

Transparency as metajournalistic performance: *The New York Times'* *Caliphate* podcast and new ways to claim journalistic authority

Journalism

2022, Vol. 23(11) 2311–2327

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DOI: 10.1177/1464884921997312

journals.sagepub.com/home/jou

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Abstract

Transparency is increasingly touted as a strategic tool for elevating journalistic authority. Despite this push, literature has overlooked how transparency can be utilized for authority purposes in audiovisual artefacts. In this paper, we conduct a qualitative thematic analysis of *The New York Times'* podcast *Caliphate* to examine how transparency is strategically weaponized to stake a claim to journalistic authority. Based on the premise that transparency is a *metajournalistic performance* – a type of journalism about journalism that is performative in acting on people's perception of journalistic authority – we identify three of those metajournalistic performances in the podcast: *Revealing the journalistic process*, *Constructing the reporter's persona* and *Reaffirming the journalistic culture*. Together, they exhibit a form of self-celebratory transparency that strategically performs boundary-setting, definitional control and legitimization functions, in a bid to impress audiences and have them recognize the journalistic authority of the *Caliphate* reporters and *The Times*. We conclude with the implications of these strategic performances of transparency. First, how it can be used by reporters to reinstate verticality over audiences. Second, how the journalistic culture (norms, values, practices, etc.) can be transparently projected *outward* (to the public) or *inward* (to the journalist themselves) to elevate authority – a new concept for journalism studies. Third, how metajournalistic performances of transparency may reveal power dynamics within the journalistic field.

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Keywords

journalistic authority, journalistic culture, journalistic transparency, metajournalism, thematic analysis

Introduction

Transparency is increasingly seen by scholars and practitioners as having the strategic potential of elevating journalistic authority (Allen, 2008; Vos and Craft, 2017), at a time when its markers – monopoly over news selection, production and dissemination; objectivity; commitment to democracy – do not hold self-evident legitimacy anymore (Vos and Thomas, 2018). Certain transparency tools seem designed to convince audiences of the authority of the journalistic method: for instance, when journalists show how the news is made ('disclosure transparency') (Karlsson, 2010). Others seem to reinvent journalistic authority on more horizontal foundations, by involving audiences in news-making ('participatory transparency') (Karlsson, 2010) or having reporters reveal their biases ('personal transparency') (Hedman, 2016).

For all the talk about transparency, however, the literature has overlooked how it can be utilized for authority-seeking purposes in audiovisual journalistic artefacts, such as podcasts, a medium that has particularly embraced transparency. *The Daily* (*The New York Times*), *PBS NewsHour* (PBS) or *Radio Atlantic* (*The Atlantic*), for example, all feature interviews between fellow journalists, or 'intraprofessional dialogues' (Lundell, 2010) illuminating the inner workings of journalism. Prior to those, the internationally famed *Serial* (2014–. . .) (WBEZ Chicago, now *The New York Times*), showcased how the behind-the-scenes of reporting a crime could be almost as riveting as the story of the crime itself.

Caliphate (2018), a *New York Times* podcast, pushes transparency further. The series features foreign correspondent Rukmini Callimachi reporting on the decline of the Islamic State (ISIS). It alternates between typical journalistic reporting and segments of transparency where backstage details of the investigation are revealed, notably through conversations between Callimachi and her producer Andy Mills. Considering how journalistic crises offer new journalistic attempts at restoring authority (Vos and Thomas, 2018), this paper addresses how *Caliphate* strategically utilizes transparency in response to today's authority crisis in journalism.

A Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2018, *Caliphate* has since come under fire for relying on the uncorroborated word of an alleged Canadian ISIS fighter, now accused by Canadian authorities of having faked his violent past in the ISIS caliphate (Smith, 2020) (n.b. the show acknowledges the possible unreliable character of its source and fact-checks his claims). *Caliphate* is also criticized for being oblivious to the problem of having US reporters retrieve (and keep) sensitive documents from a war zone (Iraq) that their own government indirectly played a role in creating (Smith, 2020). Although our study was conducted before the controversy, these criticisms, if anything, strengthen *Caliphate's* relevance as a case study in journalistic transparency. It attests to the paradoxical nature of transparency, used strategically to highlight as much as to omit elements of news-making with a view of constructing the appearance of authority. If audiences were aware of this, they might receive journalistic transparency more cautiously.

Our paper is a qualitative thematic analysis of how *Caliphate* strategically weaponizes transparency to stake a claim to journalistic authority. It draws from field theory and metajournalism – journalism about journalism (Ogbebor, 2020) – and frames the strategic use of transparency as a *metajournalistic performance*. *Metajournalistic*, in that reporters go ‘meta’ when discussing their work in a news product. *Performance*, to emphasize how transparency is not merely informative but performative, as it actively attempts to influence people’s perceptions of journalistic authority. In considering field theory, our analysis distinguishes itself by focusing on *who* engages in transparency, an under-researched aspect of both transparency and metajournalism studies. This allows us to consider the privileged position of *The New York Times* and its reporters in the journalistic field and the potential implications of their strategic use of transparency, for instance, in amplifying the gap between core (i.e. institutional) and peripheral (i.e. alternative) journalistic actors.

In our analysis, we identify three metajournalistic performances of transparency found in *Caliphate: Revealing the journalistic process, Constructing the reporter’s persona and Reaffirming the journalistic culture*. Together, they exhibit a form of self-celebratory transparency that strategically performs boundary-setting, definitional control and legitimization functions – functions that Carlson (2016) ascribes to metajournalistic discourses. We argue that transparency is weaponized to have audiences admire and ultimately recognize the epistemic authority of *The New York Times* and the *Caliphate* reporters to tell the ISIS story. This strategy, as criticisms on the podcast attest, is not without faults. In our discussion, we elaborate on implications that this strategic use of transparency may have for audiences and the journalistic field. First, how transparency can be used by reporters to reinstate verticality over audiences. Second, how the journalistic culture (norms, values, practices) can be transparently projected *outward* (to the public) or *inward* (to the journalist themselves) to elevate authority – a new concept for journalism studies. Third, how metajournalistic performances of transparency may reveal power dynamics and reactivate core-periphery divides within the journalistic field.

Literature review

A discussion of journalistic transparency should include the notion of journalistic authority – the right of journalists to ‘mediate society to society’ (Carlson, 2017: 92). This authority has been undermined by technological changes that have sparked the collapse of the advertisement business model of many news organizations (Pickard, 2019); offered audiences the ability to challenge news media’s verticality by responding directly to newsmakers (Chadha and Koliska, 2015); and transformed a once well-defined journalistic field into a blurry one where *what is journalism* and *what is not* slowly becomes indistinguishable (Ryfe, 2012). Other markers of authority, such as journalism’s professed commitment to objectivity, truth and democracy do not hold self-evident legitimacy anymore either (Vos and Thomas, 2018).

Enter transparency, increasingly seen by scholars and practitioners as a solution to addressing this crisis of authority. Transparency entails showing how the news is made (‘disclosure transparency’), for example, adding links to original sources, justifying editorial decisions, etc.; involving audiences in news-making (‘participatory transparency’) via email exchanges, user forums or social media (Karlsson, 2010); and having

reporters reveal personal opinions, biases or funding sources ('personal transparency') (Hedman, 2016). Yet the literature reveals a tension between those who frame the transparency solution as a normative imperative and those who approach it more as a strategic tool.

On the normative side, transparency is said to respond to today's demands for public accountability in all spheres of society (McBride and Rosenstiel, 2013). Accountability through transparency can empower audiences with a 'chance to monitor, check, criticize and even intervene in the journalistic process' (Deuze, 2005: 455). Transparency is also believed to be a more viable norm than objectivity, which, when understood as impartiality and lack of bias, is steadily seen as unreachable by audiences and journalists alike (Vos and Craft, 2017). Finally, transparency may bring audiences and journalists together, as it aligns with digital age values such as authenticity (Hayes et al., 2007).

On the strategic side, Karlsson (2011) underscores how transparency is a 'truth-telling strategy' whereby journalists can 'build trust, and consequently the associated authority' needed to weigh on society (p. 284). Allen (2008) points at how professional journalists can exploit transparency to re-establish jurisdictional boundaries against competing alternative content producers. They can argue for the superiority of their methods, demarcate themselves from amateurs, and protect their institutional authority (Allen, 2008). In this same vein, transparency may be used by journalists and media to 'proudly advertise the quality of their performance' and 'market the merits of their journalistic identity to potential audiences' (van der Wurff and Schönbach, 2011: 418).

Despite its strategic benefits, transparency is not without flaws. Cunningham (2006) notes that it can sometimes 'obfuscate' instead of 'clarify the question of what journalists do and why' (p. 9). Schudson (2018) contends that having reporters disclose their biases seems to 'accept the most cynical view of reporting – that reporters are slaves to their own preconceptions and preferences' (p. 65). But above all, as illustrated by the *Caliphate* controversy (Smith, 2020), transparency can be deceiving, since journalists decide what elements of their process they reveal or conceal. It can then invite more scrutiny than wanted, putting journalists in a defensive rather than authoritative stance (Smolkin, 2006).

Few scholars have looked at how journalists may be concretely mobilizing journalistic transparency to reconstruct their authority in the public gaze. Available studies have mainly addressed transparency manifestations that are peripheral to journalistic content (e.g. user forums, hyperlinks, etc.), examining to what extent the news media utilize those devices (De Maeyer and Holton, 2016; Karlsson, 2010), and whether audiences see any value in them (Karlsson and Clerwall, 2018; Karlsson et al., 2014). There is also a research gap in terms of how transparency applies to audiovisual content, as most studies focus on online written news and social media (De Maeyer and Holton, 2016; Hedman, 2016; Tandoc and Thomas, 2017). This has created a blind spot in the area of podcasting, the fastest-growing digital medium (Newman and Gallo, 2019).

Theoretical framework

Our study explores how certain journalistic actors mobilize transparency to reinforce their authority, and what it means for the public and the journalistic field. To that end, we propose linking three concepts: journalistic culture, metajournalism and field theory.

Journalistic culture. First, we look at transparency through the prism of journalistic culture. We base our understanding of it on the works of Ryfe (2012), who speaks of ‘the culture of journalism’ as an ensemble of principles (e.g. bearing witness on the ground), norms (e.g. objectivity) or practices (e.g. the practice of verifying information) shared throughout by North American journalists. While journalists might be scattered around multiple sites of production or increasingly detached from traditional newsrooms, this common frame of symbols that constitutes the journalistic culture acts as a ‘gravitational force for journalists, pulling them together so that they are more similar to one another than they are to members of any other occupation’ (Ryfe, 2012: 11). Its symbols are reproduced through professional socialization, which in turn helps journalists cultivate their distinctiveness as a sociological field while limiting the possibility of imagining journalism otherwise (Ryfe, 2012).

Based upon these premises, we propose looking at journalistic culture as a strategic conduit inducing different authority gains, a new concept for journalism studies. We argue that journalists can transparently project their journalistic culture *outward* (for audiences to see or hear) through ‘disclosure transparency’ (Karlsson, 2010) and ‘personal transparency’ (Hedman, 2016). The idea is that audiences’ understanding of the journalistic culture will translate into greater respect for their work and will to concede epistemic authority. We contend, too, that reporters can project their journalistic culture *inward* through audible or visible moments of self-reflexivity. By reconnecting with the elements of their culture, journalists can reinvigorate their own faith in their professional authority when facing doubts. The outward/inward concept will be elaborated on and supported with examples in subsequent sections.

Metajournalism. Second, we draw on Carlson’s (2016) theory of metajournalistic discourses and how these have the power to effect change in the journalistic field. Commonly described as journalism about journalism (Ogbebor, 2020), metajournalism speaks of the ‘meta-level’ of discourse that journalists engage in when discussing their work in the news. Metajournalism, along with the bordering concepts of press/journalism/media criticism, have spawned a rich body of literature on its merits (Bertrand, 2000; Carey, 1974) and limits in offering public accountability (Berkowitz, 2000; Ogbebor, 2020). Alternatively, Carlson (2016) has explored how metajournalism helps shape the contours of journalistic identity and practice. We propose that journalistic transparency can be similarly considered as metajournalism – a form of journalism about journalism that occurs within a news product – and carry the performative potential that Carlson (2016) ascribes to metajournalistic discourses: ‘boundary setting’, through which journalists grant epistemic authority to some members of their field while denying it to others; ‘legitimization’, whereby journalists reinforce certain journalistic norms, values and ways of doing; and ‘definitional control’, which crystallizes definitions over terms associated with journalism. Our study brings together the concepts of transparency and metajournalism, which have been hitherto disjointed in the literature.

Further, metajournalism is an integral part of journalistic authority-building. As Carlson (2017) states in his theory of relational authority, journalistic authority is not a given but a relationship ‘between those laying claim to authority and those who accept it’ (p. 119). Journalists must repeatedly seek authority from audiences and society’s institutions, by convincing them that they are the best suited to ‘create legitimate discursive

knowledge' about the world (Carlson, 2017: 13). One of the most explicit vehicles to achieve this is metajournalism. Through it, journalists can convey the message that their ethical compass, routines and professionalism set them apart from amateurs and, as such, they should be granted authority to speak (Carlson, 2017).

Field theory. Field theory is the third element of our theoretical framework. The journalistic field is the site of tensions between dominant and more marginal actors; the former dispose of high levels of capital (i.e. economic, cultural, social) and occupy the core of the field, while the latter, situated at the peripheries, try to garner the capital that would grant them more influence and centrality in the field (Bourdieu, 2005).

In an attempt to bridge the gap between this seminal concept in journalism studies and metajournalism, we contend that the actor behind a metajournalistic performance – the *who* – is as pertinent to study than *what* is said or done through such a performance. One's positioning in the field seems to be key in determining the authority gains that metajournalistic performances of transparency may have in the public eye and in the journalistic field. Moreover, the performative functions assigned to metajournalistic discourses by Carlson (2016), such as boundary-setting, legitimization, definitional control – which we here apply to transparency performances – may be seen as the discursive material through which power struggles between the core and the periphery of the journalistic field are fought. Core here refers to institutional legacy news media that have historically adhered to a consistent set of journalistic practices and values (Deuze and Witschge, 2018) – put otherwise, a common journalistic culture (Ryfe, 2012). Periphery, by contrast, may encompass non-traditional, very often digital journalistic actors, incarnating practices and ideals that differ from archetypical journalistic canons (Tandoc, 2019).

In this sense, we argue that the metajournalistic performances of transparency displayed in *Caliphate* are relevant for the study of journalistic authority because of the actor behind the podcast: *The New York Times*. Arguably, *Caliphate*'s display of transparency would not carry the same weight on audiences and the journalistic field had the podcast been produced by a smaller media organization with little cultural capital.

The concepts of journalistic culture, metajournalism and field theory provide the framework for a case study of the *Caliphate* podcast. Our analysis answers two research questions:

1. Through which metajournalistic performances of transparency does *Caliphate* strategically build journalistic authority?
2. What are the implications of this strategic use of journalistic transparency for audiences and the journalistic field?

Methods

Caliphate revolves around two overlapping narratives. One tracks Rukmini Callimachi, a *Times* foreign correspondent, as she travels to Iraq and Syria to report on the decline of the ISIS caliphate. Her story relies on a series of interviews with an alleged former ISIS fighter, a Canadian who presents himself as 'Abu Huzaifa'. The second narrative features

ongoing conversations between Callimachi and the show's producer, Andy Mills, who follows Callimachi and interviews her as she conducts her work.

Our study employs thematic analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006), an interpretivist technique appropriate for stressing 'the meanings and actions of actors according to their own subjective frame' (Williams, 2000: 210). With *Caliphate*, this meant looking beyond the individuality of the reporters to examine the data through the filter of the journalistic culture. This culture constitutes a subjective frame, whose relatively homogeneous beliefs, values, norms, etc., help comprehend the latent meanings imbued in metajournalistic performances of transparency.

We retrieved the 12 episodes of *Caliphate* from YouTube and uploaded them onto NVivo 12 for coding. First, we pinpointed transparency segments from the audio files. Those were any instances where the journalists talked about themselves, the behind-the-scenes of the investigation or journalism in general. We also included segments with elements not normally visible or audible in a traditional journalistic piece (e.g. sound checks, small talk, joking, etc.). Conversely, instances of actual journalistic reporting about ISIS, geopolitical issues, etc., were ignored. Second, we coded the audio segments of transparency exclusively; categories and subcategories emerged inductively from the data. Third, we reviewed printed official transcripts available on the show's website (Caliphate, 2018). New significant elements were coded manually and followed by adjustments to the NVivo code book. The full series was coded with both researchers present at every moment; all codes and categories were decided by consensus after extensive discussions.

Analysis

Instances of transparency were grouped into three categories: *Revealing the journalistic process*, *Constructing the reporter's persona* and *Reaffirming the journalistic culture*. We treat them as *metajournalistic performances* of transparency. *Metajournalistic*, in that transparency makes for self-referential journalism, while enacting authority-driven functions ascribed to metajournalism by Carlson (2016). *Performance*, for we contend that what Broersma (2010) writes about the performativity of journalistic discourses in general also applies to transparency: transparency, similarly, performs a symbolic power that seeks to effect on reality – in our case, on perceptions of journalistic authority. Here, *performance* should not be construed as opposed to *discourse*. Rather, *performance* seems more apt to embrace verbal elements (ex.: jokes, expletives, sound tests) that do not qualify as clearly intended discourses but might nonetheless appear as manifestations of transparency.

Next, we dissect each of these metajournalistic performances of transparency and how they strategically build journalistic authority. We provide audio excerpts for each example.

Revealing the journalistic process

A first metajournalistic performance of transparency is *revealing the journalistic process*. This category includes instances when the process behind the ISIS investigation is

revealed through ‘disclosure transparency’ (Karlsson, 2010): fact-checking, reaching out to sources, describing Callimachi's work, working as a team, discussing the story status, gathering documents and piecing the story together. By including these, *Caliphate* advertises the alleged hard work and methodological rigour behind the investigation as arguments that should convince listeners to consent authority to Callimachi and *The Times*.

Revealing the journalistic process also includes ‘moments of transparency’, short instances when the mechanics of the production appear to be intentionally left in for audiences to hear. These moments are made up of sound checks, greetings before interviews, expletives, jokes and similar actions. These moments are not part of the more formal ‘intra-professional dialogues’ segments (Lundell, 2010), where Mills interrogates Callimachi about her work, nor represent clearly intended discourses. Yet they are not anodyne in terms of authority-driven performances of transparency, as shown in the first example ([Audio 1] Chapter 1, The Reporter).

The scene opens with a greeting between Mills and a *Times* colleague, followed by him knocking on Callimachi's door and then a soundcheck. In itself, this serves no informational purpose for the ISIS investigation. But the same way that journalistic authority is performed through visual elements, such as the inverted pyramid (i.e. journalists' control over what needs to be considered important) (Carlson, 2017), the sound check in this excerpt (‘One, two, three, four, five’; ‘Do I need to bring [the microphone] closer?’) works as an audible performance of transparency. It metaphorically indicates that the reporters are readying themselves to tell their news story, assuming their role as ‘commanders of the ship’ – or the story.

These ‘moments of transparency’ then give way to a first conversation between Callimachi and Mills. Mills' preamble poses the question of expertise, as he, a journalist himself, admits to being clueless about how Callimachi conducts her investigations into ISIS. As such, the show sends the message that the public should not overestimate their knowledge on the matter either. Journalism, it is implied, is reserved for seemingly authoritative experts like Callimachi.

The next excerpt shows how revealing the journalistic process can illuminate hurdles in the reporting for strategic gains. Here Callimachi and Mills talk about how they have temporarily lost contact with their main subject, ‘Huzaifa’ ([Audio 2] Chapter 6, Paper Trail).

By including this incident, *Caliphate* underlines the difficulties of journalistic investigations and the perseverance to overcome them, thus providing a reason for audiences to say ‘hats off’ to the reporters. The transparency device also seems designed to sound as a manifestation of authenticity, a currency increasingly used by audiences to assess the credibility of content producers (Hayes et al., 2007). The whole enterprise may ring more credible to listeners precisely because exposing momentary failures of the journalistic process seems more authentic than pretending that it is an infallible machine.

The third example is an illustration of journalistic methodology revealed for authorial purposes. In the excerpt, Callimachi, Mills and ‘Hawk’, their Iraqi fixer, take us through the moment when they find a briefcase in the rubble of an ISIS building in Mosul ([Audio 3] Chapter 8, The Briefcase).

Chapter 8 is entirely built around this briefcase: *how* it is found, and *how* the reporters classify and analyse its contents. There is a clear emphasis on the importance of this step to the story, a reminder of the crucial role of gathering documents in investigative

journalism. Chapter 8 is *Caliphate*'s most obvious attempt at advertising journalistic methods. This evokes journalists' traditional belief that their authority, despite growing scepticism from audiences, partly lies on their perceived ability to create truth through the collection and sorting out of facts (Zelizer, 2017).

Constructing the reporter's persona

A second metajournalistic performance of transparency consists in *constructing the reporter's persona*, through a combination of differentiation and humanization that consolidates the reporter's authority within the journalistic field. This category includes moments when Callimachi is showing authority, courage, empathy, expertise and judgement or revealing personal details.

The word *persona* 'provides a way of describing the roles authors create for themselves in written discourses. . .' (Cherry, 1988: 268–269). In *Caliphate*, Callimachi's persona is portrayed on one level as an expert through 'disclosure transparency' (Karlsson, 2010), instances of the journalistic process that construct Callimachi as someone who might be admired for her knowledge and skills as a reporter. The institutional power of *The Times* is here instrumental in constructing this persona, as the prestige, resources and networks of the newspaper may elevate her expertise in the listener's ear. Notably, these assets differentiate her from the lay person, but also from the mass of her peers. On a second level, Callimachi's expert persona is counterbalanced by 'personal transparency' (Hedman, 2016) – moments when she opens up about her background or feelings – that humanizes a journalistic authority that could otherwise be intimidating. This strategic dosage can be interpreted as Callimachi and *The Times* consolidating their centrality in the journalistic field, as perceived epitomes of journalistic excellence.

Chapter 1 is incidentally entitled 'The Reporter'. In it, Callimachi explains to Mills how she approaches her investigative work, by inviting him and audiences alike to visualize stepping into her own apartment ([Audio 4] Chapter 1, The Reporter).

Callimachi enumerates things one would find in her apartment ('. . . my Bank of America statement [with] all my daily transactions') and which conclusions could be drawn from them ('. . . you might conclude from that that I'm probably middle-class'). If the analogy is intended to tell audiences that she looks at extremists' paper trail with the same scrutiny, it simultaneously serves as a narrative device for engaging in 'personal transparency' (Hedman, 2016). The conversation provides clues about who Callimachi is as a person – she drinks rice milk and speaks multiple languages – and elucidates her work process. It portrays Callimachi, right from the beginning, as someone capable, knowledgeable and relatable. This constructed first impression that audiences are left with is then meant to carry through the rest of the series.

In the following fragment, Callimachi is commanding colleagues for a fact-checking operation on Huzaifa after a customs stamp in his passport reveals that he has lied to her about when he lived in the ISIS caliphate ([Audio 5] Chapter 6, Paper Trail).

The scene contributes to building up Callimachi's profile as a lead reporter, cleverly pulling in resources from her institution in directing the investigative operation. Notably, the presence of other *Times* members in the scene, including producers, reporters and a foreign correspondent, hints at *The Times*' institutional power. While the show's focus is

on Callimachi, to the extent that listeners might feel as though they are following a free-lance reporter at times, this clip is a compelling reminder that she is backed by a journalistic powerhouse, thus reinforcing her authority over the story.

In other instances, Callimachi's persona is built through emotional moments, such as when she and Mills arrive at a refugee camp where two Yazidi women who had been made sexual slaves by ISIS reunite with their families. Callimachi quickly decides that they should leave to grant them privacy ([Audio 6] Chapter 9, Prisoners Part II).

Here, listeners witness Callimachi's negotiation of her duties as a reporter ('. . .the journalist in me wants to push as hard as I can to get these interviews') and her feelings of respect for others ('. . .but it was clear that it was inappropriate for us [. . .] to continue staying here'). This appears geared toward acknowledging common assumptions by audiences about reporters relishing in the despair of others (Frank, 2003). The show addresses them by offering Callimachi's emotions and ultimate choice not to interview the victims as proof to the contrary. Exhibiting how Callimachi seemingly *has her heart in the right place* helps soften an authoritative persona that could otherwise come across as unapproachable were it only built on her alleged professional qualities.

Reaffirming the journalistic culture

One last metajournalistic performance of transparency is *reaffirming the journalistic culture*. This category refers to moments when Callimachi seems to audibly tap into the reservoir of symbols (e.g. common principles, values, norms) of the journalistic culture (Ryfe, 2012). It includes out-loud reflections about the purpose of reporting, justifications of her actions, acknowledgements of ethical dilemmas, or reassertions of the value of her judgement and normative imperatives. On one level, this metajournalistic performance can be deemed as an *outward* projection of the journalistic culture, strategically displayed for audiences to appreciate the apparent normative and axiological robustness of the reporters' work. On the other, it is indicative of an *inward* projection of journalistic culture, as Callimachi seems to be seeking guidance and legitimacy for her actions through this transparency performance. Either way, it appears to aim for reinforcing Callimachi and *The Time's* authority as the rightful tellers of this story.

In the following fragment, Callimachi explains to Mills why she has decided not to denounce Huzaifa to the police despite his telling them that he committed murder as an ISIS member. Instead, she puts him in contact with a Canadian operative who helps deradicalize jihadists ([Audio 7] Chapter 6, Paper Trail).

Here, Callimachi is reminding the audience – and herself – that journalism is 'not an extension of law enforcement'. By enunciating this justification, she signals her adherence to the journalistic culture, which condemns turning a source in to the police unless a grave danger is imminent. This transparency performance then serves two purposes: to notify audiences (*outward* projection) of Callimachi's faithful belonging to a journalistic culture that fully expects her to conduct herself as she did; and to reassure Callimachi herself (*inward* projection), as transparently invoking elements of the journalistic culture may chase away inner doubt, unease, or other negative feelings susceptible to undermine journalistic authority.

In the following clip Callimachi again negotiates her place within the journalistic culture as she justifies her decision to interview convicted ISIS members in prison ([Audio 8] Chapter 9, Prisoners – Part I):

Callimachi admits that the situation is ‘far from ideal’ and might be seen negatively by many. On an *outward* level, this transparent reflection allows listeners to join in Callimachi's ruminations about the journalistic culture and what it demands from its members: an unwavering commitment to the story, and the ability to make difficult judgement calls – elements that paint them in an authoritative light. On an *inward* level, journalistic authority finds itself solidified by an act of self-justification by which Callimachi re-legitimizes the journalistic culture to which she belongs.

One last example further illuminates how elements of the journalistic culture are revealed for authority purposes. As Callimachi and Mills await the liberation of Mosul from ISIS’ hands, Callimachi feels inhabited by the importance of the task at hand ([Audio 9] Chapter 7, Mosul):

‘And tomorrow is going to be another notch in the lifeline of Mosul. A pretty important one. The day, perhaps, that ISIS is defeated. And it’s gonna be our job to explain what that looks like to the world’. Callimachi here reminds herself and the public of the value of bearing witness, one of the cornerstone principles on which journalists build their authority (Usher, 2020). By underlining Callimachi’s presence in Mosul, the show underlines her legitimate place as our eyes and ears in that historic moment.

Discussion

Journalistic authority is contingent on continuous public discourses and performances, through which journalists demand from audiences, sources, the State, etc., that they recognize their authority in news-making (Carlson, 2017). In *Caliphate*, the claim to journalistic authority runs through metajournalistic performances of transparency that seem to serve authority-seeking functions ascribed to metajournalism: boundary-setting, legitimization and definitional control (Carlson, 2016). Of equal importance here is the consideration of *who* engages in metajournalistic performances of transparency, as one’s positioning, and therefore status in the journalistic field, may dictate what performances are deployed and what authority gains are potentially earned.

Through which metajournalistic performances of transparency does Caliphate strategically build journalistic authority?

Our first research question pertained to identifying the metajournalistic performances of transparency that *Caliphate* strategically mobilizes to construct authority. The first performance consists in revealing the alleged hard work and methodological rigour of the journalistic process. It achieves boundary-setting functions, for it seems intended as a ‘performance marker’ that audiences will hopefully notice and use to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate content producers (van der Wurff and Schönbach, 2011). Additionally, the performance enacts definitional control and legitimization. For example, when Callimachi details how she classifies the documents from a briefcase, she

defines through her own authoritative terms and actions how she conducts document-gathering and, by extension, how it *should* be done to be deemed legitimate journalistic work. In the end, revealing the journalistic process suggests that *Caliphate* wants to publicize its positivist epistemological framework (e.g. firsthand experience, ‘objective’ facts, logical reasoning), betting on the premise that journalism’s authority has historically lied, at least partially, on audiences’ basic understanding of ‘how journalists [come] to know’ (Usher, 2020: 250). This understanding is then supposed to convince audiences of consenting epistemic authority to Callimachi and *The Times*.

The second performance involves constructing Callimachi’s persona in an authoritative manner, through ‘disclosure’ (Karlsson, 2010) and ‘personal transparency’ devices (Hedman, 2016) that differentiate her from audiences and peers, while maintaining her relatability. On the one hand, Callimachi is portrayed assuming the role of a sagacious, courageous and well-connected war reporter, which establishes a boundary between her and the audience – she is presumably qualified to do her job in a way that the public is not. Her persona creates a second boundary within the journalistic field by insinuating that she belongs in the top ranks. One cannot ignore, though, *The Times*’s centrality in the journalistic field, which helps differentiate whoever gravitates in its orbit. It is a ‘performance marker’ – to use van der Wurff and Schönbach’s (2011) expression again – that many listeners and other reporters inescapably take into account when consenting (or not) authority to journalistic actors. On the other hand, ‘personal transparency’ throughout the podcast showcases the ‘human’ behind the reporter (Callimachi). It suggests a strategy to soften a journalistic authority that could otherwise appear as forbidding, were it built on expertise alone.

The last identified metajournalistic performance of transparency – reaffirming the journalistic culture – performs boundary setting, definitional control and legitimization functions. It sets boundaries by audibly telling the public elements of the journalistic culture that make for good journalism – protecting sources, verifying information, exercising restraint – and those that do not – peddling sensationalism, policing. By naming these elements, the show also appears to showcase its control over their definitions and its power – or at least its attempt – to fix their meaning in the minds of journalists and audiences. In this sense, the *Caliphate* reporters and *The Times* get to define the journalistic principles, norms and performances they wish to be judged by, hence skewing public evaluation of their authority in favour of these preferred elements of the journalistic culture. As such, we argue that transparency can be used to strategically project the journalistic culture *outward* for audiences to hear and potentially come to respect it. Finally, making transparent the journalistic culture pursues legitimization functions. Whenever Callimachi justifies her actions, she brings up elements of the journalistic culture to sustain her judgement. In doing so, she legitimizes this culture as a reservoir from which journalists can seek normative and axiological reassurance for their work. To use Ryfe’s (2012) words, this metajournalistic performance is tantamount to ‘sharpen[ing] the boundary between the inside and outside of the profession’ (pp. 93–94); it helps the reporters reiterate and re-legitimize the boundaries of the journalistic culture and situate themselves squarely within it. We describe this as a strategic *inward* projection of the journalistic culture. It amounts to rekindling with one’s journalistic self as a way to fully inhabit journalistic authority.

What are the implications of this strategic use of journalistic transparency for audiences and the journalistic field?

The metajournalistic performances of transparency from *Caliphate* seem to be working toward the same goal: advertising the methodological rigour, human qualities and axiological/normative strength that the reporters claim to have put into their work, in hopes that this will translate into the audience's recognition of their journalistic authority. We now turn to our second research question, their potential implications for the public and the journalistic field.

A first implication is the verticality that such transparency performances may reinstate. They suggest a form of *self-celebratory transparency* that is less about self-critique or public accountability and more about re-establishing boundaries between the journalistic field and its audiences; one that is not about inviting participation but about creating a glass barrier through which audiences can admire – but not meddle in – the journalistic process. Further, in light of the controversy surrounding *Caliphate*, namely how Callimachi went ahead with including her source's likely false statements in the podcast despite cautionary evidence (Smith, 2020), this verticality seems encapsulated in a paradox: it relies on a form of transparency that reveals as much as it conceals certain elements of the process (e.g. the potential unethical behaviours and funnel-based vision that marred the investigation) (Smith, 2020). In sum, just like what Carlson (2017) says of metajournalistic discourses, metajournalistic performances of transparency, too, 'articulate the idealized authority relation between journalism and its audiences' (p. 93), one in which journalists still wield vertical power over audiences. It is achieved by underplaying typical transparency ideals and omitting elements that may tarnish the authoritative image one wishes to construct.

Other implications concern the culture and members of the journalistic field. First, our analysis makes the original claim that transparency is a conduit whereby journalists can access their journalistic culture. This seems facilitated by transparency discourses in which journalists justify their editorial decisions, as those, Ryfe (2012) notes, bring about rare moments of self-reflexivity where internalized practices and values are acknowledged. In doing so, these elements that define the journalistic culture resurface from unconsciousness and render journalistic actions sensible (Ryfe, 2012). The same can be said about *Caliphate*, with the addition of one element: the show suggests that the journalistic culture can be strategically weaponized by turning it *outward* or *inward*, both loci entailing different outcomes. When turned *outward*, the image is that of a cohesive journalistic identity that seemingly conforms itself to a uniform set of norms, values, beliefs, etc. When turned *inward*, it allows reporters to re-legitimize their actions by calling upon the core tenets of their journalistic culture. Either way, journalism's authority finds itself reinforced – be it by letting audiences see a united front (*outward*) or by dispelling journalists' inner doubts (*inward*).

Second, our analysis calls attention to the implications of transparency for members of the journalistic field themselves. These were brought to the fore by integrating metajournalism and field theory into the study of journalistic transparency, an original contribution to the literature. Metajournalism studies usually do not take into consideration the field's cultural capital of those who utter or perform metajournalism. Here, we address this gap

through the lens of transparency – insofar as we treat it as a type of metajournalism (or *metajournalistic performance*). As *Caliphate* demonstrates, one's positioning in the journalistic field (at the centre or margins) may widen or constrain their transparency performances and authority gains. The show goes to great lengths to position the main reporter (Callimachi) as a stellar character and human being, tapping into her accrued cultural capital. By extension, too, the show advertises *The Times*' already privileged position in the field as a way to further reinforce its claims to journalistic excellence. Implicit in this strategy is the centrality of *The Times* in the journalistic field which, by corollary, sanctions the existence of a periphery with various standards of journalism quality. The transparency in *Caliphate* also works as a reminder of the capacity of large media organizations to tell complex stories that more marginal actors may not be able to undertake for lack of time, human resources, contacts, funds or perceived 'star' reporters. The combination of metajournalism, transparency and field theory, in sum, suggests that transparency is weaponized by journalists for establishing authority, not only in the public gaze, but also within the journalistic field. In the particular field of podcasting, *Caliphate* points to a recalibration of the core-periphery dynamic in which well-identified journalistic actors and institutions feel less threatened by non-traditional, often digital content producers at the periphery. Rather, they are adopting their innovative practices and reclaiming their place at the centre. Although the boundaries between core and periphery might be increasingly blurred in journalism (Deuze and Witschge, 2018), *Caliphate*'s use of transparency aims to reactivate those dividing lines to the strategic advantage of *The Times* and other similar 'big houses'.

Conclusion

Through a qualitative thematic analysis of *The New York Times* podcast *Caliphate*, our study argued that the strategic use of transparency can be best comprehended as a metajournalistic performance of authority, which carries implications for audiences and the journalistic field.

With respect to authority, our analysis identified three metajournalistic performances of transparency – *revealing the journalistic process*, *constructing the reporter's persona*, *reaffirming the journalistic culture* – with functions similar to those ascribed to metajournalistic discourses: boundary-setting, definitional control and legitimization (Carlson, 2016). These are strategically weaponized to invite audiences to admire the ingenuity, personality and commitment of the show's reporters to their journalistic culture, in order to activate a claim to journalistic authority.

In regard to the implications of those metajournalistic performances of transparency, our analysis underscored the imbalanced rapport that they seem to reinstate between reporters and their audiences. The *self-celebratory* transparency of *Caliphate* indicates a greater thirst for verticality than typical transparency ideals (e.g. self-critique, audience participation): audiences need to be both impressed by and remote from the process for journalistic authority to thrive. It is also indicative of the editorially constructed nature of transparency. Transparency reveals as much as it conceals, as suggested by reports on how *Caliphate* may have underplayed the untrustworthiness of its main source (Smith, 2020).

Moreover, our analysis highlighted two implications of transparency for the journalistic field itself. First, we made the original claim that transparency can make strategic use of the journalistic culture for authority purposes. Turned *outward* (for the public to hear), the journalistic culture projects the image of journalists united under the same umbrella of norms, values, etc.: it exudes authority. Turned *inward* (toward journalists themselves), it provides journalists a channel to re-rationalize and reify the core elements of the journalistic culture: this helps journalists chase away inner doubts and embrace their epistemic authority as legitimate newsmakers and storytellers.


Second, our analysis reconciled metajournalism and field theory by showing the importance of considering one's positioning in the journalistic field (at the centre, or at the margins) – in other words, *who* does transparency – to better analyse their transparency performances and authority gains. In this vein, *Caliphate* exemplifies that core-periphery divisions might not have run their course entirely. That it is still possible to keep certain actors at the periphery of the field by combining innovation with institutional might and, in doing so, consolidate a central position at its core – as the *Times* does here. On this note, if one puts aside the controversy surrounding *Caliphate*, the strategic use of transparency could actually bode well for journalistic 'big houses', which is a surprising evolution given how transparency first developed as the blogosphere's response to mainstream media's vertical and secretive tendencies (Singer, 2007). In fact, many of them can count on a recognizable brand, famed reporters and resources to multiply the effects of transparency across their platforms and their large, even global audiences, something that smaller news organizations or freelancers may have a harder time achieving.

The backlash against *Caliphate* should not rattle scholarly interest in its metajournalistic performances of transparency, either. If they must be apprehended with a critical eye (and ear), they offer, in the abstract, innovative ways in reacquainting audiences with the journalistic process, its actors and its culture, with a view of potentially elevating journalistic authority. Our study, however, relied on just one case study, which is one of its limitations. Further research into how and why other news organizations are mobilizing transparency is needed. More studies about the reception of such strategies in audiovisual formats would also be desirable. Findings on the subject solely pertain to online news and suggest a negligible impact of transparency on how readers assess the credibility of content (Karlsson and Clerwall, 2018; Karlsson et al., 2014). In the end, whether strategic uses of transparency actually result in building authority is out of the hands of those performing transparency. It is for the public – including other journalistic actors – to grant that authority. As shown here, an aggressive weaponization of transparency carries the potential to backfire.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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