinforce professional values” (686).

The way a variety of critics define “good” journalism (beyond traditional journalism values and norms), is important when examining the legitimacy of criticisms. Further, it is through the discourse of “bad” journalism that critics—who also happen to be audiences—initiate the discourse of “good” journalism.

I will now focus on the principal actors in the discourse of journalism in the digital space and examine the theoretical input of their disposition and roles into criticism of journalistic practice.

**Critical actors in criticism**

The discursive field of journalism is a venue for both journalistic (media accountability agents and journalists) as well as various social actors (critics). Media accountability agents claim an oversight role and thus seek influence within journalistic discourse. Critics, for their part, impose their views of journalism in public discourses, while journalists seek to reinforce their professional boundaries as I will discuss later. However, the position of influence in a discursive field does not imply that journalistic actors are necessarily defenders of journalism as a profession. It is therefore necessary to tease out the theoretical inputs of various actors in a discursive field, in order to understand how criticism influences journalistic practice. I begin here with an examination of the relationship between journalists and critics, who are also audiences.

**Journalists and critics as audiences**

Digital transformation has redefined the relationship between the journalist and the audience (Napoli 2011). In digital journalism, audiences are not confined to a geographical location or nation state boundaries and therefore we have to think of them as an “imagined
audience” (Litt 2012) – all the more reason to consider an expanded diversity of media critics and criticisms (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, Wyatt 2007). There is also the nature of audience participation, which has larger implications on popular criticisms of the media. Baek, Wojcieszak, and Delli Carpini (2011) show that likely audience participants are educated and affluent citizens, as well as male, a description that the authors argue has a larger implication on political deliberation and by extension, democratic function of the media (377).

There is a more consequential relationship between audiences and journalists when it comes to public deliberation that has to do with journalism as a profession. When paradigm repair is acknowledged in the way journalists respond to deviance, McDevitt (2011) argues journalists are prone to social-control impulses during periods of charged political discourses of public outrage (I will return to the subject of paradigm-repair later). Audiences act as an “institutional force” (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, 680) as they push commercial media to make editorial decisions that serve the market’s need by sensationalising news (Napoli 2003) thus constraining their autonomy (Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos 2007). News media’s reliance on metrics in assessing audience engagement online means there is an “active, empowered (and) generative audience” in many journalistic cultures (see Anderson 2011, Moyo, Mare, and Matsilele 2019, Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc Jr 2018).

The digital space enables a measure of the “demand-supply” gap through analysing audiences choices online but also show how digital space is a constant supply of audience metrics to the journalist – an indication of loss of autonomy in making news decisions (Anderson 2011, Tandoc 2014). Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) explore the audience-journalist relationship showing the “news gap”— the mismatch between the content preferences of audiences and what journalists offer, the mismatch being a possible reason for criticism.

Furthermore, audiences have additional input to journalistic practice when they consider other issues such as trust. Karlsson and Clerwall (2018a) show that news audiences with low trust are likely to be the fiercest critics of the news. Tsfati (2003) expands the notion of media trust to include the concept of ‘media skepticism’ that refers to “...feelings of alienation and anger toward the way the media function in society” experienced by audiences (68). The media breeds a ‘spiral
of cynicism’ to itself as well the institutions and personalities it reports on, for example governments and politicians through news coverage (Cappella and Jamieson 1997).

But even when audiences disapprove of the media, journalists still feel a sense of duty towards their professional role to report certain stories that are emotive but fit into their professional role (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013, 143).

Basing their arguments on the principle of objectivity, journalists claim to deflect attention, so their audience focus on the “facts” and not their behaviour or private lives. However, media critics make journalists “the story” in some situations, such as when a journalist errs by tweeting false news that becomes fodder for critics who dwell on the journalistic error and their conduct, or even their personal lives.

It should be acknowledged here that there is a thin line between journalists and audiences as critics. Take the case of the blogger running newspaperdeathwatch.com, a journalist and media analyst offering an account of collapsing newspapers following the financial downturn of the 2000s by highlighting the idiosyncrasies of the economic system of the print media today. His “death” narrative can be considered an implicit critique of the media, while his reportage of the ‘rebirth’ of the media offers a journalistic evaluation of the print media.

To further interrogate relationships within and outside the newsroom, I discuss another added input to the discourse about the journalism: media accountability.

**Accountability: Oversight in journalism**

McQuail (2005) defines media accountability as, “voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for the quality and/or consequences of publication” (207). Traditional institutions of media accountability seek to insulate media organisations from public or state interference mostly basing their arguments on press freedom in a constitutional democracy, but also claim peer regulation as antidotes to wayward practices of journalists and news media organisations.

A normative view for an accountable media holds that journalists are “expected or obliged to render an account of their activities to their constituents” (Pritchard 2000, 2). Journalists fail to account for their errors or shortcomings, so law and ethics are key control measures in a
process Pritchard has described as that of *naming, blaming* and *claiming*.

The 'process' starts when one identifies a journalistic error (naming), then one makes the offending media organisation or journalist aware of the error (blaming), eventually the member of the audience demands a form of restitution (claiming) which could be as simple as explanation of an editorial decision or as consequential as a libel suit (Pritchard 2000, 3-4). In normative accountability studies therefore, the audience play a principle role, which is essential for the functioning of the media in a democracy (Pritchard 2000, Bertrand 2000). Subsequently, audience participation has come into focus in media accountability studies as digital platforms widen space for effective processes of accountability.

In the digital age, there is a trend towards 'participatory media regulation' (Fengler et al. 2014), which means that media control mechanisms are being opened up for participation and scrutiny of non-journalistic actors. Participatory media regulation has its roots in Claude-Bertrand’s (2000) Media Accountability Systems or M*A*S*33, which he describes as an 'arsenal for democracy' (Bertrand 2003) and a means for 'quality control' of the media. According to Bernier (2013), the “floodgates” of criticism on digital space have proved that the days of legacy news organisations as the “sole gatekeepers of public discourse”, and their influence over self-regulatory instruments such as press councils, are over (p. 2).

In assessing media criticism in media accountability studies, there are three notable factors that need interrogation. First, is the fact that audience participation in criticising the media is expected to be revolutionary for journalism practice. Second, media criticism is transformative and necessary for media accountability and thirdly, media criticism is expected to have an influence on journalism practice.

First, participation is a vital component when reviewing online ‘innovations’ of media accountability that are the products of the digital

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33 Some examples of Media Accountability Systems or M*A*S* include letters to the editor, press clubs, blogs, media monitoring organisations such as Accuracy in Media (AIM), Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (Fair) and International Forum for Responsible Media (INFORRM) as well as media schools like the Poynter Institute.
age (Fengler et al. 2014). In fact, proponents of media critics such as Cooper (2006) argue that they are a “constructive addition to the media mix” (14). However, the participatory potential of audiences poses a challenge to professional autonomy of journalists (Carlson and Lewis 2015). As citizen journalists, bloggers for example, assume the roles of reporting on news and current affairs (Domingo and Heinonen 2008b) thus blur journalists-audience relationship (Singer 2007).

The intervention of audiences in media accountability is the subject of a clash that Vos, Craft, and Ashley (2012) argue pits these non-journalists against journalists. Journalists’ admission of poor journalistic standards is an acknowledgement of weaknesses in the profession and accountability mechanisms such as press councils (Fengler et al. 2014). Audiences contribute to media accountability by “offering their own set of values and expectations for media performance” (Vos, Craft, and Ashley 2012, 851). The active audiences subsequently stretch the boundaries of traditional journalism (Carlson and Lewis 2015).

However, Vos, Craft, and Ashley (2012) conclude that media critics’ power should not be hyped as their analyses of their criticism show they “have accepted the journalistic doxa” in the sense of Bourdieu’s field theory (861-862). It implies that, although non-journalists can serve as watchdogs of the legacy news media, the journalistic canon still remains the critics’ frame of reference.

Studies of the attitudes of journalists towards media criticism show that they are ambivalent when it comes to the views of audiences about journalistic practice (Bergström and Wadbring 2014, Powell and Jempson 2014, Eberwein and Porlezza 2014). For their part, audiences consider themselves weak and logistically deficient in serving as watchdogs of the media (Spiller and Degen 2012).

The second factor in journalistic accountability is the question whether the media critic contributes towards journalistic practice in general. In theorising the place of the media-critical citizen in media accountability, there is an assumption that criticism is transformative and useful (Bernier 2013, Cooper 2006, Hayes 2008). Yet, there has been little attempt to interrogate this assumption even with the few empirical studies that examine how media criticism affects journalism practice. Cooper argues that the criticism of traditional media by bloggers is “maturing” making the platforms “a vehicle for legitimate
criticism” (19-20). However, audience commitment towards improving journalism is doubtful. Hayes (2008) argues that, as adversarial as critics may seem, their prime goal is audience-hunting and self-preservation in the digital space. There are blogs that have a political or market agenda or numerous others which Spiller and Degen (2012) term as ‘leisure projects’.

The third factor in consideration when the relationship between media criticism and accountability is examined, is the influence criticism has on journalistic practice. Journalists admit to being aware of digital media criticism, which forms a substantial source of criticism in comparison to traditional sources such as press councils (Powell and Jempson 2014, 124-126). But journalists do not consider critics as having an impact on their work (Powell and Jempson 2014), which could be explained through journalistic impulse to protect professional boundaries (Carlson and Lewis 2015, Vos, Craft, and Ashley 2012, Waisbord 2013). It could thus be questioned whether there is a strong link between media criticism and media accountability. However, journalists may not admit that audiences influence their work, but the fact that they are aware of the criticism could perhaps be a pointer to their significance in today’s journalistic practice.

Finally, in examining the answerability of journalists, normative media accountability is deficient in proposing that a direct action in responding to audience criticism or feedback is sufficient for an accountable or good journalism, while discounting the potential influences of the practice through an alternative ‘interpretative community’ (Zelizer 1993) in digital spaces.

**Journalistic responses to criticisms**

In assessing how journalists legitimise and delegitimise discourse about journalism, we can look at journalistic defences in response to perceived and real incursions into their profession. Journalists often seek ways to protect themselves from threats inside and outside the journalistic profession (Waisbord 2013, Carlson and Lewis 2015), thus maintain stability of their occupation and by extension, journalistic discourse. Journalists need outsiders to examine their work, as they are not captive of the “professional frame” (Zelizer 1993, 221). Peer-criticisms exhibited in editorial commentaries or on journalistic platforms (such as the trade press) carry the baggage of the
professional codes. Zelizer (1993) argues that part of the weakness of the journalistic discourse is that it conceals ways through which journalists construct reality through “professional codes” such as balance and objectivity. Through years of learning and practising long-held traditions and conventions, journalists turn complacent (Lule 1992, 104). Further, journalists use professional frames to “safeguard against change, loss of control and possible rebellion” hence bolster journalistic authority (Zelizer 1993, 220, Carlson 2017). Inadvertently, professional frames—whether used by journalistic actors or public critics—reveal the unprofessionalism of the media (Zelizer 1993).

As for public criticism, journalists welcome it—at least in public—as a symbolic gesture of their transparency and as a way to ward off intense criticism while also taking minor actions as remedies to show that the profession encourages and cultivates criticism of itself. Such activities aimed at boundary-maintenance such as when journalistic actors criticise transgressing journalists in public, go to maintain stability in the journalistic field (Lule 1992). Lule points out the risks of media criticism as a boundary maintenance mechanism by arguing it could “deflect inquiry on larger, structural concerns” (105).

When critics call out bad journalism, journalists engage in paradigm repair work to insulate themselves from public criticism or protect their image and brand (Klocke and McDevitt 2013, Frank 2003). Paradigms are “foundational systems that shape the conceptualized boundaries, norms, and practices of a given profession” (Perreault and Vos 2018, 555, cf. Kuhn 1962). Newsrooms resort to paradigm repair in situations of digressions from routines that are ‘indefensible’ such as cases of plagiarism in the newsroom (Hindman 2005). When faced with a transgressing crop of ‘bad apples’, journalists opt for a ‘paradigm overhaul’ (Blach-Ørsten, Møller Hartley, and Wittchen 2018, Cecil 2002) to distance themselves from the deviance. A ‘paradigm overhaul’ is engaged when news organisations makes use of the services of a news ombudsman or runs a media review programme (Klocke and McDevitt 2013, 894). However, paradigm repair and boundary maintenance, especially through criticism of journalists themselves, go to reinforce but not challenge the journalistic conventions (Bunton 2000, Haas 2006, 353).

To ward off criticism, journalists also employ ‘strategic rituals’ such as objectivity (Tuchman 1972) or credibility (Vultee 2010). Journalists
defer responsibility over criticism (especially in coverage of sensitive issues such as hate speech) to “facts” or objectivity (Klocke and McDevitt 2013, 897, Glasser 2000). According to Klocke and McDevitt (2013), the “contradictions might reflect a sophisticated negotiation by journalists in a climate intolerant of dissent while seeking to preserve a critical autonomy and professionalism” (901). Further, deviances recur as the norm of objectivity is unattainable as Schudson (2001) has observed. When journalists seek to protect the profession from deviant cultural and political stances (Hallin 1986), professional norms such as objectivity and balance are shelved in support of social norms.

Finally, journalists defensive responses reveal how they cope with criticism over errors and failures. Klocke and McDevitt (2013) show that when confronted with claims of transgressions, journalists’ reactions are: denial, ambivalence, regret and resistance. When they regret, Klocke and McDevitt (2013) note they follow with “reluctant reflexivity” (897). When confronted, they deflect by pointing to the transgressions of other journalists showing ‘distanced reflexivity’ (Klocke and McDevitt 2013). Critics spur moments of self-reflexivity even if they may not allow for complete re-examination of their past errors owing to a fast news cycle. These moments of self-reflection are more visible during “what-a-story” seasons—an unexpected big story (Berkowitz 2000)—or when reporting attracts consistent and/or damning public criticism.

**Discourses in digital media criticism**

Approaches to theorising media criticism range from theories that address institutional criticism, critiquing as an art in social-cultural settings, to criticism that is a constituent of participatory models of media accountability. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, approaching criticism in terms of media accountability narrows the scope of any study that seeks to understand criticism targeting legacy news media in digital spaces and its implications for journalistic practice.

The discursive framework of media criticism has particularly appealed to various scholars (Brown 1974, Cooper 2006, Wyatt 2007, Svensson 2015, Carlson 2017, Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). The discursive theories of media criticism borrow heavily from the Habermasian notion of public sphere, the conversational journalism models
(Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg 1994, Carey 1974) and interpretive perspective of journalism (Zelizer 1993). In arguing for media criticism in a participatory democracy, the theorists propose approaching journalism through a ‘model of discourse’, where a communicative process between itself and the society is promoted (Brown 1974, Wyatt 2007). Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) describe journalism as a ‘discursive institution’ as it opens itself up to a perpetual process of construction of meaning that entails a “discursive (re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation” (121). In this discursive process, journalists produce a “shared discourse” (Zelizer 1993) when they agree on a common interpretation of the practice (223).

Public and journalistic discourse

Wyatt (2007) views media criticism from the Habermasian perspective of discourse through rational dialogue. Wyatt therefore proposes a normative model of effective media criticism based on the Habermasian discursive theory of democracy. The theory recognises active participation of key actors: the journalists and opinion shapers (such as scholars or media activists) in a discursive exchange. The actors collectively steer and promote a discursive process with the voluntary participation of a willing critical public. Action within journalistic discourse requires civic participation and mobilisation of citizens in a public sphere, and the process occurs through three levels of criticism (Wyatt 2007, 145-149).

On the first level of criticism (See Figure 1), critics who are opinion leaders engage the public to mobilise around a journalistic fault or failure. The success of this realm of discourse largely rests on the critics’ enlistment of the public in a non-mediated context. What is notable at this level is that public discourse is livened through the opinion leaders’ facilitatory role in coalescing around an evaluative aspect of journalism.

The second level is where the critical public gets in touch with journalistic discourse. Through mediated means, the second-level accommodates an engagement between the critical public and journalistic actors, and here it becomes more practical when there is a dedicated role for press actors such as the ombudsperson. The ‘interchanges’ here are expected to lead to an accountability process (where journalists answer to the public for news content or conduct)
and then reformed action within the media, in response to prescriptions from the first level.

![Diagram of Wendy Wyatt's three levels of criticism](image)

**Figure 1:** Wendy Wyatt's three levels of criticism.

The third level is the arena for critical discourse among journalistic actors which is expected to arrive at a discourse that is fed back to the lower levels, with the critics enhancing circulation. For a proper deliberative exchange, discourse moves across all levels, and here Wyatt’s model fits into the ideals of normative accountability that propose an exchange between audiences and journalists as a measure of the answerability (see Christians 1989, McQuail 2005). The model accommodates peer-criticism, but effective criticism requires that even newsroom discourses are shared across all levels of criticism, thus the double pointed arrows in the figure above. What we can surmise from the model is that there is a clear intermediary role carved out for the critic or ‘opinion leader’ who initiates and steers critical discourse about the media.

In Wyatt’s framework, the discursive framework acknowledges media’s role as not only the principal critic of society, but as ‘platform for the exchange of criticisms’ about the society and itself (Brown 1974, Carey 1974). The theoretical assumption of journalistic discourse here
therefore is that the media builds and sustains a communicative process between journalists and the audiences rather than remain the sole conduit of information and recipient of feedback.

Avenues for media criticism such as letters to the editor or media review programmes on TV and radio were previously hailed as positive attempts to cultivate deliberation, allowing audiences to ask journalists questions or express their dissatisfaction with news reporting (Wahl-Jorgensen 2010). But such avenues have been criticised as not only inadequate for citizens, but exclusionary and “journalist-controlled” (Carey 1974, Hayes 2008, Carlson 2017, 176). Additionally, some editors are often unfriendly to public criticism and view publishing of critical content as a process of shooting themselves in the foot (Bergström and Wadbring 2014). However, journalists’ pretext that audience criticism is ‘illegitimate’ because it is irrational, contains unsubstantiated claims or is too personal and potentially libellous, and should be questioned on the basis of freedom of speech (Hayes 2008).

Second, media criticisms today—from varied sources of networked digital technologies such as social networks—are unaccounted for in Wyatt’s model yet they potentially represent new ‘genres of media critique’ (Carey 1989) because of the range of voices represented and the discourses generated. In our understanding of contemporary media criticism, what digital technologies present is a question about the legitimacy of “carrier” of journalistic discourse in the complex universe of discourse.

In summary therefore, Wyatt’s discursive framework is inadequate towards addressing the complexity that digital spaces present towards interrogating criticism today. We therefore need a broader theory of discourse to interrogate what digital media criticism heralds for journalistic practice.

**Metajournalistic discourse**

If Wyatt’s (2007) discursive framework connects the understanding of media criticism to the communicative exchange between journalists and the media, Carlson’s (2016b) theory of metajournalistic discourse expands the discursive approach to journalism.

Metajournalistic discourse refers to “public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception” (Carlson 2016b, 350). This theory widens the purview of
journalistic discourse to include conversations or commentaries about journalism by non-journalistic actors. Treating media criticism as ‘conversations’ or ‘narratives’ through which journalism is “rethought, circulated, and contested” (Carlson 2016b, 363; 2017) offers a richer contextualisation and broadens the discursive framework through which media criticism in any given context can be understood.

Popular media criticism constitutes an important component in metajournalistic discourse that either legitimises or delegitimises journalistic practice (Carlson 2017, 2016b). The theory proposes an analytical framework based on actors, sites/audiences, topics and examples of any ‘discursive processes’ that shape journalistic discourse at any given time. The constituent elements of metajournalistic discourse are subjects of a discursive struggle that entails methods through which journalists’ firm up journalistic discourse to shield the profession from incursions by outsiders.

I employ the theoretical thrust of metajournalistic discourse here to lay a platform to understand the digital media criticism that is defined through diverse and complex set of discourses from within and outside the journalism profession. As a discursive framework, metajournalistic discourse best captures the meanings and realities of the state of journalism and how it is imagined or perceived through digital media criticism. By interrogating narratives about journalism (Carlson 2017) through digital media criticism, scholars mark an entry point into understanding how journalism, in any given context, constructs its authority.

At the same time, it is necessary to take cognisance of three important points in understanding the input of metajournalistic discourse here. The first is that any approach into metajournalistic discourse recognises not only the sites of evaluation of journalism and the critical text, but also the actors within and outside journalism that play a role in the construction of meaning. Second, journalism as a cultural practice is fluid, and similarly the imaginations and realities about journalism are contextual and vary at any given period. Third, media criticism in a digital age defines not only an array of discourses, but a distinct relationship between journalistic and non-journalistic actors – a group that is diverse and complex (Jensen 1990) [as we saw earlier in the discussion of journalist-audience relationship]. Before I examine the role of various actors in a ‘discursive institution’
(Hanitzsch and Vos 2017), I will first discuss journalism as understood today and how it forms the basis of critics’ discourses.

**Legitimate digital discourses**

As we have seen in the previous sections, the normative perspective of media criticism is that the publicly mediated evaluative texts lead to ‘improvement’. Journalists, despite public and non-public criticism, may be immune to change because they have been socialised in traditions and conventions of journalism (Lule 1992) that define their beliefs and optimism in their practice. Therefore, it may be a tall order to expect them to reflect and reform when critics question their journalistic practice.

Legitimate criticism therefore has to share the core of their belief in a flawless convention and canon of journalism and spur them towards self-examination. Yet the principle of self-reflexivity in journalism practice is precarious and could even be considered “utopian” (Lule 1992, 105) because journalists only evaluate themselves in their own terms and hence critical and objective evaluation of their practice is weak. However, I argue here that self-reflexivity cannot necessarily be dismissed given journalists admit external influences, including from their audiences. Hanitzsch et al. (2010) conclude that journalists admit influences such as political, organisational and professional as well as ‘reference groups’ (colleagues, family and competitors).

Digital spaces afford more in relation to discourses that refer to journalistic practice, but other discourses as well that are peripheral to the profession. It is a space of contestations over a variety of discourses that shape society and culture. What role then can digital media criticism serve when journalists have hardened positions in their practice, and are unlikely to change?

The challenge is in the conception of criticism beyond evaluative texts or feedback of disapproval of journalism. Digital spaces as infrastructure represents an array of ‘exogenous forces’, chief among them their technological affordances and actors who reproduce alternative products to journalism, even adopting the traditional professional codes in the process. Journalism as practised by legacy news organisations today, inevitably has to conform to social norms as well as the logics of technologies that carry with them ‘competing’ discourses (Jacobs and Townsley 2017). Criticism of traditional media
on digital space, therefore, exists within a larger framework of social norms, digital technological logics that are constantly in tension with professional norms and rules.

Hanitzsch and Vos (2017, 8) argue that even within the journalism field there is a constant struggle over “discursive power” with some media organisations having more voice than others. In digital journalism, we also have to consider that this dimension becomes intricate, with, for example, some reporters having huge following on Twitter than their editors or a former journalist having a high-traffic blog. Recent studies on audience feedback have focused on ‘stability’ of the journalistic field in situations when criticism could represent a ‘threat’ to the journalistic ‘doxa’ (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, Karlsson and Clerwall 2018a, Cobley 2008). Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) argue that narratives generated through a shared discourse provide “cognitive scripts and meaning systems” through which to test in a process of self-reflexivity (121). It is this process of self-reflexivity, therefore, that precedes a decision of action or inaction following criticism.

In elucidating journalistic roles, Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) offer a pathway to understanding change within journalism:

 [...] journalists’ roles may be studied with regard to normative ideas (what journalists should do), cognitive orientations (what they want to do), professional practice (what journalists really do), and narrated performance (what they say they do).” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 118, emphasis in original)

Mellado and Van Dalen (2014) show there is a disconnect between what journalists say they do and what they actually do. Even if journalists claim to uphold high journalistic standards, especially when criticised, it does not mean that in their practice they conform to professional norms and rules at all times.

Further, in looking at legitimate discourses that criticisms could generate, there is criticism that speaks to actual journalism as is practiced and then an imagined journalism. Journalistic and non-journalistic actors co-construct the imagined practice, norms or ideas about the profession. I argue that legitimising value of criticism is borne out of the practice that is negotiated between the non-journalistic actors (the critics) and non-journalistic actors
(journalists/news organisations or media accountability actors). To concretise my arguments about legitimate discourses, I will now discuss my theoretical preposition about the possible value of the perpetual criticisms of the media in digital spaces.

**Digital discursive ecology**

In the digital age, the public discourse is a site where opinions about journalism are built, consolidated and shared among a variety of actors. However, digital spaces are no respecter of a single canon, mode or type of critique. Instead, they are a muddle of a variety of discourses (scientific, intellectual, popular and anti-elite rhetoric) and strategies (e.g. use of memes, gifs or rhetorical devices such as humour). I propose to refer to this domain of discourses as a ‘digital discursive ecology’. The digital discursive ecology places journalism in a discursive exchange involving the public, critics and journalists within digital spaces. It consists three kinds of discourses: the public discourse, metajournalistic discourse (MD) and journalistic discourse or JD (as shown in **Figure 2**).

**Figure 2**: The three types of discourses in a digital discursive ecology.
Zone of public discourse

A wider variety of social actors occupy this site, and are indirectly or directly pivotal to journalism. For example, it is the zone that contains the main subjects and sources of news and therefore a critical part of the process of news production (Primo and Zago 2015), consumption and dissemination. Public discourse encompasses a wide variety of discourses ranging from social, cultural to political. A normative view of social responsibility is that the media speaks and responds to this discourse. It is in this domain of public discourse as well that journalism derives its legitimacy, for example through the argument that it serves society and ‘public interest’. Public discourse engages with journalism because actors within the profession place its discourse right at the heart of society, for example through calls to society to defend press freedom so that media can be free from interferences (state or commercial), and by extension, promote democracy. Digital spaces can be occupied by the ‘demotic voice’ or non-elites (Carlson and Ben-Porath 2012). It is important to note here that elite voices are also represented, especially because digital technologies are a reserve of the most connected populations.

Zone of metajournalistic discourse

This is discourse that lies between the public and journalistic discourses. Carlson (2016b) has described metajournalistic discourse as “the site in which actors publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism’s legitimacy” (350). Metajournalistic discourse could be within the sphere of journalism production, but when brought to the public domain, it is exemplified by commentaries about media formats and aesthetics (Jacobs and Townsley 2017), trade publications and media reviews about new forms of journalism (Vos and Singer 2016) or ‘self-coverage’ such as that of the media struggles to cope with the economic downturn of the early 2000s (Chyi, Lewis, and Zheng 2012). Numerous non-journalistic actors are engaged in metajournalistic discourse and this include audiences, social and cultural critics. Through metajournalistic discourse, social actors are placed at a strategic position to question the authority of journalism through discourse (Carlson 2017). Metajournalistic discourse allows the public have an input towards journalism, for example the shape and forms of
journalism(s) in a precarious period for legacy news media (Picard 2014). Often, discourses confined in academic or journalism spaces are esoteric to the extent that they alienate the public, yet journalism’s role in society is critical. Metajournalistic discourse therefore bridges the gap between public and journalistic discourses.

Zone of journalistic discourses
This is mainly the site of professional discourse generated by journalistic actors—and incorporates media regulators, media defenders (like press freedom activists) or more institutionalised forms of media watchdogs. Journalistic discourses are largely texts about the profession and what journalism represents to itself and the actors involved. Such discourses circulate within the journalistic field. They are manifested through, for example, editorial policies of newsrooms, style guides, edicts or internal memos by editors to reporters, newsroom weekly reviews, public editors’ internal reports or even internal award ceremonies for journalistic excellence. When journalistic discourses are introduced to the public, they appear as defences of journalism, through, for example, apology statements and explanations of journalism processes to the public. What marks these inward-looking discourses is the “superficial” manner of assessing journalists weakness and challenges (Picard 2014). Journalistic discourse is instrumental when the actors engage in dialogue “to generate meaning of journalistic work” or “set standards of evaluation to appraise general journalistic coverage” (Zelizer 1993, 233).

The three types of discourses exhibit an interdependency in the digital discursive ecology. Journalistic discourse is not self-contained but is largely dependent on (public) discourse of non-journalistic actors (Carlson and Lewis 2015). Such a dependency marks journalism as a porous profession because journalistic discourse is comprehensible and directly relevant to the public, unlike other professions such as medicine (Waisbord 2013).

And to relate to the question posed earlier in this chapter, where critics derive their ideas for criticism, discourses are borrowed, shared, created, re-interpreted and circulated within the discursive ecology in digital spaces. Thus, to critique journalists, the public may employ professional ideals such as objectivity to assess journalistic performance, reinforcing journalistic discourse or ‘doxa’ (Vos, Craft,
and Ashley 2012). Those producing metajournalistic discourse look to public criticism for ideas of what/how journalism ought to be, and here social norms are co-opted into journalistic discourse. For example, using the case in the Introduction chapter of criticism of manels in Kenya, the idea surrounding representation of women in talk shows is derived from public discourse that is infused into a metajournalistic discourse. However, the question of representation of women can still be argued to be a journalistic discourse. Indeed journalism, whose roots reside in notions of liberal democracy, espouses ideals such as human dignity, human rights and equality. It could therefore be said that the non-journalistic actors reuse and reinforce journalistic discourses when journalism is failing, through a critical exchange that results into a discursive outcome.

Digital discursive outcome

Having set the groundwork for understanding criticism within a digital discursive ecology, I now return to our question at the beginning of this chapter: how is criticism in digital spaces legitimised in journalistic practice? And, how can the relationships between critics and journalistic actors be explained in a discursive framework of journalism?

I propose that the intersections of the discourses in the discursive ecology of criticism result into an output that ultimately defines and shapes journalistic practice. I will refer to this output as a digital discursive outcome, the point of agreement in the discursive ecology that births tension as well as consensus which feeds into journalistic discourse.

A discursive outcome of journalism as a theoretical proposition of legitimate criticism through digital media criticism consists of actual journalism (e.g. journalistic practice conforming to professional norms or claiming its independence from the state) and imagined journalism (what critics hope for in journalistic practice e.g. journalism that is more receptive to distributive justice or gender equality).

Through discursive exchanges actors—both journalistic and non-journalistic—generate grand narratives (enduring and persistent criticisms) as well as secondary narratives (periodical and event-driven criticism). The role of the narratives is to firm up journalistic discourse. For example, when there is a mismatch between the journalists’ and
audiences’ expectations, journalists “discursively renegotiate” their relationships with a variety of actors (Karlsson and Clerwall 2018a, 1184-1185, Hanitzsch and Vos 2017).

Further, criticism that imposes social norms on journalists, for example, shows critics’ concern for “power or visibility of the press in public life” (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, 687). On the one hand, critics defend this power because of the media’s critical role as a public watchdog. But on the other hand, critics berate the media for misuse of this power (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, 687), especially when journalists do not challenge governments and politicians to be accountable.

Through a discursive outcome, journalists may give an impression that there are open-minded, transformative, listening and tolerant to critical views. This function is merely one of public relations, or aimed at maintaining trust for the media, but it is about maintaining “capital stability” which Tandoc (2014) refers to as the level at which journalists feel secure that there are no threats to “economic, cultural, social or symbolic” capital (562). Lule (1992) points to a larger question of the media’s positioning in society that has to do with its social, political and economic discourses to which it exists. The mainstream media, for example, supports a stable outlook of reality, or even in circumstance of conflict and disruption would aim forestall perceptions of lack of professionalism. Maintaining stability within the journalistic field arguably serves the interest of the media organisation, news practitioners and society at large. A discursive outcome may not necessarily imply reforms, clear or subtle responsive actions in journalistic practice, but could point to an unarticulated consensus between journalistic actors and critics. But it also draws a constant struggle between various non-journalistic actors in constructing meaning about journalistic practice (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 8) at a given time. Through a discursive outcome therefore journalistic and non-journalistic actors can be engaged in a continuous “negotiation and re-negotiation” of the of the positioning of journalism in society (Karlsson and Clerwall 2018a, 1186). It is important to point out that digital media critics do not just aim their discourse at journalists, but also criticise each other (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015).

How then can a digital discursive outcome fit into the framework of media accountability discussed earlier? The normative principle
behind media accountability is that the media or journalists take the step to actively respond to questions or meet expectations of their audiences (McQuail 2003). Inherent in any media accountability is the "responsiveness to the values of the media users" (Plaisance 2000, 258) as well as action that sees journalists acting exactly the way they are expected to act by their audiences (Hodges, 1986, p.14).

Through a discursive outcome we can expand accountability beyond active ‘answerability’ of journalists to inculcate a discursive exchange between journalistic actors (journalists and media accountability agents) and critics in digital spaces. A discursive outcome activates ‘participatory media regulation’ (Fengler et al. 2014), which means that media control mechanisms are opened up for public discourse in digital spaces. Further, a discursive outcome takes into account the values of ‘media users’ through the discourses critics generate about journalism in digital spaces. Media accountability recognises a “healthy tension” between the values of media users and the medium under study (Plaisance 2000, 266). Media users’ values are therefore critical in determining the nature of actions, conduct or behaviour that defines the practice of journalism (cf. Cheruiyot 2017, Plaisance 2000).

**Dimensions of discursive outcome**

To deconstruct a discursive outcome, I will now propose theoretical dimensions through which to analyse criticism in digital spaces. The dimensions are drawn from the theoretical discussion in this chapter. The following dimensions on which discursive outcome can be assessed are: critical actors, evaluative issues, defensive response, corrective (re)action, digital resource, and eventually a discursive outcome (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3: The five dimensions that explain the digital discursive outcome.](image)

**Critical actors** are the critics evaluating journalism in several facets (form and content, individual, organisation and institution) in any particular context and time. These actors could be public or non-public.
critics. An **evaluative issue** is the subject of criticism in digital spaces. This issue could point to deficiency or failures of different elements of journalism. The **defensive response** dimension addresses the journalistic assertions about particular criticisms and the subsequent positioning regarding the issues that critics raise. The **corrective (re)action** constitutes clear or subtle manifestations of difference to form and content, the individual, the organisation or the media as an institution, subsequent to criticisms. The manifestations are varied and could include change in perspective or editorial policy. The **digital resource** is the platform, for example, Twitter or Facebook and as used by critics to generate and circulate criticisms. Lastly, the **digital discursive outcome** is the product of the aforementioned dimensions. It constitutes public and metajournalistic discourse generated by critics on digital space and the attendant journalistic discourses from journalists and media accountability agents.

**Research questions**

I have argued in this chapter that a discursive outcome gives way to new understanding of journalism within the discursive field and a wider role of actors on digital space. Journalists as active participants in the critical space constantly have to “renegotiate their identity” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 16). A discursive outcome is a subject of both invisible and visible actions towards changing journalism practice. While the theoretical proposition is an object towards criticism, it has to be acknowledged that the result is a constant engagement between the journalist and digital critics, hence the need for a revaluation of the journalist-critic relationship. To further interrogate the understanding of discursive outcome through digital media criticism, I propose the following research questions:

**RQ1. How do critics position themselves in a discursive framework of criticism in digital spaces, and what do they aim to achieve?**

This question points to the way critics legitimise themselves in a discursive arena of journalism in the digital space. Here I am interested in describing the critics, their backgrounds and occupations (to show how central or peripheral they are to journalism). Here I also seek to understand their motives for criticising the media and how they see
themselves in relation to journalism i.e. perceived roles through criticism.

RQ2. What discourses do media critics generate in digital spaces regarding journalistic practice in a comparative context?

This question addresses the discursive frame of criticism in digital spaces from non-journalistic actors. It therefore seeks to identify the issues critics raise as regarding journalism, journalists and media organisations in particular contexts (in my case, Kenya and South Africa). The question seeks to understand how critics legitimize their issues regarding journalism, for instance, the lens through which they interrogate journalism – whether from professional or social perspective. The question further interrogates the expectations and demands of critics and thereby assesses how they impose their discourse on journalists.

RQ3. How do journalistic actors legitimise and delegitimise criticism on digital platforms?

The question looks at how and why journalistic actors (journalists and media accountability agents) react to digital media critics and their criticisms of journalism. This question focuses on journalistic actors (journalists and media accountability agents) as recipients of criticism, and participants in a discursive struggle over what journalism is and could be. The question tackles how journalists and media accountability agents legitimize journalistic practice through journalistic defence strategies and mechanisms. It also interrogates their discourses about criticisms and critics as forms of either legitimisation or delegitimisation of digital media criticism.

RQ4. How does metajournalistic discourse through digital media criticism influence journalistic practice?

This question addresses how journalistic and non-journalistic actors perceive and construct the role and the influence of digital media criticism within a context of journalism practice. The questions interrogate the basis for a negotiated journalism practice in a given context. They also seek to understand how non-journalistic actors establish discourses—of everyday practice or visions of journalism—through which they impose in discursive arena. On the part of
journalistic actors, the question seeks to explain how non-journalistic actors construct a discursive outcome through their legitimisation of criticisms in digital spaces.

The take-away

Finally, this chapter has laid out the theoretical proposition for understanding the influence of digital media criticism on journalistic practice. The central concern is how digital media criticism is legitimised and how becomes effective in journalistic practice in a given context.

Overall, there is a contest between various journalistic and non-journalistic actors over legitimacy of criticism. The contest is not only about the ‘carriers’ of discourse but also about good (and bad) journalism. While the journalist-critic relationship is important in interrogating the contribution of criticism to journalism, it is also necessary to consider how journalists respond to criticism in a digital discursive ecology.

The output that manifests itself in journalistic practice following criticism emerges from legitimised journalistic criticism that consists of a set of three discourses (public, metajournalistic and journalistic). The digital discursive outcome is a product of the discourses as generated and shared in digital spaces. Therefore, digitality is pertinent in understanding how criticism shapes journalistic practice. Further, identifying legitimate discourses through criticism in digital spaces requires an appreciation of journalistic accountability as a norm and practice.

The next chapter will discuss the empirical method and approach as well as the contexts of the study towards understanding the implications of digital media criticism.
Chapter 4. Method and context

This chapter explains the empirical research process and the context of the study. It has two main parts: the first presents the qualitative research design for the study and the second describes the context of the study with a focus on media criticism in Kenya and South Africa. The section that follows explains the choice of contextual comparative approach, the in-depth interview method, the respondents interviewed, the data collection and sampling procedures, as well as reliability and validity challenges in relation to the study. The second part describes the media landscape in Kenya and South Africa through the lenses of emerging media critical culture and digital platforms. In the next section I begin by motivating the qualitative research design for this study.

Rationale for qualitative study

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the overarching aim of this research is to examine the implications of digital media criticism to journalistic practice while employing the contexts of Kenya and South Africa. To break it down further, the goals of this research are to a.) explore and explain critics and their activity of criticising the mainstream media through digital platforms b.) describe and interrogate issues that critics raise regarding journalism practice, c.) interrogate responses of journalistic actors (practicing journalists and media accountability agents) to criticisms visible to them in digital spaces, and d.) to investigate perceived influences of criticisms in digital spaces by both journalistic actors.

In the previous chapter, I underlined the importance of understanding digital media criticism through the lenses of discourses. This study explores how a journalistic practice is legitimised in a discursive struggle between journalistic and non-journalistic actors. Because media criticism exists in an arena of discourse, it is important to interrogate digital media criticism in specific contexts, especially because accountability as a practice exists within national contexts. Therefore, an assessment of the influence of digital media criticism is enriched through insights into the nature of a contextual discursive arena (with a diverse set of criticisms), and how both journalistic and non-journalistic actors construct the idea of a discursive outcome.
Informed by the theoretical questions I have raised, I employ qualitative interviews in two journalistic contexts of Kenya and South Africa. Further, to add to the layer of insights into the phenomenon of digital criticism, I employ a contextual comparative approach.

**Contextual comparative approach**

This study aims to analyse the perceptions of critics, journalists and media accountability agents using the case of Kenya and South Africa. I have employed a soft comparison of the two countries, taking a “contextualism” comparative approach (Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2018). I will briefly explain my reasons for a cross-country approach in such a study of journalistic practice.

A comparative study is useful in “contrasting different macro-level units” be it countries or cultures (Esser and Hanitzsch 2012, 5). Apart from providing diverse settings through which concepts or theory can be examined, comparative research reveals how the media works in different cultural contexts. They have offered valuable insights into understanding understudied regions (Hanitzsch 2009, Kohn 1989).

In journalism studies, cross-national comparisons are critical in the understanding of transformation of journalistic practice as a result of globalisation and most fundamentally, as an answer to “naïve universalism” that is common in single-country studies especially in the Global North (Esser 2013, Livingstone 2003). However, there is still a strong Anglo-American bias in comparative studies. Willems (2014a) observes that, “while the Global North is largely seen as a beacon of media freedom and liberal democracy, the Global South is presented as a region with an inferior media system characterised by strong state intervention and lack of press freedom” (11). Understandably, comparative studies are fraught with practical challenges to do with resources, logistics, collaborative differences and disagreements as well as epistemological problems e.g. ‘out-of-context’ measurement, mostly leading to viewing phenomenon through the lenses of the Global North (Livingstone 2003, 480-483).

There is often a common expectation—and even pressure—for comparatists to justify their approach(es) and their choice(s) of units of study, mostly the nations. Hanitzsch (2009) argues that countries offer convenience in research as they mostly are the only options that provide have “clearly-defined boundaries” (416). However, it is
important to note that the idea of nation-state as a unit of analysis is problematic because nations, “are far from self-contained but rather comprise multiple cultures” (Hanitzsch 2009, 416, Livingstone 2003). Yet again, apart from the convenience of having some defined cultural and nation-state boundaries, the nation offers the basis for evaluating a particular phenomenon with the lens of a particular journalistic culture with which the researcher is already familiar (Esser and Hanitzsch 2012).

Lastly, comparative studies are indispensable in the quest to find a proper basis for validating the extent to which a certain phenomenon exists as well as the generalisability of findings (Kohn 1989, 77). They can serve to show that phenomena/theory or findings in single units of analysis are not necessarily unique to those contexts and with today’s transnational processes, it is inevitable that individual countries will experience influences from different international contexts (Livingstone 2003).

To frame my cross-national comparison, I took the approach Powers and Vera-Zambrano (2018) has referred to as “contextualism”, which essentially “aims to understand the meaning of an idea or practice in its context and uses comparison to examine the mechanisms or principles that unify or differentiate cases” (2). In this study, contextualism would imply interrogating the features and elements that underpin digital media criticism in the journalistic contexts of Kenya and South Africa. Ultimately, a contextual approach would enable us to define and explain digital media criticism in their own contextual terms without falling into the trap of universalism through employing standardised concepts and meanings (Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2018).

**Justification of country selection**

Researchers’ choices of cross-national comparisons for smaller studies are often based on three key justifications: selection of most similar countries when treating each nation as an object of study; selection of most different countries with universality of a phenomenon to support theory building, and; choice of most different countries if the goal is to seek a similar pattern of differences based on a common framework (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990, Kohn 1989). However, researchers’ justification for selection of countries in comparative studies often
varies from convenience to common practice. For practical and logistical reasons (time and costs), this study focuses on only two contexts: Kenya and South Africa. This research is driven by scholars’ interest in exploring popular media criticism and journalistic practice in understudied countries (in the field of journalism studies), but mostly because of contexts with potential to provide rich and nuanced understanding of digital media criticism, and lastly, my familiarity with the region.

Firstly, regions with less developed media accountability are likely to have more thriving media criticism online. MediaAcT—whose research sought to suggest new media policy for Europe—concludes with a strong proposal for institutionalisation of participatory media accountability online through media criticism (Fengler et al. 2014). A study within the same project by Eberwein and Porlezza (2014) shows that countries with ‘least developed media accountability practices’ have a budding media criticism culture that could complement weak regulatory institutions.

Globally, research about digital media criticism is scant, while countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are largely marginalised in core debates of the field of journalism studies. Yet, Sub-Saharan Africa is vast and therefore for this particular study the Anglophone region is of particular interest mainly because I am an English speaker. In my selection of countries for this study therefore, I considered the following English-speaking countries: Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The reason for the selection is that they are interesting cases in the study of journalism, as I will explain here.

Comparative studies of journalistic cultures show that citizens across the world share the idea that the media should be a watchdog of government, journalists should abide by professional norms and values, and that media should aspire to certain universal ethical principles such as impartiality and accuracy (Hanitzsch et al. 2011, Weaver and Willnat 2012). However, Hanitzsch et al. (2011) identify a category of countries that are experiencing a democratisation process and therefore have journalistic cultures with non-western outlook of “active promotion of particular values, ideas, groups and social change” (286-287). Several Anglophone countries could fall within the group of countries whose journalism aspires for developmental approaches. I
sought a broader set of similarities that would lead me to arrive at the best selection of two countries with more similarities in English-speaking Africa. A cursory survey of the state of media systems, media accountability\textsuperscript{34}, freedom of the press\textsuperscript{35}, ‘freedom on the net’\textsuperscript{36}, internet penetration\textsuperscript{37}, type of democracy\textsuperscript{38} and geopolitical influence led to a selection of seven possible comparisons: Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Through a process of elimination based on ‘most similar systems’ design (Kohn 1989), I arrive at Kenya and South Africa. The rationale for selecting the two is their similar media development borne out of a shared colonial history as well as a liberalised economy that has been the basis of rapid growth of the media and a concomitant spread of information technologies (Akue-Kpakpo 2013, ITU 2017). The two emerging democracies both have a robust media and a lively news audience landscape (Kalyango 2010). The widening media freedom since the 90s in South Africa and Kenya has been enhanced by strong media economies marked by private ownership of media organisations, some of which are the largest media conglomerates in Africa (such as Naspers Group of South Africa and the Nation Media Group in Kenya). The mainstream media organisations in the two countries have influences in their regions (for South Africa, Southern Africa and Kenya, Eastern Africa) because of their strategic importance in geopolitics as well as business interest in neighbouring countries.

\textsuperscript{34} This is based on the type of regulation, and the presence of independent news ombudsmen (see, for example, http://newsombudsmen.org/)


\textsuperscript{36} Freedom Houses uses this measure to show the extent to which citizens’ freedom to participate in digital spaces are respected in a particular geographical context. In 2016, Kenya and South Africa were the only African nations rated as ‘free’. See: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2016

\textsuperscript{37} The percentage of Internet users per population (Internet World Stats 2019). As at June 2019, Kenya’s internet penetration was 83% and South Africa’s 56.2%. See: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm#africa.

\textsuperscript{38} The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index sets four categories of democracies: Full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid and authoritarian/nominal democracy. South Africa has a flawed democracy and Kenya’s is hybrid. Nations with flawed democracies have relatively developed democratic culture of elections and respect of rights, but may still experience poor governance. Hybrid democracies have weak democratic institutions and weak rule of law. See: https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index.
Several studies into media accountability in Africa have clustered South Africa and Kenya as close cousins although both have unique political histories that have been central in the development of their media (Kalyango 2010, Mudhai 2004, Obuya 2012, Tettey 2006). There are other similarities that make a contextual comparative study of media criticism worthwhile. In both Kenya and South Africa, media development cannot be discussed outside certain political developments such as the history of colonialism, slow democratisation process, and socio-political factors such as the questions of negative ethnicity and racism. Comparative studies in areas of media accountability are supported by the effort to show the link between new changes in the new media landscape as well as specific uniqueness of various journalistic cultures that could bring more understanding to the transformation of journalism globally (Esser and Hanitzsch 2012, 4). I now turn to the method I have employed in my empirical study.

**In-depth interviews**

This study seeks to understand how criticism of the mainstream media in Kenya and South Africa becomes the basis for deliberation and potential transformation of journalistic practice. To investigate journalists’ perceptions of media-critical content, I conducted interviews with journalists, media critics and media accountability agents such as press council officials and public editors in Kenya and South Africa.

Interviewing is a relevant method for exploring perceptions. In this study, I chose in-depth interviews as a method to understand how journalists perceive the mainstream media. Because in-depth interviews are unstructured, there are more opportunities to probe and further understand the phenomenon one is interrogating (Denscombe 2010). In this study, it is important to interrogate the question whether journalists and media accountability agents perceive digital media criticism as influencing journalistic practice.

While ethnographic methods such as participant observation can shed light on some of the latent practices that show how journalists engage in criticism, for instance, newsroom discussions about criticism following the coverage of a news event, or editorial meeting where journalists reflect on critical tweets, it has logistical challenges. Ethnography is dependent on access to newsrooms and working
relationships with news professionals, but also requires time, commitment and self-reflexivity for its success (Cottle 2007, 4-6). In the case of contextual comparisons as in this study, the alternative, interviews, are appropriate and feasible especially when a variety of actors such as media accountability agents and media critics are involved. Through in-depth interviews it is also possible to draw more insights from how different actors in the newsrooms, editors, reporters and sub-editors tackle criticisms from audiences.

Informed by my theoretical framework—that journalistic and non-journalistic actors constitute the production of metajournalistic discourse—I focused on three categories of actors. The first of these includes the journalists who are the principle actors in news production and whose professional role places them as main producers of journalistic discourse. Journalists are identified in multiple media criticism studies, particularly in relation to how they respond to criticism from audiences (see, for example, von Krogh and Svensson 2017). However, as earlier mentioned, few empirical studies focus on journalists (for example, Pole, Gulyás, and Rehkopf 2012). The second category is of media accountability agents (collectively, media council official, press ombudspersons and media freedom defenders). As journalistic actors as well, they are constituents of journalistic discourses in the way they either act in defence or promote discursively agreed norms and values within the profession of journalism. While this group, particularly the press council officials, may enforce practices that promote professional culture (through codes of ethics or sanctions), they legitimise journalism practice. In addition, media accountability agents are also agents of accountability as a norm and practice, and therefore in questioning the regulatory potential of digital media criticism, this group is important.

Finally, the other target for interviews were digital media critics, individuals who consistently use digital platforms to criticise the media. In this dissertation, I focused on highly visible critics, those commonly identified by journalistic actors as their main critics. There are theoretical and practical reasons for their choice. Media critics online are numerous and scattered (leading to sampling challenges), but most importantly for this study, identifying those whose content are visible and read by practising journalists is critical especially in assessing the influence of digital media criticism. The other reason is
that there is a tradition of studying “high profile” critics (Fengler 2012) in media criticism studies. Highly visible critics have ‘clout’ (Snyder, Kelley, and Smillie 1995) and have shaped the culture of criticism and even discourses about media performance and quality (Goldstein 1989, Carey 1974, Marzolf 1991). Even in digital journalism, their criticism’s resonance is notable in the way they are spreadable on social media, for example through retweets in situations when there is a Twitter storm over a journalistic error (Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019). The high-profile critics could also be argued to be representative of digital communities. However, this group tends to serve an elite agenda through the capitalistic infrastructure that makes up digital media technologies such as Twitter (Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019). Even so, the argument of elite bias could as well be made of the mainstream media in any context.

**Data collection**

I conducted the interviews of critics, journalists and media accountability agents in person in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Nairobi between July 2015 and September 2018 (four interviews and follow-ups were conducted via Skype upon request by the respondents). The interviews took on average 58 minutes each. The interviewees were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix IV). The interviews were anonymised as well as all data resulting from this research.

The interviews (see the guides in Appendices I-III) interrogated, among others, the following issues: the reasons for critics use of digital platforms to criticise the media; their issues about journalism in their contexts; their potential audiences (including journalists) and whether they responded to them; what journalists and media accountability agents perceived of digital media critics and their criticism; the nature of criticism journalists read on digital platforms; the criticisms they perceive as addressing key issues of journalism, and if journalists and media accountability agents believed that criticism from the digital media critics mattered in their work.

**Pilot study**

In July 2015, I conducted a pilot study which involved seven respondents in Nairobi to test questions (whether respondents
(understood them) and fine-tune them so they are clear before the actual study begins (see Creswell 2013). In my pilot study, apart from testing the questions, I assessed responses of journalists on the question about the sources of criticism, whether from non-public (press councils or peers) or public criticism. The outcome was informative; for instance, my initial hunch was that bloggers drew more attention of journalists. However, during the pilot it became clear from the data collected that sources of criticism were varied and journalists’ attention was not specific to a single or a few sources.

Also, during this period, I conducted a cursory online search for main sources of digital criticism in the two countries. I performed qualitative content analysis of small samples of tweets using trending, media-related hashtags in Kenya and South Africa. The aim of the two processes was to establish an inventory of main critical voices in the two contexts, and have an overview of the main issues raised through criticism in digital spaces. The insights from these exploratory processes mainly informed my interviewing, even though data obtained at this stage was not incorporated into the eventual analysis.

**Sampling**

The pilot study was conducted through convenience sampling, allowing for identification of respondent, but for the main phases of data collection, respondents were identified through strategic/purposeful sampling. Samples in qualitative studies are mostly determined by the phenomenon under study and the need for flexibility in adapting to the process of the fieldwork. In this research, I was cognisant of the practical and logistical challenges of a study based in two countries, Kenya and South Africa, and myself as a researcher living in Sweden. (I criss-crossed four cities – Nairobi, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Karlstad at various periods between 2015 to 2018).

There were two substantive impediments in conducting data collection: one was the diversity of both the media and digital landscapes in Kenya and South Africa and two, the comparative perspective of the study which then required a relative balance of data collected in both contexts. Purposive sampling was therefore appropriate here because it allows a researcher to “select participants who have experience with the central phenomenon or the key concept being explored” (Creswell and Plano Clark 2010, 112). The strategy
employed was ‘maximal variation’ which is a way to ensure that data collected takes diverse perspectives (Creswell and Plano Clark 2010). For this study, diverse perspectives would ensure richness of the data especially discourses of journalism that journalists, media accountability agents and critics generate.

For journalists, my intention was to use available list of journalists from different organisations to ensure my sample mainstream media journalists working for print, broadcast and online media. Further, I aimed to find journalists taking various roles and beats, but mainly reporters and editors, who had varied perspectives on criticism based on their job descriptions. For Kenya, the Media Council of Kenya maintains a publicly available list of accredited journalists on its website39 but without their contacts. In some cases, I used publicly available contacts for individual journalists and newsrooms to set appointments. My familiarity with the Kenyan media landscape (as a former journalist in Nairobi) helped in finding most contacts. In South Africa, while a publicly available list of practising journalists existed, access required a subscription and this was not an expense planned in my project budget. However, a contact at the University of Cape Town shared several lists that had been used for previous research of journalists in South Africa. This list was helpful even though some of the journalists’ official emails bounced. The reason is that journalists frequently move from one media organisation to another or change careers (also common in Kenya). At this point I employed snowballing to find more journalists and their contacts. I also attended journalists’ forums in Cape Town and Johannesburg where I received more references from practising journalists, media accountability agents and members of the South African National Editors’ Forum (SANEF).

For media accountability agents, I made contacts at media councils in South Africa—the Press Ombudsman office and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA)—and the Media Council in Kenya. The other respondents were public editors (who are few in both countries and are prominent figures) as well as representatives of press freedom organisations.

For media critics, journalists were important in the selection of subjects. Journalists recommended a variety of bloggers, social media influencers and rights groups. For bloggers and social media influencers, I selected those that had been mentioned often by journalists and media accountability agents. For rights groups and their officials, I made direct contacts with their organisations.

The respondents
In total, 57 interviews were conducted, involving 27 journalists, 20 media critics and 10 media accountability agents in both Kenya and South Africa. Qualitative interviews are imprecise about sufficient numbers for interviews, and for my data collection I considered two reasons in winding down my data collection in September 2018: One was that the ‘theoretical saturation’ (Creswell 2013, Lindlof and Taylor 2011) had been attained when initial data analysis showed my themes had been covered, and two, I had achieved a considerable balance of interviews in both Kenya and South Africa.

In total, 91 respondents were contacted through emails, phone calls and visits at offices and newsrooms for the interview and 68 positive responses were received. Twenty-three of those contacted did not respond to emails or phone calls, while among those who accepted to be interviewed, they were either unavailable on the dates of our appointment or preferred a different date that was not possible for me. Four of those contacted declined to be interviewed. Three were journalists (two in South Africa and one in Kenya) and the other was a media accountability agent in Kenya. For two journalists in South Africa, the reason for declining the interview was that they were not well versed with their organisations’ newsrooms. One had specialised in travel journalism (and was working for a media organisation based in China) while another had moved on to public relations by the time he was available for the interview. The journalist in Kenya declined to be interviewed as he was a subject of ferocious criticism on social networks and thus wished to avoid the subject altogether (personal communication). Lastly, the media accountability agent (in a senior position) gave two reasons for declining the interview. First was that he did not “wish to comment” on my “topic in particular” and second, he preferred that a more junior staff member speak on behalf of his organisation (personal communication). For the
Journalists

Twenty-seven journalists were interviewed – 15 from Kenya and 12 from South Africa (see Appendix V for list of journalists interviewed). They represented seven outlets of mainstream media organisations in Kenya and South Africa that included: Times Media Group, Media 24, South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), Nation Media Group, Standard Media Group, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), Mediamax Network and Radio Africa Group. These outlets were chosen because they reach majority populations in both the countries, play critical roles in setting the news agenda, have extensively used online media platforms, and therefore their content is widely available to digital media critics.

Majority of the respondents had university degree qualifications – this group being mostly journalists with less than 15 years’ experience. In both Kenya and South Africa, most journalists have a college-level education. Findings from a national survey of Kenyan journalists, for example, shows that about half of the practising ones have a minimum qualification of a bachelor’s degree (Ireri 2015b). In South Africa, more than 60% of practising journalists have a bachelors’ degree (de Beer 2016).

Among the 27 informants were 11 female journalists (six in Kenya and five in South Africa). Studies of journalists’ demographics in both countries have noted gender differences, with South Africa achieving a 50/50 parity in its workforce (Made and Morna 2009, Daniels 2014) while Kenya still lags behind with a majority—66% of its practising journalists being male (Ireri 2015b). The range of experience of the respondents was 3 and 27 years.

The roles the respondents took were defined as either reporter (writers and photojournalists) or editor (sub-editors, beat editors or managing editors). Owing to their varied activities, both the roles add to a richer scholarly understanding of journalistic practice. In most newsrooms, editors are responsible for production and publication of content and in some cases, serve as representatives of the owners in the newsrooms and are therefore concerned with the reputation of the
media organisation (Duffy 2019). For these reasons, their views of media criticism may vary from those of reporters. Further, they spend time in the newsroom and are involved in most cases, editorial meetings that discusses the content and other aspects of the practice. They perhaps would observe and reflect on media-critical content online as well as behaviour of their juniors (because editors occupy higher places in the newsroom hierarchy). For their part, reporters spend more time in the field and might meet their critics personally. Their concern with criticism would perhaps not be on the general issues as regards the media they represent, but issues specific to their beats or the stories they cover and are published.

Of importance to this study was respondents’ use or consumption of digital media. All respondents had presence on digital platforms, mostly Twitter and Facebook, but their activeness varied with one editor in South Africa keeping the lowest profile. However, respondents engaged frequently with peers about audience content and comments.

Media accountability agents
The respondents here consisted of press council officials, ombudspersons and representatives of media freedom organisations in Kenya and South Africa. In total, 10 respondents, were interviewed – five from each country (see Appendix VI for list of media accountability agents interviewed). This sample size was adequate because media accountability organisations tend to have few representatives.

Media councils receive complaints from the public, and these complaints include criticisms of the media organisations and journalists. They represent the traditional form of regulating the media and hence are vital in understanding the process through which journalistic practice should be assessed. As the ‘conventional’ critics of the media, the views of media council officials are pertinent to this study.

Public editors constitute internal media accountability mechanisms and provide criticisms as well to journalists. Ombudspersons assess newsroom work and are sometimes engaged with editors and reporters in discussions that raise accountability issues. In line with their main role of addressing public complaints (Nemeth 2000), public editors are
often involved in probing the practices that lead to public dissatisfaction with media organisations. They therefore are best placed to comment on journalistic practice and possible changes in the practice, as a result of media criticism. Lastly, media defenders (or media stakeholders in general) work to promote media freedom, media development or professionalism, and thus shield journalism against institutional interferences.

Digital media critics
As mentioned before, there is a tradition of studying “single high-profile” media critics (Fengler 2001). They constitute a defined group of popular critics that have substantial public presence (as influencers in public and social sphere) and consequently their criticisms are shared widely (see Goldstein 1989).

This group was identified through meetings and interviews with journalists of the mainstream media organisations in Kenya. These are bloggers, media watchdog officials or prominent social media users, whom journalists identified as their main critics. Twenty media critics were interviewed in Kenya and South Africa – 10 in each country (see Appendix V for list of media critics interviewed). They comprised prominent active bloggers, media activist groups, fact-checkers as well as officials of independent media monitoring.

Analysis of data
A traditional qualitative data analysis was undertaken after transcription, with the intention to get more in touch with the data in case there was a need to get back to the informants (Berger 2011). Overall, the aim of this analysis was to employ a flexible design that would allow interpretation of the big amount of a variety of data while ensuring quality throughout the process. Initially I conducted manual coding with select transcripts, owing to a setback in finding a suitable and pocket-friendly Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). Later on, when I found a CAQDAS—Dedoose—the initial analysis proved worthwhile as it had helped to have an early feel of the results and generate a coding list. After proficiency sessions with Dedoose, it became much easier to establish a coding system from the initial list.
The coding followed this process: I worked a coding manual in a separate word document. I then coded select transcripts (representing all the three categories of the respondents). The coding here was a reflexive process or evaluation of interpretations of data.

Later, I coded all data through reading and rereading of the transcripts using Dedoose. CAQDAS are necessary analytical tools when dealing with a significant amount of data as in my case. They also organise data and coding, and offers functions such as quick analyses and visualisations through which one can observe patterns in the process of the interpretation of data (Robson 2011). In the case of Dedoose, analysed results are easily imported in a variety of formats to be analysed and presented in a dissertation. However, CAQDAS, apart from being costly, can bog down the researcher in learning how to use it, or lead to obsession over analytics rather than quality of interpretation (Robson 2011). I avoided the pitfalls of CAQDAS by focusing on my research questions and through transparency on reliability and validity of the results.

Coding of the transcripts involved identifying words or phrases as dictated by the research questions CAQDAS. A software-driven line by line coding was helpful, especially in generating codes inductively. Throughout this process, notes were taken under “memo” in Dedoose. The analysis software provides memos that are linked to the codes and selected excerpts allowing for easy and progressive analysis and interpretation of data. Later, the when the coding process was done, using the sub-themes generated I established major themes based on my research questions. My theoretical framework informed the process of generating themes.

The upside of thematic coding analysis is its flexibility and ease of use, but the danger is that it can lock one in “description or exploration with little attempt made at interpretation” (Robson 2011). As a remedy, while the descriptive data is necessary especially in regard to the comparative ‘contextualism’ approach, I made careful analysis in the interpretation of data while consciously revisiting and interpreting data through the theoretical framework of this study.

**Reliability and validity**

In the case of qualitative interviews, how data is interpreted goes hand in hand with a scholar’s effort to explain reliability and validity of their
findings (Bryman 2012). Reliability refers to reproducibility of results, and hence the key indicators for any interpretation of data are ‘consistency’ and ‘trustworthiness’ (Bryman 2012). There are two main steps that were taken to increase reliability of the results in this study, mainly with an aim to offset subjectivity. First, during the interview process, utmost care was taken to avoid leading questions, which would impose the interviewer’s subjective results. Second, while constraints and volume of data could not allow for con-current transcription, a sample of the interviews (7) were transcribed separately by transcribers and myself. Additionally, subjectivity is inevitable, and thus transparency and acknowledgement of biases are necessary for good practice.

Validity refers to the quality of the results in terms of accuracy and relevance to the phenomenon under investigation (Bryman 2012). The volume of data was considered and thus multiple interviews were conducted to increase validity of the research. Another consideration made here was the comparative aspect of the study, and thus in contacting respondents balance of data from both Kenya and South Africa was taken into account. To ensure accuracy of the outcome, there was a consideration that journalists may not be forthright on whether critics' views of their news practices influences them. Further, the quality of the research is determined by the framing of proper questions and interviewing skills. A pilot study is often recommended as a way to forestall possible errors in interviewing (Creswell 2013). For this reason, I conducted a pilot study before the main study began in 2016.

Challenges and ethical considerations

Qualitative studies note the challenge with studying journalists which include their tendency to change schedules over deadlines (Besley and Roberts 2010). Many journalists are also expert interviewers and are sometimes not accustomed to being interviewed themselves. My previous career as a journalist proved an asset, but also a challenge during the data collection process. I received positive responses for my interview requests with most of my respondents, especially those who happened to be either former and current journalists. In Kenya, however, my familiarity with the journalists (being Kenyan and having practised in Nairobi) also meant frequent postponements of interviews
with an occasional short text message with, “you understand... it’s tight!”.

Familiarly as well also hampered effective interviewing, with journalists making assumptions that I already understood the context of what they were explaining because I had been in the “business”. This posed the risk of commonalities and agreements that would hinder the process of learning something new or different. Empiricists cite the challenge of “studying sideways” (interviewing people with whom we share professions) and as remedy suggest “giving reflexivity back” to the respondent as well as moderated disagreement (Plesner 2011). In most cases, I redirected the question, reframed it or asked the respondents to clarify, for “the sake of record” to which they obliged. Sometimes I motivated the respond with a statement like, “...your personal experience would be great for this research”.

Second, one of the key challenges for my research was investigating perceived influence of journalists as a result of media criticism. Making the connection between change and media criticism is difficult even when journalists have taken corrective measures in cases where they have erred. Additionally, journalists do not often admit weaknesses in the profession (Fengler et al. 2014). An interviewing strategy was therefore useful where I asked journalists about what they have perceived as influence in their profession in observing their peers. It was important as well to interrogate the question on what they perceived as ‘legitimate’ criticism, to ask, for example, if it was fine to listen to criticism by fellow journalists but not outsiders.

Third, during the interviewing processes the practical challenges included the choice of site for the interview. Some respondents (especially journalists) preferred to meet at cafes, which affected the quality of the recordings because of background noise. Often, I went to the venues early and chose the quieter sections, although this was not always possible. Other interviews were done conveniently in offices and newsroom boardrooms.

As for ethical considerations, I did the following: I availed printed consent forms (see Appendix IV) in the face-to-face interviews in Nairobi, Cape Town and Johannesburg, and made each interviewee aware of my obligation to keep the data confidential. In some cases, such as Skype interviews, the respondent and myself agreed on a verbal consent at the beginning of the interview. In addition, all the data from
the interviews were anonymised, thus my use of the codes for each respondent in the empirical chapters.

**The context of the study**

I will now return to the cases of South Africa and Kenya, which are the objects of this study. The two countries have robust media in the Anglophone region of Sub-Saharan Africa. They have the English newspapers with the widest circulation in Africa—*Sunday times* and *Daily Sun* of South Africa as well as *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* in Kenya. The two public service broadcasters—South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) have had significant influence in the two countries for decades, especially in rural areas, where majority populations live.

Since the 2000s, the mainstream media in both countries has been under intensive pressure from falling revenues, rising production costs, frequent layoffs of news professionals and even the collapse of some media organisations (Finlay 2017). At the same time, alternative media platforms are on the rise with blogs and professional media projects thriving outside the mainstream, mostly steered by laid off, retired or fired journalists. The growing significance of blogs/websites such as the *Daily Maverick* in South Africa as well as *The Elephant* and *Africa Uncensored* in Kenya is perhaps a testament to the declining influence of legacy news organisations in both countries.

The increasing internet use in the two countries in the past 15 years (Akue-Kpakpo 2013, ITU 2017) has significantly multiplied sources of news and avenues through which citizens deliberate on issues of governance and the fourth estate. But at the same time new media technologies have piled pressure on the legacy news media to adopt new business models and new strategies to meet demands of changing audiences. The popularisation of social media in both the countries, as seen in the recent growth of Twitter use in Africa (Portland-Communications 2015), poses a fresh challenge to the revenue stream of traditional media. For example, recent Twitter storm in South Africa

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40 An example is South African Press Association (SAPA) wire service, the oldest news agency in the country, which shut down in March 2015 owing to financial troubles.
(following protests under the banner of #RhodesMustFall41 and #ZumaMustFall42) and in Kenya (over the use of #SomeoneTellCNN43) marked a turn in the way media and society locally and abroad engages with audiences, sources for news and imagines citizen power (Jacobs and Wasserman 2015, Adeiza and Howard 2016, Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019).

Although privately-owned media organizations in both countries have amassed influence over national and political discourse, and have bigger budgets than public service media, FM radio and community media reach the majority of both countries’ populations in vernacular languages. It is further important to note that international media organisation with Chinese, American, British, Arabic, German and French connections, are a significant part of the news diet of audiences in both countries. They include: BBC, Al Jazeera, CGTN Africa, CNN, Voice of America (VOA), Deutsche Welle and Africanews.

Arguably, journalism in Kenya and South Africa is the most visible internationally compared to that of other African countries because of their ferociously news-hungry audience (Steyn, de Beer, and Steyn 2005, Ireri 2017b, Ismail and Deane 2008). These countries attract global experimental journalism projects and training programmes funded and run by international organisations such the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (Wan-Ifra). Further, the professionalism of Kenyan and South African journalists has been acknowledged through frequent hiring by the aforementioned global news networks and impressive performance at continental journalism competitions such as the CNN/Multichoice Africa Journalist of the Year awards44.

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41 The hashtag and subsequent protests promoted a students’ movement against the statue of British imperialist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town in March 2015.
42 The hashtag was used to protest against South Africa’s President Jacob Zuma over corruption.
43 Hashtag used in July 2015 to criticise CNN and other western news outlets over negative coverage of African countries.
Media and criticism in South Africa

South Africa’s media is perhaps the most diverse and complex in the African continent. It has large media groups, more than 300 community media (Finlay 2017) and numerous online platforms, all reaching majority of its population. Although the public service media, SABC, independently has the most reach, the print media has more influence on national discourse and even attracts more critics (Kabwato 2017). The leading print media organisations include Media 24, Times Media Group, Caxton and Independent Media.

The country enjoys a self-regulatory mechanism through two influential organisations – the Press Council of South Africa (PCSA) and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA). The press council—founded by the independent media—receives and adjudicates complaints from the public about biased or unfair reporting. To promote professionalism and adherence to ethical standards agreed by media organisations and journalists, the two have codes of ethics for journalists. The South African media has had news ombudspersons for a longer time than other African countries. Since the early 2000s, several news public editors—mostly academics with backgrounds in journalism practice—have worked for different media organisations and by 2018 at least three had been members of the global Organisation of News Ombudsmen (ONO).

The persistent critic of the media and regulatory mechanisms in South Africa is the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC). The party often accuses the media of being subservient to ‘white monopoly capital’, owing to a slow structural transformation towards giving voice and opportunities to a black majority population (Kabwato 2017, Malila 2014). The lack of diversity and plurality of the media in South Africa is often blamed on ownership structure composed of majority white control and a weak regulatory framework. Since 2007, the ANC has pushed for alternative regulatory mechanism through a proposal to create the Media Appeals Tribunal (MAT), which the party argues will be accountable to Parliament (Kabwato 2017, Reid and Isaacs 2015). Like most state interventions to regulate the media, stakeholders and journalists see MAT as a threat to media freedom (Van Leeuwen 2012).
Engagement in media policy and regulation issues is strong among news professionals, academics and other media stakeholders, with regular interests in the performance of the Press Council and BCCSA in national discourse. Universities and scholars are at the forefront of partnerships, projects, forums, conferences and reports that directly engage the media industry and journalists in a vibrant debate about journalistic performance and accountability in South Africa. There are numerous examples but a few can be mentioned here: the University of Witwatersrand has a journalism project that publishes a biennial report, *State of the Newsroom*\(^45\) and hosts fora consisting media practitioners and scholars to discuss emerging issues; Wits’ scholar Franz Kruger and University of Stellenbosch’s George Claassen are media ombudsmen for various media outlets in the country, and; Rhodes University hosts an annual conference, *Highway Africa*\(^46\), whose participants are news professionals and academics. Rhodes University also publishes the journal of the *Rhodes Journalism Review* (an equivalent of the *Columbia Journalism Review*) which invites practitioners and academics to write about major issues afflicting journalism in South Africa.

South Africa’s history of apartheid and the process of transformation has given rise to a major criticism of the media: that it is an impediment to ensuring equity between the black and the white populations (Harber and Renn 2010). Finlay (2017) summarises the challenge of South African media today as follows:

The media mirror a society that is deeply split between a wealthy and middle-class elite that is small, although less racially defined than it used to be, and a majority struggles with grinding poverty. The elite, urban media do not reach the majority of the population, that has very few information choices. At the same time calls for transformation continue, sometimes legitimate, sometimes driven by politicians’ discomfort with vigorous, independent journalism (Finlay 2017, ii).

\(^45\) [https://journalism.co.za/resources/state-of-the-newsroom/](https://journalism.co.za/resources/state-of-the-newsroom/)

\(^46\) [http://highwayafrica.ru.ac.za/](http://highwayafrica.ru.ac.za/)
South Africa has therefore seen the emergence of citizen initiatives to address journalistic performance in matters to do with diversity in coverage and fairness in media representation of mainly the black marginalised population. The Movement for Transformation in Media in South Africa (MTMSA) is an activist group that often criticises the mainstream media over racism. Other watchdog groups, while championing for press freedom, right to information, also question journalistic performance and media diversity in South Africa. They include Right2Know and Media Monitoring Africa, which is a watchdog that fights against unfair, illegal and unethical news coverage of children.

South Africa’s media review scene is diverse. While academia and press council officials monitor and engage journals in various fora, media organisations give space and time to debates and discourses about the state of journalism in the country. Among the media review programmes are The Eusebius McKaiser Show on radio 702 and podcasts. As a talk show host, Eusebius McKaiser, discusses with guests from society and politics, various topical issues including the media and race in South Africa. McKaiser hosted briefly a short-lived show on eNCA TV, Meet the Media, in 2016. Another talk show host who discusses the media as well as new technologies is Asraf Garda of the show, Media@SAfm, on SAfm 104-107.

The South African blogosphere is diverse and large relative to other African nations, although fewer blogs specialise in media criticism. The blogs that criticise the media range from the professional to the amateurish.

The professional media-critical blogs include: Harbinger (see Figure 4) by Anton Harber, a media manager and adjunct professor at Witwatersrand University; Media in the South by journalism professor Herman Wasserman, and; Low Opinions and Musings on the Media. Other blogs that criticise the media include: Akanyang Africa and TV with Thinus that focus on TV. The mainstream media in South

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47 Among previous topics of the McKaiser's recorded shows are, "Are media owners killing journalism", "women in the media", "Is mainstream media racist" and "Foreign correspondents in South Africa". See: http://www.702.co.za/podcasts/125/the-best-of-the-eusebius-mckaiser-show.
Africa also receives criticisms from the satirical puppet show *ZANEWS Daily*, whose videos are shared on YouTube.

On social media, there is an active audience of the mainstream media that comments on journalism content and coverage regularly. Journalists themselves have various networks on Facebook and Twitter through which they discuss the practice. A notable one is the Facebook group, *SA Journos from the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s - and beyond*. According to the administrator’s description, the closed group has a membership that consists of journalists who practised in South Africa before the 2000, or people who interacted with news professionals. While members “reminisce the good and the bad old days”, they also discuss the ‘poor’ state of journalism today.

*Figure 4:* Anton Harber runs the media-critical blog, ‘The Harbinger’.

In addition, since at least 2012, the South African new media landscape has seen the rise of data and fact-checking organisations. While these organisations reinforce truth-seeking and verification, they also question news sourcing practices, transparency and accountability (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018). The organisations include Code for

[https://www.facebook.com/groups/128420177290951/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/128420177290951/)
Africa, Open UP and Africa Check, which has operations in Kenya and several other African countries as well.

**Media and criticism in Kenya**

Like South Africa, Kenya has large private media corporations – Nation Media Group, Standard Media Group, Capital Group, Mediamax, Radio Africa Group and Royal Media Group. The public service media, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) has a significant reach in rural regions. Private broadcast media take a very large share of audiences in urban areas.

The newspapers owned by the main media conglomerates in the country—Nation Media Group and Standard Group—are the Daily Nation and the Standard. The two have the highest circulation in the country, although they compete closely in setting the national agenda with the Star (Radio Africa Group) and the People Daily (Mediamax Network). Radio is still the dominant medium, with large listenership of FM radio and vernacular channels, especially in Kenya’s rural counties.

Although Kenya’s media market is one of the freest in Africa (Freedom 2010, Ireri 2015a), it has periodically experienced ‘soft censorship’ (Lansner 2017b). The government—a major source of advertising revenue to private media—cuts advertisement or defaults on payments mostly to ‘tame’ the private media, a tactic that Rusbridger (2017) has called fiscal blackmail. Despite the financial strangulation, Kenya’s media is lively and has active investigative journalism that has consistently exposed institutional corruption and waste of public resources. Its exposés of corruption are subjects of critics and supporters. To some critics, Kenya’s news media subjects the public to ‘corruption fatigue’ because the political elite do little to stop endemic corruption (Lansner 2017b).

However, Kenya’s mainstream media, especially the press, has opened itself up to criticisms, occasionally publishing critical opinions or illustrations from the public, politicians, civil society groups or from its editorial cartoonists. An example are occasional editorial cartoons that portray the news media’s faults and failures. See for example the cartoon in Figure 5 depicting the earlier mentioned fiscal blackmail – the basis of a dubious relationship between the media and the state, the main source of advertising revenue in Kenya. The cartoonist is The
Standard’s Godfrey Mwapemba (Gado), who previously worked for the Daily Nation.

Figure 5: Gado’s caricature of media executives, the President and his deputy.

Kenya has a co-regulatory mechanism, the Media Council of Kenya (MCK). The council was created through legislation in 2007, but its predecessor was self-regulatory. The country does not have a long tradition of ombudspersons. The Star was the first newspaper to hire a public editor in 2012, and later other major newspapers followed the practice.

As previously mentioned, the press has kept a degree of criticism through columns that criticise the media as an institution, as well as the craft of journalism. For example, the long-running column “Mark my Word” (by veteran journalist Philip Ochieng) in the Daily Nation criticises poor use of the English language in the news. In the 90s the trade press was livened with the equivalent of the Columbia Journalism Review, eXpression Today⁴⁹, founded in 1996 by journalist David Makali. In 2019, the association of editors, Kenya

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⁴⁹ The magazine went online in the 2000s but wound up in 2013.
Editor's Guild, launched its trade publication, *Kenya Journalism Review*, whose purpose was to “enhance discourses on the place, roles/obligations and performance of the media and journalism.”

Further, the rise of media review shows in the 2010s has enriched the media accountability landscape in Kenya. In 2014, Nation Television (NTV), first ran the media review show, *Press Pass*, inviting journalists, political actors, media defenders and representatives of the public to discuss media’s coverage and performance. Later other review shows were started – Kenya Television Network’s (KTN), *The Newsroom* and Citizen TV’s *The Fourth Estate*.

As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, a media-critical culture in digital spaces has grown significantly in Kenya. On social networks, a variety of users engage in criticism of the mainstream media, and employ several strategies. In the 2010s, hashtags have particularly become popular ways to criticise the media. For example, a virtual community referred to as Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) have popularised ‘#SomeoneTell’ code. The code is applied to target any news organisation or journalist that enrages the digital public. Its most trending use was in 2015, through the criticism of CNN over its negative coverage about Kenya. Local media are occasional subjects of the hashtag that attracts numerous posts on Twitter and Facebook. Some of the hashtags used so far include, #SomeoneTellStandard, #SomeoneTellTheStar, and #SomeoneTellNation that address the faults and failures of Kenya’s mainstream newspapers.

In the 2010s, citizen blogs popularised media commentaries about journalism. In particular, the blogs, *Media Madness* and *Jackal News*, attracted the attention of journalists. They exposed newsroom intrigues, errors in the news, journalistic incompetence and poor working conditions in news organisations. Later, other blogs, including *Kenyan Editor* and *Business Today*, took up criticism, mostly focusing on ‘news about the media’, but occasionally running commentaries about content or journalists. Other blogs that solely run media commentaries have emerged and include *Journalism Drycleaner* (see Figure 6) and *Media critic Kenya*.

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50 Kenya Editors’ Guild, Twitter post, August 2019, 10.25 a.m., [https://twitter.com/KenyaEditors/status/1150380120408344258](https://twitter.com/KenyaEditors/status/1150380120408344258)
Figure 6: Veteran journalist Albert Gachiri’s media-critical blog.

Journalism Drycleaner promises its audience a consistent ‘in-depth review of the media’ through analysis and commentary of form and content of the news. The banner on the blog’s homepage declares: "If you feel a news story does not measure up to expected journalistic standards, bring it to the Journalism Drycleaner.”

The take-away

In this chapter, I have explained the method based on a contextual comparative study and qualitative interviews. Qualitative approaches are particularly fruitful in studies that aim to understand perspectives of subjects such as this one. Further, while allowing flexibility in presentation of data, a qualitative approach will help this study to sufficiently explain the phenomenon of digital media criticism in its context. In my case, I have selected Kenya and South Africa for a contextual understanding of critics and criticisms in digital spaces. The two countries have a wide inventory of media accountability practices, and also a lively media-critical culture in their digital spaces. Therefore, studying what digital media criticism portends to journalistic practice will enrich the understanding of the phenomenon.
Having explained my empirical approach and provided the context for the study, I will in the next chapter discuss the empirical results from the interviews with digital media critics.
PART II: Findings & Analysis

The next part of this dissertation consists of the empirical chapters 5-10. In organising the chapters, I employ the analytical grid that I proposed in Chapter 3. In that chapter, I observed that digital media criticism in a digital discursive ecology that comprises public discourses, metajournalistic discourse (MD) and journalistic discourse (JD). Furthermore, I argued that to deconstruct the discursive outcome as a theoretical perspective to understand digital media criticism, the following dimensions are critical: critical actors, evaluative issue, defensive response, corrective (re)action, digital resource and discursive outcome (see Figure 7).

![Figure 7: The dimensions of digital media criticism in a discursive ecology.](image)

Critical actors, the subject of Chapter 5, are the critics evaluating journalism in the terms of form and content, individual journalist, organisation, institution and ideology (categories discussed earlier in Chapter 2). In Chapter 6 (‘The sins of journalism’), the evaluative subject as a dimension of discursive outcome is addressed. The chapter examines the main themes that emerge from criticism through the
voices of both journalists and non-journalistic actors. The themes point to deficiencies or failures of different aspects of journalistic practice. Chapter 7 (‘No criticism is good criticism’) tackles the defensive response dimension. The chapter delves into the journalistic assertions about particular criticisms in the process of delegitimising them. What follows is Chapter 8 (‘A matter of Correction’), which interrogates the corrective (re)action that constitutes legitimisation of criticisms in digital spaces. The manifestations of corrective actions are varied include ways in which delineate good (and bad) criticisms. Chapter 9 (‘Digitality of Criticism’) presents findings based on the digital resource as a dimension for understanding the discursive outcome of criticism. The dimension represents the contribution of digital platforms to criticism of journalistic practice. Lastly, Chapter 10 (‘The Critical Purchase’) focusses on the discursive outcome, which are the cumulative contributions of the discourses of criticism in a digital discursive ecology.

In these empirical chapters, I present findings along with excerpts from interviews. I have used a coding system to identify respondents, in order to keep their identities anonymous. In this scheme, the first letter is the designation “J” to represent journalist, “MAA” as media accountability agent and “MC” as media critic. The second letter in the scheme refers to the country, with “K” for Kenya and “SA” for South Africa. The last part is the number assigned to a respondent from each of the two countries. Thus, you will encounter the respondent marked as ‘J-K10’, which means the journalist is from Kenya and is the 10th in the list of the interviewees from that country. I have also occasionally mentioned their specific roles, such as “reporter” or “editor” for journalists or “blogger” for media critics in cases where specific designation is relevant for context of the extract. In the next chapter I focus on the critical actor and what s/he heralds for criticism of journalism.
Chapter 5. Who’s the digital media critic?

This chapter examines the place of the critical actor in a discursive framework of digital criticism. The focus here is on how critics establish legitimacy as assessed through their nature, how they perceive their role in criticism, their vision for journalism, and how they position themselves in a community of critics in digital spaces.

As non-journalistic actors, digital media critics constitute key actors in the production of metajournalistic discourse. I have argued in Chapter 3 that the nature of critics, including their perceived roles and motivations, determine how they construct their stake in the discursive ecology of journalism. However, journalistic actors (in my case, journalists and media accountability agents) form part of this discursive entanglement. Therefore, their perceptions of digital media critics are pertinent in understanding how the non-journalistic actors are legitimised. Critics carry competencies and generate a discursive power through production of metajournalistic discourse.

The findings here show that their nature as ‘high-profile’ critics in digital spaces suggests privileged voices control the critical space of journalistic practice. The positioning of these critics in the digital discursive ecology suggests that they play an expository role – that of translators of public and journalistic discourse. These expositors mostly set the agenda about methods and content of evaluation of the media. Entry to the critical space of expositors could mean one must conform to the methods of these shapers of journalistic discourse. Further, the fact that journalists identify with such critical actors could imply they are positioned in close proximity to the realm of journalistic discourse as I discuss in this section.

The next section focusses on the description of critics and how they position themselves as actors of discourse and thereby construct an agenda for criticism.

Describing the critics

In the previous chapter, I provided details of 20 critics interviewed for this study, including 10 from South Africa and 10 from Kenya. I referred to journalists to prescribe the main critics of their work that employ digital platforms. Journalists cited these critics and their criticisms as most visible to journalists and news media organisations.
Among them were seven critics who were either practising journalists, former journalists or individuals with a background in journalism practice and education. Previous studies argue that most criticisms that journalists respond to tend to come from practising and former journalists (Zelizer 1997, Bishop 2001). These critics have knowledge about journalism, either through training at journalism schools or the practice, have experiences working in newsrooms and therefore have an insider understanding of issues affecting journalism. There were four critics who were either practicing or had worked for international news organisations in Kenya and South Africa. Two critics were academics who dabbled in journalism practice and teaching/research at universities.

Beyond their background and experiences, it is important to understand how critics position themselves as non-journalistic actors in a discursive arena of journalism through digital platforms. In the description of the critics (see Appendix VI) I point out the following: their current occupation, the type of critic (e.g. blogger or social media influencer), work experience and the main digital platforms they employ in their criticism. Among the 20 critics were six bloggers, with four of the bloggers in Kenya while the two were academics (with backgrounds in media and law) in South Africa. With the exception of bloggers, most of the respondents rarely referred to themselves with the label ‘critic’, even though they actively criticised journalism and described their text on digital platforms as referring to the local mainstream media. To appeal to audiences and optimise their visibility of their criticism, bloggers tend to be specific with a descriptive label.

We could interrogate these critics further. They are middle class, have a good education and have acquired cultural capital through their visibility on digital platforms, as well as criticism of the media which attracts attention among users online. Further, the majority (14) are male. Male dominance of discursive spaces, especially on digital platforms, is identified as a common pointer to disparities in media participation (Hindman 2009), a subject I will return to in Chapter 9.

**The insider-outsider position**

How central are critical actors to journalism? I have argued in Chapter 3 that in order to construct an idea of effective criticism, it is important to interrogate how these non-journalistic actors orient themselves in
journalism’s discursive realm. Here I interrogate critics’ discursive positions based on dimensions defined in Chapter 3: expertise, goals, strategies, reach, platforms and agenda.

_Expertise_

In terms of expertise (knowledge of journalism practice and the media environment), the media critics interviewed are close to the heart of journalism. The critics—with most visibility to journalists—have backgrounds in journalism through training or practice or interactions with journalists and media accountability agents.

What stood out in the interviews was how critics formulated the outsider-insider positions reinforcing their positions in production of metajournalistic discourse. The outsider’s vantage point legitimises their position in public discourse as detached, and even objective analysts of the news media (being ‘non-insiders’). Equally, they cement their position among the critical public through their expertise in journalism, acquired from the ‘inside’ (through training, education, experience or practice in journalism). This is how a media-critical blogger in Kenya with experience and practice in international media explained the positioning of a critic:

> I have the privilege of really being involved in the whole workings of the media [...] An outsider critiquing the media might not be aware of intricacies, the decision-making processes, the structures of the newsroom or how policy is implemented... I’m better placed to give an in-depth analysis from a knowledgeable perspective. (MC-K21)

Critics seek to endear themselves to public discourse by participating in criticism and by tapping into non-journalistic expertise (or knowledge) informed through social, political and cultural debates in digital spaces. Here a media critic with background in rights activism explains the importance of the site of public discourse (when I asked what makes him a better critic):

> ... if you want to understand society on any level, whether you're in the old or the new media world, you need to be able to critically engage with whatever content you receive and whatever is going on
because it's about that critical engagement that helps you make informed decisions (MC-SA13).

As outsiders, critics justify their credibility as appraisers of the media in journalistic discourse by offering a vantage point of a non-insider, and in this sense, they can claim to be impartial. However, for these critics, it is a conflicted position, given that journalists often delegitimise their expertise or knowledge of the news media through claims that they are, for example ‘failed journalists’ or harbour vendetta following the circumstances of their departure from the newsrooms (I will return to this in Chapter 7).

From their perceptions of their expertise in criticism, we can therefore draw five ways through which metajournalistic discourse from the critics develops ‘critical purchase’ (Wyatt 2007). One is that these critics are already part of the networks of journalistic actors, offline and online. For example, local journalists follow them on Twitter, thus are known and acknowledged, and their criticisms are easily accessible to journalists. Two, their prominence would potentially matter to not only a wide array of journalistic actors such as media council officials and public editors, but also to media managers and owners. Three, these critics would be adept at news practice and ‘speak the language’ of journalists by pinpointing professional and practice-oriented issues (see Dennis, Romm, and Ottaway 1990a). Their criticism would then be more comprehensible and palatable, and could even be more credible in the eyes of journalists. Fourth, through their positions of expertise (e.g. working at universities or with international news media) some critics have acquired cultural and network capital, and therefore in the eyes of journalists, their criticisms would carry more weight in comparison to other types of digital media critics.

Platforms
Platforms are spaces through which critics reach target audiences – mainly journalists and news organisations but also the public. I based the criteria of selection of critics on the use of digital platforms. In general, critics’ participation on digital platforms suggests close proximity to journalists in terms of spaces of criticism, where news is shared (a subject I return to in Chapter 10). The platforms used by
interviewees include blogs, organisational websites, Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. Cross-platform sharing places critics in spaces of both public and journalistic discourses, and bolsters their insider-outsider position. The variety of platforms deployed in their criticism ensures that the critics are in close touch with both public and journalistic discourse.

The critics interviewed in Kenya and South Africa could be identified in terms of the specific platform they deploy in their criticism, which places them as intermediaries between the public and journalists. Bloggers are more explicit about their position as ‘media critics’, especially by marking their content as criticism. To appeal to public discourse, they provide digestible commentaries about news journalism, but would also reach out to journalists by tackling daily journalistic issues, for instance commenting on a highly controversial coverage of an event or even a newsroom scandal (e.g. firing an investigative journalist over misconduct).

Further, bloggers (and equally social media influencers) are essentially a community of individuals who freely express themselves through free and non-institutional platforms. [In this case, ‘journalist blogs’ – those run independent of the media organisation that news professionals serve (Domingo and Heinonen 2008b)].

Critics and journalists enjoy a “symbiotic relationship” when the blogs (or social networks) serve as spaces for news commentary and independent opinions, and thereby complementary to the news media (Singer 2007, 79). However, it is the adoption of blogs as sources of information and news (as was the case for two blogs in Kenya and South Africa) that arouses tensions between journalists and critics over professionalism.

Reach
Closely related to platforms is the scope of influence of critics. While most critics rely on social networks, what is notable is the multiplicity of platforms employed in criticism. Critics gain from the expanded reach and strategic use of each. For example, a blogger would have longer commentaries and would share on social media networks to increase visibility and spur interactivity (I will return to the discussion about affordances in Chapter 10).
Bloggers and social media influencers’ capacity to share their criticisms to numerous users on a variety of platforms implies a wider reach of critical content. But for reach, while it is important journalists take them seriously, critics consider accessibility as being relevant and understandable to public discourse.

The point (of writing accessibly) is... to draw attention. Our criticism, I’m sorry to say, is not academic. We don’t write to stimulate intellectualism. I know proper criticism should stimulate something, some part of somebody’s intellect. Our criticism is more driven towards drawing attention towards something. (MC-K25)

Widely shared criticisms are visible and attract the attention of journalistic actors. The role of other users of social media then remains that of amplifying criticisms by sharing across social media platforms. In comparison, academics and writers using blogs attract interest and discussions on blogs and social networks, thus further increasing their visibility to journalists.

**Strategies**

Strategies refer to how critics can be defined though methods they deploy in their criticism. Critics deploy a range of strategies, some rhetorical, such as humour and sarcasm, while others are digital such as the use of hashtags.

Overall, critics employ journalistic norms and rules in their criticism. Thus they conform to journalistic discourses while deploying professional norms to critique journalistic practice (Waisbord 2013). Media-critical bloggers, regardless of their backgrounds, see their role as “journalistic” in defining the terms for journalism as an institution and profession.

Critics employing mostly social networks must conform to a social media logic. Social media influencers, for instance, hashtags to mobilise the public to comment on a common subject. In Kenya, for example, it is common for critics using social networks to employ hashtags to criticise the media over sensationalised news or sloppy news coverage. One example is #KeMediaFailure whose use started following the mainstream media poor coverage of terror attack and siege of a Nairobi shopping mall in 2013. Social network groups
escalate criticism, and the visible critics tap into such campaigns to appeal to both journalists and the public. A critic explained how a social network grouping KOT (referring to generally, Kenyans on Twitter) offers criticism of the mainstream media:

There is a multipurpose vehicle called KOT, Kenyans on Twitter. I’m saying multipurpose because it comments on literally everything. There are moments I feel we are part of it... but in an indirect way... once social media starts picking it (the criticism) up, and it becomes a topic of discussion, the mainstream media will pick it up. (MC-K16)

Here it is important to note that the critic takes the outsider’s position in order to instrumentalise public discourse in criticism of the media. While hashtag campaigns, especially when they are trending, appeal to the digital public and journalistic actors, they however draw antagonism towards journalistic discourse.

Other critics deploy activist strategies that employ digital mobilisation and offline campaigns. Rights activists among the critics in South Africa deploy social media to mobilise the public to join protests. For example, an activist in South Africa explained how protests are essential when seeking visibility for issues related to South Africa’s public service media, SABC (such as lack of editorial independence):

We are not averse to picketing on the street – it’s part of our culture as South Africans. But you always have to figure out which tactic to use at which time. You’ve got to be clever and say, “okay, we don’t have financial muscle or social muscle, let’s use our phones, let’s use young people, let’s use media partnerships, let’s get into arrangements and strategic partnerships”. (MC-SA25)

Through protests or meeting with journalists and editorial managers, critics stay close to journalistic discourse, but remain antagonistic as they appeal to the public that they have mobilised, and question professionalism of the news media.
**Agenda**

Overall, the critics take the view they understand good practices in journalism and therefore impose their idea of what journalism should be through criticism. Their agenda (the mission they have in criticising the media) is largely in opposition to journalistic discourse – in highlighting the failures of journalism but are also varied, depending on the nature of the critic. Critics with journalistic backgrounds may consider themselves as parties to successes or failures of the profession, but would largely exemplify an agenda that suggests their repositioning to appeal to own audience and self-interest. Other critics, for example those in academia, see their role as initiating debate that will rope in their networks and general public, as the following blogger in South Africa explains:

> I suppose the idea is to inform, to educate, but also to engage in a discussion or to create or to facilitate a discussion of thinking. And it's good for my students as well. The junior professionals on my team, hopefully, use my blog as well and it's really also... a good way to keep your own knowledge up to speed on all these things (media issues). (MC-SA20)

The critics’ agenda, while personal, also establishes itself as complementary or a reinforcement to journalistic discourse, through ‘professionalising’ criticism so as to fit into media formats, techniques or type of content. For example, two media-critical bloggers in Kenya and South Africa comment mainly on TV news and programming, while a blogger in Kenya ‘specialises’ in poor language use and grammar. The critics serving in watchdog groups are more pronounced about their civil society agenda, such as the rights of children, through their coverage in the media.

**Motives of critics**

Having looked at how critics position themselves amid public and journalistic discourses, the next step is to interrogate how critics establish their stake in journalism.

What draws critics to offer feedback in reference to news content, journalists, news organisation and the media as an institution shapes the ways that critics position themselves in criticism’s discourses.
While critics do not necessarily aspire for an engagement with the media on digital platforms, the motives of their criticisms largely suggest that their principal targets are journalists and news media organisations. When interviewed, critics play up their altruistic mission for journalism, but self-interest is embedded in their motives of criticism.

**Transforming journalism?**

Critics’ positioning and self-presentation show how they imagine themselves as an intervening force promoting a culture of quality journalism. Generally, the public assume that critics have a mission to improve journalism or engage with journalistic actors (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015). Results here show that critics offer a varied understanding of journalism, which reveals that their motives, while shaped by a preconceived notion of righting ‘journalism wrongs’, are inconsistent. Some critics argue more for independent journalism, others emphasize accurate and error-free content, while others perceive a well-managed public service media (e.g. in South Africa) as a recourse to bad journalism. These motives match well with the normative perspectives of journalistic professionalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001), thus reinforcing journalistic discourse.

Critics easily articulate their work in fostering ‘good journalism’ (interpreted variously as we will see later) as was the case when I inquired from a critic in Kenya what critics perceive as the central contribution to journalism through their criticism on digital platforms:

> I think the role of a media critic is to challenge the media to raise standards, to improve the quality of the work that’s being done, and to remain intimately connected to the public information function of the media, and to remain intimately connected with the needs of the public. (MC-K13)

Journalists and media accountability agents are ambivalent about critics’ motives. Rightly or wrongly, some journalists perceive critics’ intentions as self-serving, adversarial and distractive, which echo findings in Holt and von Krogh’s (2010) study. And some journalists perceive critics with backgrounds in journalism as vindictive, and suggest that social media influencers and bloggers seek popularity.
However, when this motive of transforming journalism is examined closely, there are the factors that critics describe as enabling or stimulating interests in criticism of the media. Largely, critics’ motivations are couched in a vision for quality journalism, but critics also reveal idealistic views of their role as citizens.

Journalistic failures and mistrust
Critics react to episodes of journalistic errors, unethical conduct or violation of rights of groups in society through news reporting. Critics are outspoken about instances when they perceive low standards in journalism or poor-quality news media. Mistrust of the media is part of what spurs them to action on digital platforms, is mistrust of the media. Journalistic failures breed mistrust of journalists and news organisations. Critical responses over standards and quality of journalism originate from critics’ lack of trust for the media. In Kenya and South Africa, the most vocal critics express deep mistrust for the mainstream media, which confirms previous studies showing link between trust and criticism (see, for example, Karlsson and Clerwall 2018a). These critics’ cynicism is expressed in their doubt about journalists’ competence to conduct well-researched news stories (in the case of Kenya) and editors’ independence free from economic and political influence (in South Africa), which could be attributed to media faults and failures (see Cappella and Jamieson 1997). In essence, persistent journalistic failures are a nuisance to critics, but on the flipside, a factor of legitimisation of their position as critics. Some critics are more explicit about journalists’ responsibility in promoting quality journalism, as this critic was when I enquired on what provoked him to criticise the media:

It’s important to actually keep them on their toes and make sure that the stories they deliver are authoritative, quality content. (MC-K24)

Eventually, critics expect the news media and journalists will account for their failures and reform, and when this does not happen, they resort to criticism in digital spaces.
Knowledge and training in journalism

Knowledge and training provide both the impetus and tools to criticise the media. When critics were adept with journalistic skills and methods of sourcing, they reinforced their practice as informed critics, as the results showed. These critics are equipped with criticism tools and language to articulate journalistic issues better than fellow users of digital platforms. When I asked how their journalistic backgrounds inspire them to criticise the media, a critic in Kenya who has had journalism training in the US stated:

[...] At Columbia University, I was exposed to those high standards. I (then) decided to start criticising journalism back at home because I was being taught by some of the best journalists there... I was dealing with the highly critical minds, some of the best editors from America. (MC-K5)

The critic here also expresses the cultural capital acquired through training that he considers “top-notch” and insufficient or missing in local journalism. He was thus spurred to ‘spread’ knowledge of best standards through criticism. In general, knowledge and training in journalism are stimulants and facilitators of feedback and conversation about journalism. Relatedly, critics with journalistic backgrounds tend to be more visible and are more equipped to participate in criticism and engage with journalists.

Digital platform, democracy and power matrix

The democratic right to free expression is an enabling factor for criticism on digital platforms, but this right is also what critics impose on the media and the technologies they deploy. Critics taking activist approaches argue that the media is a critical partner in the fight for equality, social justice and human rights. Media’s watchdog role is identified as what could democratically shape participation and public accountability, as in this description offered by a Kenyan critic when I asked about the driving force for his criticism of the local media:

For me, accountability is the deal. We cannot trust government. We cannot trust people who wield power—and this includes the media—to simply do things in our interest. We’ve got to insist that
Indeed critics, particularly activists, see their role as critiquing centres of power. Apart from their role as agents of accountability in a democracy, the critics also consider their criticisms as a “public service” in their mission to challenge media power, and its abuse. An example is the case where critics speak out against how media downplays or fails to report labour and human rights injustices. In South Africa, the media is consistently criticised for falling hostage to political and corporate interests through its failure to highlight the plight of exploited mineworkers (one case that came up several times in interviews is news reporting of a massacre during a labour protest at a mine in Marikana in 2012). The case shows critics consider themselves part of the ‘civil society’ because they perceive the social responsibility position as not only legitimising but as empowering in their criticism when the media fails. Here a South African critic explains lessons from the SABC’s reporting of the Marikana massacre of mineworkers by South African police:

They (SABC) refused to show miners shot down at Marikana. And as a public broadcaster you would expect them to allow for a documentary (of the massacre) to be (aired) on TV because people need to know that this is how we’re dealing with citizens. This is how we’re dealing with community members that are protesting, right? So... we believe that the civil society needs to stand up and say ... we need to know the political truths as they come. (MC-SA26)

Another perspective of ‘public service’ is the criticism that questions media plurality and diversity (multiplicity of media and platforms and the incorporation of a variety of voices in the media space). This could be explained by the fact that most visible critics, especially in South Africa, work for advocacy and watchdog groups that promote media development and the rights of minority groups.

**Personal interests**

As individuals, critics are explicit about their concern for the specific media or journalistic issue (e.g. factual error in the news) as the motive
driving criticism on a specific day, but rarely is such an interest consistent with their criticism practices. Personal interests, even though largely latent, precede critics’ intentions to address journalistic failures. Personal interests include criticising as a hobby, socialising with fellow users, gaining publicity from content or merely taking part in criticism for one’s own entertainment. For example, a blogger in Kenya criticises news over its quality, but ‘spices up’ his commentary with news about newsrooms intrigues such as the firing of an editor over misconduct, sex scandals or silent protests over delayed salaries and poor working conditions. Looking closely at the topics, they speak to the larger frame about the conditions of news productions and threats to professionalism, but they give away the critics’ taste for the sensational or conflicts that may attract audiences to the blog.

Although critics articulate their motives in a variety of ways—mostly emphasising altruism—they describe what closely comes down to a desire for participation and dialogue in digital spaces as is the case of the following critic who I asked the reason for tweeting regularly about the media in Kenya:

I think I’m just an engaged and concerned citizen who has found a space where her concerns are appropriate, and sharp, and necessary. Other people do this in agriculture. Others do it in education. (MC-K13)

However, by criticising the media as well as engaging with the critical content in digital spaces, the critics derive an entertainment value. Entertainment is both a tool and a product of criticism. Critics deploy, for example, humour by mocking journalistic errors (e.g. in one case Kenya, critics mocked the main newspaper Daily Nation in 2014, when a photo of two lambs suckling a cow that it had published on the frontpage was exposed as a plagiarised photo from New Zealand and not from a Western part of Kenya as it had claimed. Such explosion of criticisms draw wide interests and engagement among users on digital platforms and raise the profile of the prominent critics (Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019).

Nonetheless, critics do not often open up on the subject of self-interest, whether they seek visibility on social media or monetary gain through, for example, advertising revenue from blogs. In interviews
with bloggers, all suggest that visibility to their blogs or amassing followers/friends on social networks, while desirable, does not supersede their need to draw attention to journalistic failures and consequent further conversations.

Still for most critics, the critical community is necessary for idea-building, interactivity and idea-sharing [aligning with Kümpel, Karnowski, and Keyling’s (2015) findings about the motivations for news sharing on social media]. For example, a South African blogger explained how he tests initial ideas for his blog by posting snippets or pieces on social networks for users to comment, correct or educate on the subject raised:

I would often test an idea on the blog, because the nature of a blog is that it’s easy to put something out, and then later refine it or change it. I’d often write it (the idea) as a blog first and then see the responses. (MC-SA22).

There are times when altruistic and self-serving reasons intersect in the critics’ explanation of their motives. For example, for a group of critics that employ fact-checking or data-centred approaches in critiquing the news, an audience is essential to promote their work and visibility in digital spaces, but also to mobilise the public for data/media literacy:

So, the ultimate goal is to enable people and to encourage them to become critical and show them where they can find data, to check it for themselves. (MC-SA17)

Community mobilisation for criticism echoes Wyatt’s (2007) perspective on the critical relationship between prominent critics or social activists in interpretation and idea-formation phase. It is when critical ideas concerning the media foment within the public discourse that they become discernible and subsequently legitimised in journalistic discourse.

**Discursive positions of critics**

Drawing from the motives of critics, we can extrapolate roles that can illuminate the way scholars can understand the critic as a non-journalistic actor. Critics perform a variety of roles, which form the
basis of the legitimisation of their criticism. These functions in general reflect how the critic positions himself/herself to criticise journalism, but in a specific framework of journalistic practice, how critics promote their positions and visions of the practice. The discursive positions reveal that inevitably, critics’ positioning promotes an adversarial discourse in a discursive exchange with journalistic actors.

Principally, evaluation and judgement define the overall goal of criticising. In our case, the practice of criticising is also shaped by how critics perceive the practice of criticising and concomitantly, how journalists and media accountability agents understand critics’ role.

From the results, I break down the role of critics into the following descriptions: Appraiser/assessor, corrector, observer, adversary, comparatist, contrarian/opinionist, fault-finder, connoisseur/expert, advocate, defender and the fact-checker.

*Appraiser/Assessor:* Fundamentally, criticism entails evaluation, and when critics appraise journalism, they assign themselves the responsibility of assessing, for example, performance and quality through criticism. The role is important when we consider that a strong evaluative practice of the media is critical to self-reflection among journalistic actors. As appraisers, critics offer journalists progress reports of their practice and spur self-examination that could promote accountability.

*Fault-finder:* Critics are concerned with errors, e.g. factual, grammatical or aesthetical (I discuss this in the next chapter). Fault-finders, mainly social network users, pinpoint these errors and offer interpretation of the errors and opinions as to the source and causes of the errors. Fault-finders do not necessarily consider that their role would go beyond pinpointing errors, as was the case with a social media influencer when asked how journalism should benefit from criticism:

My job is not to fix the Kenyan media; my job is to point out the problem, and perhaps help them (journalists) think through what needs to be done next. But I think that it’s an abdication of their role for them to expect the public to fix problems that they are creating themselves internally. (MC-K13)
There could be a contestation over the mission of the fault-finding critic. Fault-finding effuses cynicism and negativity that breeds an adversarial relationship between journalists and critics. Fault-finding, while identifying journalistic faults, also indirectly delegitimises critics in a discursive arena.

**Fact-checkers:** Related to fault-finding, the role of fact-checking is to counteract non-factual news from mainstream news organisations through the claim to truth-telling. Fact-checking role is institutionalised and in Kenya and South Africa, the fact-checkers work for institutions independent of legacy news organisations. While fact-checkers construct their role as complementary to the truth-telling mission of journalism, they also largely reinforce their opposition towards journalistic discourse by highlighting weak verification practices (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018). Further ‘facts determinism’ is strongly ingrained in their practices as was apparent when I asked how a critic perceives her role vis-à-vis that of journalists:

If I want a strong, independent, accurate media, I have to be part of building it (through fact-checking), I’ve always believed that. [...] you’re an activist for the truth, but you’re not an activist in any other sense (MC-SA18).

The critic saw a fact-checker’s role as that of ‘missionaries of facts’ – by promoting a consciousness among citizens to actively involve themselves in verification of news.

Fact-checkers raise tensions with journalism as a profession when they claim to complement the journalistic function of verification. Verification practices and methods are assets of control that legitimises journalists (Tuchman 1978b, Witschge and Nygren 2009). When critics claim these practices through imposition of their own methods of verification or reinforcement, they re-enact or redefine journalism, thus threatening professional autonomy of journalists.

**Connoisseur:** As (actual or self-proclaimed) experts in media and journalism, critics place themselves in opposition to news workers with the claim of their intellect and knowledge in the practice. Their didactic
approach in their criticism asserts their ideas about different approaches to journalistic practice or a ‘schooled’ perspective of ethics and norms of journalism. This also extends to other areas of expertise, for example language or statistics as used in the news as was the case of the earlier mentioned blogger who identifies grammatical errors in Kenyan news media. As discussed earlier, some critics with backgrounds and expertise in journalism place themselves in direct conflict with practising journalists, and as connoisseurs breed resistance over their ‘superiority’ to practising journalists.

**Corrector:** Beyond error-spotting is the critics’ interest in making corrections. These corrections are aimed at simple grammatical or factual errors or misuse of statistics in the news. What is interesting here is that the corrector employs a variety of rules and norms such as grammatical, professional journalism, statistical, management (as in the case of public service media) or social norms as frames of references in making corrections with their criticisms. In general, corrections suggest a conscious effort towards improvement and a solution-oriented approach towards criticism. These corrections also show expertise and even sometimes, obsession, such as when a critic in Kenya described how “grammar Nazis” (MC-K5) “bombard” the newspapers daily with social network posts about poor English. Therefore, the corrector can be expected to be consistent, but the persistence does not sit well with journalists who consider them irritants.

**Contrarian/Opinionist:** Some critics’ feedback on digital platforms are more explicit about their opinions of news, journalists, the practice or news organisations. There is emphasis here over their differences of opinion with journalists and news organisations. The contrarian is a persistent critic who, to journalists, “never sees anything positive” (J-K10) and thus delegitimises their position as critic with persistent cynicism toward journalism.

**Comparatist:** This positioning has more to do with critics’ approach to criticism rather than nature of the practice itself. To show deficiencies and failure of journalism, some critics resort to, for example, reflections over the past era of journalistic success or “golden era” of
journalism. This nostalgic lament of a critic over a Kenyan newspaper’s ‘falling standards’ best explains a comparatist view of the media:

I remember when the Star was really ‘fresh, independent, and different’ (the daily’s slogan). It had a very clear goal. It was the pro-reform newspaper, it was a progressive newspaper, almost a left-leaning paper. the Star would chase police brutality stories up to the end of the earth. the Star would go after corruption. It had an identity. (MC-K12)

Further, it is common to critics in Kenya and South Africa to compare local journalism and that of the Global North (mainly as practiced by international news media such as BBC and CNN because of their influence in these two nations). The critics berate local journalism as sub-standard and inferior to the ‘world-class’ journalism of CNN, BBC or The New York Times.

The comparatist therefore serves as a reminder of journalists’ and news organisations’ fidelity to norms they have previously subscribed to or should develop. In most cases, norms and previous practices become parameters with which to assess journalism for comparatists.

**Advocate:** Here the positioning of the critic falls into two categories: First, the advocate is the persistent and explicit critic, for example the media-critical blogger, who actively promotes good journalism. In their quest, some of their criticism practices are simplistic (e.g. identifying inaccuracies in news) while others are idealistic, for example, contemplating on better performance of public service media in news journalism, editorial management and even organisational management. Second, advocacy in criticism is also manifested through methods of activists or watchdog groups. The groups take the view that defending the democratic role of the media to inform the citizenry accurately goes towards active promotion of a media that serves public interest. This also shows belief in normative ideas about free press, democracy and media development.

**Defender:** The critic’s evaluative stance of the media is also defensive. Critics’ defensive discourse comes in a variety of ways, such as support for editorial independence from state and government control and indirectly suggesting a weak media. Defenders are also critical of news
organisations or news reports that seem to imply political or corporate bias. Defenders also openly express support for freedom of the press and expression, which is indicative of an input into the discursive realm of criticism that both legitimises and delegitimises the media and journalism.

*Observer:* This critic makes observations about journalists and news organisations. This does not necessarily imply passiveness and agreement with news content or journalists. Their observations could be evaluative and judgemental, but here the overall frame is about consistency in commentary and description of journalistic errors. In essence, the act of observing fits into the larger framework of a monitorial practice. There is value in peeling out the role of the critic as a “monitorial citizen” (Schudson 1999). In Schudson’s description, a monitorial citizen “engages in environmental surveillance rather than information-gathering” (1999, 312) while asserting their democratic participation occasionally.

*Detractor:* The motive of this critic is to provoke, seek attention or muddle public discourse. This category, while not fitting the description of the critics I interviewed, is important because it is constituent of the critical community in digital spaces that I referred to earlier in this chapter. Detractors consist of trolls – users of digital platforms who employ uncivil language. A section of the critical public in Kenya and South Africa target journalists with offensive criticisms that are shunned and ignored (as I will discuss later in Chapter 9). The critics I interviewed seek to distance themselves from abhorrent behaviour of this community of critics, especially uncivil language and cyberbullying (I return to this in Chapter 10). They see uncivil critics as part of a digital public sphere that allows for free expression, but who are sometimes driven by a spontaneous need to vent over an outrageous news story. In Kenya, for example, respondents criticise frequent deployment of trolls by public figures (mostly politicians, corporate leaders and celebrity pastors/prophets) to attack news organisations over unfavourable stories.
Expectations of critics

From this discussion of the positioning of the critic in a discursive arena, we note that they believe they perform a critical role depending on nature, approach and the overall goal for participation in criticism. Here I zero in on the findings that show their expectations and visions through criticism in digital spaces as it is essential in understanding their ideas for shaping journalistic discourse. It is important to note here that not all critics admit to having expectations for the media. In one case, in Kenya, a social media influencer denied any expectations but tied participation to “just a wish to ventilate” (MC-K13), but further probing revealed an opinion about the media and its failures.

In building their legitimacy and that of their criticisms, critics construct a variety of ideas about journalism. While their perceived roles, represent what they imagine defining their criticism, their expectations and visions explain their ideas about journalism—some realistic while others are idealistic. Wyatt (2007, 168) argues that critics’ input to the discursive struggle about journalism is their “vision” of transformation. The visions and expectations may come into conflict with journalism professional culture and institutionalised routines.

Critics express a vision for both traditional journalism and by extension its role in society, suggesting that critics expect journalists to comply with social norms in addition to professional ones (to be discussed further in Chapter 10). Critics’ idea of quality journalism implies that journalists adopt and practice good attributes of reporting, as well as promote a vision of journalism that is altruistic and not money-driven.

From the visions and expectations of the critics, it can be surmised, first, that beyond their professional duty, critics impose principles of social responsibility to journalistic practice (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015). Second, critics’ idealism imply expectations that may not be met (Blanchard 1998), hence possible disappointment that may breed mistrust and further criticism. Normative media accountability views criticism’s role as corrective and transformative, but as a judgemental and evaluative practice, media criticism also reveals the idealised worlds of journalism of the critic.
In terms of discursive input therefore, the visions and expectations serve to build two elements: discourse of journalism and secondly, enduring criticism of journalism. In the next section I detail the expectations and visions of journalists in Kenya and South Africa.

**Journalism diligence and quality**

Critics expect journalists and news organisations to cultivate good journalism and maintain high journalistic standards through critical reporting, versatile use of media technologies and responsiveness. In addition, journalists are expected to write and produce complete and well-researched stories, while also being open about their failures or inadequacies in their content. Critics’ altruistic mission is apparent in the perceptions of critics as was the case when I asked a critic what he expects out of consistent criticism of the media in Kenya:

> If people are criticising you consistently over something then I think that should make the media do better. (MC-K12)

Critics hold high expectations of docility, responsiveness and a culture of journalists admitting responsibility. When asked how critics should expect news organisations and journalists to respond to their criticism about journalistic errors, a respondent stated:

> I think news outlets should stop being defensive. They’re not infallible, they can make mistakes. When you err in good faith, just admit and say, “guys, we blew it!” There’s no crime in admitting mistakes. (MC-K16)

Other expectations critics have for journalists in both Kenya and South Africa include: making independent editorial or management decisions that place public interest before the bottom line and focus on promoting good journalism.

**Social responsibility**

Some critics largely discuss the media in terms of their democratic role in society. These could suggest a liberal perspective of the media informed through ideas of equity, social justice and public accountability. Critics expect that the media will hold the government and politicians to account by reporting about the performance of public
figures and by investigating economic crimes and corruption. Specifically, in both Kenya and South Africa critics expected the media to be tough and persistent on state officials and politicians (e.g. during news interviews).

Apart from performing its watchdog role, critics expect the media to serve as a public sphere for citizen engagement. Critics further expect the media to represent a variety of voices in media spaces as well as issues afflicting the majority populations in the grassroots, and particularly marginalised groups such as women and rural communities. Critics representing watchdog groups in South Africa were most vocal about the media’s social responsibility and they held the view that both commercial and public service media have a civic role.

Additionally, critics propose diversity and inclusion in news coverage as well as in management and staffing by news organisations. However, further interrogation reveals critics’ liberal views toward inclusion have caveats, as in the case of Kenya where some critics would suggest “media blackouts” for politicians known to promote ethnic hate through their public speeches.

**Professional standards**

There are various aspects of professionalism that critics expect. Critics anticipate that journalists will remain fair and balanced, transparent as well as accountable. Critics expect that journalists will maintain a high standard of reporting and that they will respect ethics by adhering to news media policy, reporting diligently and showing respect to audiences. Asked how journalists and news organisations achieve the highest possible standards in their view, a critic in Kenya used an example from a case where a news anchor invited a drunk politician to a news interview:

> They can’t just bring people who are drunk on air. That’s affecting so many households. You have the ethical responsibility. You should say, “Look, dude, I’m not bringing you on air, I’m sorry.”
> (MC-K16)

Beyond professional norms, critics ascribe to other social expectations, for example inquisitiveness and unrelenting pursuit in journalists’
truth-telling mission. Further critics see journalists and news organisations as party to the mission to defend the freedom of expression and media. As such, critics expect journalists to be “activists of the media” (MC-SA18) through promoting and defending editorial independence.

In addition, as a gatekeeper, the media is expected to have transparent journalistic practice. Critics expect journalists to share sources of news, for example, documents of expenditure from government institutions so the public can verify news reports about corruption.

**Listening/responsive media**

Critics expect journalists and news media organisations to have regular conversations with the audiences and critics themselves, especially when there are complaints about errors or any news coverage. Critics expect individual journalists to respond on social networks when readers raise issues or ask questions. Also, to some critics, responsive journalists hear them out, acknowledge their grievances, and even reason with them. A specific suggestion made by some critics towards journalists fostering listening is the appointment of a readers’ representative or “community editor” (MC-SA25) who responds directly and privately to audiences.

**Expository role of the critic**

What emerges from how critics position themselves in a digital discursive ecology is that they largely occupy a strategic intermediary position. In essence, just as the media in a democratised public sphere, in digital spaces, the critic acquires the role of “expositor” (Carey 1974, 232) through its position between public and journalistic discourse. This critic enjoys the insider-outsider position, and a locus of mobility across the discursive positions of public and journalistic discourse.

An insider’s view gives the expositor the vantage point to scrutinise news journalism and its processes better than fellow critics in digital spaces, thus reinforce their legitimacy over public discourse. They understand the local media as well as a wider knowledge of best practices for journalism.

Journalists I interviewed selected these expositors as the main critics which also points to the close proximity to the journalistic
discourse. Journalists find them relevant enough to appoint them as
the most visible critics in the discursive ecology. These critics also
speak to the stratification of the digital space that reveal a set of voices
emerge as dominant in public discourse. Such critics tend to develop
network capital in digital spaces, for example by the number of times
their posts are liked or retweeted (see Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019).

Expositors mark themselves as interpreters of journalistic
discourse, but this is an unstable position. The expositor favours both
sides of the discourse—journalistic and public—but also has to play to
the digital media logic, for example by acquiring a large following on
Twitter.

The expositors however have a symbiotic relationship with the
critical community in digital spaces. As interpreters, they synthesise
topics of criticisms from the larger digital public. They also serve as a
Thus, they acquire the role of shaping public discourse, while at the
same time connect the public to journalistic discourse. In addition, the
expositor shields journalists from unpredictable and hostile digital
spaces.

Considering critics’ role as interpreters, we can argue the
respondents largely have a reasonable level of expertise to set the
criticism agenda and be heard in a digital discursive ecology. Expertise
in (effective) criticism of journalism is legitimised by journalists’
engagement (whether frequent or infrequent) with the critics. The
practice of legitimisation is further extended through critics’
acknowledgement by acquired audiences on digital platforms (for
example, increased followers on social networks). Expertise can thus
be taken as an attribute of legitimisation of criticisms of expositors.

Finally, the way critics impose themselves and their social and
political agenda implies a positioning as active and visible participants
in the discourses about journalism in a given context. In heeding to
criticisms and engaging, journalists and expositors maintain a
symbiotic relationship of promoting each other’s cultural capital. The
symbiotic relationship between the non-journalistic and journalistic
actors could be said to further set the tone and terms of their
engagement in a “rhetorical environment of journalism” (Carlson
2017). Expositors, therefore should be seen not as mere ‘shapers’ of
journalism (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, Snyder, Kelley, and Smillie
1995), but as principal determinants of a negotiated practice in a discursive ecology.

The expositor in comparative context

How can we comparatively explain the similarities and differences between the expository role of the critic in South Africa and Kenya? Largely, the expositor in South Africa is positioned in a closer proximity to journalistic discourse than in Kenya. What could explain this difference is the diversity and media accountability landscape in the two contexts. In South Africa there is a diverse set of media accountability mechanisms, such as press councils and media watchdog groups. The country also has a self-regulatory system. These differences suggest more avenues for criticism of the media, compared to Kenya, which has a less diverse media accountability landscape. The disparities between countries with more developed media accountability mechanisms and those with less are also noted in Europe (Eberwein and Porlezza 2014).

In terms of disposition of the critics, the most visible have journalistic backgrounds in both Kenya and South Africa. More social activists however drive the agenda of criticism in South Africa as compared to Kenya. This could explain the critics’ vision for journalism in South Africa that ends to lean on a social change agenda. It is the reason critics have taken a keen interest in the social responsibility role of the media, particularly public service media. Public service media, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) is relatively well-resourced and influential compared to its equivalent, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC).

In South Africa, critics employ civic approaches to seek wider appeal both offline and online, but in Kenya critics are more active on social networks and blogs. While critics need to reach an audience for wider appeal of their criticisms, they also aim to build a community of critics. Appealing more to fellow digital platform users means a closer proximity to public discourse.

In terms of motives, there are similarities in the Kenyan and South African contexts. Critics with backgrounds in journalism are motivated by the need to promote professionalism while they impose their "expertise" and analytic skills of media practice. In South Africa, critics’ expectations however ebb more towards ideological understanding of
the media’s role in a democracy. What critics give away in their
motivations to critique the media is the liberal views that are
manifested in opinions towards corporate or state control of the media
in both countries (I revisit this in Chapter 6). In Kenya, a resounding
concern for critics is professional journalism. Critics largely latch on
the motive of promoting quality journalism while others, particularly,
activists emphasise a social and political agenda. However, in both
countries critics motives show more interest in increased visibility and
position of influence in digital spaces.

The take-away

This chapter responds to RQ1: *How do critics position themselves in a
discursive framework of criticism in digital spaces, and what do they
aim to achieve?* The main findings show that as non-journalistic actors,
critics’ discursive input in digital spaces, how they describe themselves,
their motives and discursive positions, indicate that their main input is
in appraising, redefining and imposing new terms for journalism and
interactions with non-journalists. The findings also show that the key
critic who is in a strategic position to generate metajournalistic
discourse is the expositor, an intermediary between journalistic and
public discourse. The expositor is therefore the principal actor in
negotiating an alternative practice of journalism through the digital
space.

The expositor’s proximity to journalistic discourse makes this actor
engage more closely with professional journalistic issues, through
constantly roping in discourses from beyond the realm of journalism in
the discursive ecology. The expositor’s vantage point as an outsider is a
factor that legitimises a critic’s discursive position as detached observer
of journalism in digital spaces.

Lastly, critics in general see their criticisms as transformative and
part of cultivating good journalism practices. Their vision for
‘journalism as a public service’ is explicit in their utterances. Critics,
particularly those who position themselves as fact-checkers, see their
role as that of supporting the media in its truth-telling mission.
However, further probing shows that critics’ visibility and clout in
digital spaces supersedes their interests to ‘transform’ journalism.
While personal motives such as amassing followers in digital spaces
drives critics, they still evaluate journalistic practice and raise a variety
of issues through digital media criticism. In the next chapter, I will examine the main topics raised through criticism of the mainstream media in digital spaces in Kenya and South Africa.
Chapter 6. The sins of journalism

This chapter examines the discourses that digital media critics generate on digital platforms regarding journalistic practice. I present findings of the most salient topics arising from criticism, as perceived by critics. The topics emerging from criticism point to the state of the media at a given time, and within a given context – in this case, in Kenya and South Africa during the period of data collection (2015-2018). In the course of the interviews, respondents also reflect on past issues and experiences that are important for analysing discourses about journalism.

While it is important to understand the issues digital media critics raise, the narrative is incomplete without concurrent issues from journalistic actors. Therefore, in this chapter I incorporate topics journalists and media accountability agents raise regarding the media that represents their outlook of journalism in the two contexts.

The findings show that in their work, critics generate a set of grand and secondary discourses. Most criticisms hover around the grand discourses about the media that include criticism of the structure of news organisations, news performance and the relationship between the media and the state. Secondary issues, for example, news coverage, are temporal and depend on the period the journalistic practice is evaluated.

I begin laying out the main topics by categorising them based on the following subjects of criticisms: form and content, individual journalists, organisation, institution and ideology (see Chapter 2). Later, I will discuss the grand and secondary discourses that emerge from the criticisms, and then how they lead to a digital metajournalistic discourse.

Subjects of criticism

The subjects of criticism form part of the understanding of the state of journalism at any given context at a given time. While this chapter does not aim to give an assessment of news quality or media performance, the issues of criticism from the analysed data speak to most of the elements considered when providing these measurements (see Hollifield 2006, Bogart 2004).
Form and content

The journalistic issues that emerge from the findings refer mostly to news content, coverage and news focus. Here I employ Cooper’s (2006) typology of criticism (discussed in Chapter 3) to sort key issues about form and content that emerge from criticism in Kenya and South Africa. Cooper’s typology is based on four categories of media criticism: accuracy, framing, agenda setting/gatekeeping, and journalistic practices. This typology is limiting, and therefore as I seek here to expand it, based on the data from this study, by including a fifth category: aesthetics. Aesthetics describe the conventions of form and style, and appear in criticisms when critics discuss the presentation of news content, in terms of text, images and video. The five categories of form and content contribute a discursive input surrounding quality journalism, as I will show in this section.

Overall, persistent criticisms that emerge in the two contexts of Kenya and South Africa show that critics employ journalistic frames of reference to evaluate journalistic form and content. There are also additional evaluative frames, such as social-democratic principles that critics lay out when pointing to faults of journalistic content and form.

Accuracy

Questions about accuracy highlight deficiencies in verification of facts, source criticism and authenticity of information disseminated through the news. Accuracy’s discursive potency resides in its clear-cut nature – inaccuracies are black and white, and more often, journalistic and non-journalistic actors reach consensus about them. Examples of inaccuracies raised in my interviews include factual errors e.g. names of news subjects, legal or scientific facts or statistics. While some examples of inaccuracies may appear trivial in criticism in digital spaces (e.g. a screengrab of a wrong name accompanying an image on TV news graphic), others hit at the heart of journalistic verification practices. They point to weak source criticism and fact-checking that have potential negative consequences on the image of the journalistic profession and the brand of the news organisation. One example of a factual error that a critic in South Africa explained, spoke to poor fact-checking as the cause of news errors:
The *Daily Sun* had written an article in which they said children from the age of 12 are allowed by law (in South Africa) to have sex. That is not true. Children between 12 and 15 can have sex with each other, but an adult, or a 17-year-old can’t have sex with a 12-year-old. It was a story about a 12-year-old girl getting pregnant with her 15-year-old boyfriend, which isn’t against the law. So, in that (error), as you can imagine, people started saying things like, “the law is so lenient”, “it is wrong that we parents are powerless because you know our children can have sex if they want to.” (MC-SA17)

Critics attribute weak verification practices to sloppiness and lack of meticulousness in news production. In Kenya, for example, critics called out the mainstream newspapers over “rag-to-riches” stories that often inadvertently white-washed ‘tycoons’ with a corrupt past. In one case that stood out, the *Daily Nation* had run a story of a “successful entrepreneur”, only for bloggers to dig out an old article online, by the same newspaper, about the businessman charged with bank fraud involving massive sums of money.

Inaccuracies can serve as a delegitimising discourse for journalism. They challenge the discursive authority of journalistic actors by questioning their diligence, commitment to truth-telling and credibility. During my fieldwork, critics and journalistic actors mentioned the preponderance of “fake news” in both countries, even though the mainstream media were not specifically blamed for the phenomenon. At the time (2015-2018), there was a persistent discourse of “fake news” and spread of misinformation in both Kenya and South Africa (see Wasserman 2017, Ogola 2017, Rodny-Gumede 2018). For critical communities online, however, it was a weapon against the mainstream media – mostly used in reference to inaccurate or sensationalised news stories. This instrumentalisation of “fake news” has been noted in recent studies (see Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019) as an effective media-critical discourse that delegitimises the news media. “Fake news” is important in understanding criticism as delegitimising discourse because critics ascribe responsibilities to journalists towards accuracy of news, regardless of the origin of the news.

Accuracy’s potency is in its use as a tool through which critics legitimise themselves. Critics position themselves as spotter of inaccuracies and thus as fault-finders, fact-checkers and correctors (mentioned in Chapter 5). Critics define themselves through these
discursive positions, and also firm up their authority in digital spaces by perpetuating discourses of inaccuracies in the news.

Framing

Framing concerns influences surrounding interpretation of facts and how the news is contextualised. Framing in regard to form and context is fluid because it is a subject contested among all journalistic and non-journalistic actors. Here, the topics that emerged from the findings are bias and sensationalism in the news.

Bias in content relates to perceptions of the positioning of news and slant in coverage. In the Kenyan and South African contexts, discourses of bias in content are largely similar, albeit with contextual nuances. Under framing, criticism of content often questions the dubious association between politicians and journalists, a discourse that is persistent in both contexts, findings that appear in previous studies (see Ogola and Rodny-Gumede 2014, Ogola 2011). The recurring forms of biases in Kenya and South Africa are political, racial, ethnic and gender in nature.

Claims of political biases in criticism show a cynical view of objectivity and balance in news production. Biases appear especially in news coverage of political events and personalities. A common criticism is about the certain political parties, their views or leaders get most coverage in the mainstream media. In both Kenya and South Africa, select political actors—mostly already enjoying the national spotlight—receive heavy coverage while new entrants and fringe parties receive less coverage.

Criticism over political bias also reveals that it is a cyclical debate about which political opinions seems to matter most. Asked how journalistic actors perceive political news, for example, a Kenyan media council official stated:

A reader can tell you this journalist is CORD (supporter of Kenya’s opposition coalition), this one is Jubilee (the ruling party), just from their writing. There is a (persistent) bias among the writers themselves and you’ll find that these people often inject their personal feelings and opinions in a story. (MAA-K11).
Political bias through news framing is complex. ‘Tribalism’—Kenyan parlance for discrimination based on ethnicity—is deeply linked to politics (Shilaho 2018). While tribalism does not generally influence editorial decisions, it is blamed for political biases in content, as previous studies have shown (see Somerville 2011). Critics closely associate ethnic loyalty among journalists and media owners to partisanship, which gives the impression of bias in news content. In South Africa, racism is an enduring conversation in reference to biases in news content. The discourses of racism (to be discussed later) emerge from historical injustices associated with apartheid and the marginalisation of the black majority population as well as growing economic equalities since 1994 (Harber 2014).

Another form of bias that came up often in the interviews was gender-related. In both contexts, news coverage in the mainstream media promotes marginalisation of women. Most newsmakers are male, while news coverage of women often takes an unquestioning patriarchal approach, according to critics. Criticisms of journalism exposed subtle chauvinistic tropes that are part of news conventions. In the following example, a reporter (female) in South Africa explained how critics had questioned the news coverage of the chair of the African Union (2012-2017), who was a former wife of South Africa’s president, Jacob Zuma (2009-2018), but had divorced him in 1998:

Instead of being referred to (in the news) as “Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who used to head the African Union”, it’s, “(President) Jacob Zuma’s ex-wife”. She is not referred to as a politician, or former whatever, it is always “the ex-wife”. This is linking her to a male figure rather than looking at her in her own right as an individual woman, which is one of the things that I have noticed with South African media and is often being called out by media critics. (J-SA9)

Another criticism related to framing was about sensationalism in the news. According to critics, the mainstream media in Kenya and South Africa tended to exaggerate, ‘sex up’ or play up negative angles in the news. Some of the examples given were “screaming headlines” accompanied by less convincing claims in the story to support, for example, a banner headline. Critics noted the media’s occasional “hype” in their coverage or mixing gossip and serious news.
In particular, criticism of framing is contextual as it mostly relates to the intrinsic and extrinsic influences in news production in specific journalistic contexts. As a discursive element of criticism, bias depicts a persistent cynicism of journalism within and outside the newsroom.

**Agenda-setting/gatekeeping**

Agenda-setting and gatekeeping issues in digital criticism refer to editorial decisions journalists make about news content. Critics question news judgement on the selection of stories of importance to them individually and of public interests. In this category falls poor news judgement. Editorial decisions cited are varied and depend on the perspective of the critics and the news organisations.

Critics cite editorial content of the mainstream media as partial, incomplete and unrepresentative. In both Kenyan and South African contexts, the saturation of politics and the domination of political figureheads in the news forms part of the discourses about agenda-setting in digital media criticism. The debate is about the balance between political news and others that tackle social justice issues (mostly referred to as “development” topics by critics). In Kenya, for example, the news media is criticised for its focus on “petty” national politics (mostly involving a few wealthy politicians residing in the capital, Nairobi) while ignoring poverty in the North Eastern part of the country, which experiences perennial drought leading to famine that affects millions of Kenyans.

Closely related to the criticism of ‘overpolitisation’ of the news is the perception of elitism manifested in the coverage of the middle class and the marginalisation of the urban poor and rural majority populations. Asked why criticism of news content is important to them, a media critic in Kenya stated:

> [...] if you look at what filters from social media to the mainstream (media), it is mostly the middle-class voices. So, the middle class are the ones represented when the media claims (in the news) that, “The public today has expressed outrage over...” whatever. (MC-K12)

In South Africa, critics identify majority of low-income groups in big cities as least covered and only attracting media attention in times of
disasters such as fires or floods. Elitism as depicted in editorial judgement is attributed to the ownership of media organisations by a White minority and a growing black middle class (I will return to this subject when I discuss criticisms about ideology). The criticism over elitism, in particular, shows how critics co-opt social-democratic principles in their idea of the role of the media in agenda-setting.

Poor news selection practices are common in criticism of the media’s gatekeeping role. In Kenya, for example, critics cite common cases of news media “missing the story”. News stories that critics consider weighty and deserving more prominence in the mainstream media are often downplayed or ignored, only to gain attention after coverage on local blogs or international news media such as Al-Jazeera, the BBC or CNN. In addition, short-lived coverage of events, often following a media frenzy, are cited as potential causes of lopsided attention to issues of public interest and accountability. An example is Kenya’s media penchant for transient coverage of corruption scandals in government, that a critic explained as a larger problem in gatekeeping:

It (the media in Kenya) reports the now – issues, scandals, statements spring from the air. They come from nowhere and disappear into the (thin) air after a few days. And what happened today doesn’t inform our reporting tomorrow. We report tomorrow as if tomorrow will not spring from today. (MC-K22)

Furthermore, the coverage of conflicts in the news provokes a contentious and enduring discourse about the media’s gatekeeping practice. In particular, the history of violent protests in both Kenya and South Africa puts the media in a difficult position. On the one hand, the media has a responsibility to report objectively, but on the other hand, it must exercise responsibility in news coverage so as not to inflame passions, especially during election campaigns (see Somerville 2011, Wasserman 2010a).

The “peace narrative” is a critique in Kenya described as media self-censorship, in response to criticisms that it saturates its content with political hate speech that leads to ethnic violence during national elections. When criticised for stoking ethnic tensions, the media tempers its news and abandons its watchdog role. For instance,
following criticism that the media inflamed passions and exacerbated political violence (even leading to the prosecution of a Kenyan radio journalist at the International Criminal Court in The Hague) in 2007/08, journalists toned down on reporting of political violence. In the build-up to subsequent general elections in 2013 and 2017, the media went on a “peace mode”, which saw to couched reporting of politics and underreporting of riot police brutality (Gathara 2017, Nyabola 2019, Lynch, Cheeseman, and Willis 2019). According to critics and journalists, the criticisms of the ‘peace narrative’ in Kenya generated a debate about the role of the media during conflicts.

Owing to their contentious nature, issues of criticism relating to agenda-setting and gatekeeping therefore generate and sustain debate among journalistic and non-journalistic actors.

**Journalistic practices (methods)**

Cooper (2006) uses the category of journalistic practices to refer specifically to newsgathering skills as well as the presentation of content (as opposed to how I have used the term to mean in general a variety of activities that entail news production; see Chapter 3). The discursive input of the criticism of journalistic practices is embedded in its peskiness. As we will see in the next chapter, journalists dismiss criticism of say, spelling mistakes in the news, as petty and distracting. Yet criticisms of writing and editing news (see Hicks et al. 2016) are not only obvious and clear, but in the eyes of critics are important in establishing credibility and trust with audiences.

From the results in both Kenyan and South African contexts, two key issues regarding journalistic practices emerge: poor reporting and presentation of news. The criticisms of shallow or incomplete reporting describe cavalier and uncritical approach to news writing. To critics, criticism of journalistic practices indicates sloppiness, unprofessionalism and lack of aspiration towards good journalism. Examples mentioned include news reporting lacking in-depth analysis and “he said, she said” type of reporting – news without context, background and interpretation of its social importance. When I asked a respondent what specifically critics mean by common reference to “half-baked” stories, he gave an example of an article about deadly snake attacks carried in one of Kenya’s dailies:
The (Daily) Nation went to Kitui (county in Eastern Kenya) to cover a story about snakes in the plains. It was a very good piece, and they did everything well, but in the end, they didn't give us expert information or solutions as to what people living in these areas could do to prevent snake attacks. (MC-K5)

In the critic's view, including in the story antidotes to snakes bites or ways to avoid such attacks, represent more concrete and constructive ways of reporting.

Other criticisms about journalistic practices concern writing, spelling, grammar and language. They include grammatical errors, spelling mistakes and improper sentence construction. Criticisms of linguistics are easy to display on digital platforms and might include screen grabs of newspaper pages or TV screen graphics with typos. Sharing such examples of errors creates further discourses among journalistic and journalistic actors, and critics express mistrust towards journalists’ professionalism.

Aesthetics of the media
Criticisms of media aesthetics relate to conventions of form and style. Examples here are presentation of news in terms of layout and design of the newspaper, TV-news studio design, the voice of radio and TV presenters or make-up or dressing of news anchors. The input of journalistic aesthetics to discourses in digital spaces is the subjects’ nature as a point of contention over their pettiness. Journalistic actors consider aesthetics less central to professional journalism, but to critics, they matter significantly.

Varieties of aesthetics in news presentation focus mostly on the most prominent aspects of news presentations and conventions. Criticisms range from the trifle to the most serious aspects of presentations that touch on professional aspects of journalists such as impersonal nature of news (journalist shifting away focus of news to themselves). Critics, for example, offer commentaries regarding news anchors’ outfits, their mannerisms during news bulletins or the quality of ad lib (if long or just irrelevant commentary), imposing their preferences and tastes.

Two TV journalists in Kenya and South Africa shared their experiences with criticism over aesthetics. In the first case, a TV anchor
showed me—during the interview—a Facebook commentary accompanied by a screengrab of himself in a news studio and in an oversized casual jacket:

I had met him (the critic) before the post he wrote on Facebook. And he told me that he fell in love with the (news) programme... [He said] it was pacey, it was the type of journalism he wanted to see, and then he posts this picture [he then shows the interviewer the post in his Facebook phone app], and criticises the clothing (an oversized blue jacket). (J-SA6)

Another TV journalist in Kenya complained of critics’ “obsession” with TV anchors and not the content of news:

[...] it will not be the story, but what you wore on TV screen, how you wear your make-up, how you pull yourself together on TV, you know. And you’re expected to be inhuman. You should not have feelings when you’re on that screen, you should just look nice. And there are times you have seen people with wardrobe malfunction receiving a backlash. (J-K6)

Other criticisms relate to more complex aspects of news presentation that may appear trifle, but stimulate enduring debates about everyday cultural and social discourses. For example, female news anchors wear “too revealing clothing” for news bulletins or expectant mothers reading the news. In the two instances, most criticisms tended to be chauvinistic and conservative, according to journalists in both countries, which suggests the saturation of male-dominated perspectives in digital spaces.

Further there are issues of aesthetics that relate to technology used in media production, such as the quality of images and video or sound and lighting. While criticisms condemn faults and hitches, more substantive problems arise in the way journalists tie their professionalism to aesthetics. An example is the criticism over news media’s positioning of aesthetics to sell their brand or play up their commitment to technological advancements so as to “take journalism to the next level” as this critic in Kenya explained:
This week, the two big TV stations have been doing rebrands and relaunches. We’re like, “why don’t you just read the news? Why do you need all these gimmicks? ... they keep going back to the drawing board and coming back to us with these (taglines), “we’re a digital-first, and now we’re going to do this...”, I’m like, “No! All you have to do is do your job properly. Just write the news, and research it, and communicate it. That’s it. It doesn’t have to be fancy. It doesn’t have to be elaborate.” (MC-K13)

The criticism is about common news media revamps or redesigns (mostly for newspapers and FM radios in Kenya). They often involved publicity events such as journalists distributing dailies in the streets or on commuter buses, roadshows on trucks that involved editors dancing with entertainment crews, and ‘launch parties’ during which editorial managers make speeches about the “new era of journalism” (MC-K13). To critics, the focus on aesthetics takes away interests in improving quality journalism. Aesthetics shape audiences ideas of professionalism (Broersma 2007). Failure to meet such expectations of audiences, means journalists and news organisations are missing the mark when representing social reality (see Schudson 1995).

Overall, criticisms of form and content speak to shortcomings in daily news production and expose the outputs of journalism in a digital discursive ecology. Form and content are observable (because content is generated for public consumption) and is ever-present (as long as news media exists) thus sustains a discourse about journalistic practice in digital spaces.

**Individual journalist**

This touches on behaviour and conduct—ethical and professional—of journalists. What is notable in criticism of individual news professionals is that those criticised are mostly the visible journalists like TV and radio presenters, popular newspaper reporters and columnists. The discourse here largely shows critics’ misconception of the news process, such as the failure to see news production as a collective process involving several actors.
Professional norms

Professionalism refers to criticisms that highlight the failure of reporters to abide by journalistic norms and rules, ethics and competence. Critics cite objectivity, balance, neutrality and fairness in relation to journalists’ actions and behaviour, indicating that they employ norms and rules of journalism to make the assessment. Beyond professional norms, critics expect journalists to subscribe to social responsibility ideals.

Objectivity, impartiality and balance play out in various ways, for example, failure of journalists to cover “both sides of a story” (MC-K12) in cases where criminal allegations are made against a news subject. There is then a more complex discourse that exposes tensions between journalistic and social norms. Critics argue that journalists occupy important roles in the society they serve through their practice and therefore their professional calling should consider socio-cultural challenges such as human right abuses, social injustices or inequalities based on incomes and gender. The following criticism expressed by a journalist in South Africa manifests the complexity of race in news coverage, and while journalists have to apply norms such as objectivity and balance, they also contend with tensions raised by the news:

The feedback that we get is that we are always talking about race, we always write about racial issues and our racial issues are always one sided, because it’s always about one racist white person against black people. (J-SA4)

Other times, criticisms call upon journalists to disentangle themselves from professional rules and norms. A critic in Kenya, explaining the main criticism of journalists regarding their professionalism, considered balance in news as a problem:

They (journalists) have this obsession of balance for the sake of wanting to appear that they’re not siding with one side. They just try and get the other side’s opinion, even when the other side’s opinion is just nonsense. (MC-K12)

Criticisms of individual journalists further reveal critics' lack of understanding as to the threats to professionalism. For example,
critics, particularly those with inclinations to social activism, see journalists' self-censorship (owing to owners' or political interferences) as “self-inflicted” (MC-SA25). While critics sympathise with journalists when they face intimidation and bullying, critics also criticise journalists for succumbing to threats from political actors, for example threats of libel suits when the media intends to publish exposés about corruption. In other words, these critics perceive advocacy and activism in a democracy as key ingredients of professional journalism, meaning that journalists will speak truth to power even in difficult circumstances as their loyalty is to the public.

Lastly, journalists lack introspection or self-evaluation, and are intransigent towards the norm of accountability, according to critics in Kenya and South Africa. The criticisms are raised in reference to an unresponsive attitude towards calls to improve quality of journalism, and the continuous dwindling standards through journalistic faults.

Ethics

Corruption within news organisations comes up often in conversations about the state of journalism. Critics claim that reporters and editors take bribes to “bury” or “kill” news stories, mostly about fraud, corruption or labour injustices. ‘Brown envelope journalism’ (Skjerdal 2010) in Kenya and South Africa influences editorial decisions in newsrooms and hamper media’s watchdog role (Lansner 2017a, Harrington and Manji 2012, Ireri 2018). Critics with insider views of journalism (those with backgrounds in the practice) are often the ones who raise the issues of brown envelope journalism.

Further, critics accuse journalists of unethical conduct in editorial coverage of victims of rape or crimes involving children. Critics taking activist approaches are the most vocal about abuse of children and women through false reporting, exposure (for example, revealing identities of rape victims or defiled children) and misrepresentation in the news. Privacy, in particular, came up often when critics criticised coverage of marginalised groups (children, women or low-income earners). Cases of invasion of privacy were mentioned especially in relation to the coverage of grieving families:

One of the things that really gets my goat is the way the media often covers stories of say, death or loss. Journalists will just push into
someone’s home and shove cameras into some poor grieving woman’s face, but if it’s, say, a nice middle-class family which lives behind gates, they are a lot more respectful of their need for privacy.

(J-SA9)

In Kenya, there was a specific criticism of radio presenters’ “spicing up” their morning shows (some attracting wider listenership) through sensationalised phone-in sessions with listeners, in some instances, revealing their sex lives on air. In addition, radio hosts were accused of endorsing advertisers’ products in subliminal promotions during the highly-rated shows. Here is how a critic described the case of one of the presenters:

Maina Kageni (FM radio host) is probably one of the best DJs in the region (East Africa). He can sell you hot air, and you’ll buy thinking it’s gold. Beyond that ... he engages the audience in an incredibly deep and fantastic way. But people have issues about the content. I do myself. He does soft porn in the morning. Few occasions when I’ve gone into a matatu (commuter minibus), I have had to literally distract myself so I don’t listen to what he’s saying (on radio). (MC-K16)

Unethical conduct of individual journalists spurs discourses about the credibility of the news media in general. In 2018, for example, criticism of South African press intensified when journalists from the Sunday Times51 were exposed as having made up investigative stories about subversive activities in state agencies, leading to resignations.

Another ethical issue of individual journalists that breeds mistrust of the news media is plagiarism. There were several cases mentioned in both contexts of journalists lifting images or parts of articles online to be published in newspapers. In a case in Kenya, that I referred to in Chapter 5, critics on social networks exposed a photojournalist who was associated with a plagiarised image published on the frontpage of Kenya’s Daily Nation.

51 The Sunday Times accepted responsibility for the false stories and published an apology titled, ‘We got it wrong, and for that we apologise’. See: https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/news/2018-10-13-we-got-it-wrong-and-for-that-we-apologise/
Journalistic competency

Finally, in criticisms of individual journalists, there are discourses about basic reporting and editing skills. Critics charge that journalists often have poor language skills and news interviewing skills. Moreover, critics also contend that many editors are incompetent as they lack certain educational qualifications and requisite experience in journalism. This criticism is consistent with existing studies showing journalists in places such as Kenya lack basic journalistic as well as online/multimedia skills (Breit 2018, Ireri 2017a). However, to assess journalistic competence, critics deploy ideas of journalistic competences modelled along Western liberal ideals (Banda et al. 2007). Inevitably then, criticism of competences often are laced with comparisons between practices/standards of local media and those of Western organisations (mostly often Anglo-American media e.g. the BBC and CNN).

There are aspects of journalistic competence that touch on individual capacities that critics also raise. Critical thinking, while not mentioned explicitly in criticisms, is used in reference to shallow news content and casual reporting. Further, courage in journalism appears in criticism as an attribute of effective journalism. Covering the powers-that-be favourably or failing to carry critical content against political figureheads or parties is attributed to a lack of courage. Critics lament the “reduced outspokenness” of journalists that is exemplified through lack of authoritative coverage of high-level corruption in government, for example (cf. Rønning 2009).

In general, criticisms of individual journalists mostly show criticism emerging from a reasonable knowledge of the journalists (especially the most visible ones) and their conduct. Criticisms from outsiders (those with no background in the practice), while could make evaluations based on imagined and real failures of individual journalists, are sometimes incomplete and uninformed.

The organisation

Some criticisms refer to the specific news organisation or outlet. Organisational criticisms in Kenya and South Africa are largely topics about the management of news media that hamper the effectiveness of news production and independent journalism.
The criticisms highlight political and economic influences that hamper editorial independence. News organisations are subject to state/political interferences, and this is a staple for critics. Criticisms of news outlets point to state censorship in a variety of forms, for example, ‘fiscal blackmail’ in Kenya or political manipulation of state broadcasters in South Africa. To both journalistic and non-journalistic actors, news organisations fail to perform their role when they kowtow to political actors.

The state has in the history of the two democratising countries relied on the media for a development agenda, but is also keen to protect the interests of the ruling class (Wasserman 2010b, Ogola 2011). While the mainstream media would aspire to promote accountability of the ruling class, they must also contend with threats of regulation (Beer et al. 2016). At the same time, the media, especially the privately-owned, seeks to portray an image of editorial independence while it relies on both big business—some owned by politicians—and the state for advertising revenue. The media therefore, must maintain a careful balance between having a close—but beneficial—relationship with the state and promoting independent journalism. News organisation in Kenya and South Africa are often then in a catch-22 situation when it comes to the relationship between the media and the state. They, for example, have to rely on official sources of news which may imply the perception of bias or even “lazy journalism”. Bennett, Gressett, and Haltom (1985) refer to “symbiotic theory of news” where news media organisations rely on official content as they ensure “efficiency” as well as giving way to a “stable window” of reality” (50-51).

In South Africa, in particular, influences of politics on news organisations are recurring criticisms. Critics question alliances between corporate figures and politicians. The term “media capture” in South Africa describes the deep networks of control of the media through dubious alliance between political figureheads and business leaders/foreign investors. At the time of data collection in 2017, a close

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59 A carrot-and-stick approach towards controlling the media in Kenya, where state agencies withhold or cut their advertising spending to private media organisations to influence favourable coverage of the ruling elite (Rusbridger 2017).
association between President Jacob Zuma and the Gupta family (Indian foreign investors) was subject of considerable criticism. The Gupta family owned a TV news organisation, ANN7 (Africa News Network), that was deployed for political propaganda against President Zuma’s opponents. Asked to explain the view about South African news organisations’ independence in light of the criticisms of ANN7, a critic said:

There is one media that is dancing to the tune of whoever pays the piper, and that is ANN7, the Gupta-led media. They are blatantly against people who are opposing Jacob Zuma. It’s clear. It’s undeniable. In their Twitter feeds, and all over the place, they’re blatantly biased. (MC-SA12).

In Kenya, an invisible hand of owners is blamed for the sacking of journalists deemed critical to business and political interests or whose reporting might hurt advertising and the brand of the news organisation. A critic gave an example of the Daily Nation’s dismissal of its editors, editorial cartoonists and investigative reporters in 2013-16, following government complaints of unfavourable coverage and criticism. In one case that caught the attention of international news media, a fired editor had penned a New Year’s editorial[53] that had “annoyed the President” (MC-K14). In 2018, highly-publicised resignations of eight high-profile columnists of the newspaper, over claims of censorship, received widespread attention from critics with a trending Twitter hashtag, #NMGExodus[54], that revved up conversations on Twitter over an “unholy mix of business interest and political manipulation” (MC-K24).

As discussed earlier, journalists are seen to be partisan based on their ethnicity or race in both the countries. The same way, some staffing and administrative changes within media organisations are criticised as ethnically or racially influenced. Sometimes news organisations deploy journalists on the political beat from competing

[53] The editorial was titled, ‘Mr President, get your act together this year’: See: https://www.nation.co.ke/oped/Editorial/Mr-President-get-your-act-together-this-year/-/440869/4018444/-/pwegag/-/index.html

[54] NMG refers to the Nation Media Group that owns the Daily Nation.
political parties, races or ethnicities to create a public perception that balance is maintained in political news coverage. Other times news organisations strategically place reporters to tap on these identities in building sources within political parties. This is how a media critic explained ethnic balancing in newsrooms in a bid to give an image of editorial balance in the newsroom:

If you look at the Star’s (Kenyan newspaper) political desk, there’s a Kikuyu and a Luo (two ethnicities forming the largest political formations). Or if not a Luo, a tribe that is affiliated to the opposition. Their political sympathies are known, but because they (journalists) are on that beat, the paper knows that they’re going to get the gossip they need from the (respective) politicians. (MC-K12)

Further, there is a discourse surrounding staffing among new outlets that open biases discussed earlier. For example, news organisations favour male journalists to cover hard news while women are delegated to soft and showbiz news (or reproductive health and children beats). The gender placement demonstrates larger journalistic issues such as bias in news content, for example through skewed representation of female voices in the news. Criticisms, even though they largely problematise the question of gender in news media policies, could be considered to reinforce stereotypes about female news professionals (Armstrong, Wood, and Nelson 2006). For example, there were criticisms in both Kenya and South Africa that female news readers were hired based on their physical attributes and not journalistic competence.

Additionally, staffing decisions were part of the discursive exchange over news organisations, and the broader perceived consequences to quality journalism. For example, most news organisations in the two countries invest in political beats, selecting their “best journalists” to cover politicians, but give less priority to “development stories” and underfund investigative stories (MAA-SA24). Further, critics assailed news outlets for dumbing-down quality journalism through sensational news and infotainment. One example is the criticism of a trend common with FM radios in Kenya hiring career comedians—with no background or training in journalism—to host morning talk shows and push ratings.
To cut production costs, media organisations lay off journalists or cut spending on news production. In the period of my data collection, 2015-18, there were numerous job losses in the news media in both countries. Downsizing in newsrooms hurts quality journalism, for example through ‘juniorisation’, in which veteran journalists are laid off and replaced by the young and inexperienced who are paid less, or through reduced budgets for investigative journalism. To critics, the perceived effects of juniorisation are apparent in the fall of quality journalism.

Criticisms also raise the question of journalistic independence through the process and goals of media organisations ‘restructuring programmes’. In both Kenya and South Africa, critics perceived job cuts as targeting independent and vocal journalists, whose critical journalism came into conflict with business and political interests of the news organisations. Further, media organisations consolidate their newsrooms in response to falling profits and rising costs of production. In some cases, this process leads to news journalists being reassigned to write ads, supplements or paid up features.

Finally, how media organisations are managed is a concern for both journalistic and non-journalistic actors. In South Africa, critics cite public service media SABC for poor management, poor editorial management, political interference, and poor quality of journalism. Other criticisms of mismanagement were about the working conditions of journalists and remuneration. Harsh work conditions and low pay are linked to ‘brown envelope journalism’ and moonlighting (e.g. journalists’ taking stringer jobs with international news agencies or consultancy gigs with NGOs).

In general, criticisms of news organisations were diverse and identified mostly the outlets specific faults and failures in the eyes of the critics. The discourses that emerge from criticism of the news organisations are persistent and largely similar in the two contexts.

The institution

The focus on the media as a collective (its structure, operations, organisational culture and role in society) as well as its interaction with politics and government (see Snyder, Kelley, and Smillie 1995, 6) feature prominently in criticisms. When critics do not refer directly to the organisation (i.e. the media outlet), they make generalisations
about the media. This indicates also how the media positions itself and its role in society, by for instance common acknowledgement of its role, professional and organisational culture.

Criticisms, mostly from social activits, highlight media ownership and its perceived effects on editorial independence and political bias. Media owners, especially if they are prominent politicians or businesspeople, are blamed for the intensity of positive coverage on them as well as their businesses or political associates. Critics further mention commercialisation and the appearance that the media bows to the demands of advertisers. Critics accuse private media organisations of giving in to market pressure to ‘bury’ negative stories against big advertisers. Other studies have noted how the media in Kenya and South Africa succumb to market pressure hence the dumbing-down of quality through commercialisation leading to loss of editorial independence (Somerville 2011), not only to these business interests, but to the state which is a source of substantial advertising revenue (Wasserman and Mawe 2014, Nyabuga 2007). In South Africa, critics cite “white monopoly capital” (a reference to white minority ownership of the media) as the reason for elitism and lack of diversity in the media. The urban affluent population is covered while the majority poor, mostly black population, receives little or no news coverage.

Relatedly, critics ascribe the media the role of social change, meaning diversity and pluralism is considered central in journalism. For example, critics in South Africa consider that the media has an obligation towards a majority poor population (mostly consisting Blacks, Coloureds and Indians) owing to the history of Apartheid and particularly the persistent discrimination of the Black majority. The discourse centres on white monopoly capital as perpetuating the marginalisation, for example the populations in townships, the least developed urban regions with majority black populations.

Further what was common when the media was criticised in South Africa was “juniorisation”, a term used to refer to the dismissal of veteran journalists in newsrooms following harsh economic times. Critics explained the continuous job cuts in newsrooms and subsequent recruitment of inexperienced and youthful journalists to lower production costs. Juniorisation ultimately hurt the quality of journalism as the fresh graduates taking up jobs in the media were sometimes ill-trained as a media critic explained:
[...] you’re already removing a very, very important group that was there for a reason, a sort of an editorial circuit breaker. People who have worked the crime beat or a legal beat, or whatever it is, or an environmental beat for 20 years develop a stronger sense of caution... (As a veteran) you’ve heard a lot of things before so you don’t go, “That’s incredible, we have to ...” (MC-SA17)

In addition, the media is mentioned for intransigence that becomes an impediment towards accountability. Critics consider the mainstream media impervious to criticism and the bad reputation over claims of bias or poor journalism. In relation to media accountability, media regulation is weak in both Kenya and South Africa. As a self-regulatory framework in South Africa, the press council is largely respected within the mainstream media, but criticised by state actors over its ineffectiveness.

Lastly, there are criticisms that speak to broader question of the place of journalism today. Relatedly, critics accused media organisations of not taking the full potential of digital platforms to be transparent and accurate in their reporting. A media critic who is a fact-checker observed:

We have to stop pretending that media are the gatekeepers of information and that we are the only ones that can make sense of it and we need to start sharing our sources and our (digital) resources and our methodology with our audiences, to educate them to become fact-checkers themselves. (MC-SA18)

In an example of mistrust in the effectiveness of the media as an institution, some critics question why media organisations do not hire bloggers “talented” in writing and other multimedia skills. Critics consider the media to have failed in its commitment to professionalism and thus need intervention such as the involvement of bloggers and fact-checkers.

Issues about the institution speak to a generalised sense of the mainstream media organisations, often referred to in criticism as “the media” or “the press”. The media as an institution is the central target in a discursive framework of criticism. When there are failures and faults in form and content, individual journalists and news
organisations, critics mostly refer to the institution. Criticism of the media as an institution is therefore central in the understanding of a digital metajournalistic discourse.

**Ideology**

In both Kenya and South Africa, a variety of political ideologies play out in criticisms, even though not as strong or explicit in the Western sense (i.e. liberalism vs conservatism). There are generally two perspectives of ideology raised through criticism, as emerged from the interviews with both journalistic actors and critics in Kenya and South Africa.

The was a sense that the media served the progressives (those arguing for values such as equality, media freedom diversity, constitutional democracy and social justice). These groups have close ties to civil society organisations, rights groups or non-governmental organisations, locally and abroad, and who dominate social discourses online. There was another view that the media served a conservative agenda (as represented by principal actors and supporters of the contemporary political affiliations, mostly tied to ethnic and racial roots).

While both groups dominate various discourses and are antagonistic, especially when it comes to views about society and politics, the conservative group and their views dominate coverage of the mainstream media. Among this group are the political parties and figureheads in power. The mainstream media thus portrays a stronger affiliation towards conservative views of politics, tempered by ethnic and racial discourses, but there is also a strong imbalance in the treatment of the ruling elites and the opposition groups: The bias towards the ruling parties is more pronounced and as a journalist in South Africa described it:

There is a lot of focus on the ANC (ruling party, African National Congress) and I think it’s simply because it’s the government party and puts themselves there, but maybe we could do more on covering the opposition and not just when the opposition reacts to whatever the ANC has done. (J-SA3)
In Kenya, there is a strong political focus by the mainstream media that privileges voices of a small clique of the ruling elite. These politicians—some of who have a stake in private media organisations—most often drive the news agenda by creating a “personality cult”. The personalisation of new coverage means that more substantive policy issues that resonate with the poor majority find less attention in the media as a critic explained:

Our newspapers privilege the political discourse – the problems of politicians, that’s what’s important to them, not the problems of whether your train is working etc. It is (usually) whether Raila (Odinga, the opposition leader) will get elected or not. For them that’s what’s important. So that even when you come to discussions of policy they get away with saying the most awful things. “(They say) we will build a railway next to an existing one,” and nobody asks, “why do we have two railways side by side? Why are we spending trillions to build a railway when we could have fixed the one that’s there? (MC-K22)

Relatedly, in both Kenya and South Africa, journalists have to negotiate their place amid the stranglehold of a “neo-patrimonial system” that centralises power in an individual (Thomson 2000, White and Mabweazara 2018). In Kenya, for example, critics suggested that the media is victim to the “big man syndrome” – where political figureheads (mostly in the presidency) enjoy exclusive favourable coverage and praise in both public and private media. In this example, news interviews of the president in Kenya raise questions about independence of the media from the state and its political interests. As an editor explained, “the media owes the president some respect” owing to the “African culture of respecting the elderly” (J-K19) and those—apparently mostly male figures—in authority. Here it is important to highlight that in this rare instance, this respondent generally held a conservative view that culture, e.g. respect of the elderly, matters in criticism. However, this was exceptional as none of my other respondents considered there would be any cultural limitations to criticising anyone in digital spaces.

Returning to the view on interviewing the president, critics who perceived the media has a critical role in public accountability
considered the media in Kenya to be “too soft” (MC-K22) on politicians and preferred the bare-knuckle approach in news interviews.

In South Africa, there are accusations that the mainstream media still serves the interests of the white minority even with the policies that support black empowerment since the end of apartheid in 1994. Further, there are fears power would shift to a “black monopoly capital” hence resulting in media serving the interests of black capitalists (and public service media. In the criticisms of the media, critics often give SABC as an example of a news organisation serving interests of the black elite of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party.

As mentioned earlier, critics attribute poor quality of journalism to bias, lack of diversity in the media (the poor black majority often ignored) and the partisanship that see a black middle class align with the capitalist interest of ‘White monopoly capital’ (see Plaut 2018, Shai 2017). The consequences of the racial capitalists’ interests in the media and state mired in corruption have meant constant political interferences of public service media, SABC, and lack of accountability of the mainstream media in general (Harber 2014).

Ideology of the media, while was not commonly raised in the interviews with most respondents, showed a deeper understanding of journalistic practice and its attendant influences in the context of Kenya and South Africa. Critics with backgrounds in media practice or studies, engaged much more in the questions of ideology and its place in journalism. Thus, criticism of media ideology is a metajournalistic discourse generated mostly by critics with expertise (discussed in Chapter 5).

Digital metajournalistic discourse

We have so far examined evaluative issues that are prominent and recur in criticism in digital spaces. The evaluative subjects of criticism make up a metajournalistic discourse that constitute set of discourses from critical actors, who derive frames to interrogate the media from traditional journalistic and societal norms.

Further, the findings show that digital metajournalistic discourse consists discourses of mostly the state of journalism at present and occasionally, the ideas about what it can be. In the digital ‘rhetorical environment’ (Carlson 2017) therefore, metajournalistic discourses

146
offer ways to interpret and interrogates journalistic practice within its context in diverse ways.

The findings show that there are three central components from criticism shape digital metajournalistic discourse. One is that the cynical attitude towards journalistic practices develops from journalistic failures and faults. Criticisms of form and content, for example, manifests to critics the failure of journalists to abide by professional norms and develop quality journalism. Errors, whether factual or grammatical, breed mistrust in the journalistic profession thus generate other criticisms of the media as organisations (outlets) and institutions.

The second is that the criticisms show there is mismatch between critics’ expectations and real journalism practice e.g. what audiences want and what journalists/news organisations give. Journalists and news organisations construct these expectations, by claiming to abide by professional norms, while critics have their own outlooks of journalism e.g. that the media coverage will be fair to elites as well as to the poor majority. The mismatch or gaps in the expectations of critics and journalists generate metajournalistic discourses in digital spaces.

Third, the type of critics and their ideas of journalism (as discussed in the previous chapter) define the digital metajournalistic discourse. Diversity of topics speaks to the nature of discourses saturated in ideas that are shaped by journalistic and social/political discourses in digital spaces. It also suggests the idea of journalism – that it can be interpreted and discussed in many ways. The media as an institution is a conversational subject. Further, journalism as an idea and ideal is discussed according to an individual critic’s imagination, which shows journalism as a malleable institution, especially when a comparison is made with other professions (see Waisbord 2013).

Lastly, subjects of criticism can be described in ways in which the they from either a temporal or permanent digital metajournalistic discourses, as I will explain in the next section.

Grand and secondary discourses
What emerges from the findings are grand topics – structural and organisational issues such as commercialisation of the media that also happen to be common (or enduring) discourses about the media. There is enduring discourse about the decline of the media – with the
perception that media’s undoing comes from the inside – its dumbing down of professional journalism and then outside forces such as state and business actors hurting quality of journalism. There are other discourses that are temporal or specific – what I refer to as secondary discourses. For example, the criticism of the media over language and grammatical errors, which are dependent mostly on the event and time.

Most criticisms tackle the grand discourses about the media i.e. structure, operations, news performance and management, the relationship between the media and the state, issues that recur in studies of the political economy of the media (see, for example, McChesney 1999). The findings therefore show the main subjects of criticism have not changed much over the course of history of the press.

Other recurring discourses have to do with professional norms such as objectivity, fairness and balance or truth, which have also emerged as findings in other studies. For example, in their assessment of online comments on a news ombudsman’s page, Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang (2015) find that subjects about norms of journalism for example bias, accuracy or transparency are persistent.

Lastly, what is notable about grand and secondary discourses from digital criticism, is that they could be informed through how critics perceive journalism in a given context, but could also be imagined. For instance, while criticisms about biases in the media reinforce assumptions about the media’s external influences, the criticisms are sometimes imagined. The criticism is from long-held grand discourse that the media is beholden to the state, even when at a given period it might enjoy a high level of independence.

The media’s dubious relationship with the government is a persistent discourse, especially in the context of Kenya and South Africa. While mostly imagined, the relationship represents one way through which critics produce and share metajournalistic discourse about quality and professional journalism.

**Contextual comparison of criticisms**

In both contexts, the topics of criticism were largely similar, but there were contextual differences that defined metajournalistic discourse in digital spaces. In Table 2, I pinpoint subjects of criticism that occurred in the interviews with critics, journalists and media accountability agents in Kenya and South Africa.
Table 2: Subjects of digital media criticism in Kenya and South Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Criticism topics</th>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th>South Africa</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form and content</td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>Factual errors</td>
<td>Poor fact-checking</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Framing</td>
<td>Political bias</td>
<td>Political and racial bias</td>
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In terms of form and context, there are close similarities. In Kenya, when it came to the subject of accuracy, it was frequent errors in the news that recurred in criticism. In South Africa it was fact-checking – which had more to do with the spread of misinformation (the interviews took place at a period when there were intense discussions about “fake news” globally). In terms of framing, criticisms in both the contexts focused on political bias, but were either defined by partisanship as influenced by ethnicity in Kenya or race in South Africa. About agenda-setting, critics in Kenya were focussed on a ‘peace narrative’, criticism over the news media’s tendency to self-censor during national elections for fear of stirring violence. In South Africa, critics referred to the tendency of the media to serve the interests of the middle class. When it came to journalistic practice (methods), critics pinpointed poor language and grammar in the news, while in South Africa, critics mostly identified to weak reporting owing to poor research and critical skills. TV design, conventions and technology came up when aesthetics were discussed in both contexts.

For individual journalists, the issues that was common in regard to professional norms was impartiality of the news in Kenya, while in
South Africa, it was about social responsibility of the media with criticism focussing on lack of diversity and pluralism. As for ethics, critics mentioned sensationalism of radio shows in Kenya, while in South Africa it was mostly about unethical exposure of victims of sexual violence or children. The issue of journalistic competence in Kenya was about the level of training in journalism and in South Africa it was about journalists’ failure to ask critical questions in news reports.

In South Africa, ‘media’ capture referred to how the media had become trapped in a dubious relationship among media owners, politicians and foreign investors. Relatedly as an institution, South Africa’s media was criticised for its weak independence from the narrow economic and political interests of the white minority owners. In Kenya, media organisations were criticised for giving in to manipulative political interests of owners, and then as an institution, lacking in quality as it sought to serve narrow business and political interests. Lastly, in terms of ideology, critics in Kenya complained of too much focus on a few political personalities while in South Africa, the issues were about lack of diversity as the media served interests of the political elite.

The contextual issues in relation to journalism in Kenya and South Africa point to the shared discourses in the rhetorical environment, and in some cases suggest a common understanding of the role of journalism. An example is the call for the media to report on “development issues” (Kenya) or the social programmes communities in the grassroots (South Africa). The similarities in understanding of journalism in the two contexts are subjects of a variety of studies showing the unique differences between journalistic cultures in the West and in the context of African countries (see, for example, Kalyango et al. 2017, Hadland 2012, Hanitzsch et al. 2011).

The take-away

To conclude this chapter, I will highlight critical findings about what emerges regarding the “sins” of journalism by addressing the research question RQ2: What discourses do digital media critics generate in digital spaces regarding journalistic practice in a comparative context?

The findings in this chapter show critics generate grand and temporal discourses that make up metajournalistic discourse in digital
spaces. Grand discourses describe the more enduring faults and failures of journalism, for example, how media ownership influences editorial independence. Secondary discourses refer to concerns over, for example, how the media has covered a fire in a poor neighbourhood. Secondary discourses, while time-specific, could also portray larger and enduring discourses. For example, elitism of the mainstream media when it gives less prominence to the aforementioned fire and instead play up the coverage of a fashion event at an affluent neighbourhood.

Categories of criticisms that fall under form and content and individual journalists are more apparent as they are observable and both journalists and critics could reach a common agreement whether they are wrong or right. However, aspects of criticism that relate to the organisation, the media as an institution and ideology, are more contentious and are subject to antagonistic discourses between journalistic and non-journalistic actors.

The evaluative subjects through the metajournalistic discourse are essential towards understanding how criticism shapes journalistic practice. They are pointers to the state of journalism at a given time and the understanding/expectations of journalism of the future. When shared in digital spaces, the metajournalistic discourses serve as essential ingredients towards an eventual discursive outcome – how the practice and journalists change to respond to criticism.

Comparatively, the findings show that overall, the way journalists perceive issues of media criticism is mostly similar in both Kenya and South Africa. When it comes to criticism about the news organisation, the institution and media ideology, issues that critics raise are largely about editorial independence, quality journalism and representation in the media.

While there is widespread agreement of issues of criticism among journalistic and non-journalistic actors, critics elicit strong cynicism of the media in both countries. Critics tend to challenge deep-seated positions/ideologies of, for example, political elitism of the mainstream media arguing, for instance, for diversity in news coverage of the poor majority in both countries. Journalists question the positions critics hold even as they defend them as next chapter will show.
Chapter 7. ‘No criticism is good criticism’

This chapter examines how journalistic actors react and respond to digital media critics and criticism of journalism. The chapter analyses the responses of journalists and media accountability agents to criticism in digital spaces, how they explain criticisms and specific strategies that constitute their counter-discourse against critics. The defensive strategies journalists employ do not only make up for the responses such as deflecting blame or denial of responsibility, but are ways through which journalists explain how they perceive the influence of criticisms in their practice. Through the strategies, we can observe how journalists engage with critics and criticisms about journalistic practice in digital spaces, how criticisms form an array of discursive exchanges and how they shape consequent actions or inactions in journalistic practice.

The findings show that journalists mostly resist criticism in digital spaces, but they engage in open and latent processes of delegitimisation of public and metajournalistic discourse. Criticism in digital spaces therefore stimulate discursive resistances through which journalists delegitimise discourses in digital spaces.

In the next section, I identify the most salient reactions that journalists express over digital media criticism. I then discuss the strategies of journalistic responses to criticism.

Journalists’ reactions to criticism

Journalists’ attitudes develop both from preconceived ideas as well as from the nature of critics and criticism. Journalists reactions are pegged on, for example, the tone of the criticism, the type of criticism, credibility of the critic and the facticity of the criticism. In presenting the findings, I divide journalists’ reactions into two broad categories – the negative and the positive reactions. I present a descriptive account of these reactions as I discuss their implications in understanding the discursive outcome of digital media criticism.

Negative reactions

What is more pronounced in ways journalists react to criticism is the aversion and an antagonistic discursive positioning. Criticisms attract both explicit and subtle reactions from journalists. Journalists largely
assert that digital media critics often look at the “negative side of things” (J-SA6), and discount any positive attributes in their journalistic practice. In summary, the negative attitudes journalists express towards criticism are: hurtful, pesky and distracting, embarrassing, punitive, subjective and personal, petty, unfair and unrealistic.

Journalists see ulterior motives in criticisms that are personal and subjective, for example, vendetta, in the case of critics with backgrounds as journalists, and who have previously left the newsroom in acrimonious circumstances. Journalists make prejudgments about the criticisms based on what they perceive as intentions of the critic. For example, if a critic consistently pinpoints journalistic faults, journalists develop a negative attitude towards them. A South African critic explained how he had developed aversion for a blogger who was “consistently negative”:

We thought this man (media-critical blogger in South Africa) was not watching the programme at all. I then realised that he watches to find what is negative, and if he is not finding what is negative, then he has nothing to say. So, three years later he had found something that was negative, so he could latch on... to criticise us. (J-SA6)

Journalists consider the sharing of “minor” spelling or factual errors as insensitive, as it ignores the painstaking process to deliver “accurate and impactful news” (J-SA11). The type of critic plays a role here as well, for example, journalists consider criticism from former or fellow journalists disconcerting as they expect that they would understand the challenges in the newsrooms, for example, tight deadlines or budget cuts affecting the proofreading desk. Further, publicising errors hurt reputations and the credibility of journalists. This is how a journalist in Kenya described the criticism that followed the exposure of grammatical errors in a story about American linguist Noam Chomsky:

Noam Chomsky is known as the father of modern linguistics, but apparently, my story had some spelling and grammatical mistakes. Somebody (a critic) asked, “how do you interview the world’s top linguist and write about it in a story that has grammatical issues?” (J-K2)
Journalists take criticisms of writing as punitive as the exposure of errors leads to admonition and administrative actions in the newsrooms. Other administrative actions as a result of journalistic errors (some attracting legal suits or loss of ads) are suspensions or job loss. Some organised critics, such as those from watchdog organisations in South Africa, go to the extent of filling complaints before the press council or court cases in, for example, the case of violation of privacy of children or victims of sexual assault.

At the same time, some critics make claims based on unrealistic demands, according to journalists. This is closely related to prevalence of petty comments. Relatedly, journalists view some criticisms as unfair, as critics show disregard for journalistic processes or fail to read and analyse content before they post their criticisms online.

Further journalists take some criticisms as diversionary and distracting from the real journalistic issues. These criticisms are not just pesky, but discourage journalists from engaging the critics. Some journalists perceive themselves as critics’ “punching bags” because of the perpetual negativity of their criticisms.

Lastly some criticisms are offensive and journalists outrightly dismiss them (as we will see in the next chapter). Criticism with insults and those attacking the personhood are demeaning and hurtful to journalists.

**Positive reactions**

Journalists consider criticism as positive when they perceive the motives of criticism, and the intentions of the critic as genuine. However, in the interview with journalists in Kenya and South Africa, this was largely dependent on the individual journalist.

To a few journalists, “any feedback is good” (J-K4) regardless of the content. However, the respondents most open to all kinds of criticism were mostly print journalists, who were not common direct targets of criticism as individuals. Some journalists took the view that reciprocating the effort it took for critics to comment on journalistic work, required open-minded and positive approach towards criticism. When asked to explain the positive attitude towards criticism, a journalist asserted:
These are my audiences. I don't think a man is mad to read your own story then take time to write to back to you. (J-K30).

Further, when journalists perceive critics as acting in good faith, their reaction to the criticism is positive. In explaining criticism that journalists take positively, a South African journalist gave the example of a critic whose post had the ending, “I understand (you), but I just wanted to inform you (about this error)” (J-SA4). To journalists, politeness, sincerity and an understanding attitude makes for positive criticism.

When journalists consider criticism as useful appraisals of their work, they are receptive. To some journalists, critics are an integral part of their self-improvement through the insights they share regarding news content. Further, when journalists view the criticism as fair, they admit errors they made in news content or editorial judgement (to be discussed further in Chapter 8).

In general, the attitudes towards criticism—whether positive or negative—define the way journalists engage or act on the criticism. To journalists, subjective, harsh, unfair or demeaning criticisms imply critics’ disinterest in positive engagement, but politeness, fairness and understanding mean one was acting in good faith.

**Strategies of journalistic responses**

After having looked at the journalists’ reactions to criticisms, it is necessary to examine further the strategies of their responses. Strategies of journalists’ responses show the contestations of criticism in a discursive arena in digital spaces. I employ a defensive-accommodative continuum for news media accounts that Groenhart and Bardoel (2011) developed to understand editors’ reaction to audience criticism on letters to the editor. The model is based on the following kinds of responses identified by Groenhart and Bardoel (2011, 11-14): **Rejection** (denial and resistance of the form and substance of criticism), **refutation** (‘subtle’ repudiation of criticism’s claims), **evasion** (acceptance of faults, but deflection of responsibility), **justification** (rationalising mistakes), **mitigation** (admitting faults, but giving ‘excuses’), **confession** (accepting responsibility for mistakes) and **alteration** (taking responsibility for faults and remedies).
Rejection

Rejection describes journalistic responses marked by resistances and hostility towards criticism. Journalists ignore some or all critics or denigrate the importance of their criticisms in conversations with fellow news professionals. There are two attributable implications of rejection: One is that when journalists decline to engage with critics, it hampers a discursive exchange and subsequently the effectiveness of criticism. Secondly, rejection gives basis to the delegitimisation of criticism, and the solidification of discursive resistances against criticism in journalistic discourse.

Incivility is key among the that journalists cite for outright rejection of criticisms. Examples of incivility include sexist, racist or ethnic insults (I return to this subject in the next chapter). Attacks on the personhood through uncivil comments invite resentment among journalists. This is how a journalist in South Africa described her experiences of incivility:

[...] they (critics in South Africa) were really stupid and I don’t take them (criticisms) personal, but it was kind of like people telling me that I’m racist, or... actually they told me I’m racist against white people which was... stupid. Yeah, so things like that or like you are a horrible person. I am not going to take that on board because that is not actual criticism of my work. (J-SA9)

Uncivil comments invite hostility especially because they are seen as disruptive and unhelpful in improving journalism. Journalists consider the motive of such criticisms is to silence them or influence news coverage. Other perceived motives of the critic include vengeance, especially in the case of critics who are former journalists with previous experiences of conflicts in the newsroom. The other is self-promotion of the critic (for example, visibility on social media or traffic on blogs) at the expense of trivialisation of journalistic issues. Here a critic in Kenya explains some critics’ penchant for mocking journalists by, for example, sharing screengrabs of grammatical and spelling errors:

You misspell a word, they just laugh about it, for example, on the ‘Letters’ page today, somebody has written ‘Dairy Nation’ instead of ‘Daily Nation’ (newspaper title). People on social media want to laugh about it. They (critics) want to go viral. (J-K10)
Some high-profile critics, are for example labelled as “incorrigible cynics” because they “criticise for the sake of it”, as a Kenya media accountability agent described it (MAA-K3). Others with political loyalties—hidden or apparent—consistently target journalists they perceive as partisan in their criticism. Further, among journalists, there is a perception that the media are a scapegoat for societal problems. Criticisms of the media are meant to deflect from serious issues such as poor approval ratings of politicians.

To solidify reasons for their rejection, journalists not only reinforce justifications but construct a counter-discourse against critics and criticisms in two ways. The first is through marking “categorical distinctions” (Macmillan and Edwards 1999) between what they deem as ‘professional journalism’ and ‘intruders’ into journalistic discourse. For example, “bloggers” is a term journalists in Kenya use—just as ‘paparazzi’ is used as to achieve a “performative business of discourse” (Macmillan and Edwards 1999, 171)—to imply distinction between professional and popular talk about journalism in digital spaces. Generally, journalists in Kenya and South Africa deem media-critical bloggers as detractors in the news workers’ mission to cultivate professional journalism. To journalists, bloggers belong to a chaotic and unethical category whose feedback is motivated by selfish reasons. Moreover, journalists take press freedom as a basis for rejection of criticisms, especially from critics seen to harbour dubious political agenda e.g. trolls that politicians might bankroll.

Rejection is not merely meant to serve as a shield against external incursions of non-journalistic actors, but to reinforce journalistic authority. For example, some journalists think that ‘entertaining’ criticism by apologising for errors on social networks means tolerating detractors. Additionally, there are fears among journalists and media accountability agents that excessive criticism, especially from political critics, threatens editorial independence, for example, through external calls to tighten regulation (as for the case of South Africa, the government’s plan to set up a statutory Media Tribunal—parallel to the press and broadcast councils).
Refutation

In subtle ways, journalists defend their positions, arguing critics are wrong or their claims are unsubstantiated and uninformed (Groenhart and Bardoel 2011). When journalists respond to critics’ misunderstanding about the content and processes of journalism, refutation is a common strategy.

Most journalists take the view that assumptions and insinuations inform criticism. Following this view, the criticisms are therefore unsubstantiated and not worth taking seriously. When I asked an editor why she refuted critics’ claims of ownership bias, she explained how she responds to the common criticism in South Africa that the media is in the grip of a White minority elite:

I’m a political reporter, but I fundamentally disagree when people think that there is an agenda that we (her newspaper) support. There is no agenda. Like a lot of the critics (in South Africa), will be like, “oh, white media!” … or what do they call it? ‘White monopoly capital’ media! Nobody has ever influenced how a story needs to be covered and nobody has ever stopped me from doing any story that I want to do, even if it’s critical of the company that I work for. (J-SA3)

Additionally, journalists suggest that critics are largely uninformed or news illiterate. In Kenya, according to journalists I interviewed, critics either make little reference to the facts or the context of news content they criticize. What would follow are claims of poor journalism such as inaccuracies, weak research or shallow reporting. Journalists claim that critics do not read or only partially read the news before posting their criticisms online. Asked about their view of such claims, a Kenyan editor described criticism from a media-critical blogger as that of a “football spectator purporting to know more than the actual players”:

Some people (on Twitter) even start criticising the news based on what the people they follow have said. They do not take time to go and read and make their own judgement — that’s very common with social media. (Popular blogger, Robert) Alai’s followers will say, “this is total rubbish! This is nonsense!” And when you ask what is “nonsense” in the story, they really don’t know. (J-K10)
The ‘uninformed’ criticisms extend to the critics’ understanding of journalistic roles, which require that journalists regularly explain and clarify. For example, what is common in both South African and Kenya contexts is ‘misdirected’ criticism. Critics blame a specific person, say a news anchor, for the content of a news bulletin, when in fact the process involves a team of producers, editors and reporters. Closely related is journalists’ claim that audience demands are numerous, diverse, inconsistent and uninformed. To some journalists, critics do not make clear their demands and therefore find it difficult to respond to them.

Other explanations have to do with changes and news processes that critics question. These might include changes in news formats or styles which journalists and news organisation explain as inevitable dynamics of news production. Such instances of refutation are meant to calm the publics’ fears that the news media is on the decline from its “golden era” (MC-K13).

Other misunderstandings that journalists refute relate to “ignorance” about journalism’s institution’s in society and its policies. For example, a journalist working for public service media, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), explained the common misconceptions of the news organisation. To critics, the public service media, like its private counterparts, needed to “spice up” its programmes to incorporate more entertainment as it cut down its “boring” education features. According to a journalist, there is lack of public knowledge about the role of KBC as a public service media:

There is the law that binds you and defines exactly the roles that you should carry out – that you should inform and educate and promote national interest. And I don’t think there’s any one time that we’ve missed covering national-interest stories. (J-K6)

Further, in refuting criticism, journalists reassert their mission and values – individual and professional. Journalists articulate their intentions in the process of news production as “honest and sincere” and driven by a conscious effort to promote “the highest quality of journalism” (J-SA6) while observing ethical codes.
Justification

Justification is the main strategy journalists employ to defend their actions following criticism (Groenhart and Bardoel 2011). Here journalists consider and acknowledge critics’ views but then move on to give grounds for the content or conduct being criticised.

Justification is the position journalists take to explain the mismatch between the expectations of audiences vis-à-vis the performance or production in the news media. In Kenya, for example, critics comment on their being too much focus on politics over development news (i.e. stories about government projects, public utilities and economic progress). To explain the mainstream media’s focus on politics, journalists point to market research and news analytics that show that development news consistently fails to attract wide readership.

Justifications involve some actions that go toward paradigm repair. In the case of Kenya and South Africa, when criticised over bias, sensationalism or factual errors, journalists point fingers at deviant, “unprofessional” or “incompetent” fellow journalists. Experienced journalists use interns or wayward colleagues in the newsrooms to justify poor journalism e.g. in the case of a poorly edited copy. Here, repairing journalistic paradigm constitutes pinpointing the inexperienced or ‘renegades’ and marking out deficiencies so as to show they are not acceptable in the field and are therefore exceptional (Steiner et al. 2012, 706).

The re-articulation of the media’s social responsibility role provides further justification towards criticism of news coverage. The phrase “in public interest” recurs in journalists response towards criticism – the emphasis that news content responds to the greater good in a democracy (McQuail 2003). For, example, the mainstream media in Kenya and South Africa attract criticism over ‘endless’ exposés of corruption in government that do not inspire change but instead make citizens’ fatigue (see Rønning 2009 on the cycle of corruption in African countries). In response to such criticism, in the case of South Africa, this is how an editor responded:

If you are saying that we cover too much of corruption, that is our job, you know. We have to expose the corruption that is there. If it wasn’t there we wouldn’t (cover it). (J-SA3).
To justify their focus on ‘boring’ news features (mentioned in the previous section), journalists working for public service media assert their social responsibility towards majority populations. They argue that they have to give fair coverage to the white-collar urban dweller, and equally to the poor peasant farmer in the rural areas.

**Evasion**

In response to criticisms, journalists admit failures but offer excuses as a defensive strategy. Evasion is a way journalist deflect blame, but more importantly, water down criticism as a possible avenue through which to explain or answer to questions that critics raise (Groenhart and Bardoel 2011).

As part of evasive tactics, journalists deploy norms such as objectivity, fairness and balance to shield themselves from criticism. Professional norms act as ‘strategic rituals’ or ways to defer responsibility over blame (Glasser 2000, Tuchman 1972). To illustrate strategic rituals, take this reporter’s example of how journalists have to grapple with criticisms over coverage of police brutality on suspected hardcore criminals in Kenya:

> KTN (Kenya Television Network) ran something on extrajudicial killings (rampant cases of police brutality against suspects) and many people are saying, “these are terrorists, they should be killed.” Other people are saying, “this is the law” (suspect’s presumption of innocence), so we listen to all these (criticism), but at the end of the day you try and be as fair as possible and balanced as possible in your coverage. (J-K1o)

To evade criticism, journalists employ objectivity as a norm to explain that they have a responsibility to cover crime, but also to expose police killings. Again, journalists will invoke objectivity when they cover citizen’s contradicting views (i.e. whether police are justified or not in killing suspected hardcore criminals). Objectivity as a ‘strategic ritual’, acts as a “bulwark between (journalists) themselves and critics” (Tuchman 1972, 660).

A related evasive tactic in discursive exchange over criticisms of their faults is the accountability norm. Journalists evade criticism by defending their commitment to internal mechanisms in the newsrooms (e.g. answering to the editorial manager or public editor) as well as
through press councils and complaints commissions. When critics have complaints, editors direct them to seek recourse through such institutions. For example, the following journalist considers self-regulation through the South African Press Council as sufficient and therefore external media watchdogs or critics are superfluous:

I feel like we regulate ourselves well enough. So, I don’t think I live or work with the worry at the back of my mind that I may have crossed the line, that a Media Monitoring (media watchdog) would come out and say, A, B, C and D. (J-SA4)

Other regulatory avenues journalists cited are house policies and code of ethics in newsrooms. Further, to reinforce their views against criticism, journalists argue the public is not well-informed about the role of media accountability mechanisms such as press councils.

Mitigation
In mitigation, journalists resort to “circumstances of the professional process that explain these mistakes” in their practice (Groenhart and Bardoel 2011, 13). A common mitigating argument among journalists is the economies of the media. When faced with criticism, journalists explain that they face pressure to meet audience demands as well as to maintain the organisation’s bottom-line.

In South Africa, journalists explained that criticisms over poor journalism, manifested in common factual errors and poor research, are the consequence of ‘juniorisation’ (the retiring of veterans to give way to cheaper inexperienced, young journalists). To journalists, juniorisation is an measure to reduce production costs for media organisations to survive, as a respondent explained:

[…] the number of journalists we have is becoming thinner and thinner, and we still expect them to produce the same quality products they used to produce before, and cover news the way they used to cover news. But now they have twice the workload. The quality might not be the same, and the oversight might not be the same. And that also means you’ve opened yourself up to mistakes that can make even people start relying on social media more and more, because there isn’t enough time to go out and sniff around out in the public anymore. (J-SA6)
In response to claims of bias in the news, other consequences of poor economies are deployed in mitigation, including the appeasement of advertisers through sponsored articles in newspapers, or the overreliance on public relations agencies as news sources.

To explain biases in the news, journalists show editorial interferences—political and commercial—in journalistic practice. Journalists in Kenya, for example, explained that to maintain a steady stream of revenue, they had to appease traditional big advertisers. One example, is through positive coverage of especially Safaricom telecom—the most profitable company in Kenya. Critics on social networks frequently question editorial independence of the mainstream media because of the failure to cover many complaints about Safaricom’s poor services.

As mitigation, journalists put forward time pressure and a competitive media environment as reasons for poor journalism. News journalists cite deadlines they have to meet before news bulletins, or going to press, as reasons for factual or grammatical errors. Further, the competitive digital environment means they have to keep up with the news cycle (and the ‘breaking news’ culture) to meet demands of news audiences. As a result, news journalists sacrifice quality journalism with stories that lack depth and context.

There are other circumstances of news production that fall in this category of mitigation. The phenomenon of “fake news”, when used in criticism to refer to inaccuracies (see previous chapter) provides a mitigating argument for journalistic failures. While a criticised story may have relied on a questionable source online, journalists point to “complicated” nature of verification processes in digital spaces.

Finally, ‘to-err-is-human’ argument surfaces in journalists’ arguments against criticism. The “fallibility of humans” (see Carlson 2018, 97) is a common response to criticism over grammatical or factual errors. As a journalist in South Africa explained, critics need to understand the limits of human capacity:

[...] there are always going to be errors because the media is created by humans.” (J-SA9)
In other words, the discursive input in 'to-err-is-human' argument is that journalistic failures should be forgiven because journalists can never be perfect. Journalists therefore find a basis to seek understanding from critics, so they tone down on criticism about "petty errors" (J-SA9).

Confession
Beyond mitigation is the step towards acknowledging mistakes and accepting responsibility. Here journalists acknowledge faults and engage in a self-reflective process as to possible remedies. An example is how a South African news reporter reflected on her experiences of covering women:

I have fallen into traps myself... I have actually described women in terms of how they look rather than, you know.... (J-SA9)

Confession reveals how journalists cope with the acknowledgement that they are wrong. They, for example, respond with statements such as, “I sort of personally understand the frustration of the viewer” (J-SA11) following criticism of their TV programming, for example. Others admit grammatical errors on the newspaper and point out they will be meticulous in the future. But full confession was uncommon among journalists I interviewed.

Alteration
While accepting faults through confession, journalists also use alteration to acknowledging that changes can be made and how critics’ views can be taken seriously. But this is rare among journalists. Instead, journalists show they accommodate criticism with the hope that it transforms journalistic practice.

Journalists acknowledge and appreciate the role of criticism on the basis of freedom of expression. They mention critics have a right to speak their mind or express disapproval with journalism because of the guarantees in the constitution. Journalists argue that as representatives of the ‘Fourth Estate’, they promote a culture of tolerance and the free expression of divergent views on media space. However, in the spaces they control, such as the letters to the editor or comments section of their online newspapers, news organisations do
not welcome harsh criticism. When they express their wish to see more vibrant criticism, some journalists suggest the digital environment is a space they eventually have to give in to, as the following journalists in South Africa observed:

At the end of the day this is the society that we live in and as much as we are free to report on (any) matters, people are free to speak however they want to. You have to know that you are opening yourself to it by having your by-line there, by having your Twitter handle there, so the best you can do is ignore it, or report it. Or note it and move on. (J-SA4)

Finally, journalists appreciate criticism as a sign of active readership/viewership/listenership as well as interests in the workings of the media. Some journalists admit corrective actions (such as apologies, clarification or do-overs of erroneous stories) are discussed and implemented occasionally within news organisations.

**Digital discursive resistances**

I will now focus attention to the discursive resistance towards criticism on digital platforms. The discursive resistance offers ways in which journalists react to critics and their criticism, and also a way to wade through the varieties of criticism in digital spaces.

In examining how criticism is legitimised and how it eventually becomes effective in journalistic practice, discussing how journalists respond to criticism is important to establish how they legitimise and delegitimise critics and criticism.

The findings show discursive resistances stimulate an engagement—open or latent—between the critical public and journalists. The engagement builds an interest in the state of journalism and potentially a desire to shield the media from threats to press freedom. Here we can draw discursive resistances towards criticism in digital spaces through journalists’ interpretation of criticisms in four ways: consolidation, filtering, rationalisation and counter-discourse.
Consolidation

This largely entails a variety of ways of ringfencing journalistic discourses from threats to its professionalism. Traditionally, norms like objectivity are meant to shield journalism – to absolve it from blame by showing how it guides journalistic practice (Schudson 2001). In digital spaces, the practice is not any different, but goes towards consolidating or reinforcing journalistic discourses from incursions from other discourses – metajournalistic or public.

In defending their claims by, for example, tweeting responses especially when there is intense criticism over a particular coverage, journalists reinforce their commitment to professional norms. Journalists highlight that they serve public interest and meet their audiences’ demands, observe highest standards possible and act as watchdog (and defenders of democracy). Thus, journalists imply that their efforts towards achieving this role may justify errors and other inadequacies. Reinforcing journalistic discourse also involves distinguishing journalistic from non-journalistic actors. For example, making the claim that news production is best evaluated by insiders, those with the understanding of news journalism:

I think criticism is that which is informed by the full scope of the operating environment of the industry of journalism. Preferably a criticism by a peer or a person who has a proper understanding the inner workings of the media industry. Criticism has value if it is done internally, not just by outsiders. (J-K27)

Here the journalist considers peer criticism as more meaningful and fairer in addressing journalistic faults and failures. To shield their journalistic practice from blame, critics point to peer mechanisms that legitimise their journalism and keeps them accountable.

Filtering

Filtering is a separation of journalistic discourse from public discourse, through, for example, categorising the type of criticism and critics in digital spaces. Journalists acknowledge that they read the criticism and engage in a process of weighing their credibility and validity. This is important, as it implies that journalists engage with the criticism in the
process of filtering, even though are defensive and dismissive of the critics.

Filtering is also done through buck-passing as a common discursive strategy among journalists, also going to show the strategies of ‘paradigm repair that journalists engage in in digital spaces. When journalists buck-pass, they deflect responsibility (Steiner et al. 2012, 706) through pointing fingers at external subjects. For example, blaming bad sources for inaccurate news) or deviant colleagues (those engaging in unethical practice). Another example the recurred in Kenya and South Africa was the common blaming of factual errors and inaccurate news on preponderance of “fake news” in digital spaces. Previous studies also show when journalists admit misdeeds, they shift blame to other subjects within the media, or just attribute it to the “news media” (Hindman 1999, 510). Journalists hold themselves to a higher standard when it comes to professional norms and pinpoint errant journalists in an effort to shield the field from blame (McDevitt 2011), which was also apparent in my interviews.

When filtering, journalists mark critics as detractors or ‘polluters’ of conversations because of, for example, their incivility. For some journalists, the default reaction is dismissal even when serious journalistic issues are raised through criticism.

While incivility comes up often in journalists’ delegitimisation of critics, critics have differing views. They consider journalists generally as sensitive to criticism, but in some cases also point to journalists’ filtering strategies. For example, social and cultural factors, as the critic in Kenya below explained when I asked why journalists did not respond to her criticisms:

I think we definitely have a culture of deference (in Kenya), we have a culture of, young people shouldn’t speak like this to their elders. Women shouldn’t speak like this to men, those kinds of dynamics. I think that makes it difficult for people to do criticism in the public sphere. It makes it difficult for people also to engage with criticism in the public sphere. I know I’ve had conversations with older journalists where they are so focused on the fact that I’m a young woman that they lose sight of all the things that I’m actually saying.

(MC-K13)
While this was a rare mention of culture as a factor in criticism during my interviews, the sentiments of the critic pointed towards the activity in which journalists distinguished between those to listen to, and those to ignore. Part of the filtering process involves arguing that some criticisms are meant to fulfil selfish agendas of the critic (such as annoying journalists) and that they do not aim to transform journalism.

Rationalisation

Journalists accept criticisms in digital spaces if they agree with the substance – that the economic and political conditions that prepare journalism for failures are often acknowledged (as discussed in the previous section). Rationalisations involve justifications journalists make as an appeal for understanding of journalistic faults because of the circumstances beyond their control. For example, the fact that biases will recur in the news, owing to interests that media serve as the following journalist in South Africa explained:

Even if the journalist still remains completely objective, but because finances came from elsewhere, there would be that doubt that there is objectivity, because they (critics) believe that you dance to the tune of the one who pretty much pays you. (J-SA6)

The other type of rationalisation that recurred in both the Kenyan and South African context was the justification and the claim of openness towards criticisms in digital spaces. Journalists argue that criticism represents the nature of news production – that of attracting diverse views because it is “not a perfect art”:

I don’t care if you insult me personally, or if you insult my persona or my looks or whatever. I appreciate that. See, at the core of any criticism, what journalists need to appreciate is that a reader took the time to, first of all, read your work, and then go to their phones or their computers and actually get your email address right, and write to you a very lengthy criticism. I’m telling you, I’ve received criticisms of above 1,500 words, attached on a Word document, specifically written to me, you know, telling me, “I disagree with you.” (J-K17)
Journalists acknowledge that criticisms represent change even when journalists do not show proof of any action taken as a result of criticism (this point will be addressed later in the next chapter). In some cases, journalists express the way criticisms on social media served as catalyst for conversations among peers and even at editorial meetings. While rationalisation closely relates to justification, as previously discussed, here this process further involves journalists acknowledging digital criticism in journalistic discourse because of the inevitable exposure of journalism in digital spaces and attendant scrutiny.

Counter-discourse

Counter-discourses entail reactions to public and metajournalistic discourses through a journalistic or professional discourse. One way in which journalists employ counter-discourse is through tagging digital criticisms as mere ‘public’ or ‘popular’ views. “Popularisation” means journalists assign discourses from critics as non-elite, uninformed, or part of just “digital chatter”. One example in Kenya was the reference to the term “blogger” to dismiss critics as not only lacking in journalist training but as detractors or “busybodies” (MAA-K18). Indeed, a common boundary marker in journalism is expertise – a claim journalists make by arguing critics “don’t understand the business” (JS4). This aligns with previous studies (see, for example, Örnebring 2013).

Self-reflexivity

Finally, while digital discursive resistances largely show defences of journalistic discourses, they also reveal how journalistic actors engage with criticisms. Journalists engage in self-examination following criticisms. This could suggest self-reflexivity when reading criticism, a process that may imply journalists are aware of their faults, even when they do not admit, and think about them, and even when they fail to take notable action. This is how a South African journalist reflected on her writing about race:

If I’m writing it, I expect someone to read it. So, I can’t expect the person to read it the way I want them to interpret it. They interpret it the way they do, I mean, that comes back to me and educates me further about the next time. The next time I tackle a similar topic,
then I remember, ‘oh, last time I did a farm attack (in South Africa), the guy was like:’, “why are we always talking about white people that are killing black people, there are black people who kill white people on farms.” Then the next time I write about a farm attack, it just builds to my knowledge, you know, my reflections too. (J-SA4)

However, self-reflexivity is a luxury that journalists often cannot afford because of a fast-changing news cycle with pressure to share news content in digital spaces to beat the competition. Digital media criticism spurs moments of self-reflection, even if it may not allow for complete re-examination of journalistic practice.

**The take-away**

As stated earlier, examining how journalists react to criticism is important in understanding digital media criticism and its perceived influence on journalistic practice. This chapter responds to RQ3: *How do journalistic actors legitimise and/or delegitimise criticism in digital spaces?* It is the process of delegitimisation of digital media criticism that was the central focus of this chapter (legitimisation process is the subject of the next chapter).

The key finding here is that journalists engage in discursive resistances towards delegitimising digital media criticism. Discursive resistances entail practices of positioning journalistic discourse as superior and valid in digital spaces and metajournalistic and public discourses as subordinate.

Overall, the findings show that journalists seek ways to shield themselves from threats inside and outside journalistic discourse. They employ various discursive strategies to ward off criticism in digital spaces such as consolidation, filtering, rationalisation and counter-discourse. Variations of discursive resistances reside in the mode and tone of discourse as well as perceived intentions and the character of the critic.

The strategies to deal with criticism can be summarised as fitting into strategic responses of paradigm repair and boundary maintenance as ways journalists articulate their professional autonomy against incursions of outsiders. However, in digital spaces, journalists have to grapple with the inevitable exposure of both media content and journalistic discourses which are both subjected to the logics of digital
discourse. When under pressure (due to deluge and intensity of the criticism), journalists opt for acts such as blocking critics on social networks, but other times they back-pass (shift blame on, for example, “fake news” in digital spaces) or rationalise (contend with the criticism as digital reality today). However, the findings also show that despite the discursive resistances, journalists are concerned with the subjects of criticism from the public. They thus respond through re-evaluating ways to address the criticism and critics both through their practice and in digital spaces. The process of self-examination gives way to a legitimisation process, the main focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 8. A matter of corrections

In the last chapter, I examined how journalists react to criticisms, and showed that they mainly engage in practices of delegitimisation. This chapter focuses on the legitimisation process by interrogating the corrective (re)actions following criticism in digital spaces.

Legitimation of criticism plays out in two ways: One is how journalists set the terms for and ascribe value to “good criticism”, what they deemed as acceptable and actionable. Here journalists delineate the “good” from the bad through describing the qualities of criticism they consume in digital spaces. The second is the actions they describe as consequences of the criticism in digital spaces and their justifications for the remedial actions. I argue here that legitimised criticism is part of what makes criticism effective, and an important aspect in assessing the discursive outcome of digital metajournalistic discourse.

The first part of this chapter describes the attributes of criticisms in digital spaces, the specific attributes of criticisms journalists prefer and the kind of criticism journalists perceive as actionable or worth reflecting on in their journalistic practice.

Legitimation of digital criticisms

Journalists negotiate the limits of acceptable criticism in digital spaces through how they define, integrate and filter the criticisms they interact with. Journalists positioning of themselves towards criticism point to how they reinforce journalistic discourse by shielding their professional position. In the next section, I will show how they sift through criticism in digital spaces, first by providing a typology of criticism and then by showing the attributes of ‘good criticism’ that journalists describe.

Types of digital criticism

Here I discuss how journalists construct legitimacy of the criticism in digital spaces through five types of criticism: offensive; unreasonable, unfounded, instructive and analytical (Cheruiyot 2018). These distinctions of criticisms explain how journalists delineate the “good” and “bad” criticisms and reveal the process of legitimisation for criticisms of journalism in digital spaces. Each category of criticism
shows how journalists discursively negotiate the variety of criticisms they read on digital platforms. It is important to note here that journalists go beyond the texts of criticism in legitimising them (e.g. through assessing or speculating the motives of the critic) and the categories are not mutually exclusive.

**Offensive criticisms**

Offensive criticisms on digital platforms—mostly emerging from the domain of public discourse—are uncivil, demeaning or abhorrent statements used in digital spaces. Journalists consider them personal, hurtful, disparaging and rude. They include sexist, ethnic, racial, homophobic remarks or generally mean comments that attacks the character of an individual journalists and the reputation of a news organisation. One example of an offensive word used against journalists in South Africa is *kaffir*, a racist term meant to denigrate the black majority in the country. Other offensive criticisms are labels that acquire derogative meanings over time. An example in Kenya is the reference to mainstream news organisations as “gutter press”, which is meant to imply their products are sleazy and distasteful. Journalists express a negative attitude towards such criticisms as the following editor in Kenya explained:

> Their (critics on social networks) criticism tends to be very stinging... it really makes you think twice before you write a story... it (once) really hurt me a lot so I could not respond to it. (J-K2)

The comment above also shows that offensive criticisms catalyse self-reflection among journalists, especially as to the reason for the critic’s tone and how one should respond. In interrogating the input of offensive criticism, it is important to consider that offensive criticism still has value in journalistic discourse.

We can interrogate their input as metajournalistic discourse in four ways. One is that offensive criticisms attract resentment and hostility of journalistic actors thus humper a discursive engagement about journalistic practice. Two, they spur a contestation over legitimacy of the critic and criticisms. In response to insults or mean comments, journalists engage in discursive resistances such as filtering (see the previous chapter) by, for example, blocking critics from their social
network pages. The offensive criticisms thus undermine engagement between journalists and their audiences, as a media accountability agent in South Africa explained:

Unless you can actually monitor these (criticisms) and delete the offensive comments, is there then really any point allowing someone to spew this kind of garbage on your platform? (MAA-SA27)

The third is that the value that the offensive criticisms bring to metajournalistic discourse. They are a representation of mood or public reaction towards journalistic practice. Thus, they reinforce journalistic discourse through providing a convenient gauge of public perception. Further, they raise the profile of professional norms such as fairness because journalists consider them as distinguishing markers of good and bad criticism.

Fourth, the rhetorical pressure through offensive criticisms in digital spaces could spur journalists to action in taking drastic measures in responding through, for example, submitting an apology over a factual error in the news.

However, the offensive comments have a chilling effect on journalists, especially when used to demean them over news coverage unfavourable to critics with selfish political or commercial interests. Harsh and populist criticisms could be used to denigrate, intimidate or bully journalists. They thus pose as a threat to press freedom and safety of journalists, particularly women and minority groups (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016, Gardiner 2018). Incivility through criticism has to therefore be understood in the larger context of pollutants of discourse and incivility (I return to this subject in Chapter 9).

**Unreasonable criticisms**

Journalist mark some criticisms as unreasonable when they contain unwarranted or irrational comments that do not address directly any meaningful journalistic issues. Unreasonable comments do not recognise professionalism, the dignity of individual journalists or even the reputation of a news organisation.
Unreasonable comments, while not necessarily hurtful, are generalised comments that are petty, trivial and distracting. Here critics employ mockery of journalists, for example by making fun of journalists’ physical attributes or references such as “clueless or stupid” (J-SA9). Other descriptions in this category are trolls or provocative statements directed at journalists, as the following political reporter in Kenya described:

... it is rarely about the quality, it is always about countering (undercutting) you... (For example, the critics ask,) “why did you run this (story)? Were you paid to do these things (stories)? Are you part of these (political) cartel which is trying to finish so and so. (J-K27)

The value of the unreasonable criticism to metajournalistic discourse is their capacity to engage readers in general (the public and journalistic actors). Unreasonable criticisms employ rhetorical devices such as satire or humour and hence achieve easy ‘spreadability’ in digital spaces (see Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013), while also provoking more participation in digital public discourse. When I asked the kinds of criticisms that were not well-received, a journalist in Kenya stated that critics employ popular taunts and empty accusations:

They say, “these newspapers are useless... just good enough as meat wrappers (populist jibe against the media in Kenya). They always get things wrong. They always say bad things about Raila (Odinga, the opposition leader).” (J-K8)

Journalists do not consider it worthwhile to engage with critics who make unreasonable criticisms. Therefore, the unreasonable impede on any discursive exchange because journalists doubt critics’ intentions. They see critics as more focussed on venting their anger or seeking popularity on social networks.

Unfounded criticisms
These are criticisms that are not justified or substantiated. Characteristics of unfounded criticisms include, unsupported claims of bias, the misconception of errors, or misunderstanding of journalistic roles. To journalists, such criticisms show critics are ill-informed about
journalistic process. While explaining how criticism show misunderstanding of journalistic process through, for example, blaming of a news anchor for poorly sourced news story instead of a reporter, a broadcast journalist in Kenya said:

For a TV (production), it's never a one-man show like writing (for a newspaper). It's a collective bargain – like six to seven guys come up with that thing that will go on air, that story or that piece. (J-K6)

However, critics would still train their criticism on the news anchor. To close the information gap, between the critics and themselves, some journalists opt to explain to critics their journalistic practice. Unfounded criticism therefore stimulates an engagement with critics. Journalists do not frequently respond to critics in general because of the effort and times involved in bringing critics on the same plane with them.

Further, there are unfounded criticisms that focus on the negative aspects of journalistic practice and thus breed scepticism of critics' intentions among journalists. When the following media accountability agent in South Africa reflected on criticism journalists receive on social networks, he also raised the frustration over unforgiving critics who pick on slightest mistakes:

The human mind is very strange. We forget the millions of good words that were published, and we remember the 500 incidences where the media fell flat. That small percentage (of errors)—it seems like it's a drop in the ocean—instead looms large in our minds. That is one of the reasons for this vociferous criticism of the media. If you say to people (critics), “prove it! Just show me that the media are incompetent.” You will never, ever get the proof. They are just empty accusations. (MAA-SA19)

Such unfounded criticisms show critics' suspicion towards journalism and media illiteracy that is the cause of consistent criticism in digital spaces. While journalists may respond to such criticism, it is mostly because they are concerned that the critics are wrong, misinformed, and that knowledge about journalism would increase their trust of the media.
**Instructive criticism**

These are criticisms that are largely accurate and offer solutions or recommendations as to what journalists should do differently. Critics offer useful suggestions, for example, factual or grammatical errors in news content. At first glance, such criticism are useful corrections and even journalists often refer to them as “constructive criticisms”. However, what they actually mean by “constructive” has less to do with solutions or suggestions, but more reasoned argumentation I refer to “analytical criticism” as I will explain in the next section. Nevertheless, instructive criticisms are beneficial and journalists take critics’ suggestions into consideration, as an editor in Kenya explained:

> They’ll criticise you in a very constructive way. Probably you got fact wrong or probably your story was not very well balanced. They'll point that out and also, they can try to correct you by giving the correct fact if you didn't have the facts. [...] When criticism is fair and constructive, most journalists will take it in and next time they are doing their story they would be constrained to do it differently. (J-K2)

Even though journalists acknowledge and mostly verbally invite instructive criticism from their audience, they do not receive them well. Through instructive criticisms, critics impose their opinion into journalistic discourse, yet journalists consider this an incursion into their profession thus employ discursive resistances. Journalists consider constructivity as an important attribute of good criticism. The overall input of instructive criticism through digital space is in how it imposes critics’ version of the world to the profession of journalism.

**Analytic criticism**

As mentioned before, these are criticisms that are reasoned, substantiated and engaging for journalists. Analytical criticism shows appreciation and understanding of journalism. These criticisms offer a basis for journalists to explain their actions, behaviour or content to critics through a rational exchange. This is how a journalist in Kenya described the criticism she referred to as “good criticism” when I asked the kinds of criticism she would most prefer on digital platforms:
...for the good criticism, most of the time, I’m going to respond (to it), you know? If you offer a counter-argument, and you’re like “I don’t agree with you”, and I’m like “Thank you so much for writing to me. It’s a brilliant idea that you wrote about.” (J-K17)

To journalists, reasoning with critics about questions, doubts, and reservations over journalistic practice is more meaningful than engaging over suggestions that critics impose on them (the instructive criticism). Journalists find analytical criticism are inquisitive but not imposing:

... let’s say (President Jacob) Zuma says I declare tomorrow a public holiday and someone says, “how can this idiot of a President declare another public holiday, we have enough.” I wouldn’t respond to something like that. But if it is something like, “where did Zuma say this? And then I’ll supplement that with, “he was speaking at the opening of the da-da-da... in Midrand (municipality) today. (J-SA4)

An important aspect of analytical criticism is that it shows an understanding of the challenges and limitations of journalistic practice. Prime sources of analytical criticism would most likely be those with journalistic training or practical experience. Analytical criticisms fit into the scholarly prescriptions of criticism: they should show an understanding of practice, professional values, and knowledge of journalism (Brown 1974, Marzolf 1991, Carey 1974).

In summary, there is a stronger sense that journalists appreciate instructive and analytical criticism when it comes to describing ‘good criticism’. In addition to depicting knowledgeability, the two categories of criticisms rise above pettiness and incivility to engage the rational. The preference therefore suggests a higher tolerance for reasoned or ‘intellectual criticism’ (Jacobs and Townsley 2017). The ‘good criticism’ implies the best candidate for a critic would be one who has a closer proximity to journalistic discourse: the expositor (in Chapter 5).

**Attributes of good criticism**

In general, journalists prefer criticisms that are likeable to them – meaning they should be polite and even have a tinge of praise. This
could be explained by the previous chapter's results that show journalists are generally resistant to criticisms. When they take criticism seriously, journalists prefer that criticisms are fair, civil, substantiable and motivated by good faith, attributes which echo previous scholarly prepositions for criticism of journalism (Carey 1974, Brown 1974, Dennis, Romm, and Ottaway 1990b).

From the findings, we can further draw the attributes of criticism journalists prefer. Through these attributes, we can construct the understanding of ‘good criticism’ as expressed by journalists. Good criticism is one the kind that journalists prefer even though it may not necessarily be what they need. However, it is necessary to interrogate the attributes of good criticism because they are ways journalists legitimise criticism in digital spaces. From the findings, journalists describe the following attributes: Civil, positive, fair and balanced, factual, sincere, objective and specific.

**Civil**: Civility means critics do not employ personal attacks, cyberbullying tactics, threats and ultimatums. Journalists consider civility as a critics’ mark of sincerity as to the motives of criticising journalistic practice. To journalists, abusive language implies that critics’ intention is to express anger or annoy, and not reform journalism.

**Positive**: Even with criticism being judgemental, journalists expect critics to be positive. They prefer appreciation and occasional praise for work done well despite faults, like the following South African reporter:

> I do like the people who write nice things. It is just validation of, you know, your work. I don’t do it (write) for the praise, but yes, critics don’t only have to give you bad ratings. (J-SA9)

Positiveness could be explained by the instinctive human response to negative comments. Journalists, even though they may be receptive to criticism, tend to welcome positive evaluations even when they do not openly admit it.

**Fair and balanced**: Criticism that is fair, according to journalists, recognises the limitation of any practice. It recognises that journalism
is not perfect and errors are bound to occur. Along with fairness is balance in criticism, with critics pointing out errors but equally giving credit where it is due. Balance also means critics apportion blame fairly, for example, when there is a journalistic error, they would criticise reporters, as sources of original news stories, and equally the editors who are gatekeepers in news production processes.

**Objective:** Journalists lean towards criticisms that are rational and objective, meaning critics are neutral and impartial. To journalists, critics who are personal and emotional do not have an intention to engage rationally. Being objective means that criticisms would provoke journalists to self-evaluation in addressing the critics’ concerns.

**Factual:** Journalists expect criticism to be based on verified facts and not assumptions or innuendo. Journalists want critics to not only check their facts before criticising, but give reasons for their claims, as an editor in Kenya explained:

If somebody engages you and says, "Okay, these are my figures. This is the GDP, or this how much we are going to make from this Standard Gauge Railway (Kenya’s government project) and for you, you are saying this and this. This figure is from the World Bank…” or wherever it is from, “…and this is what I read.” Then you respond to them and say, "my figures are from this and this place." But if somebody insults you, do you want to insult them back? (J-K10)

Being factual also means that journalists can reason with the critic to offer a remedy or take corrective measures.

**Sincere:** Journalists expect criticisms to be done in good faith. Journalists want critics to be clear with their agenda and not harbour ulterior motives, for example by criticising them over alleged bias in news while harbouring a hidden political agenda. It also means criticisms have to be genuine with no malicious intentions.

**Specific:** Good criticism is specific as to the issue of concern. Mostly critics criticise the media (as in institution) in general when they actually refer to a specific news organisation. When asked which kinds
of criticisms journalists least respond to, a South African reporter pointed to those that make “blanket” claims:

You need to show me specifically where I have gone wrong, so either in the facts or if you think it is slanted in a certain direction, then point out the slant to me. Or if you think that I have some kind of bias because I am a woman, or because I am a white person, or because I live in Cape Town, then point out those biases to me in the copy and where they exist rather than just kind of lumping it all in. I need concrete direction. (J-SA9)

Criticisms that are specific, according to journalists, show the critic’s agenda in questioning them is genuine. Overall, attributes such as fairness and balance and objectivity, suggest journalists easily employ professional norms in evaluating good criticisms. Further, the attributes of good criticism indicate that critics should understand the journalistic processes and roles in news production – or in other words, be media literate.

Validation of criticism

Having looked at how journalists categorise criticisms, I will now address how journalistic actors discuss and reflect on actions and reactions following criticisms. They are manifestations of a reflexive process applied to criticisms of form and content, individual journalist, the media organisation, institution and ideology (as discussed in Chapter 6). From the findings the following could be noted: Self-examination processes; content changes; administrative changes; apologies, clarifications and retractions; vigilance; appointment of ombudspersons; and engagement with audiences.

Content changes

Depending on the criticism, journalists respond to criticisms by changing content. For example, if the news was criticised over gory images, news organisations might pull down the images from their online news pages. Further, editors would individually, or as an editorial group, elect to avoid provocative pictures in future publications. Another example: if journalists are criticised over bias in
election coverage, as a response, in future publications, there would be more balance in coverage of political actors and groupings.

Self-examination
Criticisms spur self-examination into journalistic faults and failures. A recurrent action towards self-examination are the editorial meetings, where journalists evaluate criticisms, discuss causes of errors, apportion blame and occasionally propose action points. While not all issues of criticism are subjects of editorial meetings, the criticisms that are discussed attract the attention of editorial managers or in some cases, owners. Reflecting on the editorial meetings in his newsroom, an editor in Kenya mentioned that journalists review past work, sometimes based on issues raised through criticism:

... when we go for internal meetings, we discuss some of these responses (criticisms). But we've never called a meeting that I can remember specifically to discuss a response by a certain blog, but I know we've discussed such responses in our meetings. (J-K2)

The process of self-reflection during meetings in newsrooms is inconsistent and in most cases is driven by a knee-jerk reaction towards the nature of criticism, its intensity and the magnitude of its perceived repercussions. For example, criticism would be taken more seriously if it points to an error that is too embarrassing and could potentially hurt reputations of news organisation and its journalists, or invite lawsuits and complaints before the press councils, or lead to loss of advertising revenue. The meetings are therefore more of ‘editorial crisis meetings’, and occasionally drastic measure are taken in response, such as the reprimand or even dismissal of a journalist. Therefore, criticisms of ‘minor’ errors are ignored in editorial meetings. Journalists acknowledge a self-reflective process towards criticism individually, and, on occasion, collectively in newsroom discussions.

In Kenya, for instance, following criticism that news talks shows were dominated by male panellists through a hashtag campaign, #SayNoToManelsKe, more TV talk show hosts appeared to have considered inclusion of women in their panels, according to most respondents. In some cases, TV or radio hosts would inform audiences,
at the start of their shows, that attempts were made to invite women to
the panel whenever there is a gender imbalance.

**Apologies, clarifications and retractions**

Journalists rarely admit criticism openly in their publications or
bulletins, although there was a widespread practice in both Kenya and
South Africa to publish or air apologies, clarifications or retractions
based on legal or sometimes professional reasons.

While this is a common practice in news, the respondent in the two
countries did not consider that news organisations responded directly
to criticisms in digital spaces. However, there were periods when some
errors discussed on social networks were followed by responses from
news organisations via social networks on their news websites.

When editors and news organisations respond, they take steps to
make amends such as retraction of the offending/erroneous content (if
they were online); clarification in the case of factual error, or apologies
that are published on the newspaper or aired during news bulletins.

However, journalists seek to avoid attention or publicity to such
responses, except when they face complaints/cases before the press
councils or courts. This was the case with the *Sunday Times* in South
Africa, which published an apology on its website and shared links on
social networks when news reports by their investigative reporters was
in 2018 found to have been fabricated. In Kenya, a dramatic apology
aired on Nation Television (NTV) during prime-time news in 2013 was
removed later from the its YouTube channel. The apology was made by
the Chief Executive Officer of the Nation Media Group (which owns
NTV) after the company’s newspaper, *Daily Nation*, published a
graphic image of a victim of a terror attack in Nairobi.

There are cases where news organisations adopt a policy to
proactively acknowledge and publish clarifications or apologies when
criticised. Journalists and media accountability agents who agree with
the proactive policy towards admitting and correcting faults consider it
as a measure to increase trust among the audience. However, most
journalists criticise such policies as hurting their credibility.

**Vigilance**

Criticism instils a sense of vigilance among journalists. There are
deterrent measures taken to ensure similar do not recur, and this
indicate journalists reflect on their work when they read criticisms in
digital spaces. For example, in some cases, editors or public editors
issue corrections, guidelines or memos to outline steps journalists need
to undertake to avoid errors following criticisms in digital spaces. To
deter future criticism, journalists step up verification of facts in their
news or do better research and source criticism. When I asked an editor
in Kenya what measures his newsroom takes following criticism on
social networks, he said:

These days, we don’t trust just one source, and we have to
counterecheck, unless this source is really an eye witness who saw
everything. (J-K30)

A reporter explained that she had become vigilant when verifying news
before publication following criticism over inaccurate news in the past:

You have to work extra hard to please the audience, you have to do
fact-finding, you can’t just do a shallow story anymore, you have to
know your facts well. (J-K6)

Responding to critics, in some cases, appear to supersede the need to
address audience demands. As an editor in South Africa explained,
critics come with demands of their own – often reflecting work done in
the past instead of focusing on new content for the future. Other times,
the attention to critics is detrimental to journalists’ work, for example,
a newspaper reporter in Kenya explained that precautions taken to
avoid criticism occasionally lead to delays in publishing a “good scoop”
which is later taken up by a competitor.

Other precautions that news organisations take is to forewarn
audiences of impeding changes to a news story or disclosing in the news
stories online that details are still scanty or that a story is “still
developing”.

Administrative and policy action
Administrative changes are those steps taken by news organisations
following criticisms. They could be managerial or apply to specific
employees of the organisations. They are varied and while not all could
be attributable to criticism in digital spaces, they are exposed, widely
publicised or reinforced through digital media criticism.
Constant criticism of grammatical errors in news content results in hiring of sub-editors in some cases, while the sloppy journalists are dismissed. However, journalists I interviewed mentioned that drastic actions such as dismissal were rarely undertaken following criticism in digital spaces. In some instances, news organisations would fire incompetent journalists as part of a restructuring programme, but the link to criticism could not be established.

But there were instances where dismissals happened following critics’ exposure of faults. In a previously mentioned example, a photojournalist was fired after a blogger exposed plagiarism. The photojournalist had allegedly lifted from the internet a photo of two lambs suckling a cow that was published on the front page of the Daily Nation55.

Other administrative actions address working conditions within newsrooms. Critics, mostly bloggers, expose unfair practices in newsrooms, such as sexual harassment of interns and junior journalists as well as wage disparities that affect employees with low bargaining power in the news organisations. A case where bloggers exposed payroll for the Standard Media Group in 2012, according to journalists in Kenya, stimulated discussions in newsroom about how to close wage gaps and harmonise salaries, according to respondents.

Policy changes mentioned by journalists and media accountability agents mostly relate to public service media. In South Africa, critics taking activist approaches pushed for policy reviews in organisation and editorial management of SABC. Some of the changes included a more participatory process in the nomination of board members and hiring of editorial managers and review of local content quota. In 2017, critics pushed for a more inclusive nomination process of the board of the public service media through campaigns online and offline, as a critic explained:

The last SABC board appointment process – normally they get about 50-100 (public) responses – we brought a campaign around it, created simple pictures for mobile phones, low resolution, simple

55 In a statement of apology, the newspaper admitted the photo was “lifted from the internet” and that “administrative action” had been taken. See http://nairobiwire.com/2014/10/daily-nation-apologise-fooled-fake-photo.html
instructions on how to nominate a person, step 1, step 2... We owned the campaign... We ended up with a record number of nominations of 363. We ended up with a process that had to be televised because there was so much interest in it. (MC-SA25)

Other changes in editorial policies in organisations are include: editorial policies (e.g. balanced coverage of the ruling party versus opposition); ethical guidelines detailing transparency in the interaction between journalists and sources; and social media policies that regulate journalists’ behaviour online, sometimes with an aim of protecting the corporate brand.

Appointment of ombudspersons
Another way news organisations respond to digital media criticism is by appointing readers’ representatives. In both South Africa and Kenya, the practice—mostly common with the big media organisations—has a short history. According to journalists, the appointment of public editors did not deter critics from criticising journalists on digital platforms, but it saved them the “trouble of having to engage directly” (J-K17) with their audiences.

Communication with critics
Occasionally journalists engage the critics, although this is rare. Some journalists took time to explain to some of their critics the editorial decisions they made or the cause of the journalistic issues raised (through, for example, private exchanges on social networks or email). Explaining journalistic processes and educating the public of the production and news processes were other notable actions following criticism.

Silence and inaction
Lastly, journalists took little or no action and kept silent following criticism, according to critics. Journalists justified their inaction by pointing to the magnitude and frequency of the criticisms:

I don’t think you can respond, because what we do is very public. That is the thing, we write for the public, we broadcast through the public, and everyone will have an opinion to the stuff that you do. And if you respond to everybody, you probably even won’t be able
to do your work, because you will be worried about what you heard critics say they didn’t like. (J-SA6)

Silence and inaction show that criticism in digital spaces may not necessarily spur action or any reaction from journalists. However, there could be latent changes that journalists and news organisation may take even when they dismiss criticisms.

**Justification of (re)actions**

While journalists may take remedial steps following criticism, they also discursively negotiate terms of general reactions. The negotiative process shows digital media criticism stimulate self-reflection, but could also be an impetus to reinforce journalistic discourse. Here I present three justifications journalists express for taking remedial steps when faced with criticism in digital spaces.

**Fear over regulation**

Journalist are aware complaints and comments online over failures and faults could lead to calls for more regulation either by the political elite or the public. Journalists fear that more stringent measures to control the media threaten press freedom and thus the need to deter criticism through showing that existing media accountability mechanisms are sufficient to deal with deviances.

Even among media accountability agents, there is fear that public pressure would stir the political elite to push for government regulation through legislation (to be discussed in the next chapter). Further, to media accountability agents, criticism in digital spaces served its purpose if it instilled fear over regulation among journalists, as a respondent in Kenya explained:

> Where we really feel that the public or whoever is criticising us (the media) is right, we eat humble pie and say, “on this one we were wrong”. I think as a responsible media, you need to do that. You earn credibility when you admit wrong. (MAA-K11)

Fear over regulation further prompt corrective actions among journalists. While corrective actions such as issuing apologies or clarifications serve as a deterrent measure against institutionalised
criticism (from the state), they also show that journalists instrumentalise media accountability mechanisms in cultivating adherence to professional norms.

**Internal pressure**
Pressure from within news organisations spur remedial measures as response to criticism in digital spaces. Pressure from editors and ombudspersons to reform are reasons journalists give for either responding to digital media critics or becoming more vigilant in their work. Senior editorial managers reprimand journalists when they are criticised in digital spaces while in other cases, the errors critics raise are discussed in editorial meetings.

**Fear of embarrassment**
Journalists are careful about their reputation and that of their news organisations. Thus, they might occasionally respond to criticism, to explain their errors, offer clarifications or apologies or follow up with corrections and future changes. As a reporter said:

> The blogs have created a space where you have to know your facts. Because, honestly, the citizen journalists will embarrass you because they have the facts. (J-K6)

Journalists therefore take various steps to avoid bad publicity, as well as maintain trust and reputation of the audience. For example, proofreading their stories before publication or corroborating facts in their stories with multiple sources to ensure accuracy. According to some journalists, critics not only made them aware they had to be cautious, but also gave solutions, tips for news and fresh angles as well as inspiration for future stories, thus reinforcing journalistic practice.

Finally, justification of journalistic reactions to criticism show that beyond the need to defend professionalism, journalists react to criticism to protect their reputation and occupation from negative internal and external repercussions. Therefore, the legitimisation process of criticism is also a process of defending journalistic discourse.
The take-away

This chapter responds to RQ3: Why and how do journalistic actors legitimise and/or delegitimise criticism in digital spaces? In the previous chapter I showed the process of delegitimisation of metajournalistic discourses, and here I have focused on legitimisation processes.

The findings show journalists engage in a process of legitimisation when faced with criticism in digital spaces. When journalists legitimise digital media criticism, they consider the issues critics raise as pertinent and useful in their practice. The legitimisation process begins when journalists assign attributes that recognise some criticism as ‘good’ and worth taking seriously. Journalists consider good criticism to have attributes such as fairness, balance and objectivity, which imply that in assessing criticism, journalists apply professional norms as well.

However, legitimisation of criticism comes out as a process towards defending journalism against external incursions as discussed in the previous chapter. Journalists put up defences such as the claim that audiences do not understand the practice or that digital media critics are uncivil in digital spaces.

Finally, journalist take remedial actions to forestall criticism despite their legitimising actions. The fear of being exposed for errors or unethical conduct in digital spaces make journalists cautious and vigilant in their reporting for reasons such as, defending the profession, preserving credibility and journalistic reputations or the fear of perceived consequences of regulatory action.

The next chapter will examine the contribution of digital resources towards (de)legitimising metajournalistic discourse.
Chapter 9. Digitality of criticism

The previous chapters have discussed the intervention of the digital critic, the evaluative issues generated through criticism as well as the legitimisation and delegitimisation processes in a digital discursive ecology. This chapter focuses on the digital resource as a dimension for understanding the discursive outcomes of criticism. Here I present findings relating to the contribution of digitalisation to the discursive struggle between journalistic actors and critics of journalism. I focus on digitality as an additive component to media criticism and discuss its significance in the production of metajournalistic discourse in digital spaces. In the next section, I will introduce the digital platforms employed in criticism in the first section and will then interrogate their contribution to media criticism.

The findings show that when critics consistently expose journalistic errors in digital spaces, they position journalistic discourse in a digital discursive ecology. Inevitably, journalists and the public are integrated into a perpetual production of metajournalistic discourse. The digital discursive ecology enhances scrutiny, interactivity, mobilisation, and engagement between journalistic and non-journalistic actors.

Suitability of digital platforms

Journalistic actors and critics utilise a variety of digital platforms, mainly Twitter, Facebook and blogs (see Appendices V-VI). Social networks are the main platforms on which journalists access criticism, communicate or engage with critics. Digital platforms afford critics the capacity to monitor journalists and news organisations because these are key spaces to access, consume and engage with journalistic content. While critics’ news consumption habits could vary—with some even being news avoiders—they, in one sense or another, engage with secondary media content (from fellow users) or at least their interpretations.

Criticisms are shared across platforms, thus increasing exposure. Through their participation in evaluating, analysing and commenting on journalistic practice, critics present themselves as active information-seekers and sharers (see Kümpel, Karnowski, and Keyling 2015). The effort towards sharing criticism in digital spaces shows critics are self-motivated towards interactivity and exposure. Further,
in digital spaces, critics find networked audiences who subsequently share their criticisms within and across platforms. I will now look at the contribution of digital platforms more closely in the next section.

**Role of the ‘digital’ in criticism**

Critics interviewed have active presence on social networks or blogs. Their participation (through posting critical text on Twitter, for example) could be individual or part of a collective criticism of the mainstream media. Blogs allow users to target a specific audience – sometimes driven to visit the blog through a link shared on social networks. Blogs also allow for long commentaries and here critics have more space to explain and analyse their concerns about journalistic practice. For short and quick comments, critics turn to social networks. Social networks expose journalists to widespread public attention and scrutiny. On these platforms as well, journalists find to a mix of criticisms, that include offensive criticisms (discussed in Chapter 9).

Cross-platform criticism is common. For bloggers, social networks play a complementary role. On social networks, bloggers find more audiences and like-minded critics as well as share and interact with fellow users.

From the findings I identify six contributions of digital platforms to media criticism: access to journalists; amplifying voices; capacity for public scrutiny; instantaneous feedback; fact-checking capacity; exposure to critical resources.

**Access to journalists**

Digital platforms lower barriers to entry thus allow a wider variety of networked publics to freely criticise the mainstream media. However, entry is limited to accessibility to the internet. Entry to digital space means accessibility to not only content of news organisations, but journalistic actors as well. The key contribution of digital platforms here therefore is reducing the distance between critics and journalists.

A variety of affordances of digital platforms allows for sharing, immediacy and interactivity of journalists and their audiences (this group consisting of critics). Through digital platforms critics can share feedback in real-time as well interact with journalists and fellow users. In addition, digital spaces—specifically social network sites and blogs—
are free from control, in comparison to other platforms of audience feedback such as the comments section of traditional news websites.

For networked publics such as critics, accessibility to journalists, news organisations and fellow users gives them a sense of empowerment. When I asked what value, the digital platforms bring to the critic-journalists interaction, an editor explained his answer in the following way:

In the past, access to journalists was really hard. You wouldn’t even reach close to someone like Jeff Koinange (Kenyan TV talk show host and news anchor). But nowadays you can tweet Jeff Koinange directly. It’s really easy to directly get in touch with these people (journalists) and they’ll respond to you. Sometimes, I see many of them responding, some ignore. (J-K10)

The example above suggests the ‘reciprocity’ at play, in the expectation that a relationship between the critics (as audiences) and journalists (Sjøvaag 2010) would be defined by how they meet the obligation to listen and respond to each other. Critics’ close accessibility to journalists and the news media means close proximity to journalistic discourse, hence the empowerment to contest media power (Couldry and Curran 2003) through criticism. However, as the editor mentioned, some journalists do not respond to critics and still seek to reinforce their power over the critics. To maintain a power distance, journalists delegitimise critics, for example by the arguing that critics are detractors. As we saw in Chapter 7, journalists point to the incivility, ill-motives and adversarial nature of some critics discursively resist public and metajournalistic discourse. Most journalists raise incivility as a reason to limit their accessibility through acts such as, blocking critics from their social network spaces.

Amplifying voices

Using the affordances of a variety of platforms, previously marginalised voices can participate in criticism in previously controlled spaces of audience feedback such as letters to the editor. Critics consider digital platforms, especially social networks, as stimulating more participation of groups often marginalised in public discourses, for example, women:
[...] people who are having the most substantive political conversations in Kenya on Twitter are women. People who are joining the political discourse, and setting the agenda, and determining the meat of the political discourse in this country are women... (This is) because it is a space that the traditional media has not given them. (MC-K13)

Supported through a rapid rise in mobile internet, stakes for media participation for a wide span of users in countries like Kenya and South Africa have increased (Willems and Mano 2017b). They include the educated youth whose active participation in digital spaces, by mobilising for political action towards human rights, public accountability or gender representation, are noted in a variety of studies of social networks in both countries (see Bosch 2017, Bosch, Wasserman, and Chuma 2018, Mutsvairo 2016). However, the digital spaces may not be as representative as the views that are most visible and accessible on digital networks tend to come from the already privileged voices such as the political elite or the digitally literate (Hermida et al. 2012, Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019, Ogola 2019). As mentioned in Chapter 5, critics in Kenya and South Africa tend to be affluent and urban-based and with access to the internet.

There is one other point on amplification of voices through criticism that I will return to later. In digital spaces there is ease to which users can build a global audience (Couldry and Curran 2003) as is the case in Kenya and South Africa. Global reach means that accessibility and scrutiny of journalistic work is not confined to narrow demographics, but instead a diverse set of digital publics.

*Capacity for public scrutiny*

Digital platforms increase attention to journalists, news media organisations, critics and their criticisms. To journalists, the exposure to a wider audience means journalistic practice is constantly monitored and commented upon, and thus news workers have to be vigilant. Consistent and extensive public scrutiny draws attention to journalistic faults and failures leading to, for example, editorial meetings in the newsroom to discuss criticisms on social networks.

With the digital infrastructure that allow ‘spreadability’ (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013) across platforms, the exposure of minor errors
to a diverse and broad public exposes journalists to ridicule and public scepticism. Mistrust in news organisations develops when critics continuously scrutinise and expose journalistic faults.

Journalists are apprehensive of exposure of errors and intense scrutiny of their work, but are still keen to follow audience feedback on social networks. In some cases, public attention becomes an impediment towards journalists’ responses to criticism as a reporter in South Africa explained when I asked about how she reacts towards criticism on social networks:

I’m shy of making overt comments on social media about matters that I know […] I don’t want my views splashed where someone could use them against me on something I’d written about. (J-SA4)

While avenues for criticism are available in digital spaces, media literacy among the networked publics is generally poor. Critics lack knowledge about how news organizations work and thus for journalists, it is the basis for their delegitimisation of critics. A common example in Kenya and South Africa is a case in which critics fail to distinguish between a news story and an opinion piece, and thus blame the news media over bias in op-eds. The digital infrastructure can also fan misunderstanding of news leading to more criticism. For instance, the criticism of secondary media content – with audiences commenting on news reinterpreted on ‘micro-spaces’ of social media (e.g. through retweet-and-comment practice on Twitter) or shared content rewritten on blogs. To clarify the misunderstanding, journalists often have to provide links to the original story or updates.

The digital publics’ role in scrutiny of journalistic practice is critical in terms of the process towards legitimisation of criticism. The public nature of digital criticism inadvertently gives a sense that journalism as a profession is opened up to public scrutiny (Lowrey and Anderson 2005). Digital platforms demystify journalism through accommodating critics’ questions about editorial process, content and operations of media organisations. As a response to criticism, of say, a story whose factivity is doubted, journalists respond by explaining verification processes or sharing sources of the story e.g. public documents. As a catalyst of public scrutiny, criticism therefore could be promoting transparency, an “ethical principle” that is pegged on its
“relational character” i.e. the interactions between the audiences and journalists (Karlsson and Clerwall 2018b, 1924, Karlsson 2010).

However, the scrutiny function of the critics in digital spaces cannot be said to promote consistent oversight of the mainstream media. Critics are seen as unreliable because of inconsistency, anonymity and unpredictability. To journalists, digital media critics take criticism as a “past-time” (J-K4) and thus breed mistrust about their intentions to transform journalism.

**Instantaneous feedback**

Digital platforms provide timely feedback, but also effective channels to which both journalists and critics engage with each other. Feedback on digital platforms varies from short comments to long commentaries, as in the case of blogs. It could include ‘mundane criticism’, the short commentaries of news under the micro-spaces embedded in social network infrastructure (Carlson, 2016) that allow for, example, replies to original news text. Here, users (re)interpret, comment and recirculate criticism. Critics generate their own agenda here and invite commentary that is sustained through further discursive exchange involving both journalistic and non-journalistic actors. When I asked how social networks enable journalists to respond to critics, a South African reporter explained that he seeks timely and continuous feedback from Twitter and Facebook users:

> [...] people will engage with what I have live-tweeted, coming with the understanding that it is directly from me. I was (published) in the op-ed pages this weekend so there is quite a lot of people engaging with the piece I wrote this weekend. (J-SA9)

Further, when it comes to instantaneous feedback, there is value of immediacy and interactivity functions to metajournalistic discourse. Public reactions through criticism is a “gauge of public mood” (J-SA8) towards journalistic content or its flaws. This way, journalists can respond in timely fashion to criticism with the aim to avert public outrage, calm tensions and maintain their credibility. One example from Kenya, where news organisations face instantaneous feedback from audiences, and whose criticism they tap into in making editorial decisions, is the coverage of elections. Reflecting on the criticism over
moderators for the presidential election debate in Kenya in 2013 and 2017, a Kenyan editor explained that early criticism on social networks over major editorial decisions about elections debates or coverage were worth consideration:

> We care about what people (on social media) tell us. So, I think it is a “yes” going forward. I think the media will really allow instant feedback from audience to strengthen journalists (work). (J-K30)

According to journalists, criticisms are an inevitable consequence when faced with a potentially contentious editorial decisions or new story, that will divide audience opinion. However, sentiments about the value of reading audiences’ mood through criticism on social networks are varied with some journalists dismissing critics’ input as insignificant.

The affordance of sharing in a timely fashion could also mean that in cases of errors, the reach of criticism is wide, and in some cases wider than the original content. Further, more errors are generated with the need to share news fast to beat competition among news organisation thus hamper verification and due diligence in sourcing, drawing criticism over poor journalism as discussed in Chapter 6. Journalistic faults following news sharing practices are also subjects of criticism:

> A lot of junior reporters come from a generation where your first instinct is to share. You know, this is the way we report on ... It’s like, if you see a car crash on the street or you see a fire, your first instinct is not to call 911, but to film it. (MC-SA18)

The compulsive sharing culture means journalists and news organisations are under utmost pressure to control the flow of information from within the newsrooms. However, the unpredictability of the public’s attention on digital platforms make journalists anxious over criticism and the repercussions on their reputations.

**Fact-checking capacity**

Through digital platforms, the verification capacity of users and journalists is enhanced. The internet boosts speed, efficiency (through crowd-sourcing) and capacity to share across to a variety of platforms and users. Critics point out factual errors, while providing evidence
from a variety of sources online, such as official reports to verify statistics as used in the news. Journalists are under pressure to keep up with audiences’ speed at verifying news and therefore have to be vigilant against any facts presented in the news.

Some precautionary measures that journalists take to deter criticism in Kenya and South Africa include flagging news stories as unverified. Digital platforms also enable journalists to share information about news sources, for example links to reports or data so critics can verify for themselves.

However, critics hinder truth-telling through for example spreading false or inaccurate information, according to the respondents. Further, the torrent of varying information received from a variety of sources online impedes on the effectiveness of journalists’ verification processes. Multiple sources, some of them critics, may share facts to verify a story, but some may as well spread false claims. In Kenya, for example, journalists described situations where bloggers who published false news would also later criticise journalists for “the slightest of factual errors” (J-K2).

According to journalists, critics do not have an agenda of improving journalism through fact-checking in digital spaces. They have personal motives such as driving traffic to their blogs or increasing the numbers of followers on social networks (as discussed in Chapter 5). Further, journalistic actors accuse critics, especially bloggers, of riding on the tide of the success of the mainstream media by plagiarising content.

Exposure to critical resources

Along with the fact-checking capacity, digital platforms expose audiences and critics to a variety of journalistic information, tools and techniques of criticism. Critics analyse the news based on content deemed to manifest best standards of research, journalistic rigour and language. Digital publics also learn the ‘art of criticising’ through a variety of other critics – social, cultural or even scholarly critics. Apart from critical skills, critics acquire and share knowledge about devices and techniques of criticism, such as using of rhetorical or social network devices such as satire, humour, memes or gifs. On digital platforms, critics find a variety of journalistic content—some largely perceived to represent the ‘best standards’, for example, The New York Times or the UK Financial Times—and such examples provide frames
to assess local journalism. Thus, digital media’s input to metajournalistic resource is educative – through providing resources and techniques of criticism of journalistic practice. An example of instrumentalisation of critical resources online is the frequent criticism of journalism in Kenya over failure to meet “global standards” based on comparisons with journalistic work in the West:

You know, they (critics) like comparing. (They say) Aljazeera does this, BBC does this, and all that. Someone like my wife doesn’t care about the local media at all. She listens only to BBC and (reads) the Financial Times (UK). Yes, because they have quality so they (critics) are able to know how our news compares. (MC-K5)

In addition, digital media critics generate ideas, crowd-source and fact-check information or build on each other’s arguments in the process of criticism. Critics offer and receive information through exchanges with fellow users and journalistic actors, while digital platforms serve as test-beds for responses to criticism.

Through social networks, for example, critics validate their criticisms and mobilise fellow users to support their ideas or oppose contrary opinions. In some cases, critics mobilise digital publics to criticise the media collectively through, for example the use of hashtags, which has the potential to pile pressure on journalists and news organisations. Here we can therefore see how public discourse—enhanced through the input of digital publics and affordances—taps into journalistic discourse (knowledge of best practices) and ultimately feeds into digital metajournalistic discourse.

Lastly, to widen the reach of their content on social networks, critics employ practices and elements of spreadability such as memes or use of rhetorical devices like humour. The mockery and trivialisation of journalistic work on digital platforms, while increasing the visibility of their metajournalistic discourse, serves to alienate journalists. Such discursive strategies provoke journalists to engage in discursive resistances such as the blocking of users from the social network spaces.
**Digital discursive strategies**

There are discursive strategies that are critical for the spread and circulations of criticisms and further explain the role of digitality in criticism. Critics employ the strategies in digital spaces. Overall, they reinforce the expositor’s position in public discourse. They include the following:

*Hashtagging:* Through hashtags, critics collectively address a specific subject about the news media in digital spaces. While hashtags categorise topics so it mobilises users to comment on a subject, they are also weaponised for a common agenda of criticism. Together with devices such as humour, hashtags add fuel to interactions among journalistic and non-journalistic actors, as well as circulations of discourses.

*Counter-storytelling:* This is a strategy used to provide an alternative account of news media narratives through a fresh article on the same subject or a version of an original news story with new facts. For example, bloggers post commentaries about news stories that sometimes gain much more traction on social networks than the original, faulted news story. Bloggers could run a story with a fresh angle to counteract one ran by the news media. In the case of fact-checkers, their analysis of facts in a news story leads to a ‘fact-checking report’ that is posted on their websites. Fact-checkers further provide links to the reports on social networks for users’ further scrutiny of the original news story. Criticism is embedded in counter-stories which achieve a double goal of reinforcing journalistic discourses (through interpretation/translation of news), but delegitimising journalism (through showing its deficiencies).

*Counter-criticism:* This entails a variety of dissenting voices through criticism. Critics or journalists may employ counter-criticism of critics who originally commented on a journalistic fault or support an opposing view relating to the original criticism. For example, in 2014 a group of Kenyan Twitter users initiated the hashtag #NationMediaLies to criticise the *Daily Nation* newspaper over investigative reports of corruption (one case involved allegations against the president’s
sister). Other critics responded with the hashtag #IStandWithNMG (Nation Media Group) in support of the newspaper, but then criticised the newspaper over other faults, for example, concealing the identities of suspects in news about corruption. While counter-criticism may in some cases be a defensive strategy that both critics and journalists employ, it generates debates while sustaining and spreading criticisms of journalism. When journalists respond to criticism of the media through counter-criticism, they widen the debate about the journalistic issues.

**Branding**: Certain words have discursive power in digital spaces. Such branding is potent in the delegitimation of the media, but also in increasing the reach and influence of criticism in digital spaces. One term mentioned before is “fake news”, which refers to the media’s tendency to publish unverified or inaccurate media based on digital sources (according to the respondents). “Fake news” is instrumentalised in criticisms of the media (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019) because critics have a shared understanding of what the term means. There are others such as “rag” or “gutter press” that are meant to dismiss the news media as sensational. In Kenya, one tag used to criticise the media on social networks is “Githeri media”. It refers to celebritisation and sensationalistic tendencies of the Kenyan mainstream media.

**Trolls and ’hired-guns’**: The practice of trolling involves individuals or groups of critics sharing controversial views about the media, mostly in the spaces of news media on social networks to generate attention and draw focus to a journalistic fault, however minor. Trolling or criticism of the media by proxy (through “hired bloggers” as was the case in both contexts) is common in controversial news stories. These groups of

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56 The tag became popular on social networks when the mainstream media was criticised for creating a celebrity out of an “alcoholic man” during a general election in August 2017. It started with a viral picture of a voter, taken as he munched away a local staple, *githeri* (a mix of boiled maize and beans), in a plastic bag (a government ban on polyethylene bags had just been announced at the time). What followed was media frenzy that turned the “Githeri man” into a celebrity, through a series of TV, radio and print interviews. The coverage attracted the interest of the corporate and government bureaucrats, leading to numerous gifts to the man that included land and presidential honours.
critics initiate and promote attacks, especially on Twitter, through hashtags and fierce criticism of the media.

'Split role of critics: This mostly refer to critics generating other forms of criticisms of institutions/subjects other that the media. Some of the critics of the media are also social, political and cultural critics. They comment on other subjects, and occasionally discuss the state of the media. As 'experts' in other subjects they establish a profile and followership that would ultimately give more visibility to their criticism of the media. They therefore easily amass support of their position in a digital discursive ecology. A common example of these critics in Kenya and South Africa are those who regularly comment on politics and social issues. In South Africa, civil society activities that comment on governance and democracy are, by extension, media critics and thus easily establish credibility and influence among digital publics. The ‘split role’ of critics emphasises their position as counter-publics – by offering a counter-discourse to the way the public understands the role of the media in society.

The community of critics: Critics are part of a wider virtual community of critics. While not necessarily identifying themselves as part of a specific ‘community’, critics recognise that fellow users collectively are important for their criticisms to be acknowledged. This is how a respondent explained the importance of the ‘community’ when I asked why he considered gaining recognition of fellow social network users:

Most of my people like the stuff I write on Facebook, where I have very good audience that I engage with. I know like 200 people on Facebook. When I criticise (the media), many people agree with what I say, and they care. (MC-K5)

Criticism gains wide appeal when shared in digital spaces as critics share, reinterpret the news and criticism, and circulate the text to fellow users. One community of critics is ‘Kenyans on Twitter’ (KOT). KOT engage in collective criticism thus contribute to advocatory pressure towards the media. To seek influence of their criticisms, critics tag KOT (using the hashtag) as a way to seek their participation, acknowledgement or vindication.
Delegitimising the digital

Digital spaces present a complexity that either builds or blights the discursive exchange between critics and journalistic actors. However, incivility, personal attacks and insults heighten the toxicity of digital platforms. Critics further hide under the cloak of ‘anonymity’ to launch insults (Santana 2013), troll journalists or defame news organisations. The pollutant discourses, unethical conduct and misinformation/disinformation hurt the credibility of critics and their criticism.

In addition, the density and diversity of information on digital platforms curtails journalists’ ability to keep up with the flow of criticisms. As a response, journalists set up a discursive fence around them by selecting which criticisms to consume and which critics to engage, as a journalist explained:

There is a lot of chaff in there (online) and you have to pick and sort some of it because if you pick everything you’ll run mad. Some of it are just plain ignorance, some of it is insults, some of it based on political leanings and so there is a lot of noise and out of that noise there is some sense, so you pick the sense out of that noise. (J-K10)

The ringfence against a chaotic and unpredictable public discourse is further supported through an active ‘high-profile’ community of expositors. Journalists follow these expositors as they provide guidance into digital discursive ecology. Journalists therefore delegitimise forms of criticism from a larger pool of critics that are participants of public discourse, opting for a select few producing metajournalistic discourse. Journalists delegitimise the larger critical public in digital spaces emphasising the offline-online disconnect and the character of the participation, as a South African reporter explained:

An argument with someone face-to-face versus an argument with someone online are very different. Some people online don’t want to see reason if they already have told themselves one thing and, because they’re hiding behind the handle, they’re invisible to you. They can throw in any hateful thing that they can, whereas if I’m speaking to you, I can read your tone, I can read your body
language, I can understand better what you're trying to put across, even though I may not agree with it. (J-SA4)

Moreover, journalists’ behaviour on social networks presents tensions that arise from their identities as professionals, employees of news organisations and private persons (Molyneux, Holton, and Lewis 2017, Ottovordemgentschenfelde 2017). Digital critics often expose journalistic tensions over these identities, while also subjecting journalistic behaviour and political/social issues to public discourse in digital spaces. Critics expect journalists to represent certain social and cultural values and norms. When their actions and views contradict this, they risk antagonising both social and professional norms.

Critics in Kenya and South Africa reveal that journalists’ views sometimes contradict their professional values, exposing them as racial, tribal, misogynists or politically radical. For example, a critic described how a veteran editor in Kenya he “once idolised” (MC-K16) made xenophobic statements on Facebook at a period when police were rounding up immigrants alleged to be linked to terrorism in Nairobi.

**Criticism of digital critics**

Despite enhancing the production, sharing and interactivity in digital spaces, digital platforms have their downside. Critics’ participation in digital spaces impede[s] on engagement with journalists and news media organisations.

Journalists consider the critical public to have crossed the line when digital criticism degenerates into hateful, sexist, homophobic, racist, ethnic or misogynist remarks. The pessimistic view considers them as the detractors or the uncivil polluters of public discourse and are therefore shunned in journalistic discourse (Wolfgang 2018). The optimistic view of uncivil digital publics see them as having a political and social function in provoking and fuelling interest in social change (Masullo Chen et al. 2019).

However, the pollutant nature of hate speech denigrates social networks as a public sphere. There are, for example, forms of hate speech in the digital spaces of Kenya and South Africa that are ethnic or racial slurs, homophobic or misogynistic. In Kenya, for example, journalists have to contend with inflammatory texts against their
ethnicities especially during the general election campaigns (Kimotho and Nyaga 2016).

Further, critics are irrational and personal, and dissemination of uncivil comments online to a wider public hurt psychologically or harm the reputation of journalists and news organisations. Here is how a media accountability agent in South Africa described how a journalist was treated online:

So, they are not attacking the newspaper or the blog or whatever, but they are attacking the person, they may sometimes attack the journalist, which has happened, and especially certain journalists that have been affected. (MS-SA27)

Further, the longevity of critics in digital spaces could be questioned. Most digital critics are inconsistent in their criticisms of journalism. Blogs, for example, are short-lived while most bloggers intermittently keep them active.

**Digital discursive ecology**

Earlier I pointed to the conundrum of understanding criticism beyond evaluative texts or feedback of disapproval of journalism. If we have to understand the input of discursive digital ecology to criticism then we have to pinpoint its attributes that reinforce its potency i.e. technological affordances that support the production, distribution and discursive value between journalistic and non-journalistic actors. The facilitative value of the digital platforms is in allowing for interaction between not just the actors but with their audiences as well as circulation of metajournalistic discourse.

The digital discursive ecology is global and networked. The discourse about the media in various geographical locations percolates into the media space in a local context. Thus, digital platforms widen not only the arena for discursive struggle for the media but the metajournalistic discourse. The discursive ecology sets the pace and tone of discourse as well. Provocative and emotive tweets, for example, are not merely an outlet for personal expression over journalistic errors, but are meant to stimulate journalists and public attention to the issues of criticism. This ecology is beyond the control of journalists such as the comments sections of online news publications, and
therefore as diverse in discourse. Here there is space for social, cultural and political critics, and thus a complexity of discourses.

While the collective of the critical community in the digital space accumulate power—imagined or real—their influence has to be understood within the context of participation. As discussed in Chapter 5, participation of media critics, however generative of metajournalistic discourse, is unrepresentative and incomplete. One reason for the skewed nature of their participation is that the most visible critics tend to be privileged in socio-economic terms (class, education or internet access). Discursive power in this sense has to be questioned as the space for criticism is “segmented by interest and structured by inequality” (Couldry and Curran 2003).

Criticism on the digital platforms, while evaluating journalistic platforms, also serves to generate its own attention and audiences. Bloggers, fact-checkers, and even social media influencers therefore serve, in this case, as “civic information sources” (Arthur, Singer, and Jerry 2007, 80) by providing guidance in the torrent of metajournalistic discourse. There is however a lot of “irrelevant and useless chaff” (J-K15), in digital spaces most of which do not address journalism but is meant to generate other divisive political or social discourses. Journalists therefore consider critics such as bloggers as detractors in effectively establishing and maintaining journalistic discourse in digital spaces (Lowrey and Anderson 2005). As a response, journalists reaffirm their professionalism by responding to critics in digital spaces, for example, through sharing links to updated news stories or highlighting changes made to a story following criticisms on social networks.

While digital spaces could be a resource, they also present the challenge of information overload. Additionally, there is an imbalance of metajournalistic discourses in digital spaces. In the discursive digital ecology, critics ‘give more than they receive’. Journalists’ responses are limited and intermittent.

The take-away

This chapter responds partly to RQ. 4 (How does metajournalistic discourse through digital media criticism influence journalistic practice?) by mainly focussing on the digital resource.
The findings show a digital discursive ecology is an avenue which promotes the generation of a variety of discourses as well as its circulation in digital spaces. By examining the input of digital platforms to criticism as well as implications of digital critics, I draw on some two key points that launches the second part of the question whose focus is the discursive outcome of digital media criticism (the next chapter).

First, criticism through digital platforms increases scrutiny of journalism. Journalists become cautious and are pushed to self-examine their journalistic practice constantly because digital metajournalistic discourse is ever-present. The digital recourse could therefore be said to play a mnemonic role – that of constantly reminding journalists of the obligations to their audiences and fidelity to professional norms and rules. Secondly, through the networked and interactive potential that digital media technologies afford, criticism of mainstream media is enhanced. Through criticism in digital spaces, critics’ participation is enhanced through collective means to mobilise action in challenging journalistic practice. In the next chapter I will examine the broader outcome from the metajournalistic discourses generated through criticism in digital spaces.
Chapter 10. The discursive outcome

This chapter examines the discursive outcomes of metajournalistic discourse by focusing on criticism in digital spaces. It is a culmination of an analysis of the following dimensions of digital media criticism: the critical actor, the evaluative subject, defensive response, corrective reaction and digital resources. It examines the input of the dimensions to the journalistic discourse (in other words the product of digital metajournalistic discourses and public discourses in a discursive ecology). It further looks at the range of tensions and expectations that results from the discourses as produced through criticism in digital spaces.

When examining how digital media criticism is incorporated into journalistic discourse, it is important to understand how traditional accountability is framed. I therefore interrogate perceptions of the journalistic and non-journalistic actors on accountability as a practice and norm in order to illuminate the position of digital media criticism in journalistic practice.

The findings show that digital discursive outcomes manifest themselves in ways that journalists incorporate digital media criticism into journalistic discourse. While critics raise issues about professional norms and rules, the fact that journalists question the legitimacy of media critics and their criticisms (as seen in Chapter 6) challenges their transformative capacity, and subsequently the capacity of critics to hold journalists to account.

Digital discursive outcomes are a combination of responses and reactions to metajournalistic discourses through digital media criticism. They constitute the critical actor, the evaluative subject, defensive response, corrective reaction and digital resource. In its most recent chapters, this study has arrived at five key findings pertinent to digital discursive outcomes.

First, the criticising expositor plays an intermediary role in digital media criticism by occupying spaces of digital public discourse and journalistic discourse. Second, the digital metajournalistic discourse is a set of grand and secondary discourses generated through digital criticism and the critical input towards journalism is contextual. Third, discursive resistances towards digital media criticisms emerge as part of a discursive struggle between journalistic and non-journalistic
actors. Journalists generate a set of discourses whose goal is delegitimisation of criticism. Fourth, criticisms in digital spaces are legitimised through the process of selecting ‘good’ criticisms that journalists acknowledge and actualise through corrective actions. Lastly, digital metajournalistic discourse exist within a discursive ecology and is a discursive site of active participation of critics within digital spaces. In light of the findings from previous chapters, the digital discursive outcome constitutes discourses that shape journalistic practice, and the ways critics are positioned in digital spaces as ‘carriers’ of legitimate discourse.

**Aggregate of digital discourses**

The discursive outcome is promoted by participation in criticism in digital spaces, which implies that the public is sufficiently concerned about the media to criticise it and potentially transform its discourse. It also implies that a journalist-critic relationship is reinforced while metajournalistic discourse provides a gauge of public ideas about journalism and its output. Journalistic discourse is in a constant ebb. It becomes a subject of public discourse, but other times it sets the agenda for metajournalistic discourse.

In public discourse, there are inconsistent and vague understandings of professionalism (in the context of performance of journalists, practice, techniques and content). This suggests the presence of diverse and complex meanings of professionalism within the digital discursive ecology. But it does not imply that digital media critics necessarily reject journalistic discourse. For example, intolerance towards amateurs expressed in the criticism of “juniorisation” in South Africa (laying off veterans and replacing them with inexperienced journalists) shows that critics acknowledge that professionalism is essential for good journalism.

Paradoxical discourses emerge in a discursive ecology as well, as in the case of Kenya where there is emphasis on less politicised content (by covering more ‘development’ news), while at the same time a need for the media to focus on politicians and corruption in government. In their defence, journalists deploy their discourse by arguing their market/audience research indicate audiences are more inclined towards political news.
Metajournalistic discourse from digital media criticism legitimises journalism through placing it in constant public discourses thus bolstering its relevance, by for example, analytical and instructive criticisms (see Chapter 8).

In a digital discursive ecology, ideas about journalism are fluid but also discourse-driven. A digital discursive outcome therefore represents the movements of discourses within the digital discursive ecology and can be illustrated as in Figure 8 by the broken lines marking the zones of metajournalistic discourse (MD) and journalistic discourse (JD).

![Figure 8: The three types of discourses in a digital discursive ecology.](image)

The digital discursive outcome generates the question: who is acknowledged as a legitimate journalism assessor? In chapter 7, the findings show that hardly anyone but journalists themselves. However, expositors (see Chapter 5) occupy a special position of generating metajournalistic discourse. While normative perspectives about criticism of journalism are disrupted in digital spaces through the democratisation of media commentary (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015), journalists and news organisations eventually make the decision on whom to listen to i.e. the expositor. To mark out deviant and
appropriate journalism, expositors use the norms and rule of professional journalism, implying that this category of critics reinforce journalistic discourse. The intermediary role of this group is value to journalistic discourses owing to the insider-position of the critic in journalism – in close proximity to journalistic discourse, but to public discourse as well.

Finally, the digital discursive outcome also has to consider the discursive resistances against criticism. Journalists’ discursive resistances, while aimed at maintaining criticism within journalistic discourse, are ineffective. The digital discursive ecology is beyond their control. However, some discursive resistances such as blocking critics on social networks are detrimental towards answerability as a framework for accountability because they do not engage with critics even though they may have taken criticisms into consideration. In the next section, I will assess the digital discursive outcome in terms of the accountability as a practice and norm of journalism.

Accountability as norm
How does criticism shape the relationship between norms and journalistic practices? The findings show how norms and rules that define journalism are defined in the digital discursive ecology. Critics want journalists to go beyond professional norms to subscribe to social norms. Therefore, journalists must negotiate their different identities as professionals, but also as social actors. A South African journalist’s narration of experiences with the historical difference between the main races (Whites, Blacks and the Coloureds) in news practice captures how journalists grapple with their identities as members of a society and as professionals:

If I have to talk about the race issue, as a black South African, I..., not as a journalist. First as a black South African woman: There was this lady who I think they (thugs) smashed into her car window and the cops came to the scene and I think there was a coloured cop and a black cop. Or a white cop and a black cop, and she refused to be helped by the black cop saying, “the same people who had smashed into my car were black people – kaffirs (derogative term against black South Africans) are useless!”, using the k word, saying “they shouldn't even be here”, you know... things like that. So obviously we report on that, because it (the comment) is something that
should be frowned upon and is something that you should report, from a journalist’s perspective. As a South African woman, I understand why I need to put... blot that woman on the news and shame her, because her behaviour is out of order and (what she did) is anti- where our society is trying to go, which is to a non-racial and non-sexist society. (J-SA4).

What we also see in the journalists reflection of the cases is how she expresses values of social equality and human dignity, which are espoused through the ideals of public interest and social responsibility in journalism (Waisbord 2013). Professional as well as social norms function as lenses to evaluate journalistic practice (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015). Assessment of good journalism, according to critics, is based on social norms such as good judgement of what is morally wrong and right, which promotes journalistic norms as well. Through this process, critics “reinforce professional values” (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, 686).

**Accountability as practice**

To understand the digital discursive outcome, digital media criticism has to be examined based on existing media accountability frameworks in a particular context. In this section, I discuss the way journalistic actors and critics compare traditional mechanisms to digital media criticism. The findings show that tensions between public and journalistic discourse arise among journalistic actors over traditional accountability. Traditional accountability – for example, media councils – seek to maintain and defend journalistic discourse. Journalistic actors and critics differ when it comes to traditional accountability mechanisms. To journalists, the level of independence and understanding of journalists and media environment matters in how they perceive accountability frameworks. To critics, the mechanisms fail the legitimacy test because journalism fails fulfil the promise of professionalism.

Traditional accountability mechanisms in the Kenyan and South African contexts include media councils, news ombudspersons, codes of ethics and media watchdogs. Journalists acknowledge traditional accountability mechanisms in comparison to digital media criticism, as they represent order and institutionalism. Two journalists from Kenya and South Africa pointed this out:

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213
I think the criticism from, say, a structure like the Press Ombudsman (the chair of Press Council in South Africa), carries a lot a weight because it is an official structure. There is an official ruling that is handed down that you need to comply with. So, it definitely carries weight. (J-SA9)

It is very rare that you get quality criticism from social media or from bloggers. If it’s the Media Council (in Kenya), they’ll take time with your piece (news story). They will ask questions, like, “why did you not contact so and so (when writing a news story)? You know this is against the code of ethics....” (J-K27)

The views that the councils are ‘professional critics’ because of the knowledge of the media and journalistic practice reinforce journalists discourse and mark boundary with ‘non-institutionalised’ forms of criticism. For their part, digital media critics are generally ambivalent about the effectiveness of media accountability frameworks (press councils and ombudspersons. As a critic in Kenya stated:

... to be quite honest, the traditional forums have certainly failed in enabling and changing the behaviour of the press. (MC-K22)

To critics, numerous journalistic failures and faults would be “rare” if existing mechanisms were effective in policing journalistic practice. Frequent errors, cases of ethical misconduct or claims of political/commercial bias could explain critics’ pessimistic view about the accountability frameworks.

There is however a general misunderstanding about the role of the accountability mechanisms. Press councils are defenders of press freedom in both Kenya and South Africa, rather than ‘promoters’ of professionalism. This could be explained by the highly publicised campaigns and pronouncements over press freedom by press councils in the two countries, for example, when journalists are attacked or arrested. For the ombudspersons, the general impression created (even among press council officials in both countries) is that news organisations use them to “clean up” their public image (MS-K26).

It is important to note here that critics, mostly those without a background in journalism, have little understanding of any of the
mechanisms or in some cases, their existence. Poor media literacy could explain critics' little knowledge of media accountability instruments or their missions and operations.

Independence is a critical currency for regulatory frameworks such as the press councils. The independence of councils is derived from laws or policies establishing them, composition of its representatives (if from within or outside the media) and the conduct of its mission (for example, how it adjudicates publics ‘complaints). Self-regulation, rooted in the principle of peer/voluntary regulation, is more independent and pro-media in comparison to co-regulation (statutory and with a modicum of state involvement) as well as statutory/government regulation. Kenya has a co-regulatory system while South Africa maintains self-regulation.

In my interviews in Kenya and South Africa, it was clear that journalists’ perception of independence was critical. For example, the Media Council of Kenya lacks credibility among practising journalists and critics. State involvement in Kenya’s co-regulatory framework hurts its image of independence. Journalists and critics see the media council as ineffective in maintaining professionalism because it buys into ‘punitive’ thinking of regulation apparent in government agencies. This is how a critic (with a journalistic background) in Kenya expressed his view of the media council when I asked him to compare the council’s contribution with that of digital media critics:

There is a fiction that is portrayed that the Media Council represents self-regulation. It doesn’t. It is regulation by the state that is posing as self-regulation. Its mandate is to expand and improve coverage. It doesn’t see it that way... it thinks of regulation as stopping, reducing, or shutting down. (MC-K22)

Equally, most journalists in Kenya perceived the council as “vindictive” (J-K27) instead of conciliatory whenever there were complaints raised against the media. For example, journalists mentioned that the council threatens sanctions against journalists such as withdrawing accreditation cards, which means reporters are denied entry at state functions. The council was also “out of touch with newsroom realities” (J-K27) because of the perception its officials did not have experience in the newsrooms (some being government appointees from the public
sector). This is how a newspaper journalist explained his perception of the role of the council:

I don’t take media council’s criticism that seriously. I always thought they were a bit skewed in their thinking. [...] when I used to be in charge of the photo desk, we once had a picture of a murdered woman and a baby on the frontpage. They reprimanded us for the use of the photo. I expected the media council would support us... seeing the photo was (published) in public interest. (J-K30)

Journalists believe that press councils should function within the confines of journalism discourse and defend journalistic professionalism during periods of public outrage or criticism of journalism. However, media accountability agents, particularly council officials, take the view that press councils are effective in “cultivating professionalism” in newsrooms, as well as defending media freedom (MS-K18).

In South Africa, there is less criticism of its two main councils, the Press Ombudsman and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA). Journalists generally have a positive attitude towards the councils and their operations (for example, in adjudicating public complaints against journalists and news organisations). They mostly report the two regulatory agencies as fair:

... the ombudsman (the chair of Press Council in South Africa) is very important. All the rulings he gives are fair. We always respect... even though they affect our media houses. It’s always good to respect those rulings. I think they are necessary and they keep us in check. (J-SA4)

However, critics, especially activists, see the two councils as too friendly to the media and as largely ineffective in taming deviances in news journalism. Ineffectiveness derives from the fact the councils and ombudspersons largely express their criticisms to journalists internally. Their criticism is therefore insular and in service of a journalistic discourse.

Public editors in both South Africa and Kenya are perceived as ‘pro-journalists’ and elitist as they answer to mostly concerns on
professional news practice and only occasionally respond to critics’ views in emails or columns. Even among journalists, ombudspersons, being mostly veteran or retired journalists, are aloof from the daily news realities as expressed by this reporter (and columnist) in Kenya:

I have been criticised so many times by the public editor at my own newspaper. I don’t think there’s a columnist that has been criticised as much by the public editor to a point to I got those concerns, not just from me, but from my editors, like: “what’s going on?” The public editor belongs to a different school of thought, a different generation. (J-K17)

The sentiments of the journalist above also show the differences in the way less experienced/younger and veteran journalists perceive journalistic standards noted in recent studies (Ferrucci 2018a). While such views of generational differences are not common among journalistic actors, they generally highlight tensions that exist between the ways media accountability agents and journalists view professionalism.

In summary, traditional media accountability builds its legitimacy with the promise of order, institutionalisation, independence, expertise in journalism and its defence against threats to press freedom. These mechanisms therefore promote journalistic discourse. Traditional accountability however generates scepticism when media accountability agents are perceived to act contrary to journalistic discourse or represent public discourse, for example in the case of press council representatives being viewed as outsiders (because they do not have experience in the newsrooms) or as state operatives.

**Digital media criticism as accountability**

When asked whether digital media criticism can define and shape the notion of accountability as a practice, journalistic actors mostly express ambivalence. Here I interrogate journalistic actors’ perception towards digital media criticism as an accountability mechanism.

Digital spaces are informal, chaotic and unregulated while digital publics have a reputation for being unethical and uncivil, even though blogs, in particular, have been more inclined to order and consistency, for example watchblogs. Effectively, digital media criticism is
delegitimised when more institutionalised forms of media accountability offer a scale to assess its potential effectiveness. Media councils legitimise their position as arbiters and through their composition of media representatives, mostly individuals with backgrounds in journalism or other professionals of repute, the structure, policies and legislation.

**Complementarity of digital criticism**

Media accountability agents and journalists consider complementarity as an important asset of their audiences as critics. First is the general sense that digital media criticism can both reinforce and promote accountability as a norm in journalistic practice. Overall, the mnemonic value of digital media criticism – the persistent reminder of journalistic failures keeps journalists both aware and attentive to their ethical and professional commitments.

Second, criticism in digital spaces stimulates debate about journalism that engages both journalistic and non-journalistic actors, whether online or offline. For example, when critics expose reporters with open political views that cause of bias in the news, journalists and news organisations engage the critics and the subjects of criticism in a discursive exchange about what bias portends to the news outlet or to the profession in general. Public editors may take up the reports and ventilate on them in their columns, while censuring reporters at editorial or individual meetings. For their part, editorial managers may take drastic actions such as reprimanding or suspending the reporter, while media accountability agents, such as press councils, may admonish journalists in general.

Beyond the newsroom, the advocatory pressure piled on erring news organisations and journalists by digital media criticism may expose reporters to press councils. In cases where there is outright violation of the code of conduct, and an official complaint filed before the press council, punitive measure such as fines are imposed on the news organisations. A public editor in Kenya observed that critics outside the newsroom increasingly carve a role for themselves in reinforcing accountability processes and practices:

> As a public editor, you cannot institute any punitive measures against the media and the owner. As the public editor, your role is
just advisory. So, the public raises it (an issue), you take it up and try to raise it internally and if it’s not addressed internally, it escalates now to the Media Council (MS-K11).

The sheer number of media critics in digital spaces and their variety of expertise to voluntarily monitor news content in real time, considerably enhances their capacity for media oversight. Critics are therefore a needed intervention in bolstering the monitorial capacity of traditional media accountability mechanisms, especially in times when news organisations are phasing out redundant editorial roles to cut costs as a result of fall in revenues (Ferrucci 2018b). In South Africa, for instance, the public editor’s position is precarious and an easy target of any lay off plan in the newsroom. When I asked about the role of digital media critics during an economically tenuous period for the mainstream media, a public editor in South Africa stated:

One of the serious questions being asked about the future of journalism is, with a dwindling number of people in newsrooms, what is going to happen to journalism? Where will the checks and balances be? I think in many instances, citizen journalists and media critics out there are becoming more and more sort of an extension of newsrooms to help that process of awareness (towards journalistic responsibility). (MS-SA24)

In relation to the above view about the future of journalism, there is an important extended co-dependency between journalistic actors and critics

As citizen journalists, critics’ roles are more aligned to that of journalist actors when it comes to the media watchdog role. While digital critics expose the media’s failure in fulfilling its role of serving public interest, their roles in complementing the media’s functions is an asset to journalism. One group of critics, fact-checkers, see their role as both critics and supporters of the truth-telling mission of journalism. They criticise inaccurate news, but also expose phony news sources and fact-check statements from political sources published in the news. In one case of fact-checking in Kenya, a government policy towards recruitment of police officers was exposed as having been based on an “imaginary” United Nation’s population-to-police-ratio of 1:450 (recommendation that the global standard be based on one
police officer manning a population of 450 people). The local mainstream media had for a long time reported about Kenya government’s “impressive” development towards meeting the “global police standard”. Bureaucrats were quoted in the news numerous times extolling the government’s “commendable achievement” (MC-K14).

The other group of critics are bloggers who perceive themselves as serving a complementary role to that of the mainstream media in promoting public accountability. They critique the traditional media’s failure to expose corruption, misuse of state resources or human and labour rights violations. In critical posts, they expose cover-up in coverage or the media’s poor performance as a watchdog. The other way is through carrying out investigative news reports. Citizen journalists’ bold approach towards the news, and their independence from state or commercial news, foments co-dependency between them and journalists in public affairs reporting.

Digital media critics also occupy a place in journalism, beyond oversight and that is in reinforcing journalism’s accuracy (as co-producers) and defenders (acting as a bulwark against state regulation or censorship).

Lastly, during the course of my research, the Media Council of Kenya launched a watchblog. Beyond reviewing media content, the Observer (mediaobserver.co.ke) employs an engaging style that allows for interaction with audiences through its Twitter page. This is how a media accountability agent explained the role of the media review blog:

The Observer looks and checks, sometimes ridicule, sometimes praises how media has covered as story, or broken specific code of ethics […] In fact, the next level for the Observer, will be asking experienced… those established journalists to review some particular article and criticise. (MS-K18)

Through such a strategy, the council engages Twitter users in media criticism, thus making accountability more participatory. The media council thereby places digital platforms as supplementary to their media monitoring activities, but an asset in linking media accountability to digital public discourse. However, by incorporating veteran journalists in criticism, the watchblog implies that the council seeks to preserve journalistic discourse.
Digital discursive outcome in practice

Among journalistic actors, there is ambivalence over digital media criticism, when compared to other institutionalised forms of accountability. In media accountability studies, arguments are made towards ‘order’ or ‘social institution’ (see Cooper 2006, Pritchard 2000), but frustration arises over the chaotic and uncivil nature of the digital discursive ecology. Inevitably, there is negative perception towards its potential to transform journalism as discussed in the previous chapters. For their part, media accountability agents confine their discourses within the journalistic field. The journalistic discourse that they define through the institutions rarely allows them to tap into metajournalistic discourses or even public discourse. There is comfort in journalistic discourse as it is predictable and within the control of journalistic actors.

Journalistic faults and failures expose weaknesses of institutionalised accountability mechanisms because solutions are designed within journalistic discourses. Advocatory pressure through digital media criticism imposes public discourse on institutionalised forms of accountability. Inevitably, media accountability agents must contend with ways to incorporate metajournalistic discourse in their work. Some of the media accountability agents I interviewed were explicit about more citizen-oriented approaches towards media accountability:

One of the things we want to do as the Media Council is to create more opportunities where there can be discussions among media practitioners as well as between media practitioners and the public and as well as between media and the government. Because the media is answerable to the public... we want to see many more engagements where the public have an opportunity to openly criticise, give their feedback and have debates with media people. (MS-K3)

However, among media accountability agents there is consistent delegitimisation of the public discourses based on perceived notion of taking over journalist discourse. Media accountability agents reinforce journalistic discourses through legitimisation of their role as that of promoting professionalism and press freedom. However, critics argue
that traditional accountability is ineffective, owing to common faults and failures of journalism. In viewing digital media criticism as an alternative to traditional media accountability therefore, there are several ways that respondents expressed changes that followed criticism in digital spaces.

**Essential checks**

Critics provide checks and balances. Critics keep journalists from getting out of control because of perpetual monitoring and feedback on digital platforms. Digital media critics offer a constant reminder that journalists are being watched and hence pushed to produce good journalism. Digital media critics, while not assuming the gatekeeping role, represent a countercheck to media power. Critics scrutinise and comment on the work of journalists without inhibitions in digital spaces, as a respondent in Kenya explained:

> But there is, I think, for me, a reluctance to simply operate within the parameters that the media itself chooses and says, “go to the Media Council or send it to our editor”. No, we have this other space which is unmediated, is unedited, nobody there will tell me, no, I can’t publish this, or “no, you can’t write this”. I will write it. And I find it to be much more powerful in holding the media to account. (MC-K22).

Journalists are aware of the loss of control on the digital discursive ecology, and this calls for more vigilance in journalistic practice. However, critics instil the “fear of public shaming” on journalists, as any blunders are exposed on public platforms (J-K10).

**Journalistic reforms**

In Chapter 8, I referred to actions journalists and news organisations take following criticism. These actions are manifested in two ways that shape accountability. Actual actions to remedy identified journalistic errors and a reformed mindset on the part of individual journalists. Visible actions could involve lodging a complaint before the council or filing a suit. One example was how critic-activists in South Africa filed a case in court to protest against a decision by the South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) to increase government or Sunshine news content.
In terms of subtle actions: some journalists linked criticism to motivation to be keen in fact-checking or proofreading their news stories. Through criticism, journalists develop a reform mindset — through, for example, focusing on ways to report news accurately. Some journalists admit that they identify their own faults when they see criticisms of their colleagues on social networks and hence become keener to avoid similar mistakes.

**Regulatory pressure**
Press councils or public editors are pushed to react to criticism, sometimes through defending, reprimanding or preferring sanctions against journalists. Criticism, especially when it is consistent and intense, provides an impulse to political actors to legitimise tougher regulations. In 2018, criticism of South African press intensified when the journalists of a leading newspaper, *Sunday Times*[^57], were exposed as having made up investigative stories about subversive activities in state agencies, leading to resignations.

However, some respondents blame digital media criticism for silencing journalists. While most journalists did not admit to having been silenced through digital criticism, most took precautions not to report story angles or use sources that had previously been criticised.

**Competition and conflicts**
Critics take on double roles that rouse conflicts with news journalists. Critics, as citizen journalists, are both competitors and sources for news media. Bloggers, for example, attract attention to their blogs and content while critics in general share tips, information to build stories or just fresh perspectives for journalists to explore in their work.

There are cases when bloggers take roles in news productions that they provoke tensions between themselves and journalists. For example, in 2016, a blogger in Kenya became the first to expose fraudulent activities—in a detail investigative article—in one of the country’s banks.

[^57]: The *Sunday Times* accepted responsibility for the false stories and published an apology titled, ‘We got it wrong, and for that we apologise’. See: https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/news/2018-10-13-we-got-it-wrong-and-for-that-we-apologise/
that was on the brink of collapse. Later in the same year, social media users reported about the precarious situation at another leading bank, causing jitters in financial institutions and caught the mainstream media unaware. To control the narrative in such cases, news organisations own up failures and declare they are open to public’s support in establishing facts about the story. Basically, the competition from alternative news producers is an implicit criticism of failure of the media to report fraud in banks.

There are also cases where criticisms degenerate into personal attacks and insults against journalists in digital spaces rather than supplement news production.

Social change/social control
The respondents see criticism as creating awareness not only of professional failings but journalism’s social responsibility. As a critic explained, the consequences of a campaign against male-only panels on TV in Kenya in digital spaces elicited attention of female professionals to participate in talk shows:

The women who have embraced their ability to go on television, to go on radio, to be in the paper, and to tell these stories are already seeing the changes in their professional lives, the opportunities that have opened up, but are also seeing a shift in the conversation around them. (MC-K13)

However, critics tend to exaggerate their influence on the mainstream media, and as we saw in Chapter 8, journalists are mostly impervious to suggestions to reform. According to critics, journalists are not keen to respond to questions about societal expectations, and are on the defensive when their professionalism is called into question.

Finally, traditional accountability builds its legitimacy through ethics and policies that guide the media council’s relationship with journalists and news organisation. In comparison, digital space is unregulated and critics do not subscribe to specific norms that shape their participation in digital spaces. Thus, the toxic nature of digital spaces (marked by personal attacks and incivility) impedes on the relationship between journalists and critics, and subsequently, the potential for the legitimisation of the digital media criticism as an accountability mechanism.
The take away

This chapter addressed the concluding part of RQ.4 (*How does metajournalistic discourse through digital media criticism influence journalistic practice*?). Overall, the findings show that the discursive outcome is a meeting point of public and metajournalistic at a zone of journalistic discourses. In response to criticism, journalists incorporate elements of digital metajournalistic discourse into journalistic practice, and thus portray a measure of legitimisation of digital media criticism.

An interesting result from this study is that media accountability agents are more resolute about journalistic autonomy. Traditional accountability is a means to establish boundaries to shield the profession from outsiders’ incursions, and therefore journalistic actors delegitimise digital media criticism as lacking the tenets of institutionalism and order. However, traditional accountability’s effectiveness is doubtful when it is too insular, overly defensive of journalistic discourse, and leaves little room for public discourse.

The expectation over accountability as a practice also plays out in the way digital media criticism comes raises conflict between societal and professional norms. Through criticisms in digital spaces, critics demand a journalism that is responsive to societal aspirations, for example equality thus impose societal norms into journalistic discourse.

In conclusion, digital discursive outcome is a product of legitimised criticism. Legitimised criticism emerges from the digital metajournalistic discourse generated by expositors in a given context. Digital discursive outcome shapes journalistic practice through serving as a meeting point of discourses and actors in digital spaces. However, any endeavour towards understanding effective criticisms from digital spaces must also understand journalists’ delegitimisation practices.
PART III: Conclusion

The overarching aim of this dissertation was to examine the implications of media criticism in digital spaces for journalistic practice. The objectives of the research were: a.) to investigate discourses arising from digital media criticisms about the mainstream media, b.) to interrogate how journalists understand and respond to digital media criticism, and c.) to establish ways that criticism in digital spaces influences journalistic practice.

The study is relevant today because digital spaces are sites of production of journalism and also a discursive ecology that expands participation of a variety of actors, albeit mostly those connected to networked digital technologies. Journalism engages in a discursive struggle over its authority because critics in digital spaces impose their own discourse on journalism in a particular context.

Scholars argue that for the news media to be accountable, the public needs to scrutinise journalists and their practice. The public has had the opportunity to criticise journalism through letters to the editor or online comments. However, journalists control these spaces, limiting perspectives and actors who go against journalistic rules of discourses. To a larger extent, digital spaces (e.g. blogs and social networks) open up criticism of journalism to a broader set of platforms, voices and perspectives.

Digital spaces expose journalism to greater scrutiny. Further, they subject journalism to logics of discourse in digital spaces that come into tension with their professional norms. For journalists, they are sites of news production and dissemination, as well as interaction with audiences. They are also opportunities for critics, journalists, scholars, and audiences rethinking accountability as a norm and practice.

This last part of the dissertation concludes the study by highlighting major findings, discussing the dissertation’s contribution, and offering future research directions that would help scholars further understand digital media criticism. The next section discusses highlights from the findings.
Chapter 11. Critical future of journalism

The findings in this study have shown that through digital spaces, criticism of journalistic practice circulates in the same universe as journalistic texts. Criticism in digital spaces assumes value when journalists legitimise and deploy the metajournalistic discourse into journalistic practice. This means they form part of self-reflexive and practical corrective actions that are latent or apparent towards shaping journalistic practice.

Journalistic and non-journalistic actors place themselves within a discursive ecology that define their interactions. This study sought to interrogate these interactions and its outcome, in the way it shapes journalistic practice and by extension accountability of journalists. The study therefore identified actors who are critical for these interactions. The actors are practising journalists, critics and media accountability agents—representatives of institutionalised oversight of journalism such as press councils.

Discursive theoretical perspectives explore how journalistic and non-journalistic actors construct an idea of journalism at any given time. What was not previously resolved is the question whether journalists incorporate criticisms into their practice. Overall, digital media criticism plays a mnemonic role in journalism – that of constantly reminding journalists to live up to the expectations of the profession which they set for themselves through journalistic discourse. What this means is that for journalists to defend the profession today, they must renegotiate their terms of engagement with actors and discourses as well as the logics of digital technologies in a digital discursive ecology.

This study has shown how journalists perceive and negotiate the growing voice of the critic. In digital spaces, the most prominent critics are the ‘carriers’ of legitimate discourse. These critics play an expository role – they are intermediaries in the discursive struggle between journalists and users of digital technologies. In addition, they interpret journalistic discourse to digital publics by, for instance, setting the agenda of criticism of journalists and later exchanging directly with journalists on social networks. Digital media critics in general generate, interpret and circulate public and metajournalistic discourse in digital spaces.
The study is relevant because digital technologies are ubiquitous while at the same time they are critical for news production and consumption.

Responses to research questions

I will now lay out what the findings showed as the implications of digital media criticism as metajournalistic discourse by revisiting the research questions that guided this study.

RQ1. How do critics position themselves in a discursive frame-work of criticism in digital spaces, and what do they aim to achieve?

In Chapter 5, I examined the critics that are the key sources of criticism to journalists in digital spaces in the contexts of Kenya and South Africa. I further interrogated how critics position themselves in a digital discursive ecology. When examined based on expertise, reach of criticism, strategies employed, platforms used and the agenda for criticism, critics tend to sit in close proximity to journalistic discourse. The particular critic whose position in the digital discursive ecology is strategic, is the expositor. As an expositor, this critic takes an insider-outsider position in journalism. This implies that first, the expositor has knowledge or experience in journalistic practice. Thus, journalists take a critic seriously because s/he understands news processes. Secondly, the expositor appeals to public discourse because this critic is a ‘non-insider’ in journalism by fellow users of digital platforms. The critic is also highly visible in digital spaces (e.g. through large following on social networks) and is an agenda-setter because the expositors’ criticisms gain traction among fellow users, through for example, many retweets or likes on social networks. The expositor is therefore the ‘carrier’ of legitimate criticism – metajournalistic discourse that shapes journalistic practice. However, being the most desired critics by journalists does not imply the motives of the expositor are to promote journalism.

While the expositor’s role reveals support for journalistic discourse, for example, by advocating for good journalism, it is uncommon for this agenda to be transformative in practice. Digital media critics harbour personal motives—apparent or subtle—such as gaining visibility in digital spaces through, for example, increasing followers on social networks. However, beyond the transformative motives of journalism,
critics discursive positioning expresses better their contribution towards journalistic discourse. As appraisers, correctors, observers, adversaries, comparatists, contrarians, fault-finders, connoisseurs, advocates, defenders and fact-checkers, the critics bequeath journalism with both reinforcing and antagonistic discourses.

In summary therefore, the expositors’ critical purchase is in generating, cultivating and circulating metajournalistic discourse in digital spaces. Further, when expositors and journalists engage in digital spaces, they promote discursive exchanges that expand discourses about journalism.

**RQ2. What discourses do digital media critics generate in digital space regarding journalistic practice in a comparative context?**

This question sought to interrogate the criticisms about journalism in the context of Kenya and South Africa. The findings in Chapter 6 showed critics generate metajournalistic discourses that feature grand (enduring criticisms) and secondary discourses that are temporal. Digital metajournalistic discourse produced in each context pointed to how critics perceived the state of journalism at any given time. It also revealed the level, intensity and nature of the discursive struggle between journalists and critics in a particular context.

The grand (and secondary) discourses emerge from criticisms of form and content, individual journalists, the organisations, the media as an institution and media ideology in the context of Kenya and South Africa. Comparatively, subjects of criticism were similar in both contexts, but differences emerged in the critics’ expectations. South African critics mostly raised subjects about the role of media in social change, for example in promoting fair new coverage of marginalised groups. In comparison to Kenya, South Africa had more critics in organised watchdog and civil society groups.

What the grand and secondary discourses imply is firstly, the evaluative issues of journalism in a broad sense go to define journalism as perceived by specific actors criticising the media. For example, those with a previous background in journalistic training and practice have an insider view of journalistic faults and failures. Critics without prior expertise of journalism mostly evaluate the visible aspects of journalism, for example, poor grammar or aesthetics of a TV studio. However, criticism in digital spaces build on broader socio-political
discourses. For example, the perception that a news organisation is politically biased against opposition parties or that news coverage is skewed towards the middle-class in big cities. Secondly, there are domains or practices of journalism that are seldom criticised in digital spaces, for example, corruption among journalists. This suggest the opaque nature of journalism (Karlsson 2011, Singer 2005) deters exposure of some journalistic faults and failures. Lastly, criticism of journalistic practices largely shows similarities to those in other journalistic cultures (to be discussed later in this chapter).

RQ3. How do journalistic actors legitimise and/or delegitimise criticism in digital space?

In Chapters 7 and 8, I examined how journalistic actors legitimise and delegitimise digital media criticism. The findings showed that journalists respond to the criticisms in digital spaces through discursive resistance strategies. Journalists develop resistances to fend off criticism while reinforcing journalistic discourse in digital spaces. They position themselves to defend journalism as a profession through digital boundary work, such as filtering (for example, blocking uncivil critics from their social network spaces). In filtering, for instance, incivility is a common defence for outright delegitimisation of digital media critics. Journalists point to the motives of critics as justification for delegitimisation. For example, some journalists might claim that a trolling critic undermines the credibility of news organisations.

The process of delegitimisation also involves delineating the good and bad criticisms. Journalists dismiss or treat with contempt the criticisms that are offensive (mean comments or insults), unreasonable, (trivial and irrational) and unfounded (false or unsubstantiable) claims. They instead legitimise criticisms that are instructive (corrections and suggestions for improvement) and analytical (rational and thought-provoking). When they legitimise criticism, journalists cite attributes of good criticism such as fairness, objectivity, sincerity or specificity. Apart from the norms of rational conversations, journalistic norms are used as frames when assessing legitimate criticisms.

Legitimisation of criticisms manifests itself in the latent or apparent ways such as self-examination, public apologies, administrative and
policy changes, appointment of public editors or communication with critics.

**RQ4. How does metajournalistic discourse through digital media criticism influence journalistic practice?**

In Chapters 9 and 10, I presented findings that explain how journalists interpret criticism and incorporate metajournalistic discourse into journalistic practice. The findings showed that digital platforms are both a resource and channel for criticism. The digital resource of criticism contributes to the overall discursive value of metajournalistic discourse.

Through a digital discursive ecology, both public and metajournalistic discourses set the terms for the way accountability can be rethought as a norm and practice. I discussed this in Chapter 10. In digital spaces, critics have increased accessibility to journalists, opportunities for scrutiny of journalistic practice and tools for criticism (e.g. memes or rhetorical devices like humour). In addition, critics employ discursive strategies such as hashtags, counter-storytelling or trolls to increase their influence among the public and journalistic actors.

In digital spaces, therefore journalists must conform to the logic of digital spaces. At the same time, journalists have to maintain their identity as professionals despite their presence and participation in digital space. Thus, when criticised over their journalist faults and failures through, say, #SayNoToManelsKe (campaign against manels in Kenya), journalists consider professional norms such as fairness and balance, but also social norms like equality through representation of the marginalised gender.

**Contribution of the study**

Previous research on media criticism was anecdotal and theoretical, focusing mostly on individual critics and specific events of criticism that draw public attention. This study has provided a broad empirical study of media criticism in digital spaces in two contexts from the Global South, while appreciating the diversity of criticism, critics and sites of dissemination of criticism in digital spaces. Methodologically, this study has provided insights into how journalistic and non-journalistic actors react to criticism. First to journalists, and how they negotiate criticism of journalistic practice as emerging from these platforms.
Two, by focusing on media accountability agents, showing the way they conceive and interpret the place of media critics and criticisms of journalistic practice. Third, critics in digital spaces – their nature, how they position themselves in a discursive framework of criticism and their motives for criticising journalism, as well as expectations for journalists within their contexts.

I will now explain three main contributions of this study to the field of journalism studies: the discursive outcome of criticism; the expository role and digital media criticism as a form of accountability.

The discursive outcome of criticism

Digital media criticism can shape journalistic practice in ways readily apparent or subtle. Digital metajournalistic discourse triggers actions that are the output of a reflexive process in journalistic practice. This is what I have referred to as a discursive outcome of digital media criticism. The discursive outcome is the thought processes or actions resulting from the following dimensions of digital media criticism: critical actors, evaluative subjects, corrective (re)actions and the digital resource. Here I discuss the theoretical implications of the findings to journalism.

Existing studies show journalists deploy boundary work to defend the profession, yet digital journalism faces pressure on its authority (Carlson and Lewis 2015, Carlson 2017). First, journalism is a public activity – journalistic processes such as sourcing or verification are done through public sources, and even through public platforms. Conventions, practices and skills of journalism are public too, and non-journalists can learn and deploy them. Second, journalism as a profession opens itself up to incursions from outsiders, for example citizen journalists. Journalism thus lacks control over the profession, especially in digital spaces. It is therefore important for journalists to keep critics at bay because they are an incursion to journalistic authority – they pinpoint the failures of journalism profession. Thus, journalists have maintained distance through controlled spaces of audience feedback such as online user comments.

From the findings, digital media critics bridge this distance through criticism in digital spaces. Critics go digital for two reasons. One is that, they do not find access in traditional avenues of feedback, for example through narrow selection of letters to the editors or radio talk shows or
restrictive rules of moderation in users comments’ space. Two, in digital spaces, critics can directly access audiences—those of the news media they criticise and fellow users who read and comment on their criticisms.

Indeed, as a departure from previous research, the study has placed digitality at the heart of the study of media criticism. A key finding in this dissertation is that criticism circulates in the same universe as journalistic text. The contribution of digital platforms to media criticism is manifested in the following ways, that also confirms previous research (see Carlson 2016a): Fluidity (the capacity to evolve and applied to different settings/situation/media), open-endedness (ability to address multiple journalism subjects), reproduction (the capacity to be original evaluative issues, but also interpretation of media text and practices) and circulation (through the way they are generated, interpreted and shared on digital platforms). In addition, the findings showed that digital platforms establish a discursive ecology – a meeting point for a variety of actors who produce public, metajournalistic and journalistic discourses. Criticism circulates in digital spaces along with media texts thus stimulate or undercut active participation and discursive resistances among journalists.

Further the study expands on the boundary work in journalism through discursive resistance in digital spaces. The problematic of the legitimacy of digital media criticism arises from the nature of the critic and the type criticism. The tensions between critics and media professionals is apparent in the way journalists question critics’ motives. There in a discursive resistance from journalistic actors based on the claim that public discourse is prone to personal attacks and uncivil comments.

Critics consider journalists to be impervious to criticism, dismissive and lacking commitment to reform. However, critics and journalistic actors still have a meeting point in terms of their discourses as the critics still refer to journalistic norms and rules in criticising journalism. Wyatt (2018) referred to this situation of agreement as a “shared starting point of critique” (8). Journalists and critics expand on such ideals by co-opting social and political discourses that define and redefine journalism. Thus, for example, critics expect journalism to conform to social norms, such as ensuring gender equality in the newsrooms.
While a discursive outcome through digital media criticism is what would shape journalistic practice, it also emerged from the findings that there are domains of journalism that escape criticism in digital spaces. While popular criticism interrogates news, content, quality of journalism, and performance of the media, it can still be argued that it falls short of comprehensive oversight of journalism in a broader sense. The proximity of critics, even those with backgrounds in journalism, to the newsroom cannot allow daily monitoring. Further, journalists and news media organisations, act in opaque ways, and have not opened up the newsroom for public scrutiny. Critics therefore miss out, for example, on allegations of sexual harassment against journalists in the newsrooms or wheeler-dealing between news executives and power brokers that compromises objective reporting.

**Expository role of digital critics**

Expositors are the digital “carriers” of legitimate criticism but they are not the sole owners of the intermediary function in criticism. This role is not confined to critics, as members of the public can assume this role. Previous studies show that expositors (who include journalists) play an educative role (Wyatt 2007, Carey 1974) and interpret public discourses to journalists. Here, expositors’ role is key in generating a metajournalistic discourse in digital spaces, the discourse that ropes in both journalistic actors and digital publics.

Digital media criticism places journalism in a discursive ecology, with a variety of actors – social actors, journalistic and non-journalistic. As I have previously discussed, journalistic actors seek to maintain professional autonomy through retaining journalistic discourse within a smaller set of actors i.e. fellow professionals and media accountability agents. In digital spaces however, journalists lose this control as the practice is exposed and is subjected to scrutiny by a variety of actors. Even so, one set of actors, the expositors, are the more dominant sources of metajournalistic discourse because of their capacity to play inside-outsider positions and to engage in both journalistic and public discourses.

The results show that digital metajournalistic discourse defines the relationship between the expositor and journalistic actors. However the critic still cannot be viewed as a “co-collaborator” in journalism
(Hermida 2011b, 14), but is a more complex consumer and producer of public and metajournalistic discourses.

To journalists, the expositors are a filter and a bulwark against the unpredictability of digital public discourse and its unpleasant side, e.g., incivility. Thus, they assume a role as legitimisers and delegitimisers of digital media criticism.

The findings showed that expositors employ journalistic norms in their commentary about the media, for example, by being objective in their criticism. Inadvertently, they position themselves as ‘advocates’ of professional journalism. Owing to their backgrounds, expositors largely propose traditional professional norms as expectations for quality journalistic practice. But their discursive positioning in the digital discursive ecology is subject to contestation from journalistic scepticism and delegitimisation.

**Digital media criticism as form of accountability**

Accountability is closely linked to the media’s democratic role expressed through increased awareness about media’s role in society and the citizens’ role in promoting effective and good journalism. Press councils insulate media organisations from public or state interference, mostly basing their arguments on the constitutional protection of press freedom in functioning democracies. But they also see media regulation and peer regulation as antidotes to wayward practices of journalists and news media organisations. Unfortunately, self-examination among practising journalists is often ineffective and could be considered “utopian” (Lule 1992, 105) as they only evaluate themselves in their own terms. Critical and objective evaluation within journalistic practice is therefore weak.

With this in mind, what does digital media critic do for accountability? First is the demystification of journalism through digital platforms hence potential for more scrutiny of journalistic practice. Second is the sense of empowerment to digital publics in their participation through criticism of journalism. And third, digital media criticism provides journalistic inclination towards a digital-centred discourse that is less controlled by journalistic actors.

Complementarity of digital media criticism to traditional media accountability is an important aspect of the findings and it can be looked at from various perspectives. Expositors are better placed to
challenge an inter-elite dependency that both stabilises and undermines professional journalism and accountability. To maintain professionalism, critics need to challenge more than just individual professional failings, but also the social and political system that controls the media, and institutions that promote accountability. This is where digital publics come in: they impose social and political discourses that set news norms, rules and expectations for journalism.

What it means to journalism
Criticism is ingrained in metajournalistic discourses, and defines the way to think about journalistic practice journalism at any given time. The challenge to journalistic authority through digital media criticism appears in three ways, as the finds show: digital media critics challenging journalists; critics challenging traditional media accountability agents as well as peer criticism; journalists questioning critics authority. Digital media critics therefore have to establish their legitimacy by reinforcing their strategic positioning outside the journalistic discourse.

Journalists who fit descriptions of good journalism (or ‘respected journalists’) often have exceptional skills and personal attributes, for example, in news interviewing or courage in investigative journalism. However, critics are harsher on them whenever they err, and their errors offer evidence of a deterioration of journalism in general. The group of ‘respected journalists’ (most often investigative journalists) therefore have a ‘discursive power’ over journalism and how the public imagines it, because their journalistic practice is more visible and observable in a digital discursive ecology.

Further, this study has shown how metajournalistic discourses generated in the digital discursive ecology defines or shapes journalism. Beyond professional norms, public and metajournalistic discourses infuse social norms and values into journalism. The criticism based on social values showed critics’ concern for “power or visibility of the press in public life” (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, 687). On the one hand, critics defend this power because of the capacity to challenge misuse of power by corporates and governments. But on the other hand, critics berate the media for misuse of this power (see also Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015, 687) when they do not challenge governments and politicians to be accountable.
There is then the larger question of the media's positioning in society that has to do with its social, political and economic framework to which it exists. Elite media, for example, tend to support a stable outlook of reality, or even in circumstance of conflict and disruptions would be tempted to forestall perceptions or visions that rock the ideological boat or stir social tension. Maintaining the status quo arguably serves the interest of the media organisation, news practitioners and society at large. This is related to tendencies of the media towards “policing dissent” particularly in periods of public discussions over a deviant ideological position in the media and public discourse (McDevitt 2011).

In the era of campaigns that speak to larger political, social cultural debates that has implications on all insinuations including the media (such as the #MeToo movement against oppression of women), peer-criticism can be insufficient, only speaking to newsroom policy and editorial processes, while barely scratching the surface of bigger societal dynamics such as the lack of gender balance in the newsroom or news coverage.

**Limitations and future research**

The study has focused on perceptions of critics (how they explain their motives, the practice of criticising, their views of journalism in their contexts and their visions for journalism). For journalistic actors—journalists and media accountability agents—this study has interrogated how they negotiate criticism of faults and failures of journalistic practice.

As a limitation to this study, we can expect journalists to be defensive of their profession (Domingo and Heinonen 2008a). Therefore, journalists are hardly impartial on the issue of outsiders influencing their practice. The fact that journalists are dismissive of digital media critics does not necessarily imply they do not take a conscious step to access and consume critical content.

Journalists occasionally dismiss digital media critics, but the news professionals engage in latent boundary work and even editorial reforms. In some cases, journalists admit they take steps towards making amends when critics highlight errors, but even when they do not make the link clear, digital media criticism still retains a discursive value through its ability to expose journalistic work to public scrutiny.
and perpetuate monitorial practices that ultimately shape journalism. However, interrogating nuances to the expository role of the non-journalistic actor is important especially in consideration of today’s realities such as ‘dark participation’ (Quandt 2018) as well increasing journalism reform projects as response to crises (see Vos 2018).

When we interrogate the assertion that digital media criticism can keep journalists accountable, it is important to remember that the criticisms constitute a fraction of what may exist offline. Further, while criticism via computer-mediated communication (CMC) embolden users to communicate freely without inhibitions—cultural or social—it has limitations. Digital platforms are insufficient means of communicative exchanges as non-verbal cues are not conveyed here, for example, emotions. Face-to-face communication of criticism between journalists and critics could be different, also considering possible power distance existing between the subjects.

Additionally, digital media criticism is incomplete in addressing existing media that are sources of news in particular contexts. Also, criticisms of popular critics fall short of addressing traditional journalistic practice. Criticisms address stylistic issues, language, aesthetics and contextualisation, issues relevant to critics at a particular moment. Thus, digital media criticism cannot be considered complete enforcer of good journalism, independent of other media accountability mechanisms.

Further, there is an overall elite bias in journalistic practice and criticism in digital spaces. Most critics in Kenya and South Africa focused on “prestige media” and the most visible journalists (those on TV and radio and in the case of print media, journalists most visible on social media). There was further a medium-bias – mainly the tendency to criticise newspapers and TV more. However, radio received less attention. Ironically, in both countries radio still reaches a significant portion of the population. The medium bias does not necessarily suggest that radio is less criticised generally (offline and online) than other kinds of the media. The few criticisms could imply radio audiences may not necessarily have access to digital platforms.

Moreover, while digital media users could still largely listen to radio, they criticise radio online less because of the following reasons: its content is often not available online; content is temporal and few
Implications of the study
There are two main implications of this study: One is the way we can understand digital input to criticisms and the second, what the study means for the way to understand journalism globally today.

Digital, but not really popular
Digital media criticism calls to question social norms, not just traditional journalism norms and values. Popular media criticism refers to widely circulated criticisms that addresses the media as it exists and operates at a given time even if the critics are academics, politicians, governments, organisations, audiences or fellow journalists. In most studies, journalists prefer popular criticism to academic criticism, which according to Carey (1974) is narrow and elitist in terms of reach.

In this study, I have used ‘popular’ to refer to criticism of the traditional journalism in digital spaces. Digital media criticism comes in a variety of formats and platforms, and is generated by users in digital spaces. There are sites of perpetual evaluative texts with more visibility online and ‘mundane criticism’ – short commentaries that accompany news text on a variety of platforms (Carlson 2016a).

This study shows that the networked media landscape and digital platforms narrows the interaction between the publics and the media. The digital technologies and participation through criticism of journalism are a preserve of the already connected. As mentioned in the previous section, there is a strong elite bias in digital spaces that confines criticism to the most vocal/visible voices. Such a study shows that in a digital discursive ecology, a narrow set of actors compete for the spaces of dominating discourse.

Journalism is journalism everywhere
This study has shown that the discourses of journalism that emerge from digital media criticism in Kenya and South Africa are largely similar. The study also indicates that professional norms and rules are conceived in similar ways, while structural, political and cultural
influences surrounding journalistic practice (as arising from criticism) recur in both contexts. Here I argue that the similarities show there are many shared attributes of journalism in various journalistic cultures.

Historically, there has been a diffusion of various aspects of journalism, most notably routines and practices as well as norms that unify the profession, giving a sense of predictability through, for example, fidelity to objectivity (Schudson 2001). Other aspects of journalism that are shared in many journalistic cultures globally include, technologies, the news paradigm (Høyer 2005) and news conventions forms and styles (Broersma 2007).

Despite the “international exchange of journalistic ideas”, (Waisbord 2013) reminds us that news organisations and professionals do not necessarily appropriate Western journalism holistically, some practices are discarded and others adopted (14). In the case of journalism ethics, for example, scholars argue journalistic cultures in most parts of Africa are amenable to principles of ‘Afri-ethics’ (Kasoma 1996) and ‘ubuntuism’ (Kamwangamalu 1999) in journalistic practice. Further Hanitzsch et al. (2011) show that Kenya and South Africa fall in the category of journalistic cultures with non-western approaches that aspire for developmental approaches through “active promotion of particular values, ideas, groups and social change” (286-287). Even though there are cultural specificities in journalistic practice, universal values are dominant and there is also an intermix of the two (Skjerdal 2009). But the emphasis here is that there has been a strong American influence on journalistic practice globally (Waisbord 2013, Hallin and Mancini 2012, Hallin and Mancini 2004, Hanitzsch 2007a). Hanitzsch (2007a) argues that the liberal democratic tradition has influenced professional values around the world. Therefore, there is a tendency for both journalists and critics to apply ideas such as watchdog journalism in metajournalistic discourse as discussed in Chapter 6.

While recognising similarities in conceptions of journalistic practice, values and norms and even media technologies (as cross-cultural media studies have shown), journalism is often viewed from a Western/Anglo-American vantage point, mostly owing to a dearth of studies from the non-Western world (Hanitzsch 2007a) and particularly from Sub-Saharan Africa. Notably, when reference is made to journalism in African nations, there is often an assumption that it refers to a certain “ideology” of journalism (Skjerdal 2015, 63-64) that
should be understood as distinct from, or ‘opposite of the West’ (Mbembe 2001). Yet as Skjerdal (2015) emphasises, geographical choice of study should not obscure focus on intellectual and theoretical debates that address universal challenges. This dissertation addresses debates in the field of journalism studies. My examples have been taken from a global context, but mostly the US—a site of robust studies and writing on media/press criticism in particular. The examples I have used mainly in Chapter 2 and 3 are from the US context. The reason is that examples have a global resonance, and while some are subjects of key texts used in journalism studies, others are widely discussed on digital media platforms, and will therefore be in most cases familiar to my readers.

There are epistemological challenges that arise from too much focus on the Global North, for example, taking Western theoretical perspectives for granted and applying to contexts in the Global South. However there is the danger too of being too insular, and the risk of further widening the epistemic gap between the dominant centre and the periphery (Willems 2014a, b). In this study I have employed a toolbox of theoretical perspectives, concepts, discourses and methods—without distinctions of the politics surrounding their epistemological origins—mainly for theoretical, conceptual, methodological direction and sometimes for intellectual and philosophical inspiration or illustrative purposes. This does not mean I am oblivious to the discourses of knowledge production or the common Western ‘imperial impulse’ towards studies about cases from the Global South. I instead consider that broad and universal approaches are important to widen perspective to understanding a phenomenon. Further, I consider such a study as providing an ‘epistemic bridge’ between the periphery and the dominant centre in the debates about the production of knowledge. Hopefully, such an ‘epistemic bridge’ study would change the citation practices of scholars in the Global North who find studies from the South ‘too peripheral’ to have relevance in their research.

Even though the dissertation squarely contributes to the journalism studies field, it inadvertently expands area studies of African journalism. This study that examines how digital media shapes journalism is in line with the key goals of African journalism studies. Africa-oriented scholars have sustained the call to study dynamics of
journalism and news production (Kupe 2010) as well as the impact of disruptive technologies on traditional news practice (Atton and Mabweazara 2011). However, despite vibrant journalism practices and the news ecologies in the digital era, most African countries still remain under-researched (Mabweazara, Mudhai, and Whittaker 2014, Atton and Mabweazara 2011, cf. Gustafsson and Nielsen 2017). The relationships between the news digital landscape and its implications to traditional news practice (see Atton and Mabweazara 2011) have instead received responses through studies of digital media technologies especially social media that are rapidly growing (for example, Bosch 2017, Bosch, Wasserman, and Chuma 2018, Ogola 2019).

Examining the digital media practices of audiences and users in African nations that ultimately has implications on journalism far beyond the democracy-oriented approaches (see, for example, Ibelema 2008), is worthwhile in further broadening insights into journalistic cultures across the globe (White and Mabweazara 2018, Hanitzsch 2007a). The media and digital landscapes of Kenya and South Africa offer a complex contextual mix to audience and journalism practices owing to: socio-political environment marked by a modicum of government-controlled media; widening and lively digital spaces; increasing constitutional freedoms and civic liberties; and relatively rapid socio-economic development.

While the media dynamics and complexities are global, owing to the strong influence of technologies, ideologies and news practices from the West (Kupe 2005, Ndlela 2009, Mabweazara 2015), this study draws timely and urgently needed conceptual insights into a unique set of digital publics in two African nations (see Willems and Mano 2017a).

**Concluding remarks**

To conclude, the expositors’ position in a digital discursive ecology is significant. The monitorial capacity of these critics could be tapped to expand media literacy in a networked environment of news production. Owing to their insider-outsider position, expositors could potentially interpret and explain journalistic practice to digital publics, especially amid today’s disinformation and misinformation.

Secondly, criticisms are narratives – in a simplistic sense, stories about the media and journalism especially as told and retold in digital
spaces. They are a recollection of what went wrong, what never worked, what was misunderstood, and more. As an evaluative practice therefore, digital media criticism is important in reflecting on the critical moments of the media.

Lastly, earlier I mentioned that despite being numerous in digital spaces, criticism falls short of holistic assessment of journalistic practice. Insufficient solution-focussed discourses go to show that criticism does little as far as transformation of journalistic practice is concerned. However, digital spaces place journalism at a perpetual discursive position where it experiences persistent pressure to conform, transform or reform in response to critics wishes and demands. It can be surmised therefore that critics care enough about the media to criticise it, while journalism has to care enough for criticism to remain relevant in public life.
References


248


Gillmor, Dan. 2004. *We the media: Grassroots journalism by the people, for the people*. Cambridge; Sebastopol: O’Reilly.


263


Appendix I: Interview guide: Journalists

Name:        Media Organisation:

1. What role do you take in your current news media organisation, and what are your main tasks?
2. How long have you worked as a journalist?
3. How often is your journalism work criticised?
4. Who are the main critics of your work? And why?
5. Who (or what) would you consider is the main source of criticism of the mainstream media in (Kenya/South Africa)?
6. How often are you criticised on blogs, social media platforms (or any other platforms)? And why?
7. How different are criticisms online from others, like say letters to the editor?
8. What issues do these media critics online raise about journalists and the mainstream media in (Kenya/South Africa)?
9. What criticisms do you consider as relevant to your daily work and that of your news organisation?
10. Do you respond to critics online? If so, what are the situations in which you have had to respond to the critics?
11. [As a follow-up to Q.10] How would you describe your responses to the critics?
12. How do your colleagues react to the criticisms they read online?
13. Would you say media critics on blogs or social media have a place in journalism in (Kenya/South Africa)? If so, why?
14. How would you compare the criticism from the digital platforms to that from the press council? What about, from your colleagues? Your editorial managers?
15. Would you consider the criticism from your fellow journalists or editors as having more weight than those from other sources? Why?
16. Would you consider the criticisms from social networks and/or blogs important for journalism?
Appendix II: Interview guide: Accountability agents

Name: \hspace{10cm} Role:

1. What do you think of the critics of the mainstream media on blogs and social media (or any other online platform)?
2. How do you take the criticisms online?
3. Would you say they are relevant and important for journalism in (Kenya/South Africa)? If so, why?
4. What issues have you seen raised on these digital platforms?
5. Why do you think user of digital platforms raise these issues (on social networks/blogs)?
6. Would you consider critics online as assuming your role of monitoring and keeping the media in check?
7. Would you say their criticism has any place in the news media and accountability today? Why?
8. Would you say media criticism online has any place in journalism today? Why?
9. How does criticism of the mainstream media change the media accountability landscape in Kenya/South Africa?
10. [As a follow-up to Q.9] What of criticisms on social media, blogs, or any other?
11. How do journalists respond to online media critics and their criticisms?
12. What do you think of journalists’ response to critics?
Appendix III: Interview guide: Media critics

Name:  
Occupation:  

1. What digital platforms do you use?  
2. What is your main platform of criticism of the media?  
3. Which news media organisations or journalists in (Kenya or South Africa) do you criticise often?  
4. Why do you choose to criticise these journalists or media organisations?  
5. What motivates you to criticise the mainstream media in (Kenya and South Africa)?  
6. Why use social media or blogs, or any other?  
7. What are the kinds of issues that concern you about journalists or news media organisations in (Kenya and South Africa)?  
8. Would you say online critics of the mainstream media in (Kenya and South Africa) raise important issues on journalism? Why?  
9. How would you describe your criticisms of the mainstream media in (Kenya and South Africa)?  
10. How would you describe criticisms by critics in your country using online platforms?  
11. What would you say are the critics’ reasons for criticising the mainstream media?  
12. What kinds of criticisms of the mainstream media in (Kenya/South Africa) would you consider important?  
13. What are your expectations of journalists or media organisations when you criticise them?  
14. Do journalists or media organisations respond to your criticism? If so, what do they say?  
15. How would you want journalists and news organisations to respond to you?  
16. Would you consider criticism of the mainstream media through social media or blogs as important? Why?  
17. What actions do you expect journalist/editors or news organisations to take when you criticise them?  
18. Would you say more digital media critics should criticise the mainstream media in (Kenya/South Africa)? Why?  
19. In what ways do you think criticising the media can change journalism?
Appendix IV: Interview consent form

My name is David Cheruiyot. I am a PhD Candidate with the News and Opinion in the Digital Era (NODE) Research Centre, which is part of the Department of Geography, Media and Communication at Karlstad University in Sweden.

I am conducting research comparing and analysing media/press criticism online and its influence(s) on journalism in Kenya and South Africa; in order to examine a.) the role of media/press criticism online (e.g. on blogs/social media) in journalism and what it portends to how scholars today understand journalism, b.) how practising journalists perceive criticism of the mainstream media online, and its influence(s) on their practice and; c) the viability of media/press criticism online as a media accountability practice i.e. if and how the criticism can be integrated as a way to keep journalists accountable along with other traditional 'instruments' such as the press councils.

As part of this research therefore, I will conduct interviews with practising journalists, asking questions about their practice and their views on media criticisms/ critics online. I will also conduct interviews with media critics as well as other stakeholders in media accountability such as press council officials and news ombudspersons. I am hoping that you will agree to be interviewed as part of this project.

The decision to take part in an interview is free and reversible. If you at any time during the interview wish to withdraw, you are free to do so. If you at any time feel that your interview should not be used in this research, you can withdraw consent and I will simply delete all recordings (written or audio) of the interview. However, it will not be possible to withdraw consent once the research is published.

I intend to make an audio recording of the interview. If you wish, you are free to decide to participate in the interview, but refuse to be recorded. In that case, I will instead take notes. Using the interview for research will be impossible if there is no record of any kind, so if you do not wish the interview to be recorded at all I will simply consider that you have declined to take part.

The audio recordings will not be used by anyone but myself. All interviewees will be anonymised along with all the published material from this research. The published data will be identified by a.) nationality, b) roles, e.g. media critic, press council official or reporter c.) the medium that you work for, and d.) online platform that you use.

I have read and understood this consent form, and I give my consent to be interviewed and an audio recording to be made of the interview. I am aware that I can withdraw from the interview at any time and rescind my consent at any time after the interview but prior to any publication of results.

Signed____________________________________________________
## Appendix V. Interviewed journalists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Main digital platform</th>
<th>Year of interview</th>
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Appendix VI: Interviewed digital media critics

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Appendix VII. Interviewed Accountability agents

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Criticising Journalism

Does criticism in digital spaces matter to journalism? Legacy news media face intense criticism on social networks or blogs, while their accountability towards the public is weak. This dissertation explores the contribution of digital media critics and their criticisms to journalism, through qualitative interviews with journalists, critics and media accountability agents. The main findings show how journalists negotiate a variety of criticisms (from the rational to the uncivil) and critics (with varying expertise and influence) in digital spaces. The study is relevant today because digitality complicates the journalist-critic relationship as critical text from the public circulate in the same universe as journalistic text. What this means is that journalists must find new ways to cope with the logics of digital platforms, such as social networks and blogs. At the same time, news professionals must respond to pressure to conform to social norms such as equity in gender representation in the news, that comes through, for example, hashtag campaigns on social networks.
CRITICISING JOURNALISM

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