



Between ritual and information: Three phases of Norwegian news audiences' sense-making of the election of Donald Trump

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Abstract

This article investigates sense-making processes of news audiences when faced with destabilizing global events. The destabilizing event is Trump's 2016 election win, which we study from the perspective of audiences far removed: in the Nordic region. Asking how we can understand shifts in the balance between the informational and ritual aspects of news over time, we study how journalism matters when ordinary practices are suddenly uprooted, and in the gradual return to everyday life. Based on the analysis of extensive qualitative material, we formulate three successive phases of Norwegian news audiences' reactions to the election: annoying circus far away, world-shattering shock and regained stability. We underline not only shared experiences but also nuances which we link to differences in media use routines, levels of interests in news as well as resources for the sense-making of politics. Our findings contribute to the scrutiny of news use in everyday life and at times of political upheaval, and add an audience perspective to research on Trump and the media.

Keywords

Audiences, destabilization, election, news, polarization, qualitative, ritual, Trump

News is an important way for citizens to learn about the social and political world. This is typically highlighted during political events such as elections (e.g. Graber, 2004), and the informational potential of journalism appears ever more important with the onslaught

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of propaganda and populism that mark the current political climate across the world (Hafez, 2019; Russel, 2019 in the 20th anniversary issue of this journal). Studies on news use in everyday life, however, underline variable modes of engagement. News use is informational but also ritual: we ‘check up on’ news to see if the world still stands and ‘stumble upon’ it unexpectedly (Ørmen, 2016), or engage with news in a series of mundane and unfocused ways (Meijer and Kormelink, 2015). To understand the role of news in shaping how people make sense of events, we need to ask how separate or entangled the informational and ritual uses of news are. How can we understand shifts in balance between these two aspects over time?

Our contribution to answering this question stems from in-depth analysis of how news audiences react when ordinary news practices are challenged, as in the case of extraordinary political upheavals. The 2016 US Presidential Election campaign with Donald Trump’s victory represents one such upheaval. Our premise is that the election was potentially destabilizing, also on a personal level, to news audiences far removed from the United States. To investigate what such destabilization entails, we ask how Norwegian news audiences made sense of this event that many initially followed as part of routine news consumption. For most Norwegians, whose shared political imaginary is shaped by traditions of social-democratic politics (Brandal et al., 2013), Trump’s victory came as a shock. We analyse their sense-making processes in the reception of election news before and after this shock to illuminate how ordinary practices were suddenly uprooted, and thereafter gradually re-stabilized. Our approach to sense-making, which we will outline below, emphasizes two contrasted but also intertwined ways in which news becomes meaningful to audiences: as ritual, or as transmission of information. We focus on the interplay and balance between these shifts over time.

Methodologically, our analysis builds on comprehensive qualitative data on news as part of cross-media user experiences. Our material encompasses two rounds of in-depth interviews with 50 informants who reflect the socio-demographic diversity of the Norwegian population. The interviews were conducted shortly before and after the campaign, and intercepted by a media diary phase leading up to the actual election. As such, the data provide unique materials for analysis of temporal shifts in news processing centred around an important event. Theoretically, we build on recent work on journalism’s audiences. We evoke work on news as myths, and on the ritual aspects of communication, and substantiate such perspectives by mobilizing them to study temporal shifts between informational and ritual aspects in audiences’ engagement with journalism.

In our analysis, we formulate three successive phases of Norwegian news audiences’ reactions to the election. These phases follow audiences from frustrated interpretations of the campaign as a scandalous and distant media spectacle, through the astonishment of the election result producing an urgent need for sense-making in an unstable world, to the gradual recovering of sufficient equilibrium to go on with ordinary routines. In these phases, audiences express not only diverse criticism of media and politics but also reliance on journalism to foster understanding of the incomprehensible.

Our findings contribute to nuanced scrutiny of the role of news in everyday life and at times of change, and add an empirical audience perspective to research on Trump and the media. Moreover, our discussion gives insight into how audiences make sense of polarizing political events. We contribute to the methodological toolbox of journalism

research with a robust, qualitative set-up that allows for the study of news audiences over time.

A populist spectacle, news as myths and the ritual view of communication

Journalism research has paid attention to the Trump campaign, the role of the media before and after the election, and wider consequences for news and democracy. The campaign was fueled by deliberately antagonistic communication (e.g. Morgan and Shanahan, 2017), with social media and partisan websites proliferating ‘angry populism’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). In the United States, the election caused commotion in the media landscape, caused disconnect between voter demographics and established news outlets and triggered discourses on fake news (Boczkowski and Parachharissi, 2018). The campaign polarized publics in the United States, and scholars have pointed out how the media coverage was characterized by appeals to emotion and to identity (Kreiss, 2018). If, as Kellner (2016) argues, the media coverage was a spectacle, a ‘media construct’ ‘disrupt[ing] the habitual flow of information’ (p. 3), the case raises questions about the role of news for audiences’ processing of events in the world.

Scholarship that sees news as myth seems a relevant lens with which to view this phenomenon. According to a well-versed argument, ‘news plays a cultural role analogous to that of myth by using familiar, recurring narrative patterns that help explain why it seems simultaneously novel, yet soothingly predictable’ (Bird and Dardenne, 2009: 206). As myth, news can unify ‘people around shared values’ (Bird and Dardenne, 2009: 209). Such an insight rests on consideration of news use as negotiations of meaning in a broader cultural context (Bird, 2010), and echoes James Carey’s seminal work. Inspired by Dewey, Carey in 1975 took aim at a dominant view in US communication research, which he saw as giving too much attention to transmissive aspects, while ignoring the ritual. The former is about sending information, while the latter ‘is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time’ (Carey, 2009 [1975]: 15). A ritual view of communication allows us to see news ‘less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed’ (Carey, 2009 [1975]: 16).

Scholars have developed the notion of ritual to analyse different phenomena (Ehrlich, 1996 for review), including political rituals and their function for social cohesion. These scholars questioned the media’s role in sustaining the status quo, underlining rituals as inherently political (Lipari, 1999). More recent studies in this tradition often build upon Couldry’s exploration of ‘media rituals’. For him, rituals are ‘power enacted through form’ (Couldry, 2012: 66) and refer to ‘media’s claim to offer privileged access to a common reality to which we must pay attention’ (p. 66). Couldry (2002) is sympathetic to Carey’s conception, but argues that it lacks a detailed model for studying ‘the structured patterns through which we live with, and even accept, the concentration in media institutions of the power to define reality’ (p. 19). News use constitutes one such structured pattern, and aspects of power can be brought to light by analysing how people use news and explicate critiques of media, as they try to make sense of destabilizing political events.

A ritual view seems important to highlight how the body of news works as myth for audiences in routine settings, but a transmissive view is needed to understand engagement with individual stories. In line with this, the ritual and the transmissive view are not dichotomies. As Carey (2009 [1975]) was careful to underline, the former is not excluded from the latter (p. 17). News use is not exclusively ritual, a point that has been made to critique (e.g. Gripsrud, 2000) naïve celebrations of tabloid journalism, which ignores dimensions of informational value. However, recent work on news use in digital society brings out the importance of considering the two views in combination. As illustrated in typologies such as Ørmen's (2016) description of four attention practices, news use is highly variable: what he labels 'digging in' requires sustained, focused attention, leaning forward for deep reading. 'Checking up' is the opposite, a momentary but routine visit to a website or news aggregator. 'Flowing along' is when news takes place in the background while we attend to something else, often socially. 'Stumbling upon' describes incidental exposure, an undirected and momentary attention (Ørmen, 2016). They all represent ways of using news where ritual functions seem to matter as much as the transmissive. In a similar way, Meijer and Kormelink's (2015) description of news use as 'monitoring, checking, snacking, scanning, watching, viewing, reading, listening, searching and clicking' underlines mundane routines in everyday settings. Studies of news avoidance also stress that some people feel disempowered by the news, and that emotional trauma can be a reason for avoiding it (Toff and Palmer, 2018).

Such research underlines how individuals' everyday media routines can be seen as having ritualistic components. Sometimes – but not by necessity – news in such everyday settings work as myths, made sense of as a body conveying broad cultural messages rather than as singular pieces of information. In this sense, a ritual view of communication can be said to consist of two aspects: the routineness of people's engagement with journalism, and the more or less pronounced role of the body of news.

But how can we understand the entanglement between the ritual and the transmissive in the context of the disruptive and polarizing campaign of Donald Trump? On one level, this case invites questions of how the overarching narratives offered by the news demarcate a community of shared values. Yet, reporting on an election result that surprised the political mainstream neither fits with the idea of news as myth, which 'comforts' and 'provide[s] a sense of control' (Bird and Dardenne, 2009: 206), nor the idea of news use as a ritual confirmation of a world view. As Madianou (2010) reminds us, news rituals can involve anxiety as well as security – and the lack of news during a crisis can be terrifying.

Studies of crisis communication focus on how journalism works during extraordinary periods, for example, following natural disasters (Durham, 2008; Riegert and Olsson, 2007). Fewer studies of journalism exist on how audiences deal with extraordinary events (but see Turnock, 2000). Political psychologists argue that anxiety can trigger information gathering (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015) and that different negative feelings can have different political effects (Vasilopoulos et al., 2018). What research seldom facilitates is comprehensive analysis of the role of news in people's sense-making before, during and after major disruptions. We provide such an analysis, taking as a starting point the notion that media use has ritual as well as informational aspects. Our aim is to

scrutinize the impression that the ritual is at the fore in the everyday, and that the informational is mobilized at times of crisis.

The case of Norway, methods and data

The Trump election was a media event with outreach far beyond the United States (Flew, 2018; Kellner, 2016). In a context of widespread populism (Müller et al., 2017) and rapidly changing technologies, it provides a prime case for studying communicative reactions across national borders. Yet, to our knowledge, no study so far explored how global audiences responded to the election.

Our analysis draws on qualitative data from a large-scale project conducted in Norway (Nærland, 2019; Ytre-Arne, 2019; Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2018). Norway offers a markedly different context for studying audiences' engagement with the Trump election. Compared with the United States, the Nordic countries represent a different political system (multi-party parliamentary democracies), distinct media system (proactive state operating at arms-length distance, Syvertsen et al., 2014), and very different social and cultural conditions (small language areas, extensive welfare states). Whereas the United States is marked by increasing hostility across party lines (Iyengar et al., 2012), and according to Putnam (2000), with a decline in social capital, the Nordic countries enjoy comparatively high levels of social capital and political trust (Fukuyama, 2014), and are characterized by high socio-cultural homogeneity. Norway has traditions of cross-party compromise and consensus-oriented politics (Knutsen, 2017), and also has a comparatively non-aggressive branch of right-wing populism integrated in the party system (Jupskås et al., 2017). On the contrary, the United States stands in a position of power with regard to Norway, wielding cultural influence, close political ties (e.g. as NATO members) and financial superiority as well.

Fifty informants were recruited to reflect the Norwegian population according to age; gender; education levels; occupations; and rural, urban and minority representation. All informants were asked to participate in two rounds of in-depth interviews intercepted by a media diary.¹

Informants were not pre-categorized according to presumed high or low levels of news consumption or political interest. Rather, these were central aspects investigated in the study.

The project was designed as a broadly oriented, explorative investigation of people's cross-media use (Schröder, 2011) and public connection, from a socio-cultural perspective (Hovden and Moe, 2017). It was not, from the outset, designed for the specific research question of sense-making after destabilizing political events. However, data collection took place in the fall of 2016, with the US election on the international news agenda, allowing us to study reactions step by step, as situated in broader media use practices.

The first round of interviews, which centred on informants' everyday lives, interests and media use, was conducted in August and September 2016. The media diary followed in October, the month leading up to the election, and the second round of interviews in November and December. Our analysis focuses on the diary and the second interview

round, while taking the advantage of the whole process to paint a more comprehensive picture. All quotes are translated from Norwegian to English by the authors. More specifically, we draw on our material in the following ways.

The media diaries are analysed in order to gain insights into how Norwegian news audiences experienced the election campaign (Hartley, 2018 for related use of diaries). The diary had a relatively open format, in which informants were asked a few questions (e.g. Can you mention any news stories or topics that caught your interest?), but invited to reply in their own words, and to write as much and as freely as they wanted. Informants were asked for daily entries for 1 week and then weekly entries for 3 weeks, assuming that the kind of news stories informants remembered would be different over a daily and weekly period. While the number and extent of diary entries varied considerably, a majority of informants participated for the whole month. We have identified and categorized all diary responses pertaining to the US election.

The second interview round that followed the diary is analysed to shed light on immediate and subsequent reactions to the election result. These were semi-structured interviews designed to follow up on the diary of each individual informant as well as recurring topics in the diaries overall. Each informant was asked general questions about their lives, and impressions from the media that they had in the diary period. They were also asked more specific questions about the election, media coverage, and differences and similarities to Norwegian politics.

We have conducted a qualitative analysis of central themes that emerged in personal reactions and interpretations of the election campaign and its aftermath. Our analytical focus is sense-making as a temporal and dynamic process. Consequently, we study the interplay and shifting balance between ritual and informational aspects in people's interpretations of election news, rather than categorize particular practices of news use as either ritual or informational. We emphasize how informants reacted to the election as experienced through the body of news, but pay particular attention to instances when singular media texts were recollected and highlighted by informants, potentially signalling more informational modes of engaging with particular news stories.

From our analysis of this material, we identify three phases in the process of sense-making. We call these phases as *annoying circus far away*, *world-shattering shock* and *regained stability*. They were developed dynamically through the interchange between empirical analysis and theoretical perspectives. First, the phases were formulated based on the theoretical insights and initial probing of the material. Second, they were explored more systematically and in greater depth, also checking for alternative interpretations. In the analysis that follows, we apply the phases as our main categories, but focus further on differences within them, and on the transitions from one phase to the next. Importantly, the phases are not the only reactions found in the material, and there are considerable variations in how explicitly informants relate to them. However, they constitute an overarching narrative that illustrates a shared process of sense-making as it emerges in our material.

In order to elucidate the diversity among our informants, we include their occupation, categorize their level of interest in news and politics (as low, medium, or high) and give a description of their key means for orientation towards the public, based on

interpretation of all the three steps of the data collection. The aim here is not to do justice to the informants' full media or news repertoires (Edgerly, 2015; Hasebrink and Popp, 2006). Rather, we characterize the central components of each informant's mediated means for orientation towards, and interest in, the public realm.

Phase I: An annoying circus far away

The cover of David Morley's (1992) book *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* features cartoon art of a mid-century-looking family watching television. 'Coming up next on the news: terrifying inexplicable events occurring in far-away places, presented without historical or sociological context!' exclaims the televised voice-over. 'Geez! It looks pretty bad out there!' comments the father, to which the mother adds 'I'm certainly glad we're safe here at home'. The piece poignantly sums up a stark critique of journalism, especially of television news and its audience. Rather than engaging with the events depicted before them, the family seeks comfort in the safety of their own home. This sentiment is premeditated on the experience of *distance* between news audiences and the events on the television screen. The meaning of distance in the construction of spectator positions for news audiences has been discussed, for instance, in view of audiences of distant suffering (Chouliaraki, 2006), and corresponds well with the myth-making qualities inherent in the ritual view of communication.

The cartoon thus illustrates the characteristics of the first phase of Norwegian news audiences' response to the campaign. In this phase, audiences' sense-making had three interrelated components: the campaign was experienced as a circus (and Trump a clown), the election coverage as irritating and as taking place far away. We will examine more closely what these elements of circus, annoyance and distance entail. First, however, we underline that these are impressions of the body of election coverage, not necessarily discerning between particular news stories. Even in our diary phase, as informants were prompted to recall news stories they had noticed that day, responses emphasize the overall overwhelming spectacle of the election. The notion of news as myth (Bird and Dardenne, 2009) is relevant to understand sense-making in this phase: the election converged Norwegian audiences around shared values by representing familiar patterns of a spectacle taking place far away, in contrast to the closer and very different Norwegian politics at home:

Noticing a lot of attention on the US election, but can't relate to it. It seems like a childish circus I can't take seriously. Deliberately avoiding everything that concerns the election. (Bianca, architect, high interest in news and politics, oriented towards art, tv drama and documentaries)

You hear about Trump every day. Incredible that such a crazy man can reach such a position [. . .] Trump is someone we discuss every day, while we shake our heads. (Heidi, retired librarian, medium interest in news and politics, oriented towards literature, tv documentaries and debates, and local events)

And then there is the news of Donald Trump [sic]. That was discussed at lunch. Everyone agrees he is not in his right mind. (Geir, engineer, low interest in news and politics, oriented towards tv crime series and professional events)

These are some of the diary entries in which informants referred to the election campaign as a ‘circus’ or ‘craziness’. The diaries showed a predominance of ambivalent or negative feelings, not just about Trump as a candidate, but also concerning the election coverage in Norwegian news, and the overall rhetoric of the campaign. Some wrote that the election was important, or that they discussed it with friends, family and co-workers. However, more invested informants found the extent of election coverage and the transgressions of Trump too much to bear, and expressed irritation and fatigue at having to deal with news that was carnivalesque, but impossible to avoid. Some mixed these feelings with amusement.

While the impression of a circus might be shared by domestic US audiences as well (e.g. Morgan and Shanahan, 2017), the position of Norwegian news audiences as distant to the event allowed them to shake their heads and discuss the spectacle from the safe haven of Norwegian society with its uneventful politics. The experience of detachment becomes even more salient when we consider that mentions of Trump and the election were part of diary entries in which informants reported on other issues than those primarily concerning Trump. These entries included entertainment and cultural experiences, various issues that engaged them, and big and small happenings in their lives. In the middle of this, we find mentions of stumbling upon ‘Circus Trump’ or checking up on ‘the craziness of the election’ (Ørmen, 2016). Such examples highlight the two aspects of news as ritual: on one level, through individuals’ routine and mundane everyday media use (when briefly checking or randomly stumbling upon a story), and on a second level, through the engagement with the myth-serving functions of the overall news coverage.

The feeling of annoyance was shared across the informant group. The four informants whose diaries are quoted above span diverse orientations towards the public, low and high interest in news, and different class positions. However, while everyone could participate in the head-shaking, some informants more explicitly combined this with informational aspects in their sense-making processes:

Went into town with my mother for shopping and lunch. Then home to rest. Listened to podcasts and read some newspapers. [. . .] News of an old tape of presidential candidate Trump has surfaced. He is demeaning to women, and many think this scandal will break the camel’s back. [. . .] I read about it in the morning and followed it online throughout the day. Discussed briefly with my mother as we spent time together. I dare not believe the experts who say this is the end of Trump, but you can always hope. (Lene, kindergarten teacher, medium interest in news and politics, oriented towards social media, podcasts and tv drama)

This quote signals engagement that went beyond the predominant eye-rolling. Lene is not a news junkie, but her interest in public affairs and her media habits facilitated more sustained attention. We should, however, not overstate the point. Lene describes how she observes news as it flows along (Ørmen, 2016) and is more or less actively monitored throughout the day. The diaries thus illustrate how routines and small events concerning work, family and cross-media use goes on ‘in here’ – within the framework of each informant’s everyday life – while the events in the news are something else happening ‘out there’, occasionally noticed and reflected upon.

We thus find that the election was partly important, slightly entertaining, often annoying, at times intrusive, but also with little relevance for the daily, real-world experiences of our informants. That changed dramatically in the second phase.

Phase II: World-shattering shock

I was up all night and could not sleep. I realized . . . for fuck's sake . . . [. . .] I had bought a few beers and taken with me to work . . . and then I sat there until seven in the morning. I just had to go home. I had to. I couldn't take it any longer, at that time the election was . . . there were five states left. I went home, went to bed, with the livestream still on, and woke as they said that Donald Trump had won. Donald Trump is the next president of the USA. I threw up. I felt really sick. [. . .] That was the moment when I could feel the world go to hell (Knut, bartender, high interest in politics, low interest in news, oriented towards music and culture)

This is Knut, a working-class male in his twenties, recounting his reaction to Trump's victory. Overall, Knut expressed that news rarely concerned him. He was opinionated about several political issues, but disinterested in news. Before election night, he had veered between 'hoping the US would figure it out', declaring that 'Trump and Clinton were both retarded', and entertaining the idea that a Trump victory could uproot the world in a good way. By considering that a Trump victory was not a complete disaster, Knut was part of a small minority in the informant group. However, when the victory materialized, it felt like the end of the world. His recounting of election night highlights how both aspects of news as rituals changed: his use was extraordinary, breaking everyday routines into the night, and the feeling of control supported by the previous phase's coverage broke down. Elections are unusual events that invite unusual news use. The interesting question here is that what the shocking result led to: the position of the distant spectator gradually ceased to exist, so that a shared world was affected by the result.

Several informants stated that 'our world' or 'our values' were threatened when Trump was elected. This implied a strong, deep-seated disagreement with Trump and what he represented, but also that suddenly they could no longer take comfort in the distance between Norway and the United States:

The US election . . . you sit here at home, you work so hard . . . I have a wife, kids, a dog, a house . . . I have everything I need . . . a normal life, you know? And then you sit there in bed and think oh my gosh there are so many sick politicians out there. Are these the people who control the world? Is it really true? (John, real estate developer, medium interest in news and politics, oriented towards social media, religious and local communities)

As John finely articulated, it was his normal life that rushed through his head when he heard the election result. Elsewhere in the interview, he expressed how post-election economic uncertainty affected his work in real estate. He described the campaign as 'a bad movie' that he had followed on YouTube 'to see what insane thing Trump will say next', but now he felt forcibly reminded of Trump whenever the dollar currency changed, and compelled to follow financial news in detail. Both his news routines and attitudes towards the news changed temporarily due to the shock.

Several other informants who addressed the election coverage shared the sentiment of being personally affected and, in different ways, compelled to deal with the fallout in their own life worlds. The priest Sara talked about threats to the world and ‘our values’ in a sermon, and public health nurse Anne of counselling scared schoolchildren:

Because the coverage was so black and white, the kids didn’t understand anything. The big bad wolf who was not supposed to win *had* won. It set off quite strong reactions in schools among the kids old enough to watch the news. They were scared: fires had to be put out. [. . .] Yes, it became serious for me too. (Anne, public health nurse, medium interest in news and politics, oriented towards radio, tv documentaries, local and professional communities)

These informants’ occupations might have triggered the search for responses that went beyond opinions or basic, visceral reactions. Retrospectively, Anne was very critical of the media for polarized coverage vilifying Trump. Many informants joined her in harsh criticism of Norwegian and international campaign news. While media criticism in the first phase focused on the volume of coverage of the circus, phase II entailed a turn towards matters of representation, looking at how Trump had been painted as an evil caricature, and how his voters had been neglected by experts. This amounts to a critique of the myth-making coverage of the body of news pre-election.

This can be interpreted in a number of ways: On one hand, critical informants undoubtedly joined a discourse that was prevalent in the media after the election. On the other hand, as part of sense-making after an unsettling event, blaming the media seemed like the less scary alternative compared with acknowledging that the world had become a more dangerous place. Criticizing the dark image painted of Trump thereby enabled informants to hope things could turn out better than anticipated. However, in the aftermath of the shock, any kind of prediction about the future would be uncertain, and lack of stability hindered the effect of comforting arguments.

In order to bring out the temporal dimension in how informants handled the shock, we follow one informant through the different phases: Lene, the kindergarten teacher who wrote in the diary that she dared not believe Trump would disappear. In the second interview, she elaborated on this feeling from the campaign period:

I felt I had to shield myself from all the horrors coming out of the mouth of that vile man. [. . .] I couldn’t look at him. I actually posted on Facebook, saying can someone please let me know when he has gone up in smoke, so I can watch TV again. (Lene, kindergarten teacher, medium interest in news and politics, oriented towards social media, podcasts and tv drama)

In this quote, her imagery paints Trump as a dark, magical figure from a nightmare come alive. She was waiting for him to ‘go up in smoke’. The interviewer then asked how she felt knowing that Trump would stay in the picture. To this, Lene first laughed and restated her individual shielding mechanism: ‘muting the television whenever he is on’. This practice is reminiscent of those found in studies of people who avoid news and give emotional trauma as reason (Toff and Palmer, 2018), and underline that news triggers feelings of disempowerment. But Lene is far from a news avoider, and, importantly, she went on to declare that societal change was called for: ‘Apparently, we have missed out on a whole wave of people who do not feel part of society’. Her call for attention to

Trump voters resonates with arguments that the press, by over-focusing on fake news, failed to account for the underlying socio-cultural conditions that prepared the ground for Trump's appeal (Kreiss, 2018).

These questions – who are these people, how can we understand them, what are the alternatives to populism – became critical in the transition to phase III. This implied a call on journalism to fulfil two purposes, referring to a ritual and a transmissive view: in the ritual view, the coherent worldview portrayed and observed through routine news use needed to be re-established. In the transmissive view, specific information on why Trump had won and what the victory would mean was needed.

Phase III: Regaining stability

We have seen how a ritual view can illustrate a distanced mode of news reception, in which news does not really offer events *to engage with* but rather the confirmation that the world works in a certain way. We have also observed how this mode was challenged by an event that destabilized the embedded world-view, collapsing the distance between news and audiences' life worlds. The third phase of the sense-making process, after the immediate surprise of the election result, saw the gradual return to normal. For some, the route to normalization went through strong informational engagement, digging into news stories.

Many of our informants appeared to be back to normal, both in terms of their news routines and feelings of stability, already when we interviewed them a few weeks post-election. They said they had been surprised or even shocked, but still answered in a factual rather than emotional tone, for instance, explaining which news providers had the best election coverage, rather than describing personal emotional responses. Some informants provided further insight into *how* this measure of stability had been regained.

Here, we find that the media played an important role – but through a mode of news use that was different from the repetitive confirmation of a coherent world order embedded in the ritual view of communication. Instead, selected media texts were perceived as enlightening and memorable, because they acknowledged that there was significant transformation to the world order, and aimed to explain what had changed. Irrespective of varying degrees of interest in news and politics, we found that some informants highlighted such texts as crucial to their 'recovery'.

A particularly interesting example of how news mattered in this phase of the sense-making, which recurred in multiple interviews, was a Norwegian documentary aired as part of the satirical talk show *Trygdekontoret* (translated: 'The social security office'). The show is broadcast on the public service institution NRK's second channel, hosted by rock musician Thomas Seltzer. *Trygdekontoret* is a dark, alternative talk show with a fairly narrow appeal that hinges on advanced cultural and aesthetic capital. In the documentary, produced pre-election, Seltzer visited American relatives who would vote for Trump, trying to understand how poverty and unemployment had transformed the political climate. Sigurd, a professional writer from the cultural elite, described the election special as 'one of the best things ever aired on Norwegian television'. However, we found that viewers from a range of backgrounds, including people who did not watch the show regularly or even know its name, had come across the programme as it aired, and found the answers they were looking for:

[The host] was so good at not mocking them, but keeping a quiet dialogue, even though they probably had different views than himself. And then you got to know how they really think, those people. That was a really good programme (Venke, retired speech therapist, medium to high interest in news and politics, oriented towards local communities, literature and tv crime series)

On one hand, this quote suggests the potential of journalism to foster understanding across political and social differences. On the other hand, the idea of understanding ‘those people’ has limitations, particularly when enacted by distant audiences. Personal equilibrium was restored for the viewers, but the distance towards the events of the news was also reinstated, allowing people to go on with their lives ‘safe here at home’, to return to the cartoon we described earlier. It seemed that they took advantage of the considerable geographical and political distance to move on personally, but left the larger social issues unresolved.

A group of informants talked about how using other forms of media content also contributed, in different ways, to the regaining of stability. The kindergarten teacher Lene, who was tired of the circus, scared of the nightmare, and eventually addressed the need to better understand the Trump voters, talked at length about her podcast and television habits. She had been re-watching her favourite drama series *The West Wing* and listening to the podcast *The West Wing Weekly*. While she did not say so herself, these choices appear as a nostalgic or even utopic contrast to the events of 2016. Lene referred to the fictional president Bartlet as ‘the best president America never had’. She perceived the series as a fairly realistic depiction of a bygone era. Most importantly, she said the characters were engaging because they were likable and morally good people, in contrast to *House of Cards*. This corresponds with analysis of the civic potential of *The West Wing* and fan responses to it (Williams, 2011). Immersion in entertainment of relevance to the situation, but with radically different values, thus became another route towards regaining stability.

There were, however, some differences between informants in whether they needed information in order to move on, or simply needed them for time to pass after the shock. Two contrasting quotes can illustrate the point:

I think . . . a lot of people reacted when he was elected, saying that now we will have World War III . . . It cannot be that bad you know . . . maybe things have been exaggerated, they will always adjust . . . in a campaign they say harsh things . . . and then things calm down. (Vera, cleaning lady, low to medium interest in news and politics, oriented towards tv entertainment, crime novels and local events)

I was active in discussions because I had opinions about it. Some people said it would probably be ok even though Trump is bad. I asked questions, because how do you know that? That is really just something you hope for. Saying it is so is deadly dangerous, that’s for sure. (Sigurd, professional writer, high interest in news and politics, oriented towards social media, public debate and non-fiction literature)

Vera refers to how ‘things’ were bound to ‘adjust’ or ‘calm down’, not detailing how this would happen, but dismissing the perceived threat to global stability as an exaggerated

immediate reaction. Vera is no news avoider, but in distancing herself from the threat, in Sigurd's words 'hoping' things would work out, she expresses some of the same motives found to be important for those who avoid news (Toff and Palmer, 2018). Representing the cultural elite, Sigurd, on the contrary, broke his daily routines to dig into the news (Ørmen, 2016) and found it necessary to critically oppose those who assumed things would be okay without having any specific supportive arguments. However, as he explained elsewhere in the interview, he developed other ways to cope: by engaging in extensive discussions in social media, and using his expert knowledge and established position in journalism to find information and perspectives from colleagues whose insights he respected. Beyond the shared process of regaining stability partly helped by non-routine media use, we see how, also in this final phase, resources and the ability to mobilize latent media practices lead to differences within the informant group – both in the way news mattered for sense-making, and to the extent informants referred to a re-instated feeling of control instigated by the myth-making qualities of news.

Conclusion

This article has studied temporal shifts in the role of journalism for audiences' sense-making through a period of dramatic political change. We have argued that people's engagement with news elicits deep-seated experiences of the world and of relations within it. The analysis has shown how audiences in three successive phases experienced annoyance, surprise and a sense of reclaimed stability. Through these phases, we have showed how people use news to deal with a major disruptive political event.

We have discussed the temporal shifts with the aid of the dual concepts of ritual and transmission, underlining how the former covers individuals' everyday routine relations with journalism, as well as the overall function of news as myths. The analysis has made evident how news not only works as transmission, but also evokes affective experiences of social and political order. News coverage of the election had narrative qualities clearly extending beyond communication of facts and information: it presented a dramatic spectacle to which audiences reacted with emotional intensity. Thus, this study points to how transmissive and ritual qualities of news coverage are intertwined. Audiences' ritual engagement with news, on one hand, and uptake of information, on the other hand, are indeed also intertwined. As demonstrated, political upheavals can uproot the worldview portrayed through news, and briefly and for some audiences galvanize information-seeking. Finally, when everyday life returned, the ritual mode of reception again came to the fore – in the sense of routine (dis)engagement with journalism, and in the sense of the myth-making capabilities of news. The insights from this study thus differentiate Carey's contention of the relationship between information and ritual in news consumption, highlighting the importance of temporal shifts in the balance between the two aspects. One implication of our findings is that in the course of these temporal shifts, some people engage with news through practices and sense-making processes that break with their ordinary routines, potentially broadening their horizons as news users. The process also induced people to criticize prevalent myths created through the body of news, potentially sharpening their awareness. However, the comfort of returning to normal and re-instating distance towards the news implied that these were temporary rather than permanent changes.

Our analysis indicates significant similarities in sense-making processes to this event, in spite of difference in social background. Importantly, the shared nature of these experiences brings attention to the national context. The collectively enacted ritual engagement with news highlighted in our analysis unifies people around shared values. Despite – or because of – Norway’s cultural proximity to the United States, and despite sustained political cooperation and military dependence, the United States’ distance and difference from Norway became important for the sense-making. This article thus offers an example suggesting how audiences’ engagement with major geopolitical upheavals forges a sense of community. It also hints at imaginations of transnational interpretive communities, but maintains that the position of distant news audiences remains crucial. These insights further actualize issues of a more distinct political nature. Recent survey-based research found that Trump’s victory increased the popularity of the European Union (EU) in Europe, and broadened and ideologically diversified the EU’s base of support (Minkus et al., 2018). The findings from our study suggest a similar dynamic. Whereas Trump’s campaign and its press coverage polarized publics in the United States, for our informants, the coverage prompted a reinforcement of, or convergence towards, a national community.

We have argued that beyond the shared traits, our informants differ in their engagement with news and politics, and that this is a potential dividing point in whether reactions to the US election included a turn to information-seeking or not. In each of the three phases, however, some informants went further than others. Our informants are concerned about different public issues, vary in their interest levels, and have different cross-media repertoires and different social backgrounds. We see this not only in more sustained attention or consumption of news, or in more elaborate discussion with peers, but also in their voicing of concerns and constructive media criticism, and in their talk about how the turmoil impacted their ‘new normal’ everyday life.

This points to the need to study news and media use as one aspect of orientations towards the public. How people make sense of political upheaval must also be understood in light of their overall lifestyle – the structured whole of their behaviour and practices (Hovden and Moe, 2017). Paying in-depth attention to how people’s usage of news is entwined with their everyday practices and social biographies, would prove valuable for richer illuminations of how people make sense of political upheavals. With a world order perceived as unstable, such studies can make us wiser on exactly how news matters.

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Note

1. Informants were recruited through network recruitment, but selected to ensure diversity according to the mentioned criteria and population demographics. To systematically capture diversity in social background, the recruitment was based on pre-established occupational

categories adopted from the Norwegian Oslo Register Data Class Scheme (ORDC) (Hansen et al., 2009), with divisions into cultural, professional and economical elites; upper middle classes and lower middle classes; and occupational sub-strata of the working classes. They were not paid to participate, but given a gift card to the cinema or a book store as a token of appreciation for their time.

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