# Changing Journalistic Information-Gathering Practices? Reliability in Everyday Information Gathering in High-Speed Newsrooms

## Els Diekerhof

Published online: 11 May 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ⬀

View related articles ⬀

View Crossmark data ⬀

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

# Changing Journalistic Information-Gathering Practices? Reliability in Everyday Information Gathering in High-Speed Newsrooms

Els Diekerhof[a,b]

[a]Utrecht University of Applied Sciences; J-lab/School of Journalism, Utrecht, The Netherlands; [b]University of Amsterdam, ASCA, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

**ABSTRACT**

It is generally assumed that the journalists' strive for reliability of information is taken over by the increased need for speed in today's newsrooms. However, little empirical evidence supports that assumption. This study explores how journalists in high-speed newsrooms gather information, how gathering activities are temporally structured and how reliability manifests itself in information-gathering activities. Data were collected through micro-observations of information-gathering activities of individual journalists in eight Dutch newsrooms, with a variety of professional practices and temporal affordances. Analysis of these micro-observations suggests that journalists' striving to achieve reliability manifests in recurring checking and completing activities. The temporal structuring of information-gathering practices is, partly due to the story-driven character of news work, loose, multi-serial and often non-linear. The findings suggest that the assumed augmented tension between reliability and immediacy needs rethinking, at least with regard to everyday information-gathering practices. Even in high-speed newsrooms, immediacy is not as omnipresent as presumed and, although on occasion postponed, reliability is approached in a 'classic' manner.

## Introduction

The authority of journalism is based, to a significant extent, on the fast dissemination of reliable information. However, the public trust in journalism as an "authoritative" profession is no longer indisputable. While trust in the institution of journalism has been declining for many years (Reuters Institute 2020), the shift to digital publishing processes seems to have amplified concerns about the reliability of the information provided by news outlets (Fisher et al. 2020; Flew 2019).

Increased concerns about reliability have been connected to the acceleration of the journalistic production process. The digital 24/7 production context has been compared to a *hamster wheel* (Starkman 2010) and seems to bring along an *ASAP culture* (Usher

2014). This presupposed acceleration may enforce new norms such as *not-wrong-for-long* (Johnston and Forde 2009), more lenient attitudes towards verification (Nygren and Widholm 2018), or may have resulted in an adaptation and redefinition of the traditional guiding principles (Agarwal and Barthel 2015).

The tension between reliability and immediacy in journalistic practice is a classic phenomenon: speed has always been "the enemy of accuracy" (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 59), especially in information-gathering practices. Nevertheless, the importance of immediacy seems to have increased, particularly online. It is even assumed immediacy rules over reliability (Domingo 2008). The online continuous news cycle supposedly puts pressure on the historical professional dictum of "Get it first, but first get it right", which also guides journalistic information gathering.

However, there is little empirical evidence that the *information-gathering* work of journalists is becoming less reliable now that digital technologies are accelerating the journalistic production process. This needs further analysis. *Gathering practices* in *high-speed newsrooms* probably show both the assumed acceleration and the related augmented tension between immediacy and reliability most prominently. Therefore, the present study explores how reliability is manifested in information-gathering activities of journalists working at news- and current affairs desks of *high-speed newsrooms.*

In many journalism studies, mostly content analyses, reliability is directly related to the prominent and complex role of the reliability of *sources* (e.g., Carlson 2009). Studies also analyse the use of particular sources, such as social media (e.g., Brandtzaeg et al. 2016; Lecheler, Kruikemeier, and Haan 2019). This offers useful insights into in the *products* of the work of journalists. Yet, it is in the *making* of these products, in the gathering activities, that reliability takes shape. Consequently an analysis of reliability needs an additional emphasis on the everyday gathering activities of journalists, as the professional principles of reliability and immediacy are not detached ideas but get articulated in these activities.

In the context of the supposed acceleration of journalism and amplified immediacy, an analysis of gathering practices should also take into account the *temporal structuring* (Orlikowski and Yates 2002) of information-gathering practices. Temporal patterns and routines may be more nuanced and context related (Zelizer 2018) than a unidimensional "need for speed". The role of time and sequence in news production reaches beyond the notion of immediacy (cf. Usher 2018).

The few journalism studies that focus on gathering *activities,* mainly depart from a normative perspective and are limited to the activities of verifying, judging and checking (e.g., Shapiro et al. 2013). This is understandable, as this is closely related to the truth-finding mission that is at the heart of professional journalism. However, exploring the *amalgam* of *all* everyday information-gathering actions might provide a more detailed and multi-layered insight into the principles and activities of information gathering.

## Principles of Information Gathering

The theoretical starting point for this detailed analysis of gathering activities is the premise of the *interdependency* between everyday gathering *activities* and the professional *principles* of reliability and immediacy. This starting point links up with the central premise of *practice theories* in journalism studies, that the ongoing and reciprocal *exchange* between professional activities and professional principles should be taken into

account in the analysis of contemporary journalism (Ahva 2017; Witschge and Harbers 2018).

The notion of *practice*, of the interaction between "doings" and "sayings" and "shared understandings" (Schatzki 2001, 56), underlines the intertwinement of the *everyday gathering activities* on the one hand, and the normative ideals and shared understandings of the professional *principles* of *reliability* and *immediacy* on the other. Hence, professional principles are not regarded as unambiguous instructions for journalists' daily gathering activities. Furthermore, analyses departing from determinative principles too often induce normative approaches and put emphasis on what journalists *should* do, instead of offering insights into their actual activities and taking the agency of journalists into account.

This study on information-gathering practices starts from newsroom activities. In order to analyse the empirical data on these activities, the *professional principles* need identification. It goes beyond the scope of this article to include all theoretical debates on the notions of reliability and immediacy. However, the most important elements will be introduced and operationalised, with emphasis on the context of information-gathering practices. Evidentially, this theoretical framework also includes insights from previous empirical research on the *activities* of information gathering and especially on the *temporal structuring* of these activities.

The principle of *reliability* is a crucial element of the journalistic occupational ideology of truth seeking (Deuze 2005). With regard to journalistic information gathering, reliability is mostly put on a par with accuracy (e.g., Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 56–60). However, reliability includes more than mere accuracy. In the context of information-gathering practices, two components of reliability need to be distinguished: *accuracy and completeness* (cf. McQuail and Deuze 2020, 217; Westerståhl 1983, 405). The goal of journalists' information-gathering activities are factually correct as well as complete stories. Accuracy can be defined as factual correctness, as "getting the facts straight" (cf. Shapiro et al. 2013). Completeness concerns balance in the use of sources, to grant both (or more) sides equal attention (Starkey 2006).

As mentioned above, in journalism studies reliability is often referred to as a feature of information artefacts, as a quality of sources (cf. Gans 1979, 129–130; Reich 2011a, 2011b). In journalism studies, *sources* are traditionally a key issue (Carlson 2009), while reliability is predominately connected to studies on sourcing strategies and practices (e.g., Lecheler, Kruikemeier, and Haan 2019; Reich 2011b), or on the use and verification of a particular (online) source (Tylor 2015; Wintterlin 2020). Journalists themselves also usually talk of reliable *sources*, although there is a distinction between the reliability of sources and the reliability of the *information* provided by these sources. Recent research shows that journalists do differentiate between source credibility and message credibility, but source evaluation is the "autopilot" default mode (Barnoy and Reich 2020).

However, reliability is not an inherent feature that can be perceived as such. It is an *ascribed* feature of information and sources. Reliability is a social construct: journalists determine the reliability of information (Gans 1979, 129–133; Reich 2011a, 2011b). Thus, reliability is foremost a feature of the activities of journalists, as they strive to deliver reliable information. Therefore, in this study reliability is identified as the journalists' purpose to provide reliable stories as manifested in their gathering activities by aiming for accuracy and completeness of information.

The second professional principle that becomes manifest in information-gathering practices is *immediacy*. Immediacy is a vital element of the professional ideology of journalism (cf. Craig 2016; Deuze 2005). Especially in high-speed newsrooms, immediacy seems a defining principle that guides the actions of journalists (Domingo 2008; Usher 2014, 90, 148–149).

Immediacy is a complex notion, as it implies a central value of the professional identity as well as the connected imperative principle to work fast. The notion of immediacy refers to the idea that quick reporting is a mark of good journalism (Zelizer 2018, 112) and to the professional pride of "being the first", of beating colleagues to it (see Karlsson and Strömbäck 2010; Karlsson 2011). Immediacy is also connected to the notion of *urgency* as a feature of newsworthiness (cf. Tuchman 1978, 5).

Immediacy as a guiding principle in information-gathering practices can be defined as "*the need for speed*" or, more precisely, the *identified* need for speed: the need for a fast enactment of (gathering) activities. Journalists can demonstrate the "need for speed" when they accelerate their activities, after which the principle of immediacy becomes manifest in gathering practices.

## Activities of Information Gathering

A distinctive feature of information gathering practices in journalism is that information is gathered in the process of constructing a new information artefact (Attfield and Dowell 2003, 189). Information-gathering activities of journalists are *story driven*. They concern both concrete actions to collect information for stories and the (implicit) judging of the quality of that information.

Previous research on journalistic information gathering indicates that the major daily gathering activity in journalism is the gathering of all kinds of *additional information* on top of external material that crosses the desk of the journalists automatically (Machill and Beiler 2009; Quandt 2008; Domingo 2008; Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008). For instance, British research showed that 49% of the published items of quality papers relied mainly on agency copy or on other media (Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008, 30).

The most studied information-gathering activity in journalism studies is *verifying* and, lately, especially verifying online sources (e.g., Lecheler, Kruikemeier, and Haan 2019). A general finding is that journalists tend to avoid extensive verifying in news production. They do, however, check accuracy (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016; Diekerhof and Bakker 2012; Reich 2011b; Tuchman 1972), although mostly only simple, factual information (Shapiro et al. 2013). This also applies to online newsrooms (Manninen 2017; Shapiro et al. 2013) and to online information (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016). Still, online verification practices seem to be dominated by traditional journalistic methods (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016, 337–338). This attention paid to judging and checking activities in journalism studies does not reflect the attention paid by journalists to verification activities in newsrooms, as this is quite limited. The average time journalists spend on checking is, according to one meticulous research project, only eleven minutes a day (Machill and Beiler 2009).

Much research in this body of work, which analyses information gathering as *routines*, often refers to the notion of "strategic ritual" (Tuchman 1972) as a way of coping with sources and information. Reported routines rely on a "gut feeling" and casuistry to determine accuracy (Kemman et al. 2013; Reich 2011a). One particular strategy is the use of a tight ring of

regular, reliable sources, described as "a priori typecasting" (Reich 2011b, 31). Another routine is the so-called "churning": the habit of not checking at all, but of repacking and re-using stories provided by press agencies and other external news sources (Davies 2008).

## Temporal Structuring of Information-Gathering Activities

To understand information-gathering practices in journalism, it is important to also analyse the *temporal structuring* (Orlikowski and Yates 2002) of the practices. Traditional models of the journalistic production process, - which take newspapers as default -, presuppose a fixed chronological order in newsroom activities: gathering precedes information processing and publishing (Domingo et al. 2008). Similarly, models that categorise the distinct activities of a search process usually presuppose a linear process of consecutive stages with distinct activities, such as finding topics, cross-checking and scope extension (Machill and Beiler 2009), or initiation and selection, exploration, angle formulation and collection (Kemman et al. 2013). However, other models disagree with this linearity and emphasise the circular nature of information gathering (e.g., Shapiro et al. 2013, 668). Moreover, the temporal affordance (Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger 2018) of continuous deadlines and the online "new news process" (Jarvis 2009) call the linear and fixed chronological order of newsroom activities into question.

The temporal structuring of information-gathering practices in high-speed newsrooms is linked with other temporal phenomena that influence the enactment of activities. Radically shortened news cycles demand a faster daily tempo (Karlsson and Strömbäck 2010), create an ASAP (as-soon-as-possible) culture (Usher 2014, 147–149) and cause time pressure (Harro-Loit and Josephi 2019).

Overseeing the existing research on information gathering and the overview of the most relevant theoretical considerations regarding reliability, the importance is confirmed of a detailed analysis of *how reliability manifests itself in the convergence of all different information-gathering activities*, now that journalism seems to accelerate. Putting emphasis on the everyday newsroom activities avoids a normative perspective and avoids narrowing down information-gathering activities to mere verifying.

In order to provide more insight into and to extend existing knowledge of information gathering in journalism, this study will attempt to answer the questions, successively, how journalists in high-speed newsrooms gather information, how gathering activities are temporally structured and how reliability and immediacy manifest in information-gathering activities.

## Method

This study on everyday information gathering in journalism focuses on the journalists' *activities*, on what journalists actually *do* in high-speed newsrooms. Data on daily activities are best gathered through observations in a particular context, through watching what people do. Compared to interviews, observations also result in data on mundane activities, including the obvious and inefficient actions (Silverman 2014, 234). Moreover, observations do not generate socially desirable answers. This is especially important when researching professional norms for activities, such as reliability. Through the method of *micro-observations* (Hout 2011), the activities of individual journalists in eight Dutch

newsrooms were closely observed. The method of micro-observations consists of a combination of qualitative, ethnographic observational techniques and precise, direct observations of individual behaviour. It offers rich, profound, and very detailed qualitative data.

For the selection of the newsrooms, the method of non-random theoretical sampling (Gerring 2006, 2011; Corbin and Strauss 1990, 8) was used. The eight *high-speed* newsrooms were selected because in this kind of newsrooms, the probable tension between the need for speed and accuracy & completeness manifests most prominently. In this study high-speed newsrooms are operationalised as mainstream newsrooms with a 24/7 news cycle, both online and broadcast, that publish or broadcast most news and current affairs stories to the utmost within 24 h.

A further goal of the selection of newsrooms was to achieve variety in information-gathering practices. The sample of cases consists of four *online* newsrooms and four *broadcast* newsrooms. This inherently implicates a variety in deadlines, as online newsrooms have *continuou*s and broadcast newsrooms have *fixed* deadlines. Variety in the proximity of news events was realised by selecting two *regional* newsrooms (one broadcast, one online), while the other six are *national*.

Gaining access to newsrooms and to individual journalists was time consuming and complicated. Micro-observations constitute an intruding method that gives detailed insight into the newsroom's routines and enters the personal space of individual journalists. Assuring the non-judgmental character of the observations (Silverman 2014, 217) and guaranteeing anonymity helped but a little in the time-consuming negotiations with editors-in-chief. Working bottom-up and using existing relationships with former students of the researcher proved to be the best access method (cf. Silverman 2014, 215).

To observe the actions of the individual journalists, the researcher sat, as invisibly as possible, diagonally behind the journalist, with a view on the journalist's screens and a paper notebook on her lap. All journalists were observed during a regular shift, which varied from seven to ten hours. Preparation of the observations consisted of a source analysis of the journalist's previous work and an intense and detailed following of all ongoing news events. The source analysis provided insight into the kind of sources the journalists use, to better understand, while observing, what the journalists were looking for and where they might look for information. The field notes mainly concerned detailed descriptions of all actions according to a topic list, using gathering *verbs* (such as "scrolling", "calling") and the kind of information they were gathering. The field notes also included explanations to understand the actual news context, observations of the used hard- and software and, separately noted, first interpretations and methodological notes.

In this study, the terms "activity" and "action" are used interchangeably. Activities such as checking and gathering context information are in themselves an unobservable category, but do allow for an interpretation of observable actions, such as scrolling (cf. Quandt 2008, 97). A gathering activity consists of a bundle or array of actions, leading to particular information for a story. *Judging* information and sources is a crucial part of gathering practices but is not observable as such. The judgement of several aspects of the quality of information or sources becomes clear in the type of activity that follows after it. In different kinds of gathering activities, the result of different kinds of judgments becomes visible.

To analyse the collected data, all field notes were first coded with descriptive codes referring to different kind of actions, and subsequently related to and grouped into

different categories of activities, connected to the concept of reliability and different types of temporal structure. The categorisation of different kind of gathering activities could partly be related to the proposed theoretical distinction between the two elements of reliability. Reliability as accuracy and reliability as completeness could be categorised as the activity of *checking* and the activity of *completing*, respectively. The analyses of the temporal structures of information-gathering practices started with an attempt to map different stages in a linear search processes, but as this linear approach did not correspond with the data, it was changed into analysing the flow of activities connected to certain stories. The speed of the flow of activities was not measured in exact time duration, although in the fieldnotes the time was noted approximately every ten minutes. In this observational qualitative study "speeding up" and "slowing down" were coded by comparing the pace of the activities: at intervals of "speeding up" or "slowing down" journalists demonstrated faster or slower enactment of (gathering) activities then before these intervals.

## Findings

To understand how reliability takes shape in information-gathering practices, first the enactment of the daily information-gathering activities has been analysed in detail. These *doings* are the essential elements in journalistic gathering practices (cf. Witschge and Harbers 2018; Ahva 2017, 4). How do journalists in high-speed newsrooms gather information for their stories?

The analysis takes into account both the (temporal) structuring of the journalist's activities as well as the different distinct information-gathering activities themselves. First the complex structuring of information-gathering practices will be described, followed by a mapping of the concrete gathering activities in high-speed newsrooms. The last section contains a further analysis of the manifestation of reliability and immediacy in gathering activities.

### *Structuring of Information-Gathering Activities*

The temporal structuring of the gathering activities of the journalists in high-speed newsrooms seldom follows simple linear patterns. The journalists take detours, swerve and lose focus. At first sight, information-gathering practices seem to be structured somehow chaotically and intuitively. Gathering practices do not consist of straight linear arrays of distinct actions, leading to information for a certain story. Analysis of the micro-observations of the journalists' daily (gathering) activities shows a multitrack temporal structuring of gathering actions, with a lot of intermingling and interruptions.

The temporal structuring of the gathering activities shows wandering patterns with interruptions, dead ends, forced breaks, loops and byways. Gathering particular information for a certain story is part of the journalistic production process, not a separated task with a well-defined end. Journalists in high-speed newsrooms often work simultaneously on multiple stories or items. The array of gathering actions for one story is constantly *interrupted* by the information gathering for other stories. Especially calling sources for specific information for a certain story is a recurring interrupting activity.

Information-gathering activities also lead to *dead ends*. Journalists sometimes break off their information-gathering activity, especially when it is apparently too difficult to find particular information or a certain source. The discontinuation of the search for certain information or a specific source is not solely the journalist's decision, but is also caused by evident, mostly technical, online obstacles (e.g., poor functioning search bars on specific websites) or the unavailability of certain people. Especially journalists who work at the current affairs radio programmes sometimes spend a lot of time calling, mailing and whatsapping persons, to gather context information about intended studio guests. If these intended sources turn out to be unavailable, their search actions stop.

Another pattern of non-linear, not fast-forwarding information gathering is constituted by *loops* in the arrays of activities. All journalists repeat certain search actions. They often search for information and sources they already found earlier but apparently did not store for easy retrieval. These loops in information-gathering activities can consist of the simple retyping of already used words in Google to find the same information again. It sometimes takes time, however, to re-find that information, especially when journalists are monitoring new developments or gathering context information about a subject.

Taking *byways* is another pattern of structuring gathering actions. While searching for certain information, journalists are distracted by all kinds of information that is interesting but not necessarily related to the story they work on. Byways are taken to information about personal interests (such as the latest sports results), they linger on Twitter and also get distracted by (breaking) news developments. Sometimes these byways bring unforeseen, interesting and useful information for a story. Information gathering includes serendipity.

The structuring of information-gathering activities is also complex and multi-layered because information gathering is continuously interrupted by and entwined with *other newsroom activities*. Information gathering in high-speed newsrooms does not consist of a demarcated set of actions and activities. Gathering is not finished before writing, the two activities are interwoven: journalists go back and forth between gathering activities and writing activities.

In online newsrooms with a *continuous* deadline, information-gathering activities are not only entwined with information processing, but they also alternate with *publishing* activities. Occasionally, journalists use these technological and temporal affordances of a continuous deadline. Journalists at online news sites also gather additional information and sources *after* the (first) publication. In such cases, information-gathering activities come in two rounds: basic factual information before the first publication, and a second round of gathering to produce updates with more context and corrections. This seems a fragmentation of the gathering activities, but information gathering, whether with or without fixed deadlines, is already fragmented in itself. The structuring of information-gathering is an incremental process as information for stories is always gathered in bits and pieces.

The analysis of the temporal structuring shows a variety of multiple chains and arrays of (gathering) activities, with no strict, fixed or compelling chronological order for the enactment of the distinct activities of the journalistic production process. Gathering activities are entwined and interrupted by other gathering activities and by other

newsroom activities such as writing. In online newsrooms even the traditional, inevitable print chronology of gathering before publishing no longer holds.

The sometimes seemingly chaotic temporal structuring of activities shows that not all information-gathering activities end up unswervingly at a particular source or specific information. Journalists do not always take a beeline to sources that can provide them with the needed information. Yet, these multitrack, multi-serial, entwined and often circular arrays of actions do not implicate that journalists' activities are not goal-oriented. Most gathering activities of journalists result, at any rate in the end, in the needed information and sources for the stories; they are focused and mostly efficient.

## Information-Gathering Activities

They read, they scroll, they app, they mail, they phone, they search, they check, they talk. Journalists in high-speed newsrooms demonstrate a rich variety of information-gathering actions and activities. Based on the kind of information and the purpose of the information in the context of the story, these activities can be categorised.

A significant feature of all these activities is that the information gathering is mostly *additional* information gathering. A lot of information does not have to be gathered at all: it is already there. Journalists in high-speed newsrooms are surrounded by sources such as the newsfeeds from several national and international press agencies and social media. The everyday activities of the journalists in these high-speed newsrooms are characterised more by the monitoring and selecting of stories from a constant flux of external information and stories, than by a proactive search for original stories.

Journalists assess whether the provided information from external news feeds is sufficient, accurate and complete. These (implicit) judgments become apparent in the gathering activities they perform thereafter. Gathering actions in high-speed newsrooms can be categorised into three general activities with distinct purposes and different kinds of (additional) information to be gathered: gathering context, checking and completing. When information is insufficient, journalists gather information for more *context*. When information is probably inaccurate, journalists *check* information for accuracy. When a story is probably unbalanced, journalists gather information and sources to make the story *complete*.

In these high-speed newsrooms, and especially at the two national online news desks, journalists also decide to omit any additional gathering. They edit the information offered by external sources without adding self-gathered information. Their waiving of further gathering might imply they judged the provided information was sufficient, reliable and complete. But their "non-activity" may also indicate they forget to check.

The analysis of a broad variety of actions shows three types of (additional) information-gathering activities in high-speed newsrooms: gathering context information, checking and completing. Checking and completing are both *doings,* in which the ongoing exchange with the professional principle of reliability takes shape. This will be further explained in the last sections. First a typology of gathering activities in high-speed newsrooms:

1. *Gathering context information*

The most frequently occurring type of additional information gathering in these newsrooms is gathering information to get more *context* regarding the issue of the news stories of external sources. Especially journalists at current affairs desks always gather a lot of context information. Most gathering activities for context information are simple digital searches, although some journalists use advanced search options.

All journalists in high-speed newsrooms carry out gathering activities to get information about the *historical context* of news events. This is a recurring gathering activity: journalists search their own media archives for all the stories they have published on a certain issue. Apparently, since most journalists seem to tag their stories sloppily and most Content Management Systems have poor search facilities, this gathering of previous stories can be difficult and detours (via Google) are frequently used. This type of gathering information resembles the pre-digital print, "news cuttings folder" method.

Much of the searched context information is information about *actual policy and regulations* regarding certain events. Journalists surf directly to the websites of the authorities to find that kind of information. The regional journalists know the URLs from the city council websites by heart, while the nationally operating journalists also go directly to the general governmental website that offers factual information about regulations, policy and agendas.

Not only the information and stories provided by external parties need context. Journalists also gather *background information about people*. They look for information about guests they are going to invite to the programme, about sources involved in the issue, and about experts. Looking for bios on LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook is a standard activity for gathering this kind of context information. Current affairs journalists and radio journalists do more; they also read articles written by studio guests or experts.

2. *Checking*

In the activity of checking, reliability manifests itself. The journalists in high-speed newsrooms gather information to *check* whether the information in the stories offered by external parties is correct. To gather additional information so as to determine factual correctness, most journalists do digital searches and cross-check with websites of authorities.

Checking the factual correctness of content mostly concerns facts that are *easy* to check: numbers (such as the price for a special post stamp) and names (such as the name of a certain fish). Yet, the current affairs journalists also call *experts* to check more complicated factual information. They ask these experts to corroborate the factual information and to provide context for complex issues. Sometimes journalists start to check factual information but do not find any corroboration. Then, they just leave out this information. All writing journalists not only check the accuracy of content, but they also check spelling.

Particularly in broadcast newsrooms and at current affairs desks, sources are not limited to press agencies, authorities and other regular news sources. Less well-known and involved people are important sources, too. When journalists apparently doubted their neutrality, these informal sources were checked. This also seems to work the

other way around: the information of experts with a reputation, who are well-known as a source in other media, was used without further checking. An unexpected, reliable source to cross-check all kinds of information is *the nearby colleague.* Colleagues are often consulted about all sorts of issues.

The accuracy of factual *information* from external sources is checked against factual information found at websites of authorities. Especially the journalists who work at current affairs desks and those who make original stories show a lot of double-checking actions. Occasionally, journalists seem to rely on their gut feeling in judging the incorrectness of information: after a critical reading, they just leave out the wrong or vague information without further checking.

3. *Completing*

The strive towards reliability is also demonstrated in the gathering activity of completing. Journalists in high-speed newsrooms gather information and sources to *complete* a story. Journalists also gather extra information and sources to add more, or more detailed, information to information about the issue provided by external sources. They do digital searches, follow a "text trail" with Google, but they also take the "people trail": they mail, app or call sources. These are not only experts but also press officers, personal and professional acquaintances and colleagues. The observed journalists are all generalists; they do not have a beat network. The regional journalists have networks of family and acquaintances that provide them with useful information about local issues to complete their stories.

Journalists who work for the broadcast media and journalists in the regional newsrooms search for sources with different opinions. The journalists in national broadcast newsrooms try to find sources with opposite political opinions (in which they do not always succeed). They often follow the Twitter accounts of politicians to find out about their latest statements.

## Manifestation of Reliability and Immediacy

The two elements of reliability, *accuracy* and *completeness* (cf. McQuail and Deuze 2020, 217; cf. Westerståhl 1983, 405) are both reflected in the activities of journalists in high-speed newsrooms. In their *checking* activities, journalists demonstrate their aim for accuracy. Completeness is obtained through *completing*.

The most ordinary everyday activity in all high-speed newsrooms regarding *accuracy* is to seek quick corroboration for simple, easy to find, factual information. However, the journalists in high-speed newsrooms also engage in cross-checking at authorities' websites and consultations of experts.

The findings also show the journalists' intention to make *balanced* and *complete* stories and items. Particularly in broadcast newsrooms it is common practice to find a second source with an opposing or at least different opinion, to tell a complete story. Journalists who work at current affairs desks also demonstrate they aim for completeness.

However, not all information from the continuous information flow generated by national and international press-agencies, social media and other mainstream media is always checked. The information provided by these kinds of sources is apparently

mostly regarded as reliable, although the journalists do also check information obtained from these sources.

Thus, all the journalists realise reliability by aiming for factual correctness and balance in the information of their stories. (Professional principles of which they were also reminded by the presence of an observer). The journalists who work at news desks in online newsrooms occasionally do not always realise reliability at once, but only in updates. They sometimes keep on gathering information and sources after first publication to correct and complete an already published story. Then the journalists "postpone" their aim for reliability to updates.

*Immediacy*, operationalised as "the need for speed", manifests itself in gathering activities when external news sources such as press agencies' newsfeeds or push notifications by other media confer urgency to the information they provide. At those moments, the activities of the journalists accelerate. The analysis did not indicate a permanent need for speed in everyday information-gathering practices.

The daily tempo of gathering activities is the highest at the online national news desks. These journalists work fast when they rapidly write several updates of news stories, provided by the wire services of news agencies. They speed up when other national media are sending push notifications. Temporary accelerations are also demonstrated in the activities of broadcast journalists. They speed up just before the deadline and just before newsroom meetings. Newsroom meetings are also important acceleration-inducing events for regional journalists.

All journalists slow down for a while during the day. They do so when they have finished several articles or when the programme has been put together, and there is no near deadline or fresh news. Most journalists then switch to a "monitoring modus". They stop focused information gathering. They do a so-called "tour of the fields": they monitor the news and information at a bunch of recognised websites or they scroll their Twitter timeline. They seldom do nothing, they keep on being busy with all kinds of information, especially with news.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored how journalists gather information in high-speed newsrooms and how reliability takes shape in gathering activities, now that journalism seems to accelerate and immediacy seems to become more important. The findings show a rich variety of gathering activities and insight into the temporal structuring of the activities. They also show various manifestations of the journalists' strive to deliver reliable information.

Although the findings of this study are predominantly descriptive, more can be said about the impact and implications, especially with regard to the assumed increased tension between reliability and immediacy. Both the *activities* and the *principles* of information-gathering practices in high-speed newsrooms will be further discussed.

### Gathering Activities and Their Temporal Structuring

The findings illustrate the significance of exploring journalistic practices by observing the amalgam of all everyday newsrooms activities, instead of isolated actions or certain sources. The direct-observations of individual journalists provided a detailed insight

into what journalist are *actually doing* when gathering information and also in the complex, multitrack, often non-linear paths they follow. It pictures everyday news work, instead of moments of exceptional breaking news.

The major daily gathering in the high-speed newsrooms consists of gathering all kinds of *additional* information. This supplementary character of information gathering has also been observed by previous studies (cf. Machill and Beiler 2009; Quandt 2008; Domingo 2008; Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008; Manninen 2017). The journalists in high-speed newsrooms demonstrated a rich variety of actions that could be categorised into three types: gathering context, checking and completing. The demonstrated *diversity* of gathering actions suggests that the emphasis on mere verifying in journalism studies is too limited to understand information-gathering practices.

The general activities of information gathering in high-speed newsrooms are *recurrent* activities. The activities and actions do not occur in clear-cut distinct stages of the production of stories and items. The analysis also demonstrates there is *no compelling chronological* order for the enactment of the distinct activities of the journalistic production process: gathering and writing are entwined activities. In online newsrooms with the technological affordance of a continuous deadline, even the inevitable print chronology of gathering before publishing no longer holds. Therefore, contrary to textbook instructions and (theoretical) models on information-seeking behaviour, the temporal structure of the activities is not always linear, nor is it well demarcated. Models describing information-gathering activities as phases of the research process, such as "the exploring phase" (Kemman et al. 2013; Kuhlthau 2004) or "scope-extension research" (Machill and Beiler 2009), probably apply more to slow journalism than to ordinary, everyday information gathering in high-speed newsrooms.

The temporal structuring of gathering practices illustrates the *story-driven character* of information-gathering activities in high-speed newsrooms. Journalistic information gathering is never an end in itself: it is always related to the production of a story or item (see also Attfield and Dowell 2003, 189). Information-gathering practices in high-speed newsrooms constitute multiple, simultaneous arrays of related actions to gather information for several stories, which are continuously interrupted by other story-related actions. The findings show that models of information seeking that presuppose a focused information need and that end when the needed information is found (cf. Kuhlthau 2004), do not apply to information-gathering practices in high-speed journalism.

### Reliability in Gathering Practices

Even in online newsrooms, with their potential of immediate publishing, information-gathering practices strongly reflect the classic *journalist's first obligation to the truth* (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 49–68). The findings show that journalists attach great importance to demonstrating their professionalism more or less consistently (see also Broersma 2013; Tuchman 1972). Through checking and through completing the journalists demonstrate their aim for reliability. They strive for accuracy and for completeness of information.

In the context of high-speed newsrooms the realisation of reliability does not necessarily require special skills or expertise. Information practices in high-speed newsrooms are not characterised by hard to find and complicated information. Except for the journalists

at current-affairs desks, in all high-speed newsrooms the most ordinary everyday gathering activity is to seek quick corroboration for simple, easy to find, factual information. The observed "*quick & easy*" way of checking confirms earlier findings on journalistic verification behaviour (Shapiro et al. 2013).

Previous research (cf. Agarwal and Barthel 2015, 385; Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008, 30; Quandt 2008) suggests journalists in online newsrooms "repack" information without further checking. This was also observed in this study. However, not checking does not implicate that the reliability of information is not *judged*. The "activity" of *renouncing further checking*, could also be explained by the circumstance that the main information and sources in the high-speed newsrooms come from highly familiar sources, such as news agencies and other mainstream media. These kinds of sources seem to be "a priori" regarded as reliable (cf. Reich 2011b). Although the journalists consider these sources as reliable, they nevertheless regularly also judge, and check and complete the information of these sources. Journalists did make a distinction between the sources and the information provided by the sources (see also Barnoy and Reich 2020).

Occasionally, at news desks in online newsrooms, journalists also check and correct information after first publication; reliability was then only realised in updates. From a strict, and product- and result-oriented point of view, this *not-wrong-for-long* method (Johnston and Forde 2009) involves a weakening of the reliability of information. However, one might also argue that the aim to gather reliable information remains the same, that what changes is the *visibility* of news production.

In online newsrooms with a continuous deadline also unfinished results of the gathering process become visible to the public in the successive updates (cf. Karlsson 2011). If the realisation of reliability is considered to be a transparent process rather than a finished product, this demonstrates a changing manifestation, not a changing professional principle.

The "postponing" of the realisation of reliability in updates is probably an illustration of how a new form of the aim for reliability of journalistic information is embraced. This new form is intertwined with the developing news production style of *incremental updating* (Jarvis 2009; Usher 2018), provided by the temporal affordance of a continuous deadline. Yet, as other research has also demonstrated (Henkel et al. 2020; Nygren and Widholm 2018), online journalists mostly have the same, "traditional" approach towards reliability as the other journalists have. The question is whether this reflects a tendency to stick to a "classic" realisation of reliability, or whether this new practice is the beginning of serious changes in information-gathering practices.

### *Immediacy in Gathering Practices*

Immediacy is manifested in the gathering activities of the journalists in the high-speed newsrooms, however it is but a temporary temporal phenomenon. The "need for speed" is perceived short term. The acceleration of activities in high-speed newsrooms only occurs at certain moments. In newsrooms with a continuous deadline, the perceived *urgency of a story* provokes acceleration. In the other newsrooms, the fixed *deadline* works as a temporary accelerator.

Everyday information-gathering activities in high-speed newsrooms are carried out at different paces, varying from top speed to very slow. The gathering activities of the

journalists did not reflect strong traits of "hamster wheel journalism" (Starkman 2010), nor of a compelling ASAP culture (Usher 2014). So the assumed permanent, continuous immediacy seems, even in online journalism, more of an "aura" (cf. Deuze 2005, 449) than an everyday practice of ordinary news production. Immediacy belongs to the "sayings" of the professional ideology, it is an important element of the newsroom culture, but it is not omnipresent at the level of ordinary information gathering activities.

Although speed and acceleration are part of the daily newsroom tempo, not all fast actions and speeding up are directly dictated or guided by the *professional principle* of immediacy, by the get-it-first-and-fast imperative. The findings show the fuzziness of the notion of *immediacy*. At least information-gathering activities in high-speed newsrooms are not driven by immediacy in an unmediated way. The immediacy principle might be less directly related to information gathering and writing activities than to *publishing*. Most analyses of immediacy (in online newsrooms) concern immediacy on the level of the news sites, not on the level of activities (cf. Karlsson and Strömbäck 2010). Either way, it shows that (new, fast) publishing strategies and practices do not necessarily require new ways of information gathering.

In this study the professional principle of immediacy is predominately observed in the speeding up of gathering activities of the journalists. Whether this "need for speed" also refers to the professional value of "being the first" (see Karlsson and Strömbäck 2010) cannot be decided based on observations, although journalists seem to accelerate when press agencies send push notifications and "alarms". This might indicate that the journalists are attached to their professional identity and are proud of beating the colleagues (cf. Karlsson 2011), or at least do not want to be the last.

Thus, the analysis of the activities of the journalists did not support the idea of an increased tension between reliability and immediacy in information-gathering practices in high-speed newsrooms. The journalists demonstrate that their aim for reliable information has not been "overruled" by immediacy, by a perceived need for speed. Previous research (e.g., Hermida 2012; Lewis and Cushion 2009) reported that the increasing importance of immediacy in journalism resulted in less reliability. However, these observations do not involve *everyday* information gathering activities, but mainly concern a relatively small part of information-gathering practices in journalism: breaking news on disasters and other unexpected events, which require immediate (online) publication or broadcasting.

It seems that in *ordinary, everyday* information gathering in journalism, immediacy relates differently to reliability. An explanation may be that information gathering in these newsrooms is predominantly *additional* gathering. Most elementary and necessary information for a (news) story has already been gathered, there is less urgency about further gathering. In addition, the everyday information gathering in high-speed newsrooms concerns mainly expected stories about prescheduled events, which requires less unplanned acceleration.

The findings suggest a more differentiated perspective towards the notions of reliability and immediacy in journalism practice should be considered. The detailed data on the individual activities of journalists of this study suggest that reliability and immediacy seem differently manifested at the individual level than they are at the media level. Furthermore, the professional principles seem also differentially manifested in gathering than they are in publishing. The postulated augmented tension between the

principles of reliability and immediacy also needs rethinking because immediacy is not as omnipresent and continuous in everyday journalism practice as has been assumed. High-speed newsrooms practices are not dominated by constant haste and a permanent high speed.

Finally, this study has explored the aim for reliability as manifested in the journalists' activities, not the reliability of their sources, nor their stories or media. However, the finding that the journalists (still) strive for reliability, even in high-speed newsrooms, may contribute to the increase of *public trust* in journalism. The relation between reliability and trust, the public's perception of the reliability of journalistic information and of media and journalists, is ambiguous and complicated (Broersma 2013, 33; Flew 2019). However, recent audience research on trust in media (Fisher et al. 2020) suggests removing bias is one of the factors which improves trust. This implies the journalists' aim for factual correct and complete information is crucial. The findings of this study show that the journalists take this crucial role. The everyday information gathering activities of journalists at high-speed newsrooms embody the occupational ideology of providing reliable information.

## Disclosure statement

## Funding

## References

Agarwal, S. D., and M. L. Barthel. 2015. "The Friendly Barbarians: Professional Norms and Work Routines of Online Journalists in the United States." *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 16 (3): 376–391.

Ahva, L. 2017. "Practice Theory for Journalism Studies: Operationalizing the Concept of Practice for the Study of Participation." *Journalism Studies* 18 (12): 1523–1541.

Attfield, S., and J. Dowell. 2003. "Information Seeking and use by Newspaper Journalists." *Journal of Documentation* 59 (2): 187–204.

Barnoy, A., and Z. Reich. 2020. "Trusting Others: A Pareto Distribution of Source and Message Credibility Among News Reporters." *Communication Research*. doi:10.1177/0093650220911814.

Brandtzaeg, P. B., M. Lüders, J. Spangenberg, L. Rath-Wiggins, and A. Følstad. 2016. "Emerging Journalistic Verification Practices Concerning Social Media." *Journalism Practice* 10 (3): 323–342.

Broersma, M. 2013. "A Refractured Paradigm: Journalism, Hoaxes and the Challenge of Trust." In *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape*, edited by C. Peters and M. Broersma, 28–44. London: Routledge.

Carlson, M. 2009. "Dueling, Dancing, or Dominating? Journalists and Their Sources." *Sociology Compass* 3 (4): 526–542.

Corbin, J. M., and A. Strauss. 1990. "Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria." *Qualitative Sociology* 13 (1): 3–21.

Craig, G. 2016. "Reclaiming Slowness in Journalism: Critique, Complexity and Difference." *Journalism Practice* 10 (4): 461–475.

Davies, N. 2008. *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Deuze, M. 2005. "What is Journalism?" *Professional Identity and Ideology of Journalists Reconsidered. Journalism* 6 (4): 442–464.

Diekerhof, E., and P. Bakker. 2012. "To Check or not to Check: An Exploratory Study on Source Checking by Dutch Journalists." *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies* 1 (2): 241–253.

Domingo, D. 2008. "When Immediacy Rules: Online Journalism Models in Four Catalan Online Newsrooms." In *Making Online News. The Ethnography of new Media Production*, edited by T. E. Patterson and D. Domingo, 113–126. New York: Peter Lang.

Domingo, D., T. Quandt, A. Heinonen, S. Paulussen, J. B. Singer, and M. Vujnovic. 2008. "Participatory Journalism Practices in the Media and Beyond: An International Comparative Study of Initiatives in Online Newspaper." *Journalism Practice* 2 (3): 326–342. doi:10.1080/17512780802281065.

Fisher, C., T. Flew, S. Park, J. Y. Lee, and U. Dulleck. 2020. "Improving Trust in News: Audience Solutions." *Journalism Practice* 1–19.

Flew, T. 2019. "Communication and the Challenge of Trust." SSRN. Accessed October 17, 2019. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3471104 or doi:10.2139/ssrn.3471104

Gans, H. J. 1979. *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*. New York: Vintage.

Gerring, J. 2006. *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*. Cambridge University Press.

Harro-Loit, H., and B. Josephi. 2019. "Journalists' Perception of Time Pressure: A Global Perspective." *Journalism Practice*, 1–17. doi:10.1080/17512786.2019.1623710.

Henkel, I., N. Thurman, J. Möller, and D. Trilling. 2020. "Do Online, Offline, and Multiplatform Journalists Differ in Their Professional Principles and Practices? Findings from a Multinational Study." *Journalism Studies* 1–21. (ahead-of-print), doi:10.1080/1461670X.2020.1749111.

Hermida, A. 2012. "Tweets and Truth: Journalism as a Discipline of Collaborative Verification." *Journalism Practice* 6 (5): 659–668. doi:10.1080/17512786.2012.667269.

Hout, T. van. 2011. "Sourcing Business News: A Case Study of Public Relations Uptake." In *Journalists, Sources, and Credibility: New Perspectives*, edited by B. Franklin and M. Carlson, 107–126. New York: Routledge.

Jarvis, J. 2009. "Product vs. Process Journalism: The Myth of Perfection vs. Beta Culture." https://buzzmachine.com/2009/06/07/processjournalism/

Johnston, J., and S. Forde. 2009. "'Not Wrong for Long': The Role and Penetration of News Wire Agencies in the 24/7 News Landscape." *Global Media Journal* 3 (2): 1–16.

Karlsson, M. 2011. "The Immediacy of Online News, the Visibility of Journalistic Processes and a Restructuring of Journalistic Authority." *Journalism* 12 (3): 279–295.

Karlsson, M., and J. Strömbäck. 2010. "Freezing the Flow of Online News." *Journalism Studies* 11 (1): 2–19. doi:10.1080/14616700903119784.

Kemman, M. J., M. Kleppe, B. Nieman, and H. Beunders. 2013. "El Periodismo Holandés en la era Digital." *Revista ICONO14. Revista Científica de Comunicación y Tecnologías Emergentes* 11 (2): 163–181.

Kovach, B., and T. Rosenstiel. 2014. *The Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Kuhlthau, C. C. 2004. *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Lecheler, S., S. Kruikemeier, and Y. de Haan. 2019. "The use and Verification of Online Sources in the News Production Process." In *Journalism and Truth in an age of Social Media*. New York: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/oso/9780190900250.003.0012.

Lewis, J., and S. Cushion. 2009. "The Thirst to be First: An Analysis of Breaking News Stories and Their Impact on the Quality of 24-Hour News Coverage in the UK." *Journalism Practice* 3 (3): 304–318.

Lewis, J., A. Williams, and B. Franklin. 2008. "Four Rumours and an Explanation: A Political Economic Account of Journalists' Changing Newsgathering and Reporting Practices." *Journalism Practice* 2 (1): 27–45.

Machill, M., and M. Beiler. 2009. "The Importance of the Internet for Journalistic Research: A Multi-Method Study of the Research Performed by Journalists Working for Daily Newspapers, Radio, Television and Online." *Journalism Studies* 10 (2): 178–203.

Manninen, V. J. E. 2017. "Sourcing Practices in Online Journalism: An Ethnographic Study of the Formation of Trust in and the Use of Journalistic Sources." *Journal of Media Practice* 18 (2–3): 212–228.

McQuail, D., and M. Deuze. 2020. *McQuail's Media & Mass Communication Theory*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Nygren, G., and A. Widholm. 2018. "Changing Norms Concerning Verification Towards a Relative Truth in Online News." In *Trust in Media and Journalism: Empirical Perspectives on Ethics, Norms, Impacts and Populism in Europe*, edited by K. Otto, and A. Kohler, 29–59. Wiesbaden: Springer.

Orlikowski, W. J., and J. Yates. 2002. "It's About Time: Temporal Structuring in Organizations." *Organization Science* 13 (6): 684–700. doi:10.1287/orsc.13.6.684.501.

Quandt, T. 2008. "News Tuning and Content Management: An Observation Study of old and new Routines in German Online Newsrooms." In *Making Online News: The Ethnography of new Media Production*, edited by C. A. Paterson and D. Domingo, 77–98. New York: Peter Lang.

Reich, Z. 2011a. "Source Credibility and Journalism: Between Visceral and Discretional Judgment." *Journalism Practice* 5 (1): 51–67.

Reich, Z. 2011b. "Source Credibility as a Journalistic Work Tool." In *Journalists, Sources, and Credibility: New Perspectives*, edited by B. Franklin and M. Carlson, 19–36. New York: Routledge.

Reuters Institute. "Digital News Report 2020." http://www.digitalnewsreport.org

Schatzki, T. R. 2001. "Introduction: Practice Theory." In *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, edited by T. R. Schatzki, 10–23. London: Routledge.

Shapiro, I., C. Brin, I. Bédard-Brûlé, and K. Mychajlowycz. 2013. "Verification as a Strategic Ritual." *Journalism Practice* 7 (6): 657–673. doi:10.1080/17512786.2013.765638.

Silverman, D. 2014. *Interpreting Qualitative Data*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Starkey, G. 2006. *Balance and Bias in Journalism: Representation, Regulation and Democracy*. London: Palgrave.

Starkman, D. 2010. "The Hamster Wheel." https://www.cjr.org/cover_story/the_hamster_wheel.php

Tenenboim-Weinblatt, K., and M. Neiger. 2018. "Temporal Affordances in the News." *Journalism* 19 (1): 37–55.

Tuchman, G. 1972. "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity." *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (4): 660–679.

Tuchman, G. 1978. *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. New York: The Free Press.

Tylor, J. 2015. "An Examination of how Student Journalists Seek Information and Evaluate Online Sources During the Newsgathering Process." *New Media & Society* 17 (8): 1277–1298.

Usher, N. 2014. *Making News at the New York Times*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Usher, N. 2018. "Breaking News Production Processes in US Metropolitan Newspapers: Immediacy and Journalistic Authority." *Journalism* 19 (1): 21–36.

Westerståhl, J. 1983. "Objective News Reporting: General Premises." *Communication Research* 10 (3): 403–424.

Wintterlin, F. 2020. "Trust in Distant Sources: An Analytical Model Capturing Antecedents of Risk and Trustworthiness as Perceived by Journalists." *Journalism* 21 (1): 130–145.

Witschge, T., and F. Harbers. 2018. "Journalism as Practice." In *Journalism*, edited by T. P. Vos, 105–123. Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

Zelizer, B. 2018. "Epilogue: Timing the Study of News Temporality." *Journalism* 19 (1): 111–121. doi:10.1177/1464884916688964.