

# EPISTEMIC PLURALITIES:

critique of the notion of journalists  
as an interpretative community



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**ABSTRACT** – This paper focuses on a critical reading of the concept of journalism as a field constituted by a single interpretive community, as proposed by Barbie Zelizer and Nelson Traquina. By pondering the implications of using Stanley Fish's original notion of interpretive communities in Journalism Studies, the article revisits the terms of his proposition and then offers clues for identifying a multitude of interpretive communities in journalism. Then, we focus on the epistemic singularities of literary journalism and its own diversity of interpretive communities. We conclude that the notion of diversity in interpretive communities of journalists is useful for understanding journalism practices that are divergent or even disruptive in relation to hegemonic notions of journalism that are assumed to be natural under the perspective of objectivity.

**Keywords:** Theory of Journalism. Interpretive communities. Objectivity. Newsworthiness. Journalistic treatment.

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## PLURALIDADES EPISTÊMICAS: uma crítica à noção dos jornalistas como comunidade interpretativa

**RESUMO** – O artigo se dedica a uma leitura crítica do tratamento do jornalismo enquanto prática constituída por uma comunidade interpretativa única, conforme defendido por Barbie Zelizer e Nelson Traquina. A partir de uma indagação sobre as implicações do uso da concepção original de Stanley Fish em torno da noção de comunidades interpretativas em pesquisas no campo do jornalismo, o trabalho revisita os termos de sua proposição para em seguida identificar pistas para a distinção de múltiplas comunidades interpretativas no jornalismo, detendo-se sobre as distinções epistêmicas do jornalismo literário e sua própria diversidade de comunidades interpretativas. Conclui-se que a noção plural de comunidades interpretativas de jornalistas é útil na compreensão de práticas jornalísticas que apresentam divergências ou rupturas em relação a noções hegemônicas de jornalismo naturalizadas pela máscara da objetividade.

**Palavras-chave:** Teoria do Jornalismo. Comunidades interpretativas. Objetividade. Noticiabilidade. Abordagem jornalística.

## PLURALIDADES EPISTÊMICAS: una crítica a la noción de periodistas como comunidad interpretativa

**RESUMEN** – El artículo está dedicado a una lectura crítica del tratamiento del periodismo como una práctica constituída por una comunidad interpretativa única, tal como lo defienden Barbie Zelizer y Nelson Traquina. A partir de una investigación sobre las implicaciones de utilizar la concepción original de Stanley Fish sobre las comunidades interpretativas en la investigación en el campo del periodismo, el artículo revisa los términos de su propuesta para luego identificar pistas para distinguir múltiples comunidades interpretativas en el periodismo, centrándose en las distinciones epistémicas del periodismo literario y su propia diversidad de comunidades interpretativas. Se concluye que la noción plural de comunidades interpretativas de periodistas es útil para comprender prácticas periodísticas que presentan divergencias o rupturas en relación a las nociones hegemônicas del periodismo naturalizadas por la máscara de la objetividad.

**Palabras clave:** Teoría del Periodismo. Comunidades interpretativas. Objetividad. Noticiabilidad. Enfoque periodístico.

### 1 Is there a single journalistic tribe?

Discussions surrounding the nature of journalism and its ways of interpreting and representing the phenomena of what we conventionally call reality are not only a recurrent topic, but one of the central concerns of journalism studies as a research field. It is from these discussions that we establish parameters for comparative analyses and reference standards for what may be effectively considered correct, desirable, or positive, or, when it fails to meet these standards, what is considered incorrect, deviant, aberrant, poorly executed, dishonest, or, in the worst-case scenario, not journalistic.

In an economically titled article, “*Journalists as interpretive communities*”, Barbie Zelizer (1993) presented one of the key contributions to understanding journalistic activity. In opposition to authors who advocated a collective reading of journalists as subjects defined primarily by a profession that presupposes a set of procedures and practices, Zelizer proposed that the common ground among journalists lies at a more essential and deeper level: the sharing of interpretive notions about events. Zelizer anchors her argument in a discussion of how American journalists represented McCarthyism and the Watergate scandal, identifying a consensual unity in this representation. Even when the passage of time revealed the abandonment of an earlier reading and the adoption of a new stance, this new social construction of reality also proved to be shared by the journalistic collective.

Zelizer’s contribution had a considerable impact on journalism studies. A search conducted using the Publish or Perish software on December 20, 2024, identified that the article had been cited 1.476 times by other studies. This notion that journalists are part of a single interpretive community became better known in the Brazilian field of journalism studies through the second volume of *Teorias do Jornalismo* [Journalism Theories] by Nelson Traquina. Entries correspond to different editions of the book total 1.000 citations, according to the same application on the same date. Traquina takes Zelizer’s study as a point of departure and expands its implications through a dialogue with several other authors engaged in constructing a theory of journalism. He further reframes the concept through another expression: a transnational “journalistic tribe” united by consensus around professional protocols and criteria for selecting facts and constructing their verbal representation – news values – while also taking into account the influence of journalistic organizations in this equation.

Traquina’s argument is reinforced by a comparative analysis of AIDS coverage in five newspapers from different countries: The New York Times (USA), Folha de S.Paulo (Brazil), El País (Spain), Correio da Manhã (Portugal), and Diário de Notícias (Portugal). This analysis identifies similar interpretive procedures across all five outlets, such as the predominance of official sources and the concentration of coverage on events in three countries (Germany, the United States, and France). Traquina also examines sociological studies of the American journalistic community and comparative studies of news coverage across different countries that lead to the same conclusion.

These two contributions thus point toward a unifying and universalizing understanding of journalists – and, by extension, of journalism as a transnational phenomenon – guided by a single set of rules for interpreting and representing reality. This apparently pacifying solution, however, brings with it a set of assumptions that prove problematic insofar as they seem to presume repulsion toward or estrangement from individuals, outlets, and organizations that display varying degrees of violation of or rupture with these rules. They also tend to naturalize ideological categorizations and convert them into unquestionable common sense, as argued by Marcia Veiga da Silva and Fabiana Moraes (2021) in their critique of an academic reaction of conformism toward an analysis of the media invisibility of the civil war between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups in Rwanda during the 1990s; an example mentioned within the scope of a broader study by the same authors. Such procedures are often justified through reference to supposedly “objective” news values. Both the mask of universalism and that of objectivism, however, reveal cracks, and this article will address some of them.

If the primary seed of this problem in journalism research is Zelizer’s (1993) article, the author also reaps the harvest of earlier sowings. Her study cites nearly a dozen sources that contributed to her definition of interpretive community, but one has exerted a singular influence: Stanley Fish’s book *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), which, according to Publish or Perish on December 20, 2024, has been cited 13.878 times. Zelizer’s article incorporates very little from the book, limiting itself to noting that “For Fish (1980, p. 171) in literary studies, interpretive communities produce texts and ‘determine the shape of what is read’” (Zelizer, 1993, p. 223, our translation), a move that conceals and eliminates most of the implications of the concept from a Fishian perspective. Latour (2000) points out that this is a routine procedure in scientific dynamics, which he calls translation – the modifications, simplifications, and conformations to which ideas and statements are subjected when they become citations. Fish’s book, however, even if it was not the first to use the expression, endowed it with innovative implications and acted as a catalyst for an international boom around the concept of interpretive communities, mobilizing various fields of knowledge toward epistemological tensions.

I therefore begin to inquire into the implications of using Stanley Fish’s conception of interpretive communities in journalism

research, based on two points. The first is the fact that Fish's arguments are essentially centered on the notion of objectivity – a particularly sensitive point of tension in journalism studies (Tuchman, 2016; Veiga da Silva & Moraes, 2021; Henriques, 2018, 2019; Carvalho & Belda, 2017). It may be important to clarify that the notion of objectivity referred to here is that which opposes subjectivity – that is, the possibility of reporting on or analyzing the materiality of an object or phenomenon itself, rather than interpretations of the phenomenon – and not objectivity as a synonym for reporting rigor, investigation, or fact-checking, as it is sometimes used in Brazilian journalistic jargon (Moraes, 2022) and which constitutes the basis of any journalistic text.

The second point concerns Fish's effort to identify the presence of multiple interpretive communities and a plurality of epistemic stances within a single discipline or profession – that of the American literary criticism – running counter to the universalizing efforts of Zelizer and Traquina.

Other works, such as Marcos Paulo Silva's (2017) analysis of interpretive elements in the critical work of Franco Moretti – understood as a sociological perspective on literary forms – point to the validity and effective contribution of concepts and analytical systems from literary studies to the understanding of journalistic phenomena. These are two domains that have historically established relationships of exchange and mutual fertilization, when not outright hybridization (Silva, 2017; Underwood, 2013; Eberwein, 2013; Sims, 2007; Cosson, 2007).

Accordingly, this article is devoted to a critical reading of the treatment of journalism as a practice constituted by a single interpretive community, starting with a review of the terms of its original proposition as formulated in *Is There a Text in This Class?* by Stanley Fish (1980).

In a subsequent section, I propose identifying some clues for distinguishing the presence of multiple interpretive communities within journalism, followed by a more detailed examination of the epistemic distinctions of the phenomenon known as literary journalism, among other denominations, pointing to its own internal diversity of interpretive communities. Finally, I offer some considerations regarding the investigative trajectory of this article and indicate possible avenues for further developing the tensions raised.

## 2 Getting back to the Fishian notion of interpretive communities

As mentioned earlier, the idea of the interpretive community emerges within the field of literary theory, stemming from Stanley Fish's questioning of the dynamics of readers' interpretive autonomy in the reading and criticism of literary texts, as well as of the limits of authorial authority in establishing the meanings of works – questions that, as Fish himself (1980) notes, have precursors in authors such as William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley.

In *Is There a Text in This Class? — The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, a collection of essays largely published in journals throughout the 1970s, Stanley Fish advances the discussion from the “death of the author” toward the “death of the text”. The very notion of the interpretive community emerges relatively late in the volume – in the final four essays (out of sixteen), precisely those not previously published – as Fish's response to increasingly hostile reactions to the positions he adopts.

At the core of his argument, as already anticipated, Fish focuses on the possibility, or even the viability, of interpreting a literary text objectively, to the point of asserting that, in a certain sense, the text itself does not exist, or exists only as an unattainable ideal. In its place, the text that one actually reads would be produced in the very act of reading:

What I am suggesting is that there is no direct relationship between the meaning of a sentence (paragraph, novel, poem) and what its words mean. Or, to put the matter less provocatively, the information an utterance gives, its message, is a constituent of, but certainly not to be identified with, its meaning. It is the experience of an utterance – all of it and not anything that could be said about it, including anything I could say – that is its meaning. (Fish, 1980, p. 32).

The notion of the reader's active participation (of their repertoire and expectations) in the construction of the text, or at least of the text that is effectively experienced in the act of reading, had already been proposed in the 1960s by Wolfgang Iser (1996) and later taken up by authors such as Umberto Eco (2020). Fish, however, pushes the issue to a radical point by refusing to establish limits between the materiality of the text and its interpretations, since, in his terms, there would be no form of text detached from interpretation. No matter how “unbiased” a reading might intend to

be, it would still carry a set of expectations that precede the act of reading: knowledge or lack thereof about the author, the content and language of the text; prior reading repertoire and personal tastes; individual reading strategies and behaviors; reactions to words and sentences; and the materiality of the text itself, all of which have consequences for reading, even if they are often underestimated and naturalized. As Fish notes, “one does not doubt in a vacuum but from a perspective, and that perspective is itself immune to doubt until it has been replaced by another which then will be similarly immune” (p. 360). The notion of the periodic revision of assumptions taken as foundational certainties is precisely what Thomas S. Kuhn (2006) had termed a paradigm in the previous decade, pointing to crisis and the proposal of new paradigms as a cycle inherent to the nature of science.

In the twelve essays that make up the first part of *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Fish presents his defense of readers’ autonomy in relation to the text – focused on the individuality of subjects and their subjectivities. However, as previously mentioned, in the face of harsh and impassioned detractors, the author advances a new argument in support of his critique of the viability of objective reading and then proposes the use of the concept of interpretive communities, that was already introduced in the chapter “*Interpreting the Variorum*”, originally published in 1976 in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, but articulated more densely and centrally in the four texts written specifically for inclusion in the book.

Under these new terms, it is not the autonomous individual who independently creates the conditions for reading and interpreting a text, but rather their belonging to a given social group that shares interpretive behaviors: language, ideas, values, assumptions, conventions, and reading strategies. Fish refers to each of these social groups as an interpretive community, and we must consider the possibility that individuals may interact with and share ideas from more than one interpretive community simultaneously. In this sense, textual interpretation ceases to be perceived as a merely individual act and becomes collective – or even institutional, insofar as it inevitably relates dialogically, even in the form of reaction or refutation, to meanings that circulate and are reinforced by a wide range of social institutions.

The validation of interpretations is another highly relevant aspect of Fish’s theory and, once again, is decided based on

consensus within an interpretive community, according to its methods and interpretive keys, “a shared basis of agreement” (Fish, 1980, p. 317). This can be illustrated by imagining how the fate of an academic article submitted to a conference or journal, or of a research project submitted for evaluation by funding agencies or institutional committees, depends not only on its intrinsic virtues of scientific rigor (if we can still affirm their existence in an essentialist sense) but also on the profile of the reviewers who will examine the material, their adherence to or rejection of the theories and methods presented, their perception of the pertinence of the arguments and the relevance of the topic, their affiliation with one or another research tradition, and so forth. In this way, Fish avoids accusations of absolute relativism and instead argues that interpretations are constructed and validated through collective conventions – which vary significantly across different interpretive communities – such that a given reading or set of methods deemed laughable or fragile by one community may be regarded as “serious and orthodox” (p. 349) by another.

Fish turns his attention to the field of literary criticism and, as anticipated, identifies there not a single interpretive community, but a vast plurality of them – each with its own set of values, assumptions, and methodological rules – and points to the impossibility of the existence of critical interpretations that are more correct, superior, or even more objective in relation to the text than others. Although the practice of accusing one interpretive school or another of distancing itself from the text and obscuring it through the importation of external ideas and assumptions is quite common (a critique articulated, for example, by Susan Sontag (2020) in “Against Interpretation”), Fish points to the impossibility of approaching a text without such external tools: “Strictly speaking, getting ‘back-to-the-text’ is not a move one can perform, because the text one gets back to will be the text demanded by some other interpretation and that interpretation will be presiding over its production” (p. 354). What marks the distinction among interpretive communities is that the assumptions of each are not perceived as cultural or ideological constructs or readings, but are naturalized as truths, and thus the interpretations validated within them are internally perceived as objective:

To put it another way, the claims of objectivity and subjectivity can no longer be debated because the authorizing agency, the center of interpretive authority, is at once both and neither. An interpretive community is not objective because as a bundle of interests, of particular purposes and goals, its perspective is interested rather than neutral; but by the very same reasoning, the meanings and texts produced by an interpretive community are not subjective because they do not proceed from an isolated individual but from a public and conventional point of view. (Fish, 1980, p. 14).

Thus, Fish calls into question the supposed binarity of objectivity and subjectivity and introduces a third element that both combines them and simultaneously exists as something distinct, apart, pointing to their inseparability. If we extend this line of thinking to journalism as practice, one implication would be the inadequacy of attempts to establish hierarchies among readings and representations of reality, as well as of texts, arising from different journalistic approaches, since the set of rules and values of one are disparate and do not apply directly to the other, and frequently rely on models proposed and validated by different actors and institutions.

In her book *A pauta é uma arma de combate* [The News Agenda is a Weapon for Combat], Fabiana Moraes (2022), drawing on González Rey, also works with the notion of collective subjectivity or intersubjectivity as a historical and cultural construction, even though each individual contributes to it. She proposes observing meanings and subjective configurations as part of a complex cultural fabric, an articulated system of diverse spheres and subjective productions marked by tensions, disputes and ideologies.

### **3 A few clues for identifying journalistic communities**

One of the mannerisms of American literary criticism identified by Fish is the refusal to interpret and the claim to focus primarily on descriptive procedures: “one of the most common practices in literary criticism is to announce that one is not doing criticism. This happens because at the heart of that institution lies the desire to deny that its actions have any consequence. [...] The greatest fear of a critic is to be found guilty of the crime of having made an interpretation” (Fish, 1980, p. 355). Although Zelizer (1993) and Traquina (2013) espouse notions of journalistic practices as interpretations of phenomena and of news as social

constructions of reality, the interpretive communities that establish themselves as reference points for proposing universalizing values of journalism rely on the appearance of objectivity to stage an absence of interpretation, on which their validation depends (Tuchman, 2016).

There is, however, a series of indications – outlined here in brief, though deserving of more than superficial attention in other investigations – that together point to the presence of a considerable diversity of interpretive communities in journalism. The criteria that would guide the delimitation of interpretive communities, and which would need to be scrutinized in any defense of the singularity of the transnational interpretive community advocated by Traquina (2013), revolve around the ways of interpreting and representing reality, the criteria for selecting stories and for textual construction.

The coexistence of different perceptions of the social significance of events, one of the key dimensions of news values (Silva, 2014), is one such important clue. An extreme case to consider is that of news items in outlets or sections categorized as popular journalism – another notion that has become overly broad – or gossip journalism (Portari, 2020; Castro, 2019; Arruda, 2015), infamously exemplified by headlines such as “Caetano estaciona carro no Leblon nesta quinta-feira” [“Caetano parks car in Leblon this Thursday”] in the “Famosos” [Celebrities] section of the Terra portal, and “Chico Buarque compra baguetes para o lanche da tarde” [“Chico Buarque buys baguettes for his afternoon snack”] in the “EGO” section of Globo.com. Both are very short stories depicting major Brazilian popular musicians Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque dealing with mundane affairs such as parking a car or buying bread. According to Portari’s analysis (2020), the appearance of this type of news (deemed irrelevant under some hegemonic notions of how topics should be ranked) stems not from a lack of respect for or ignorance of prevailing news values, but from the existence of another set of news values cultivated in response to a perceived demand from a particular audience for news about artists and celebrities. This demand generates a volume of web traffic that justifies retaining professionals to create such content, thus providing one form of validation. It is also worth noting that certain theoretical perspectives point to the presence of famous or prominent people as a news value of great importance

(Gomis, 1991, 2004; Martí-Danés & Sorribes, 2025). As Fish (1980) predicted, the prejudice, estrangement, irritation and repudiation expressed toward such material would arise precisely from the epistemic disparity. Thus, even though their headlines emulate the aesthetic of certain hegemonic journalistic practices, their criteria for selecting events are radically different and indicate their belonging to another journalistic interpretive community.

Another indication of the diversity of interpretive communities in journalism can be seen in the hierarchization of events – and of countries – in the international coverage of newspapers and news websites. Although Traquina (2013) observed uniformities in coverage of the AIDS pandemic, as presented earlier, these results may derive from the selection, for the corpus, of outlets with similar profiles which, although from different countries, still belong to a Eurocentric, objectivist journalistic tradition and have similar class perspectives, as well as from comparative criteria in Traquina’s methodology that favor the identification of a certain interpretive homogeneity. However, studies such as those by Wu (2006), Yang (2003), and Veiga da Silva and Moraes (2021) point to disparities.

Although Wu (2006) noted a predominance of the United States in the international coverage of 23 of 38 countries, he also found different criteria for the hierarchization of nations within his sample. Countries categorized as “developing” tended to prioritize geographically proximate countries, while other criteria – such as GDP per capita, population, geographical size, linguistic proximity, and trade partnerships – guided distinct groups of countries. Yang (2003), comparing coverage of NATO air strikes in Kosovo in 1999 in two Chinese outlets and two American outlets, identified opposed framings of the event: its characterization as a violation of Yugoslav sovereignty by the former and a positive interpretation as an act of humanitarian aid to Albanians by the latter. This suggests that national interests – and, by extension, the broader cultural environment in which geopolitical interpretations are constructed in dialogue with those interests – are essential elements in the construction of journalistic representations.

As noted in the first section of this article, Moraes and Veiga da Silva (2021) discuss, among other topics, the invisibilization of the Rwandan civil war in the coverage of the American magazine *Newsweek* in 1994. In considering the justification of

that invisibility via supposedly objective newsworthiness criteria, they criticize the use of the objectivist mask as a strategy of epistemic naturalization of ideological assumptions that can be understood as sexist, heteronormative, and cisnormative; in other words, as the configuration of various social orders of domination and colonization. The notion that gender perspectives are inseparable from what we might consider hegemonic journalistic communities was also explored by Marcia Veiga da Silva (2014) in the book *Masculino, o gênero do jornalismo* [Journalism's gender is Masculine]. Sally Lehrman (2008) likewise found that reporters' ethnicity directly influenced the representation of different ethnic groups in news outlets: especially when the newsroom composition was predominantly white, coverage tended to produce derogatory and stereotypical representations of subjects and communities from non-white ethnicities.

Moraes and Veiga da Silva (2021) envisage the possibility of journalistic practices that, drawing on decolonial logics, would subvert these relations of domination, creating narratives that recognize epistemic subjectivities in journalistic representations of reality – perhaps in the direction of the resistant practices identified by Veiga da Silva and Marocco (2018) in the books authored by reporters such as Eliane Brum, Alexandra Lucas Coelho and Fabiana Moraes herself. These practices can also be observed in independent Brazilian news outlets such as *Alma Preta* and *Revista AzMina*, which work with different assumptions regarding the hierarchization of topics, news approaches, and treatment of sources, based on racial and gender perspectives, respectively. Even within a journalistic approach that could be described as feminist, Rodarte (2025) finds that there is diversity of positions, practices, and worldviews when comparing the communities of reporters in Argentina and Brazil.

Other dire consequences of notions of territorial hierarchization by journalistic interpretive communities can be found in Giovani Vieira Miranda's study (2021) of the process of news-desert formation in small Brazilian cities in the face of their "economic irrelevance" and the collapse of news organizations. He also considers the potential emergence of hyperlocal journalism initiatives that, guided by interpretive criteria tending to value local aspects in their most immediate dimensions, could counteract the dynamics of desertification.

## 4 Interpretive communities in literary journalism

Literary journalism is a significant phenomenon for thinking about interpretive communities in journalism. In the past, it was rejected as a strange and epistemologically inadequate practice both by knowledge-validation spheres within hegemonic journalistic interpretive communities (Wolfe, 2005; Genro Filho, 2012) and within literary communities (Cosson, 2007; Hartsock, 2000), being regarded by one side or the other as a practice that constituted neither journalism nor literature. Today, however, it enjoys legitimacy in both fields, evidenced not only by the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Svetlana Alexievich in 2015, but also by the emergence of an international research community formalized through the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies (IALJS) and the academic journal *Literary Journalism Studies*.

The notion of literary journalism used here refers to a set of speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986) that constitute journalism in terms of content (because they are developed using journalistic methods of reporting) and constitute literature both in material terms (because they rely on the written word organized around narrative structures) and in terms of reception (because they are also read for aesthetic enjoyment, for their narrativity, often for decades or even centuries after their original publication). Thus, the term “literary” is not being used as a marker of distinction or value – especially when literature is thought of as synonymous with the literary canon, a notion long outdated – nor does it imply an intentional affiliation of authors with that tradition. Rather, it reflects both the expressive language used and the fact that these genres belong simultaneously to both fields, while dialoguing with contemporary notions in literary studies that encompass diverse non-fictional productions.

In his introduction to the collection *Literary Journalism Across the Globe*, John S. Bak (2011) reflects on the difficulties of finding a single definition for literary journalism or classifying it as a single genre or form, given that authors’ approaches vary widely around the world and throughout history. Although it was once believed that literary journalism originated in the period known as New Journalism, situated in the 1960s in the United States, global mapping efforts (Bak, 2011; Eberwein, 2013) show that these genres emerged and developed independently in various countries

between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in contexts where journalistic and literary practices converged. In the Anglophone world, for example, they began with sketches that became popular from the 1820s, a genre analogous to the Brazilian *crônica* (Sims, 2007).

As a representation of reality, literary journalism is better understood as a practice of distinct interpretive communities rather than as a genre or style grouped alongside functional categories such as informative, opinion, or interpretive journalism (Assis, 2015), which are traditional in Brazilian scholarship but mainly address hegemonic journalistic communities. In this way, literary journalism stands in opposition, as a model, to the standard journalism whose principal and most prestigious product is news structured in the inverted-pyramid form headed by a lead, which is supposed to contain the essential informational unit of an event (Genro Filho, 2012). In a broader scope – one marked by the historical separation between news and opinion, between event and interpretation – this model also encompasses the various informative, opinion, and interpretive genres associated with that binary.

Thus, one might first assume that such a separation does not exist within literary journalism genres; however, as David Eason noted when discussing enunciative voices in *American New Journalism* (1990), there is a substantial group of reporters who avoid including overtly opinionated content, or who prefer to do so through metaphorical descriptions or comparisons (Martinez, 2016), without directly judging people and actions. Eason labels these writers “realist” literary journalists – what we might call empiricists – who presume the viability of apprehending and reconstructing in text an external reality that exists a priori. Opposing this group, he identifies “modernist” reporters, akin to phenomenologists, who aim to present their appreciation and narration of events and people through their own lenses, cultural and ideological filters, and who do not hesitate to offer opinions, because they understand their role not as neutral mediation but as interpretation of reality; though still based on fact-gathering and interviews. Although Eason’s reading introduces a binary system that simplifies the positions of various authors of that period – Truman Capote, Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, John McPhee, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, Hunter S. Thompson, and others – it nonetheless shows that the degree of separation between

facts and opinions, and the level of acceptance of explicit authorial interpretation, varies greatly among authors and genres of literary journalism. This suggests another set of communities with differing criteria and validation mechanisms. As Eduardo Ritter (2018) notes, Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo journalism is distinguished by parrhesia – a frank, unfettered speech – which is absent, for example, in the reports of Lillian Ross, who believed the actions and words of her interviewees were sufficient for readers to draw conclusions about them.

A clearer way to distinguish how each model conceives the epistemology of journalism lies in the peculiar use of sources of information as definers of reality in literary journalism: a characteristic common to the various enunciative genres encompassed by the term.

In inverted-pyramid journalism, according to Aldo Schmitz (2011), sources assist in reporting as interviewees and deliberately provide content that may generate news and feature stories, thus becoming “a power that measures itself against the ‘power of the press’” (Schmitz, 2011, p. 10). Schmitz differentiates between primary sources – directly involved in events – and secondary sources, whose role is to analyze and interpret information obtained from primary sources. These can further be classified by social status as official, corporate, institutional, popular, notable, testimonial, specialized, or referential. Stuart Hall et al. (2016) argue that a specific set of individuals occupies a privileged position as sources – either through direct involvement in events or through their analyses – to the extent that their statements define the focus and narrative thread of news stories. These official, corporate, institutional, and specialized sources are termed “primary definers” precisely because of this crucial role in directing journalistic production. The dominance of such sources in the performance of objectivity has also been noted by Gaye Tuchman (2016) and Consuelo Chaves Joncew (2005).

It is precisely in search of objectivity that inverted-pyramid journalism entrusts these primary definers with the role of interpreters of reality, delegating to the reporter the function of mediator and “prospector” of their statements. Thus, inverted-pyramid journalism relies not on individuals for the representation and analysis of facts, but on institutions: governments, police and defense agencies, companies, and

especially the various branches of science. It is the institutional power, prestige, and social recognition of these organizations that lend credibility both to the sources that represent them and to the news material that uses them to cover an event.

These procedures, however, lead to the reproduction of hegemonic thinking that Voloshinov (1973) calls “official ideology”, developed and reinforced by the very institutions that support the primary definers. Voloshinov contrasts this with the “everyday ideologies” formed by the immediate experience of individuals connected or not to these institutions – an experience that is, in this context, unmediated, before the mass media construct reality.

Some implications of validating reality through subjects’ experience and everyday ideologies are evident in reports such as *Ganbare!: Warsztaty umierania* [Ganbare!: Workshops on Dying] by Katarzyna Boni (2021) and *Ghosts of the Tsunami* by Richard Lloyd Parry (2017). Both address the experiences of Fukushima residents and nuclear-plant workers with the 2011 tsunami and the subsequent plant collapse, focusing on survivors’ experiences with ghosts believed to roam the area. Rather than presenting rationalizing discussions that distance their discourse from these experiences, Boni and Parry seek to represent their characters’ testimony on those characters’ own terms and sense of reality, without imposing a distancing mediation or discrediting their speech. A similar approach is adopted by Marcelo Leite (2025) in dealing with rituals of the Jurema Sagrada religion.

Some interpretive communities of literary journalism validate, and often adopt as models, interpretive and representational practices that even many within literary journalism would hesitate to recognize as journalism. This is the case with Hanna Krall, regarded as one of the greatest names in Polish journalism alongside Ryszard Kapuściński (Wiktorowska, 2018). Krall uses a strategy that runs counter to some of the essential elements Norman Sims (2007) identifies in literary journalism, particularly the notion of informational accuracy. Her report “*Ta z Hamburga*” [“The Woman from Hamburg”] (Krall, 2005), for example, is full of information gaps – including ones that would situate the reader more concretely in space and time – omissions and suggestions of events, abrupt leaps in time, and dialogues where only one speaker’s words are recorded. For Krall, these procedures are more faithful to how subjects experience reality (Passos & Marchetto, 2020).

On the other hand, whereas inverted-pyramid journalism uses interviewees as information sources validated by the institutions they represent, literary journalism transforms these individuals into characters. Depicted through their feelings and actions, their speech is validated by their lived experiences, conferring credibility independently of institutional backing (Passos, 2017). Even when those characters are people with institutional capital who would normally be primary definers – such as police officers, judges, or record-industry producers (Sims, 2007) – reporters are more interested in the experience these people carry with them, the everyday ideology they offer. These interviews are woven into narratives as experiences and scenes. This discursive approach reflects the counter-hegemonic stance guiding many New Journalism authors (Pauly, 1990), which extends to literary journalism traditions and interpretive communities worldwide (Eberwein, 2013; Queirós, 2017). Some theoretical perspectives prefer other terms – such as “journalism of non-events” (Ventura & Abib, 2020a, 2020b) or “reporter’s book” (Marocco, 2020; Veiga da Silva & Marocco, 2018) – but all emphasize acts of resistance, critique and epistemological rupture relative to the consensus of hegemonic inverted-pyramid journalism, while framing the phenomenon with different concepts and interpretive lenses.

One shared element among the diverse interpretive communities of literary journalism – perhaps a common denominator that allows them to be seen collectively as a super-interpretive community – is that journalists’ choices of topics and text construction are guided not by news or informational concerns in the usual sense, but by a virtual experience of events through narrative aesthetics (Hartsock, 2015), often established years or decades after the events themselves. From this perspective, it makes more sense to think of these guiding principles as “narrative values” rather than “news values”, bearing in mind that these narrative values would differ substantially from one interpretive community of literary journalism to another.

## **5 Some considerations and further developments**

This short final portion of the article begins with a spoiler that, I hope, can help illuminate one of the central implications of

Fish's notion of interpretive communities. In the film *Hollywood Ending* (2002), starring and directed by Woody Allen, the protagonist Van Waxman is a neurotic director who, while shooting a new film, develops psychosomatic blindness and ends up directing all the recording and editing sessions without seeing anything. Upon its release, Waxman's film is a critical and box-office flop in the American circuit, yet it becomes a celebrated success in France, leading to a contract for a new project there. The film's ending can be read as an acerbic commentary on the cinema market and the field of film criticism, but it raises a curious question for us: is Waxman's film good or bad? The answer, obviously, depends on another question: for whom? According to which criteria? Both interpretive communities will be able to argue – using reasoning they perceive and validate as objective – and point to elements that justify their positions. Our own adherence or proximity, as subjects and interpreters, to one community or another, or to their assumptions – and, why not, to their colonial ideological influences – will determine the reading and the arguments we adopt. The same reasoning applies if we choose to maintain a critical stance toward both.

Beyond a conceptual review and a critical reading of the notion of unity as something positive, this article sought clues to think about the implications of tensions around objectivity in journalism. Fish's perspective makes us question whether this conception of objectivity is genuinely viable; the idea of consensus and convention within interpretive communities points us in another direction, casting new light on the binary view that opposes objectivity and subjectivity. It allows us to envision a reading that is not strictly intermediary but non-binary, a perspective also defended, through other frameworks, by authors such as Rafael Paes Henriques (2018, 2019). As we have seen, practices of representing reality that are considered objective by some journalistic interpretive communities can – and often do – appear subjective to other interpretive communities – openly or implicitly – or even non-journalistic. The naturalization of certain hegemonic epistemic practices, such as those of inverted-pyramid journalism, implies the naturalization of representations of reality and the hierarchization of subjects embodying certain hegemonic ideologies, thus suffocating other perspectives and voices (Moraes & Veiga da Silva, 2021).

Thus, we can only think of the whole – transnational, as Traquina would say – body of journalists as a single interpretive

community when we observe it at a distance, ignoring the myriad distinctions among reporters, outlets, companies, and other journalistic institutions, and among communities of readers, listeners, and viewers. Observing epistemic pluralities can help us find paths that no longer aim to construct a notion of unity that ignores or rejects dissent and discrepancy in journalistic practices, recognizing the concurrent existence of diverse journalism operating according to distinct principles, without embracing an uncritical, context-free relativism that validates them all equally.

The plural notion of journalists' interpretive communities can therefore be useful for understanding journalistic practices that diverge from or rupture the hegemonic notions of inverted-pyramid journalism. Instead of asking whether a given practice is more or less journalistic, more or less objective, we can ask what notions of interpretation and representation of reality guide it, what its spheres of validation are, who its actors are and through which networks (Latour, 2000) they are articulated, which interests and social dynamics they defend (Fish, 1980), and what values and demands are at stake, as well as the power asymmetries between communities that lead to their naturalization – so that some are seen as the only possible practices – or marginalization.

Studying interpretive communities in reception contexts also has valuable potential, as noted by Luanda Schramm (2006) and, more recently, Marcia Benetti (2020). Benetti acknowledges Fish's contribution but opts for John Swales's discourse community approach because of its empirical observation and categorization of communities. Once again, dialogue with a Fishian perspective would allow us to discern and understand the plurality of interpretive communities among news readers rather than trying to group them into a single community. Studies like that of Camila Quesada Tavares (2020), which identify the role of reception in news construction, add elements for understanding audiences as validation instances that influence the rules for selecting and representing events in journalistic interpretive communities.

The notion of interpretive communities could also help the field understand the formation and establishment of disinformation networks organized around flat-earth or far-right ideas, which often distance themselves from and discredit the mainstream press, proposing their own outlets, institutions, and

validation agents (Martí-Danes & Sorribes, 2025). This may change the very notion of credibility from something inherent to subjects and content to a value ascribed by the audience. Once the rules and validation systems of an interpretive community close within the community itself, it ceases to be guided or even influenced by external validation dynamics and establishes its own credibility logics (da Silva et al., 2025). Combatting disinformation from this perspective would involve less the reformulation of journalistic discourses external to these networks (Carvalho & Belda, 2017) – which would be ineffective until their validation and consensus-building systems are addressed – in the same way that strengthening representations of reality guided by what Fabiana Moraes (2022) calls “subjectivity journalism” would not replace the hegemonic interpretive communities of journalism but would instead form other, autonomous interpretive communities, again with their own systems of values, interpretation and representation of reality, and validation.

The hope that one interpretive community will be effectively validated by another – whether journalistic or academic – seems vain, since given disparities across all these epistemic elements, such validation would only occur if one of the communities radically changed its character to receive it, thus potentially being absorbed by the other.

## NOTES

- 1 Retrieved from [www.terra.com.br/diversao/gente/caetano-estaciona-carro-no-leblon-nesta-quinta-feira,41d3399ae915a310VgnCLD200000bbcceb0aRCRD.html](http://www.terra.com.br/diversao/gente/caetano-estaciona-carro-no-leblon-nesta-quinta-feira,41d3399ae915a310VgnCLD200000bbcceb0aRCRD.html)
- 2 Retrieved from <http://ego.globo.com/Gente/Noticias/0,,MUL1363727-9798,00-CHICO+BUARQUE+COMPRA+BAGUETES+PARA+O+LANCHE+DA+TARDE.html>

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