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# “There Must be Room for Critical Questions, but ... ”: A News Audience Perspective on (In)decorous Journalistic Roles in the Emergence Phase of a Health Crisis

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we study how journalists may discursively balance their different and, at times, conflicting roles in the emergence phase of a health crisis in order not to violate news audience respondents' sense of *decorum*, i.e., propriety or appropriateness in a communication situation. Based on 21 in-depth interviews with Danish news users about the questions posed by journalists to politicians and public officials in the emergence phase of the corona (COVID-19) pandemic, we identify the types of questions that news users deem, respectively, proper, improper and (in)appropriate, the latter referring to questions that the news users perceive as neither clearly decorous nor indecorous, but highly dependent on situational finesse and discursive adaptation. Findings suggest that in the eyes of respondents, critical questions in particular may be inappropriate and, thus, particularly discursively demanding in the emergence phase of a health crisis. However, respondents' responses were contradictory, indicating that in the context of a democratic, corporatist media system respondents are reluctant to challenge journalists' ideal role as democracy's watchdog even under extreme circumstances.

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## Introduction

During a health crisis, journalists ideally perform several crucial roles. Adopting the terminology proposed by Weaver and Wilhoit (1996), journalists should, on the one hand, act as *disseminators* and, on the other hand, as *adversarial*s. Whereas the disseminator role involves fast information dissemination and verification of facts, the adversary role entails safeguarding of public interest through critical confrontation with power holders. In a health crisis, journalists should furthermore act as *educators* and in that role communicate in a way so as to avoid public anxiety or, even worse, panic (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 155; Schwitzer 2004).

However, from the perspective of news audiences, these different roles may at times be at odds, especially in the early phase of a crisis (Kay et al. 2011; Konow-Lund,

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Hågvar, and Olsson 2019, 957). For instance, a journalist that takes on the role of critical adversary and questions the information from political leaders and authorities may create doubts and fears that undermine the same journalist's subsequent attempts at performing the role of neutral disseminator and reassuring educator. To continue to reach, inform, and engage their audiences, journalists must therefore strike a fine balance between the various roles that they are expected to perform in the early phase of a health crisis.

In this article, we study this balancing act from the perspective of news audiences. We conceptualize a crisis as a dynamic rhetorical situation (Bitzer 1968; Hauser 2002) where respondents' perception of what constitutes *decorum*, i.e., propriety or appropriateness in a given situation (Hariman 1992), depends on in which phase of a crisis communication transpires. We focus on the early phase of a health crisis and, specifically, on what Pederesen, Ritter, and Benedetto (2020) have termed the *emergence phase*, i.e., where signs of a crisis have emerged and initial public measures are taken, but where the precise character and full extent of the crisis is yet unknown. In this phase, the public must be mobilized to take immediate action and, at the same time, persuaded to stay calm. Therefore, the emergence phase of a health crisis constitutes an absolutely crucial point in time where journalism and its relative effectiveness are of the outmost importance.

In continuation of this, we hypothesize that journalists' role performance and prioritization may be subject to a different norm of decorum in the eyes of respondents in the emergence phase of a health crisis compared to later phases. Because we see journalistic roles as discursive performances that are enacted in journalists' communication (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017), e.g., the various types of questions journalists pose to politicians and public officials (Clayman 2002; Clayman et al. 2007; Clayman and Heritage 2002; Clayman and Romaniuk 2011; Ekström et al. 2016), we hypothesize that news audience respondents may perceive certain questions as (in)decorous in this phase. While this does *not* necessarily mean that journalists should refrain from posing certain questions, it may however mean that journalists should pose certain questions with particular care to communicate in a way that "fits" the situation in the eyes of news audiences and, thus, helps to sustain the relationship between journalists and their audiences (Hariman 1992, 164; Kapust 2011). In order to be able to fulfill news audiences' needs as citizens, journalists must, in other words, communicate in a way that does not actively alienate audiences and push them away.

Previous research has shown that the onset of a crisis with high media coverage can put traditional political disagreements on hold and, in turn, lead to increased public support for incumbent power holders, albeit for a limited period of time and dependent on the character and context of the specific crisis (Mueller 1970). This tendency to "rally 'round the flag" (Mueller 1970) is also evident during health crises specifically (Bækgaard et al. 2020). In the context of news use, one would therefore expect news users to be particularly sensitive to journalistic questions that challenge politicians and public officials and, thus, disrupt this sense of temporary community and consensus in the emergence phase of a health crisis. Little is known, however, about news audiences' perception of journalistic role performance and prioritization in this early phase of a health crisis and, in continuation of this, how this may affect the relationship between journalists and news audiences. Specifically, qualitative research on how news users motivate their perception of journalistic decorum in this phase is scarce. To gain an in-depth understanding of this dynamic, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: *What types of questions from journalists to politicians and public officials do respondents perceive as (in)decorous during the emergence phase of a public health crisis?*

RQ2: *What do respondents perceive as (in)decorous journalistic roles in this phase?*

As our case, we have chosen the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis. Existing research on media and the COVID-19 pandemic is overwhelmingly based on quantitative methods, either population surveys or large-scale digital data sets (Mihelj, Kondor, and Štětka 2022). Consequently, existing research provides plenty of information on broad patterns in media use and news consumption, and how they correlate with attitudes and behavior. But as Mihelj et al. stress, this line of research tells us little about citizens' experiences, responses and motivations, e.g., how and why audiences experienced and responded to the information received (Mihelj, Kondor, and Štětka 2022, 2). With our study and its careful exploration of how respondents perceive journalists' discursive role performance in the emergence phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, we contribute with qualitative insights into the causes and consequences of citizens' engagement with COVID-19 journalism and, thus, with a more nuanced view of how news users perceive journalism in the early phase of a health crisis. As chief of the World Health Organization Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has formulated it: "When the next pandemic comes knocking—and it will—we must be ready to answer" (World Health Organization 2023). For journalists this includes learning from the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of how to communicate effectively to the public by striking a decorous balance between different journalistic roles.

We have conducted 21 in-depth interviews with Danish news users after they had watched the televised press conference from March 11th 2020 where the first nationwide lockdown in Denmark was announced and where journalists from a broad selection of Danish news media subsequently posed questions to politicians and public officials. We consider this specific press conference a well-suited case for studying what the audience accepts regarding journalistic questioning practices in the emergence phase of a health crisis. Typically, in a press conference journalists raise questions that put elite figures in the position of having to explain and justify their opinions, policies, and actions before the citizenry (Clayman 2002, 198). At this specific press conference, the primary focus was an information transfer from politicians and authorities to the public with journalists acting as the public's representatives. From the perspective of the political leaders and public officials, the press conference was a tool of news management and a means to inform the public about an urgent matter via the news media (Scacco and Wiemer 2019, 1 and 5). In addition, it was a ritual of political/public accountability in which politicians and authorities were obliged to explain and justify their decisions regarding the lockdown and, consequently, this press conference played a key role for citizens in deciding how to act at a crucial point in time. A final argument for choosing this press conference as our case, was that journalists from all major Danish media attended and therefore a broad variety of questions were posed to politicians and authorities.

We have asked the respondents what their impressions were of the various questions considering the situation. Based on the respondents' answers, we can identify which questions the respondents see as, on the one hand, decorous and, on the other hand, indecorous and which they see as situated between these two extremes, i.e., which

questions they see as potentially appropriate, but also dependent on particular situational and discursive finesse. We analyze the respondents' perceptions of what characterizes (in)appropriate questions, and why they are potentially (in)appropriate in the situation. Finally, we discuss our findings in light of journalistic role theory. First, however, we introduce our theoretical framework, starting with a definition of the central concept in our analysis: *decorum*.

## Journalistic Decorum in Health Crises

Decorum is a key concept in rhetorical theory that, generally speaking, refers to the importance of situational adaptation in communication. In the antique rhetorical canon, two different but related meanings of the concept exist: On the one hand, decorum refers to general norms that pertain to communication in *similar* situations, i.e., what in modern terms may be thought of as genre conventions; on the other hand, decorum refers to particular norms that pertain to communication in *specific* situations and, hence, depend on rhetors' ability to adapt their communication to a given situation—including the ability to discern when it is appropriate to ignore the general norms (Hariman 1992, 152–155). As Hariman notes, “decorum can be seen both as the rule that one should always behave in certain ways and the means by which people negotiate how they should behave in response to new and troubling circumstances” (Hariman 1992, 163). Decorum, in other words, may refer both to concrete do's and don'ts that explicate what is rhetorically *proper* in situations of a certain type (norms of propriety) and a more abstract sensibility that enables rhetors to judge what is rhetorically *appropriate* in specific situations (norms of appropriateness) (Hariman 1992, 164).

Often the two kinds of norms are aligned, i.e., what is proper is also appropriate (Hariman 1992, 164). This is the case, for example, when the general norm that journalists should act as democracy's critical watchdog is also the particular norm in a specific situation such as at a press conference about a recent political initiative. But sometimes the two kinds of norms are *not* aligned, i.e., what is proper is, in actuality, inappropriate (Hariman 1992, 164). This could be the case, for example, when journalists' performance of the proper role of watchdog is inappropriate in a specific situation such as at a press conference in the immediate wake of a terror attack. While news audiences may acknowledge the general importance of adversarial journalism, in such a situation they may nonetheless find journalists' critical scrutiny of the police's response to such an attack inappropriate in the situation (Konow-Lund, Hågvær, and Olsson 2019, 957). As a result, most of the time journalistic decorum entails knowing how to “stick to the rules”, so to speak, but sometimes it is instead a matter of knowing when to deviate from them.

Decorum is important, also for journalists, because as Hariman explains “[f]ailure to adapt indicates to observers that either the actor or the code is too rigid to warrant continued respect in a changing world” (Hariman 1992, 164). If news audiences perceive journalists' communication as indecorous in a given situation, they may conclude that either the professional norms of journalism in general or specific journalists' interpretation of those norms are out of touch with the audiences' own norms. To communicate decorously is, as Kapust points out, “intimately involved with meeting the expectations and desires of one's audience” (Kapust 2011, 98). Respecting news audiences' sense of decorum does not entail catering uncritically to their idiosyncratic wants, but rather to

communicate in a way that makes continued communication possible and, thus, enable journalists to fulfill audiences' ideal needs as citizens. Journalists must, in other words, not accommodate the subjective norms of each individual member of a news audience; but if journalists wish to maintain "continued respect" from news audiences and be able to reach, inform, and engage them, journalists must respect the audiences' intersubjective, common judgement of what constitutes decorum (Kapust 2011, 99–100 and 106). In the context of our study, decorum thus refers to a civic norm negotiated among citizens, not (necessarily) a professional norm negotiated among elite figures such as journalists, politicians, and/or scientists; in principle, all citizens have a say in terms of negotiating decorum in a given communication situation. At times this negotiation takes place in public, e.g., as was arguably the case in the wake of some of President Donald Trump's press meetings during the coronavirus pandemic (see Cathey 2020 for an overview); but often the negotiation is relegated to the private sphere and inaccessible to journalists. Our study, thus, contributes to unpack how news audiences negotiate decorum in the emergence phase of a health crisis, and what implications this may have for journalistic practice.

While respecting decorum is important, it may, however, also be difficult. As Cicero famously puts it in *Orator* (46 BC), here cited via Fantham, "[i]n speech as in life nothing is harder than to perceive what is appropriate" (Fantham 1984, 123). Especially the norm of appropriateness—as opposed to the norm of propriety—may be difficult to ascertain because it pertains to specific situations and, thus, can only be met by gauging the situation at hand and adapting one's rhetoric accordingly. In his original treatment of the relationship between rhetoric and situation, Bitzer argued that rhetorical situations "invites a *fitting* response" (Bitzer 1968, 10) and, moreover, that "[a] situation which is strong and clear dictates the purpose, theme, matter, and style of the response" (Bitzer 1968, 11). This somewhat deterministic view may, to some extent, apply to situations where the norms of propriety and appropriateness are aligned and audiences' expectations of what constitutes decorum can therefore be expected to be clear; but in situations where the two norms are not aligned, it becomes more ambiguous what kind of response actually "fits" the situation best and, thus, more dependent on critical and creative interpretation by the rhetor (cf. Vatz 1973). To make matters even more complex, rhetorical situations are dynamic and changeable; thus, "fitting responses will be influenced by the stage in the situation's life cycle" (Hauser 2002, 58). Thus, the norms that journalists must gauge are flexible and in flux, not least in times of crises.

### **Health Crises and Their Phases**

We follow Olsson in her definition of a crisis as a situation "when core values or life-sustaining systems of a community are under threat, which in turn induce a sense of urgency and create considerable uncertainties regarding the nature of the event and its consequences" (Olsson 2014, 114). As originally pointed out by Fink, here cited via Sturges, any crisis is constituted of several stages in its life cycle (Sturges 1994, 299). We follow a model with five distinct phases for crisis analysis: pre-crisis normality, emergence, occurrence, aftermath, and post-crisis normality (Pedersen, Ritter, and Benedetto 2020) where each phase differs in its content and duration. Our data collection focused on the *emergence phase* where signs of crisis have become clearer and the crisis is on the brink of

occurrence, but where the exact nature and full scale of the crisis is yet unknown (Pedersen, Ritter, and Benedetto 2020, 317).

In a crisis such as the corona pandemic, news media are expected to play a fundamental role in providing relevant and precise information. Media and journalists make information from the authorities public and thereby add to the collective knowledge of what is going on (Sorribes and Rovira 2011). The audience uses information provided by journalists to interpret the crisis and act upon it. Therefore, news media and journalists can increase or decrease public panic and hence play an important role in the prevention of crisis escalation (van der Meer et al. 2014). Unfortunately, the very nature of a crisis makes it difficult for journalists to suitably report on the events. A crisis is a sudden and unpredictable event that may pose a danger to society and create high levels of uncertainty, confusion, and time pressure (e.g., Fleischer 2013; van der Meer et al. 2017). In times of crises common journalistic practices, roles and standards might be challenged (Sorribes and Rovira 2011) and also changed (Klemm, Das, and Hartmann 2019) because it becomes hard to obtain and spread information and to find the time to validate stories (Veil 2012). Nevertheless, journalists have a responsibility to report on such newsworthy crisis events (Galtung and Ruge 1965). Even in the absence of crucial information, a news story still needs to be run to address news audiences' immediate need for information when being confronted with significant risks (van der Meer et al. 2017).

## Study Design

### *The Case*

This study is based on data gathered in Denmark, a Nordic country with a population of 5.8 million, located at the digital forefront. Together with Sweden, Norway, and Finland, Denmark is clustered at the extreme end of the Democratic Corporatists model (Hallin and Mancini 2004), and the country's media system model may be seen to represent a distinct Nordic type, emphasizing the mix of professionalism, press subsidies, and an inclusive media market (Brüggemann et al. 2014). In general, the Nordic media markets are healthy, scoring high on trust and have low media polarization (Schröder, Blach-Ørsten, and Kæmbsgaard Eberholst 2020). Nordic journalists in both private and public media prefer the role of detached watchdog over acting for societal change or maximum reach, and they have traditionally felt shielded from political and economic pressures (Ahva et al. 2017).

### *Method*

We apply a method referred to as "watching and discussing news" (Groot Kormelink 2020, 870). The aim of this method is to have respondents reflect on a specific past experience to obtain a more detailed, coherent, and reflective perspective on their news use (Groot Kormelink 2020, 870). The optimal approach would have been to question all respondents during or in the hours immediately after the press conference on March 11th 2020 but it was not an option. Instead, we chose to expose respondents to video recordings from the press conference and while watching they were encouraged to take notes on impressions and bring these to the interview.



The stimulus material consisted of a 13-minute video recording of two parts of the press conference from the Prime Minister's Office aired on the Danish public service television channel DR1 on March 11th 2020 where the Prime Minister (PM), Mette Frederiksen, declared the first national corona-lockdown. The first part was a recording of the entire speech from the PM, explaining why a lockdown was necessary, and how it was to be implemented. The second recording was a compilation of all questions posed by the journalists attending the press conference (see Appendix 4 for an overview of the questions). The short speeches given by authorities and the answers to questions from journalists were not part of the stimulus material. The omission of the responses from the PM and officials comes with methodological consequences and somewhat limits the results of this study. However, the entire press conference had a duration of approximately 60 minutes which we considered too demanding for participants to watch. Since the press conference had very high media coverage, meaning that many Danes watched, paid attention to, and remembered it clearly, the main purpose of the stimulus material was to spark respondent memory.

### ***Sampling***

A convenience sample of 21 Danes (see appendix 1 for demographics) were recruited to participate in the study based on two broad inclusion criteria: They had participated in a representative survey on the Danes' perception of journalism during the corona crisis, and they had chosen to answer open-ended questions in this survey.<sup>1</sup> We decided to take the latter as a sign of engagement in the topic and expected these respondents to be more inclined to participate in follow-up interviews. The recruitment was conducted by DMA Research,<sup>2</sup> who created a first pool of respondents contacted them via email or subsequently by text message if they did not respond within four days; those who agreed to take part in the study were interviewed. In the second phase of recruitment, the respondents who either declined to participate or did not respond were replaced by another pool of respondents who were contacted in the same way. This iterative approach led to the recruitment of 21 respondents—a number that matches the sample size recommendations of Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006). At this point, data saturation (Fusch and Ness 2015) was reached, and new data was redundant considering the data already collected.

### ***Data Collection***

The semi-structured interviews were conducted via the video conferencing platform Zoom in June 2020 and were conducted by one of the authors of this article (19) and a student assistant (2). Since the research involves human subjects, it obtained formal, prospective approval from the SDU ethics committee. The interviewing techniques were adapted to fit a video conferencing platform as proposed by Heiselberg and Stępińska (2022), and they had an average length of 30 min. The interview guide was based on the research question and informed by a comprehensive review of the literature. The interview guide was divided into two sections as follows: (1) Impression of the PM's speech (this data is not used in this paper). (2) Impressions of questions posed by the journalists present at the press conference (see appendix 2). All interviews were conducted in



Danish, audio visually recorded and transcribed non-verbatim, i.e., the fundamental meaning of statements were transcribed while words and sounds that did not contribute to this meaning were removed. As part of the recruitment, an informed consent was accepted by email. Participant validation was done during the interview, as the interviewers made summaries of their understanding of the points conveyed by a respondent. In this manner the respondent was given a possibility to confirm or correct the interpretations made by the interviewer.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis consisted of five phases (Boyatzis 1998). In the first phase, the researchers constructed an initial coding list based on the research questions, literature, and familiarization with the data set. In this phase, the researchers worked from the assumption that the respondents' perception of journalistic questions could be categorized using four overarching codes, i.e., proper, improper, appropriate, and inappropriate questions. In the second phase, tentative categorization and condensation of the data set was undertaken. In this phase, the aim was to identify the various types of journalistic questions that the respondents deemed, respectively, (im)proper and/or (in)appropriate. To enhance the reliability of the study, two coders (the authors) conducted the coding. In this process the initial codes were matched with data extracts to demonstrate the code. In the third phase, the researchers compared the code labels applied in the previous coding phase. By reviewing, comparing, combining, and refining the independent coding, a preliminary joint coding book was developed and agreed upon. Hereafter, the independent coders coded six interviews as a final round of validation, and several adjustments of the code book were made before no additional codes emerged. In addition, some codes were grouped together into categories or divided in hierarchies. The final code list had eight codes which were hierarchically organized in overarching codes (3) and subcodes (5) (see appendix 3). The overarching codes referred to the respondents' perception of the relative (im)propriety and/or (in)appropriateness of journalistic questions, while the subcodes referred to different types of journalistic questions. The overarching codes were reduced from four to three as the categories of appropriate and inappropriate questions were merged. The labels for the subcodes were based on the respondents' emic descriptions (Jensen 2012, 267) of the questions posed at the press conference. In the fourth phase, all 21 interviews were coded in a spreadsheet. It was ensured that all data extracts were coded, and then ordered within each code. The individual extracts of data appear in as many different codes as they fit into. The final fifth phase was a pattern-seeking process, conducted by applying thematic analysis and visual data display.

### **Analysis**

#### ***The Rhetorical Situation of the Press Conference***

The press conference on March 11th 2020 took place in a complex rhetorical situation. The event represented a tentative culmination of the corona crisis in Denmark, after weeks of increasingly intensified media coverage of the corona virus in Danish media, especially since the first infected Dane was reported on February 27th 2020. Broadcast live and live streamed on commercial and public service television stations and news outlets, a

record high number of Danes (1.9 million, cf. Hansen and Scheutz 2021, 20) tuned in as the PM, Mette Frederiksen, declared that “What I am going to say here tonight will have huge consequences for all Danes” and minutes later announced the first national lockdown (Frederiksen 2020). Flanked by the Minister of Health and representatives of public agencies and authorities, the PM first made an extended statement, then passed the word to the other official speakers, and finally took questions from the journalists present who represented all major news outlets in Denmark, including the two national public service television stations DR and TV2 and several national newspapers.

In this early phase of the corona crisis the overall *controlling exigence* (Bitzer 1968, 6–7) was—from the perspective of the observing public—a need to know how to (re)act in the situation. As pointed out by Hauser in his discussion of health crises as rhetorical situations, this included a need for information about the available facts and appropriate behavior, but also a need for reassurance (Hauser 2002, 44).

Several rhetorical constraints were at play in the situation, i.e., circumstances that either negatively or positively “constrain[ed] decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (Bitzer 1968, 8). The negative constraints included—but were certainly not limited to—the lack of certain knowledge about the corona virus at this point in time and the potential negative consequences of the lockdown, economic as well as human. A positive constraint was the relatively high level of trust in Denmark, a welfare state with a generally well-educated and well-off population who trust societal institutions such as the political system and the press (Schrøder, Blach-Ørsten, and Kæmsgaard Eberholst 2020, 32–33). Considering the focus of our study, a crucial constraint was also the generic format of the press conference (Scacco and Wiemer 2019) which allowed for subsequent questions from journalists.

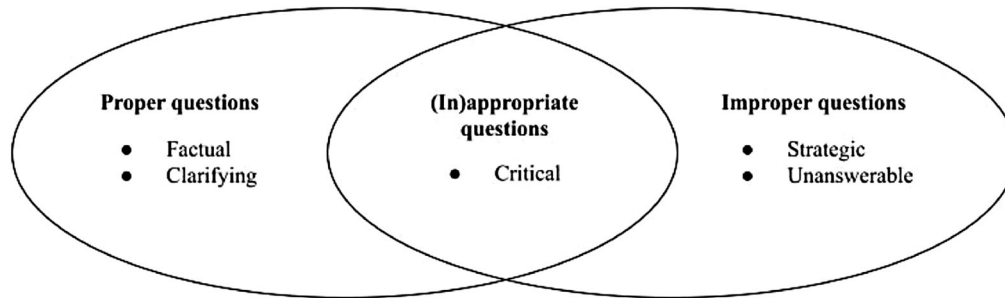
### ***Proper, Improper and (in)Appropriate Questions***

In Figure 1, the key points from the data analysis are illustrated in a visual display which portrays the relational categorization of (in)decorous journalistic questions in an accessible and compact form. In the analysis that follows, we give a characterization of each category before we offer a more detailed analysis of the respondents’ perceptions of (in)appropriate questions, specifically.

#### ***Proper Questions***

The first category includes questions that the respondents perceive as decorous in the sense that the questions are *proper* (Hariman 1992, 164), i.e., according to the respondents the questions adhere to general norms of good journalistic practice. There is widespread consensus among respondents as to which questions were deemed proper. The data analysis shows that proper questions include *factual* and *clarifying* questions.

Generally, the respondents find that the main function of journalistic inquiry in the emergence phase of a health crisis is to serve the immediate needs of citizens. In the respondents’ view both factual and clarifying questions function as citizen-oriented questions where journalists ask questions on behalf of the audience, e.g., questions that the respondents would have liked to ask the PM and/or the authorities themselves. This way factual and clarifying questions can reflect and acknowledge the worries and feelings of uncertainty that many citizens feel at this specific time:



**Figure 1.** News audience respondents' perceptions of (in)decorous questions from journalists in the emergence phase of a health crisis.

*They address infection pressure [...] and what to do, and what is our situation now and what we must do tomorrow, if you can board a plane, eat out, use public transportation. What can and must not be done. I think this type of question fits very well into many people's everyday lives. (M, 38)*

When the respondents refer to a factual question, they mean a question which requires a fact-based answer. There is typically only one correct answer which can be verified by facts and/or experts. The respondents argue that factual questions contribute to rational and calm crisis communication which is perceived as essential. Furthermore, respondents perceive factual questions to be a key tool in the public authorities' efforts to make the public understand the important matters being communicated and, at the same time, provide a feeling of security and safety.

Respondents react positively to what we inspired by their answers term clarifying questions. Based on the respondents' descriptions, clarifying questions aim to eliminate ambiguity, confusion, or misunderstanding. The respondents notice and welcome both why- and how-question formats. According to the respondents, clarifying questions are particularly relevant because this type of questions sheds light on the practical and implemental aspect of how a new everyday life will proceed without necessarily challenging the initiatives taken by the politicians and public authorities.

Respondents find it relevant for journalists to address both the here and now situation, on the one hand, and the near future, on the other, but they do not use different terms for the two types of questions. Research on journalistic questions, however, does distinguish between the two. Clayman and Romaniuk (2011) use the term *clarifying of promises* to define questions that focus on which future actions and measures politicians and authorities will take. An example of a clarifying of promises question from the stimulus material is: "Will the state pay the salaries of private employees during repatriation?" Furthermore, Ekström et al. (2016, 984) uses the term *principal assessment questions* to define questions which ask the authorities or politicians about their assessment or interpretation of a situation in which they are involved. The principal assessment questions are typically oriented toward the here-and-now situation. An example of a principal assessment question from the stimulus material is: "Do you have an overview of what this means in concrete terms for the healthcare system". In short, these question forms are available in the stimulus material, but the respondents do not distinguish between the two in their assessments of proper questions.

### **Improper Questions**

The second category includes questions that the respondents perceive as *indecorous* in the sense that the questions are *improper* (Hariman 1992, 164), i.e., according to the respondents the questions violate general norms of good journalistic practice. As was the case in the category of proper questions, there is also broad consensus about which questions are considered improper. The data analysis shows that improper questions include *strategic* questions (including self-serving and sensationalist questions) and *unanswerable* questions.

Based on the respondents' descriptions, a strategic question is a question which is influenced by the journalist's, the editor's or the media's strategic agenda. By this the respondents seem to mean that a strategic question serves a purpose of achieving a

long-term or overall aim and/or interest of the journalists and their employer (the editor and/or media the journalist works for):

*Some of the journalists ask questions to have a story they can sell ... I do not like that. No, they must be journalistically objective and not prioritize the [strategic] line of their media ... (M, 69)*

*They [the journalists] must take a breath and think of the people not themselves. Just put the population first, and then consider the editor afterwards. (F, 26)*

According to the respondents, sensationalist questions also fit into the category of strategic questions because some journalists and media have a strategy of delivering sensational journalism.

Clayman (2002) argues that journalists often present themselves as servants of the public, and, assuredly, the respondents in our study expected journalists to act on their behalf. In this case, when journalists act in a self-serving strategic manner, the respondent's expectations and the journalists' actual behavior collide in a way that alienates the audience. Therefore, we categorize strategic questions (including sensationalist questions) as improper.

Respondents also react to what we term unanswerable questions. Based on the respondents' descriptions, an unanswerable question is a question which in the view of the respondents cannot be answered in the situation because of a lack of factual knowledge:

*What now? What will happen? How long does this last? But they do not know [...] One journalist asks Brostrøm [the Director General of the Danish Health Authority] whether he expects us to enter the red zone, or whether we turn to the green zone. That, I think, is a little unfair to ask, because how on earth should he know? (F, 46)*

In this example, the respondent reacts negatively to a question that cannot be answered with certainty at the time of utterance and, thus, incites a key public official to speculate on a possible future reality (Blom et al. 2021, 1147). While such unanswerable questions and the answers they elicit may be useful in theory (Blom et al. 2021, 1156), in our data the respondents unanimously find them both unnecessary and unfair and, therefore, we classify this category of questions as improper. In general, the respondents find this type of questions irrelevant and, moreover, that the very act of posing them reveals a lack of intelligence or common sense:

*The first one asked: When does this reach its max? But how on earth should they be able to answer this question right now? No one knows ... It was a stupid question (F, 21)*

### **(In)Appropriate Questions**

The third category includes questions that the respondents perceive as neither clearly proper nor improper. According to the respondents, these questions adhere to general norms of good journalistic practice, i.e., seemingly they are proper; however, depending on how they are formulated, the questions may nonetheless violate the respondents' perception of norms of journalistic conduct in the specific situation, i.e., they may be *(in)appropriate* (Hariman 1992, 164). For example, while some respondents explicitly acknowledge journalists' obligation to critically challenge politicians and other public officials *in principle*, they nonetheless perceive this practice as problematic *in the*

*specific situation*. Respondents explicitly refer to *critical* questions as potentially (in)appropriate in the situation.

In journalism research, critical journalistic inquiry has been studied in terms of its aggressiveness. Clayman et al. (2007, 29) divide aggressive questions into five forms: initiative, directness, assertiveness, adversarialness, and accountability. In our interview data, respondents are primarily occupied with the (in)appropriateness of what Clayman et al. (2007) term adversarialness and accountability. Adversarialness is the extent to which questions pursue an agenda in opposition to the politicians and/or authorities (Clayman et al. 2007, 31). An example of an adversarial question from the stimulus material is: “You lower the injunction to 100 people, but then 99 people standing together in one place also poses a risk of infection, right? Why isn’t the injunction significantly lower?”. An accountability question is the extent to which the question explicitly asks a politician or public official to justify a policy or action (Clayman et al. 2007, 32). In addition, Ekström et al. define accountability questions as questions which assume that the interviewee has responsibilities for certain policies, actions, or non-actions, and asks for justification of policies, actions, or non-actions, typically with an orientation toward the past (2016, 984). An example of an accountability question in the stimulus material is: “We have learnt that Denmark is one of the countries where the infection is spreading very fast now [...] are you acting too late?”. Respondents do not explicitly distinguish between adversarial and accountability questions but use the general term “critical” to refer to both types of questions.

When the respondents are asked to reflect on the journalists’ use of critical questions, they disagree with each other and sometimes also with themselves. To some respondents, critical and, specifically, adversarial questions are appropriate. As they see it, the most important task of journalists is to bring out the truth no matter the circumstances. These respondents, in other words, refer to a general norm of propriety, i.e., that journalists should act as truth-seeking adversaries to powerholders. In the quote below a respondent is addressing the following question: “You lower the injunction to 100 people, but then 99 people standing together in one place also poses a risk of infection, right? Why isn’t the injunction significantly lower?”:

*I think it’s nice that he asks, because I also wonder why it’s 100. He is right. 99 people can also infect each other ... Journalists must always ask critical questions. We must always reflect on what is going on. (F, 46)*

Other respondents believe that adversarial questions are inappropriate:

*Last week it [the injunction] was 50, and today it is 500. I remember feeling it [adversarial question] was a bit off, as it allows people to doubt what is being said by authorities rather than agreeing on what we are being asked to do ... I fear people stop following the injunction as they think the authorities cannot figure it out themselves. (F, 51)*

In the quote, the respondent indicates that she thinks a specific norm of appropriateness is at play in the situation, i.e., that, for the time being, journalists should support the authorities in mobilizing citizens to act in a certain way and, thus, refrain from acting as adversaries.

This mixed respondent reaction is also evident regarding accountability questions. In the quotes below, respondents react to the question: “We have learnt that Denmark is

one of the countries where the infection is spreading very fast now [...] are you acting too late?":

*In the beginning, I thought that it was okay to pose questions on why the pandemic was handled the way it was ... because it is a new situation for everyone. (M, 37)*

*I thought at first that they [journalists] should take a step back and say: 'Now we are just helping so we can be at the forefront of this instead of drilling into what they should have done earlier'. I am convinced that it would have been the same question, if they had held the same press conference two weeks earlier ... I think that when it is the first press conference, it should be a collaboration between the government and the journalists to inform the Danes. Then they [journalists] can drill later ... it has to do with fairness. (F, 26)*

As expected, the respondents find that the relative (in)appropriateness of critical questions is dependent on timing. A theme which occurs in the data is that respondents have mixed reactions when critical questions are asked during the emergence phase of a health crisis, but more uniform and positive reactions toward critical questions at a later stage in the crisis:

*I think it was a difficult balancing act. At first ... I think the critical questions were a bit rough in that situation. When you get further in ... then I can well understand that you ask some critical questions. It's mostly about situational awareness and knowing if it benefits the rest of us, if they ask critical questions about their policy, or whether they have to wait a week. (F, 23)*

Another theme in the data is a negative reaction to critical questions that come across as overly hostile. Therefore, some respondents find critical questions combined with insisting follow-up questions to be closer to the improper category:

*There must be room for critical questions, but sometimes you want them to move on because the journalists do not get an answer. Mette Frederiksen cannot openly tell every detail about why the government does as it does and who has advised, etc. (M, 66)*

The (in)appropriate nature of critical questions due to propriety and appropriateness not being aligned in the emergence phases of a health crisis, makes it necessary for journalists to carefully consider how a critical question can be posed without offending the audience. Respondents underline that it is important for critical questions to not come across as hostile and that insisting follow-up questions related to critical questions can seem inappropriate.

However, as the examples above illustrate, there is disagreement among the respondents on whether critical questions are appropriate in the emergence phase of a health crisis or not. Not only do the respondents disagree with each other on the subject; some of the respondents are also in conflict with themselves on the matter. As indicated by formulations such as "I think it was a difficult balancing act" (F, 23) and "There must be room for critical questions, but ..." (M, 66), the respondents do not provide clear-cut answers to the question of appropriateness in the situation.

### **Discussion: A News Audience Perspective on (In)Decoruous Journalistic Roles**

The questions that the respondents find decoruous in the situation, i.e., factual and clarifying questions, correspond to the journalistic role of *disseminator* (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 153). In the emergence phase of a health crisis, the respondents seemingly first and foremost



want journalists to “report things ‘as they are’ (...) [and act] as detached bystanders, adhering to *strict neutrality*” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 153, our emphasis). According to the respondents, journalists fulfill an important role when they report the facts of the situation and lay out the reasons for and intended implications of the initiatives taken by politicians and public authorities. By doing so, journalists help the public understand the nature and extent of the crisis in a rational manner and, moreover, incite the public to stay calm.

Conversely, the questions that the respondents find indecorous, i.e., strategic and unanswerable questions, correspond to journalistic roles that in one way or the other transgress the norm of “strict neutrality” and the position of “detached bystander”. In certain respects, strategic questions correspond to the role of *adversary* where “journalists deliberately posture themselves as [a] countervailing force to political authority” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 155). However, whereas the ideal role of adversary entails that journalists serve the interests of “the people” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 155), the respondents’ disapproval of strategic questions seems to be motivated by their perception that in the situation these questions rather serve the interests of the journalists themselves, their editors, and/or the media they work for. Unanswerable questions transgress the norm of neutrality in another sense. As pointed out by Blom et al. (2021, 1146), by posing such questions journalists enact aspects of the role of *interpreter* (Weaver et al. 2007, 141) or *analyst* (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 154). In this role, journalists place “a strong emphasis on subjectivity (...) by tracing causes and predicting consequences” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 154). According to the respondents, this role is indecorous in the emergence phase of a health crisis, seemingly because it is at odds with the role of disseminator. By posing questions that cannot be answered with certainty at the time of utterance and, as a result, inciting politicians and public officials to speculate, journalists not only stray from the facts, but also take up valuable time that, in the respondents’ view, would be better used disseminating the best currently available factual information to the public.

The questions that the respondents find neither clearly decorous nor clearly indecorous in the situation, i.e., critical questions, in various respects correspond to the journalistic roles of *watchdog* and *adversary*, respectively (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 154-155). These two roles are closely connected and somewhat similar (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 152). The difference between the two roles has to do with journalists’ level of subjective involvement in the archetypal conflict between journalists and representatives of power. Compared to the role of watchdog, in the role of adversary journalists play a more active role as subjective participants in the conflict (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 155). Seemingly, it is this subjective involvement that the respondents in our study react to. On the one hand, the respondents generally acknowledge the importance of journalists’ role of watchdog; on the other hand, some respondents find the more aggressive role of adversary as potentially untimely in the specific situation. Especially if the role of adversary conflicts with the role of neutral disseminator, caution is advised. Of the two roles, the respondents generally find the role of disseminator to be the most important in the situation and, thus, find that journalists, if need be, should prioritize a supportive rather than an adversarial stance toward the political and governmental authorities.

## Conclusion

This article has explored news audiences' perception of (in)decorous journalistic questioning practice and, in turn, journalistic role performance in the emergence phase of a public health crisis. Findings suggest that respondents find factual and clarifying questions proper in this phase and, by contrast, strategic and unanswerable questions improper. In between the proper and improper questions is a group of potentially (in)appropriate questions which journalists need to carefully consider. In this category are critical questions, including both adversarial and accountability questions. The results show that these types of questions are particularly troublesome in the emergence phase of a health crisis because some respondents find them appropriate while others find them inappropriate at this point of time. Because the latter believe there is an urgent need for establishing public trust in the government and public authorities, they find critical questions to be unfair, rule breaking, and unnecessarily hostile and aggressive in the situation.

In line with previous research, we found that while critical questions are normally perceived as proper by respondents, in the emergence phase of a health crisis they can seem inappropriate to some respondents. However, our analysis also nuances previous research. Our respondents disagreed across responses about the relative appropriateness of critical questions and, furthermore, argued for and against this type of questions in their individual responses. This indicates that in the context of a democratic, corporatist media system such as the Danish (Hallin and Mancini 2004) respondents are reluctant to challenge journalists' ideal role as democracy's watchdog even under extreme circumstances. Nonetheless, to sustain the relationship between journalists and their audiences during the emergence phase of a health crisis, it is necessary for journalists to continuously consider how critical questions can be posed without offending audience members with different sensibilities, preferences, and norms. This is, to be sure, a very difficult balance to strike, but a precondition for succeeding in doing so is to be aware that such a balancing act is necessary. This study has offered a conceptual framework for raising such awareness.

As for the limitations of the study, only questions from journalists were included in the stimulus material, not answers from the PM, ministers, and public officials. An answer can doubtlessly change one's view of the question, and therefore in future studies answers should ideally also be part of the stimulus material. Furthermore, the respondents are a sample of especially engaged citizens who are willing to answer open-ended questions in a survey and, as a result, who may have reflected more on the issue studied than average; thus, future research should include less engaged news audiences. In addition, while we do think that the study's overall theoretical framework is applicable in other contexts, the study is a single case study focusing on a Danish press conference, and therefore empirical generalization should be made with care. To strengthen generalization, future research should therefore be conducted cross county and with larger samples.

## Notes

1. This study was a representative survey with 1041 respondents collected via DMA Research's online panel. The data was collected between 4 and 7 April 2020.
2. DMA Research re-contacted the respondents in the quantitative study and asked if they were interested in participating in a follow-up qualitative interview study, and subsequently, a list

of interested respondents were delivered to the research team who selected and contacted potential study respondents.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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