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THEORIZING IDEOLOGY AS AN INTEGRAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING THE SOCIOLOGICAL DEMARCATION OF JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT – This article develops a novel theoretical framework for studying the sociological demarcation of journalism through the lens of ideology. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of ideology as a necessary symbolic structure for community integration and authority legitimation, and complementing it with Susan Gal's and Judith Irvine's semiotic model of iconicity, recursiveness, and erasure, we reinterpret key journalistic practices — collective memory, boundary work, and paradigm repair — as interrelated ideological operations. Our argument highlights how ideological processes simultaneously foster cohesion within the journalistic field, legitimize journalism's cultural and cognitive role, and risk distorting self-representations to resist change. By synthesizing Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach with semiotic theory, this article bridges various research traditions and offers a more integrative understanding of how journalism's sociological demarcation is constructed, contested, and maintained.
Keywords: Boundary work. Collective memory. Demarcation. Ideology. Paradigm repair.

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O CONCEITO DE IDEOLOGIA COMO UM ARCABOUÇO INTEGRAL PARA O ESTUDO DA DEMARCAÇÃO SOCIOLÓGICA DO JORNALISMO

RESUMO – Este artigo desenvolve um novo arcabouço teórico para o estudo da demarcação sociológica do jornalismo a partir da perspectiva da ideologia. Com base na teoria da ideologia de Paul Ricoeur — concebida como uma estrutura simbólica necessária para a integração comunitária e a legitimação da autoridade — e complementando-a com o modelo semiótico de iconicidade, recursividade e apagamento proposto por Susan Gal e Judith Irvine, reinterpretamos práticas jornalísticas centrais — memória coletiva, *boundary work* e *paradigm repair* — como operações ideológicas inter-relacionadas. Nosso argumento destaca como os processos ideológicos promovem simultaneamente a coesão no campo jornalístico, legitimam o papel cultural e cognitivo do jornalismo e correm o risco de distorcer as autorrepresentações para resistir à mudança. Ao sintetizar a abordagem hermenêutica de Ricoeur com a teoria semiótica, este artigo estabelece pontes entre diferentes tradições de pesquisa e oferece uma compreensão mais integrada de como a demarcação sociológica do jornalismo é construída, contestada e mantida.
Palavras-chave: Boundary work. Demarcação. Ideologia. Memória coletiva. Paradigm repair.

EL CONCEPTO DE IDEOLOGÍA COMO MARCO INTEGRAL PARA EL ESTUDIO DE LA DEMARCACIÓN SOCIOLÓGICA DEL PERIODISMO

RESUMEN – Este artículo desarrolla un marco teórico para el estudio de la demarcación sociológica del periodismo desde la perspectiva de la ideología. Basándonos en la teoría de la ideología de Paul Ricoeur — concebida como una estructura simbólica necesaria para la integración comunitaria y la legitimación de la autoridad —, y complementándola con el modelo semiótico de iconicidad, recursividad y borramiento propuesto por Susan Gal y Judith Irvine, reinterpretamos prácticas periodísticas clave — memoria colectiva, *boundary work* y *paradigm repair* — como operaciones ideológicas interrelacionadas. Nuestro argumento destaca cómo la ideología promueve la cohesión del campo periodístico, legitima el papel cultural del periodismo y, al mismo tiempo, conlleva el riesgo de distorsionar sus autorrepresentaciones como forma de resistencia al cambio. Al sintetizar el enfoque hermenéutico de Ricoeur con la teoría semiótica, este artículo tiende puentes entre tradiciones y ofrece una comprensión más integrada de cómo se construye, disputa y mantiene la demarcación sociológica del periodismo.
Palabras clave: Boundary work. Demarcación. Ideología. Memoria colectiva. Paradigm repair.

1 Introduction

Few questions in journalism studies have proven as enduringly central – or persistently elusive – as "What is journalism?" and "Who is a journalist?". These are not matters of mere scholarly interest; rather, they go to the heart of journalism's societal role, professional identity, and epistemic authority. While it would be inaccurate to portray journalism's current definitional struggles as entirely new (Hermida, 2019), it is nonetheless clear that they have

only intensified in an era marked by cultural, technological, and economic upheaval (Vos & Thomas, 2018). The sheer number of emerging journalistic forms underscores this definitional instability. Scholars have cataloged more than 160 adjectival variants of journalism, ranging from data journalism and drone journalism to solutions journalism and slow journalism (Loosen et al., 2022). This proliferation of "x journalisms" – a catch-all label for the ever-growing list of novel journalistic hybrids – reflects not only terminological exuberance, but also deeper ontological uncertainty: as journalism evolves, scholars and practitioners alike struggle to articulate its core characteristics.

Against this backdrop, the definitional question – "What is journalism?" – appears not as a peripheral concern, but as a fundamental problem for the field. It directly affects journalism's ability to claim cultural authority, distinguish itself from imitations, and justify its normative role in society. In brief, journalism faces the persistent challenge of self-definition. This article draws upon the concept of demarcation – well-established within science studies but underdeveloped in journalism scholarship – as an analytical framework to refine contemporary understandings of what constitutes journalism. As a point of departure, we engage a key distinction in science studies between epistemological and sociological demarcation (see, e.g., Evans, 2005). The former seeks to identify the intrinsic properties that validate knowledge claims – e.g., scientific vs. journalistic ones – while the latter examines the extrinsic, non-epistemic factors that shape the credibility and cultural authority of knowledge-producing institutions, practices, and agents. In this theoretical article, we set aside questions of epistemological demarcation – whether journalism's knowledge claims are epistemically warranted – to focus instead on the sociological demarcation of journalism: how journalists collectively construct, communicate, and defend the nature and borders of their profession within society.

As science studies show, demarcation from a strictly sociological perspective is closely linked to the concept of professional ideology (see, e.g., Gieryn, 1983; Mulkay, 1976). That is, the problem of sociological demarcation concerns how members of a knowledge profession – such as scientists, but also journalists (Donsbach, 2014) – discursively construct and represent their professional practice, both internally and to external audiences, especially in practical and everyday contexts where implicit understandings of questions such

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as "What is science?" – or, in our case, "Who is a journalist?" – are made explicit. Internally, ideology functions as a symbolic resource that fosters cohesion within the professional community (Deuze, 2005). In the context of journalism, this pertains to "how journalists construct the nature of **themselves** as a profession" (Lewis, 2012, p. 841, original highlight). Externally, ideology concerns "how the press [...] lay[s] claim to being the legitimate conduit through which society's worldview **ought** to be shaped" (p. 841, original highlight). At this second level, ideology serves to mediate between professional claims to cultural and epistemic authority and the public's recognition and acceptance of that authority. In this sense, ideology functions as a necessary symbolic structure that underpins public trust in journalism and maintains journalists' standing "as legitimate chroniclers of the events in the world" (Carlson, 2016, p. 350).

In section 2, we will theorize this dynamic by drawing on Paul Ricoeur's (1986/2019) multifaceted notion of ideology, which he characterizes as serving two essential functions: the integration of a community and the legitimation of authority. Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach offers a nuanced account for understanding professional ideologies – one that avoids both Marxist reductionism and overly instrumentalist perspectives. Importantly, for Ricoeur, ideology is not an inherently deceptive or pejorative concept; it is a necessary symbolic framework that communities use to understand and justify their social existence.

To operationalize Ricoeur's theory of ideology for the sociological demarcation of journalism, in section 3 we will introduce another important theoretical contribution of this article: the incorporation of Susan Gal's and Judith Irvine's (1995) model of the three core semiotic processes – iconicity, recursiveness, and erasure – through which ideology creates and maintains social distinctions. By synthesizing Ricoeur's hermeneutic-philosophical view of ideology with Gal and Irvine's semiotic insights, we will build an integrative theoretical framework that bridges three influential areas or strands in journalism studies. Specifically, we will show that the discursive practices known as collective memory (which fosters cohesion through a shared professional past), boundary work (which secures journalism's jurisdictional domain), and paradigm repair (which rhetorically restores journalistic normalcy after professional failures) can be understood as interrelated ideological practices that address how journalism constructs and defends its professional identity and cultural authority.

2 Journalism as an ideology and sociological demarcation

Paul Ricoeur's theory of ideology, particularly as outlined in his series of *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986/2019), offers an insightful framework for examining the professional identity of journalists and their credibility as legitimate sources of knowledge within society. As stated above, Ricoeur views ideology not merely in the negative and derogatory Marxist sense, but rather as a cultural and symbolic system essential for community integration and the legitimation of authority. His theory proves particularly valuable when applied to journalism, a field that continually navigates its identity and social status in the public sphere.

2.1 Background: the concept of ideology from Marx to Ricoeur

Before advancing a characterization of journalism as an ideology, it is necessary to clarify the sense in which we use the term "ideology", and why we find Ricoeur's conceptualization particularly well suited to our theoretical aims. As numerous scholars have noted (see, e.g., Gerring, 1997), the concept of ideology is characterized by a well-documented semantic promiscuity – it has accumulated a range of meanings across scholarly traditions and common usage. This conceptual ambiguity requires a preliminary clarification: before ideology can serve as an effective analytical tool, it must be purged of certain entrenched associations, especially those that obscure its more productive dimensions.

Since its roots in Marxist thought, the notion of ideology has undergone a variety of reformulations. We propose that the most prominent conceptualizations can be grouped into four general families, derived from the intersection of two axes (see table 1 below). The first axis concerns the thematic scope of ideology: whether it is understood as restricted to political or social issues, or extended to include cultural, aesthetic, moral, and professional domains. The second axis concerns the epistemological stance of the analyst: whether ideology is treated pejoratively, as a form of mystification or distortion, or analytically, as a neutral and descriptive framework for understanding the belief systems of social groups.

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In this scheme, Karl Marx's original conception of ideology falls into the restricted-pejorative category. According to Marx, ideology is a form of "false consciousness" – a distorted mode of thought imposed by the interests of the dominant class and internalized by subordinate classes. It obscures material conditions and perpetuates exploitation. In contrast, the British political scientist Michael Freeden (1996) offers a restricted-analytic view. While still limiting ideology to the realm of political discourse, Freeden's morphological approach treats ideologies as structured configurations of core political concepts that organize political thought without resorting to distortion or falsehood.

A third influential conception of ideology is offered by the German sociologist Karl Mannheim (1936/2019), who exemplifies the broad-pejorative category in our scheme. Unlike Marx or Freeden, Mannheim expands the thematic scope of ideology beyond formal politics, arguing that all forms of public knowledge – philosophical, moral, cultural – are shaped by social conditions and therefore ideologically inflected. However, Mannheim notoriously exempts empirical and formal sciences from ideological influence, maintaining a hard divide between ideologically "tainted" public discourse and "objective" scientific knowledge.

Finally, Ricoeur offers a conception of ideology that is both broad in scope and analytic in orientation, and it is this understanding that provides the basis of our theoretical approach to journalism as a professional ideology. Ricoeur (1986/2019, pp. 275-285) sees ideology not as a distortion of truth, but as a symbolic structure through which communities generate meaning, maintain group cohesion, and preserve collective identity over time. From this perspective, ideology is a necessary condition for collective self-understanding and historical continuity, not an impediment to knowledge. This makes ideology a fruitful lens for examining how journalism constructs and maintains its professional identity and normative role in society. Rather than being a mere distorting or mystifying force, ideology for Ricoeur is a necessary feature of collective life, arising from the way actions are interpreted, represented, and made intelligible in a social context, both to the actors themselves and to others.

Table 1

Four conceptual families of ideology

		Thematic scope	
		Restricted scope	Broad scope
Epistemological stance	Pejorative view	Marx (false consciousness)	Mannheim (social conditioning of thought)
	Analytic view	Freeden (morphological approach)	Ricoeur (symbolic structure)

Source: original.

Central to Ricoeur's theory is the idea that ideology is inherent in human action rather than an external false overlay. Ricoeur rejects the classical Marxist notion of ideology as a deliberate mask or illusion imposed on people. Instead, he presents it as an intrinsic aspect of the interpretive frameworks through which agents comprehend and justify their practices within a broader symbolic universe. Human action, Ricoeur argues, is never purely instrumental or transparently self-evident; it is always mediated by culturally and historically sedimented symbols and narratives. These publicly shared representations are interpretive constructions that enable social actors to make sense of their practices, imbue them with meaning, and situate themselves within a larger social imaginary. In Ricoeur's (1986/2019, pp. 276-277) terms, this constitutes ideology as the "symbolic structure of action". It allows communities to understand themselves, orient their actions, and normalize their roles in society. In this regard, Adams (2015) rightly emphasizes that Ricoeur's purpose is "to emphasize the way in which symbolic systems mediate action, and this conclusively to demonstrate that ideology and praxis are not opposed but rather that ideology in its integrative aspect is the ground of praxis" (p. 142).

This conceptualization of ideology is particularly resonant for journalism, an occupation in which practice is intimately intertwined with what Carlson (2016) terms "interpretive metadiscourse", which he describes as "a field of discourse that continually constructs meaning around journalism and its larger

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social place" (p. 350). Journalists not only report events, but also routinely articulate the meaning of their role in society, asserting, defending, and – if necessary –reinterpreting their professional identity and cultural authority in response to external criticism, internal crises, and shifting cultural expectations. In journalism, practices are not only performed but also represented and narrated, both internally (within the professional community) and externally (to the larger public). This reflexive self-representation is precisely the kind of practice-bound symbolic activity that Ricoeur identifies as ideological.

2.2 Ricoeur's dual functions of ideology: integration and legitimation

In his "genetic phenomenology of ideology", a hermeneutic approach that Ricoeur (1986/2019) defines as "an attempt to dig under the surface of the apparent meaning to the more fundamental meanings" (p. 286), the French philosopher attributes two primary constructive functions to ideology that are more fundamental than its negative connotations of distortion. These functions are: (1) ideology as integration, or the fostering of group cohesion through a shared symbolic repertoire, and (2) ideology as legitimation, or the justification of authority through what Ricoeur (1976, p. 22) calls a "surplus of belief". Each function corresponds to a basic need of any enduring social group: to bind its members together with a sense of collective identity and to secure its public authority or social standing. Thus, Ricoeur's account recasts ideology in a non-reductive light as both inward-facing (as a means of identity preservation) and outward-facing (as a means of authority justification).

The integrative function refers to the role of ideology in shaping a shared world of meaning that unites individuals into a cohesive community. In the field of journalism, this function is reflected in the profession's foundational myths and normative narratives. Journalists frequently reference iconic stories, such as Watergate, along with core principles like truth-telling, independence, and the "watchdog" role, which are integral to their identity. These references serve a purpose beyond mere rhetoric; they act as ideological mechanisms that foster a sense of professional unity across different media outlets and generations.

For instance, commemorating the heroes of investigative journalism or honoring journalists who have died while serving their duty fulfills a ritualistic function: it reinforces a shared heritage and collective mission. Through these symbols and narratives, journalists come to perceive themselves as members of a distinct community with a vital societal role, despite the various internal differences and the rapidly evolving media landscape. In summary, the integrative function of ideology provides journalism with a self-image aimed at the preservation of a collective identity.

The second function, legitimation, is concerned with how ideology supports the public authority of a group or institution. Ricoeur emphasizes that authority in modern societies is never self-evident; rather, it requires continuous symbolic justification. Ideology provides the "cement" that binds together those who claim authority and those who are asked to acknowledge it (Ricoeur, 1986/2019, p. 213). It is interesting here to introduce a complementary conceptual clarification: the distinction between deontic and epistemic authority from philosopher Józef Bochenski (1979). Deontic authority is the right to command or direct the actions of others, as in a law or an order, whereas epistemic authority is recognized expertise or credibility in a particular domain of knowledge. Ricoeur's discussion of the legitimating function of ideology focuses on authority in the prescriptive sense – the deontic authority of rulers. However, his insights can be extended to journalism as a knowledge-based profession. Just as no system of power sustains itself on rational-legal grounds alone and needs myths, symbols, and rituals to secure allegiance (see Ricoeur, 1986/2019, p. 231), no community of knowledge, like journalism or science, relies purely on its technical merits. It must also cultivate belief in its reliability.

In other words, journalism's authority to report and interpret the news – an epistemic authority, in Bochenski's terms – cannot depend solely on internal criteria of epistemic validity and truth-seeking; it must also be supported by external conditions that lend credibility to knowledge claims. According to Ricoeur (1986/2019, p. 213), whenever there is a structural discrepancy between a claim to legitimacy and its acceptance, between what an institution or group claims about itself and what people are willing to believe, ideology steps in to bridge the "credibility gap". Lacking the tools of coercive power, journalism is a prime example of the kind of

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authority that must continually be performed and ideologically sustained rather than enforced (Carlson, 2017, 2023). Journalists cannot force the public to accept their accounts as true; they must persuade audiences to trust them. This makes journalism a fundamentally relational form of authority (Carlson, 2017). Its legitimacy stems from a tacit social contract with the public at large, whereby members of society grant journalists a "right to be listened to" (Carlson, 2023, p. 67).

Thus, the legitimating function of journalism's ideology involves ongoing symbolic labor to convince society that journalism is an indispensable arbiter of reality. This includes invoking professional values such as verification, transparency, and public service as hallmarks of journalism's commitment to truth and the public interest. Such values, when presented as inviolable norms, serve an ideological role: they signal to the public why journalists deserve trust and authority, even as debates may continue internally about what those values mean in practice. By elevating these ideals, journalism projects an image of itself as an objective, reliable knowledge provider distinct from other information sources. In effect, the repetition of these normative claims functions as a legitimating narrative in the Ricoeurian sense: it positions journalists as uniquely equipped to "get it right" and therefore worthy of their societal mandate. Importantly, from the lens of sociological demarcation, what matters is not whether journalists always live up to these ideals, but that the invocation of such ideals helps maintain journalism's cultural authority.

We can further elaborate this point by bringing Ricoeur's theory into dialogue with Michael Freeden's morphological approach to the analysis of empirical ideologies, understood here as ideologies manifested through discourse. His insights offer a valuable framework for examining the professional ideology of journalism as it is reproduced through "metajournalistic discourse", which, as already mentioned above, are "public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception" (Carlson, 2016, p. 353). Freeden distinguishes between two levels at which ideologies can be studied: the semantic level and the syntactic level, each addressing a different dimension of how ideologies are structured and contested in public discourse.

At the semantic level, Freeden's morphological analysis focuses on the variable meanings of core political concepts.

Ideologies, in this view, are not composed of fixed definitions but of fluid and essentially contested conceptual vocabularies. For example, in Freeden's (2015) work on liberalism, the concept of "freedom" does not have a single, stable meaning; rather, it is constantly reinterpreted depending on its contextual deployment – ranging from "negative liberty" (freedom from interference) to "positive liberty" (freedom to act or self-realize). Applied to journalism, this level of analysis can be useful for studying how key professional concepts – such as objectivity, truth, or autonomy – are interpreted, disputed, and rearticulated in journalistic metadiscourse. Consider, for instance, the ongoing debate over whether objectivity entails equivalence in the treatment of conflicting viewpoints – a question that has gained urgency in the coverage of polarized political actors (Henrichsen, 2023; see also Velloso, 2025). Does objectivity require equal representation of positions, even when one side demonstrably misrepresents facts? This is a semantic dispute that reveals deeper ideological divisions about the role of journalism in democratic life.

At the syntactic level, Freeden's morphological approach shifts the focus to the internal configuration and relative positioning of these contested concepts within an ideological structure. Ideologies are not simply lists of values but organized ensembles in which certain concepts occupy more central or peripheral positions depending on the historical, institutional, or discursive context. Translated to journalism, this insight invites inquiry into how the professional ideology evolves by re-weighing or reordering its core components. For example, one might examine the shifting relationship between objectivity and transparency in journalistic self-legitimation (see, e.g., Vos & Moore, 2020). Is objectivity, long considered the cornerstone of journalistic credibility, being displaced by transparency as a more central justificatory value? Is transparency gaining normative weight in contemporary professional metadiscourse, moving from a peripheral adjunct to a new ideological core?

By attending to both the semantic struggles over meaning and the syntactic shifts in conceptual structure, we gain a more nuanced understanding of how the professional ideology of journalism is both discursively reproduced and transformed in response to evolving social, political, and technological pressures. In addition to illustrating the analytical utility of Freeden's model for examining journalists' professional ideologies, these considerations also sharpen our understanding of Ricoeur's account of the integrative

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and legitimating functions of ideology. Viewed through this lens, journalism emerges not merely as a set of practices for the collection and dissemination of news, but as an ideological system engaged in the continual production and negotiation of meaning about itself. Through integration, ideology forges a community of journalists united by shared stories and values; as Mesbahian (2008) states in his commentary on Ricoeur, "ideology, by creating and maintaining influential symbols and images, establishes meaning for human actions, and creates identities for both individuals and groups" (p. 39). Through legitimation, it mounts a defense of the epistemic and cultural authority of journalism in the public sphere. As we explore below, moments of stress or crisis tend to make these ideological operations most visible. It is at such moments that journalism's self-assertions become most pronounced and revealing. As Zelizer (1993) succinctly puts it, "professional consciousness [in journalism] emerges [...] around ruptures where the borders of appropriate practice need renegotiation" (p. 224).

3 Semiotic mechanisms of demarcation

Having established how journalism, when viewed through the lens of ideology, is entangled with questions of preserving its professional identity and legitimating its cultural and epistemic authority, we now introduce a complementary theoretical perspective that further links ideology to the question of sociological demarcation.

While Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach provides us with a macro-level understanding of the functional structure of ideology – what it does for a group – his framework offers limited tools for analyzing the specific semiotic mechanisms by which these ideological functions are enacted in discourse. At this point, Susan Gal's and Judith Irvine's (1995) theory of the semiotic processes of ideology provides a valuable complement to Ricoeur's macro-level framework. Their account identifies three processes – iconicity, recursiveness, and erasure – through which ideology operates to produce, naturalize, and stabilize social distinctions. These mechanisms describe a more granular, operationalizable account of how difference is made, contested, and maintained in practice. Originally formulated in the context of linguistics and cultural anthropology – to explain how ideologies construct social differences

based on dialects or languages – the semiotic processes of iconicity, recursiveness, and erasure are broadly applicable to any domain in which groups delineate an identity in opposition to others.

Iconicity collapses the difference between representation and essence: a particular symbol or example comes to stand for (index) an entire social identity. Recursiveness takes a distinction or opposition that exists in one context and projects it onto another. This creates a mirrored pattern of differentiation. For example, an internal debate or dichotomy within journalism, such as the tension between speed and accuracy, might be projected onto an external boundary, for instance, between legacy media or traditional journalism and online content platforms. The effect is to externalize internal ambiguities or conflicts to reinforce a clear boundary with something outside. Erasure is the process of selectively ignoring or downplaying elements that do not fit into the dominant ideological scheme. Through the process of erasure, complexities and counterexamples are rendered invisible, which maintains a cleaner, simpler narrative about the group. In practice, this can mean overlooking how journalism sometimes fails to live up to its stated ideals to maintain the impression that these ideals are universally valid.

Together, these processes naturalize and stabilize the distinctions on which a community relies for its identity and status. In what follows, we apply these insights to journalism's professional ideology by examining three prominent concepts in journalism research. Specifically, we show how iconicity is at work in journalism's construction of its collective memory, how recursivity characterizes many instances of journalistic boundary work, and how erasure underpins the process of paradigm repair. By analyzing these practices through the lens of Gal's and Irvine's semiotic processes of differentiation, we gain a more nuanced view of how the functions that Ricoeur ascribes to ideology – integration, legitimation, and the management of contradictions – are performed in concrete discourse. In the context of journalism, we argue that iconicity, recursiveness, and erasure constitute the linguistic and semiotic means by which journalists make their social boundaries feel solid, and their authority feel justified. At the same time, the use of these mechanisms can introduce distortions – when parts of reality are iconized or erased, a degree of simplification or bias is introduced. In addition to its integrative

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and legitimating functions, Ricoeur's theory warns us that ideology has a deformative potential when its schemes become rigid. We will return to this point in the conclusions section, after examining each practice in more detail.

3.1 Iconicity and collective memory

The ideological function of collective memory – as both a symbolic resource and a mode of narrative cohesion – figures prominently in journalism research, particularly through the pioneering work of scholars such as Zelizer (1993) and Schudson (1992). These studies have shown how journalists as an "interpretive community" – that is, as an occupational group "united through [its] collective interpretations of key public events" (Zelizer, 1993, p. 223) – rely on shared narratives of the past to construct their professional identity, legitimize their norms, and navigate crises. Journalists often return to foundational episodes – such as Watergate, 9/11, or coverage of war zones – not simply to report or reflect, but to reinscribe and affirm professional values such as watchdog independence, truth-seeking, or public service. This way, "[j]ournalists become involved in an ongoing process by which they create a repertoire of past events that is used as a standard for judging contemporary action" (Zelizer, 1993, pp. 223-224). These discursive practices of memorialization are not merely acts of retrospection: they are active processes of ideological integration that maintain a narrative identity for the profession, connecting its past, present, and future. As Kitch (2014) puts it, "proud references to yesterday are really about tomorrow, a prescriptive future into which certain kinds of reporting **should** endure" (p. 228; original highlight).

This dynamic corresponds directly with the constitutive function of ideology that Ricoeur emphasizes in his analysis: the preservation of collective identity through symbolic systems. As Mesbahian (2008) explains, this integrative role of ideology is "linked to the necessity for a social group to provide an image of itself and to keep this image alive" (p. 40); it falls to "symbolic ritual representations to maintain the group's awareness of its status, separateness, or origins" (p. 40). Ricoeur himself identifies the shaping of collective memory as one of the central operations by which ideology bolsters social cohesion and collective self-understanding: "[T]he enduring

memory of the group's founders or of its foundational events is [...] an ideological structure that can function positively as a structure of integration" (Ricoeur, 1986/2019, p. 281).

This process of memory-shaping can be further clarified through Gal's and Irvine's semiotic mechanism of iconicity, which, as we have seen, refers to the ideological consolidation and naturalization of perceived similarities between sign and meaning, where certain signs are treated as indexes of the identities of entire social groups (Gal & Irvine, 1995, p. 973). In the context of journalism's collective memory, iconicity allows certain events or figures in journalism's past to be elevated as icons of the profession's core values. For example, Watergate is not just a historical episode; it has become iconic in the sense that it is a kind of shorthand for the watchdog role of the press and its ability to hold power accountable (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014). Edward R. Murrow standing up to McCarthy (Berkowitz & Gutsche, 2012), or war correspondents reporting from harm's way (Carlson, 2006): such images gain iconic status and are treated as emblematic of the essence of journalism. Iconicity here means that an internal professional ideal (speaking truth to power, courage under fire) is seen as inherently represented by certain concrete examples. The profession's interpretive communities use these icons to map the boundaries of journalism – valorizing certain practices as authentically journalistic, while casting others as aberrations (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014). In effect, iconic cases provide a template against which current practice is measured. They make the borders of the profession feel rooted in historical examples, lending a sense of continuity and inevitability to norms that are in fact socially constructed.

3.2 Recursiveness and boundary work

While iconicity and collective memory are primarily concerned with internal cohesion, the practice of boundary work is more directly concerned with distinguishing journalism from adjacent fields and activities. The concept of boundary-work stems from Thomas F. Gieryn's (1983) seminal study of how scientists ideologically demarcate science from non-science to protect their social status and resources. Gieryn observed that scientists engage in strategic definitions and exclusions, especially when

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the credibility and epistemic authority of science are publicly contested. Crucially, he noted that internal strains and dichotomies within the professional ideology of the scientific community, such as tensions between theory and application, could be mobilized externally to differentiate science from adjacent knowledge domains. For example, theoretical abstraction could be emphasized to distinguish science from mere engineering or mechanics, while practical utility could be emphasized to delineate it from religion or metaphysics – whichever contrast best bolsters the prestige of science in a particular context or situation (Gieryn, 1983, p. 792). In this way, internal binaries within a profession's discourse become the raw material for external boundary construction – an operation that exemplifies the recursive logic of ideological differentiation described by Gal and Irvine.

The semiotic process of recursiveness, as theorized by Gal and Irvine, involves the projection of an opposition or distinction salient at one level of social or discursive organization onto another (Gal & Irvine, 1995, p. 974). In other words, and linking this to Gieryn's insights on the sociological demarcation of science from non-science, a structural tension or binary internal to one system is externalized and mapped onto broader social differentiations. This mechanism, we argue, is central to the ideological work of boundary construction as originally described by Gieryn, particularly in the case of professional fields that seek to assert epistemic authority. The logic is recursive because it repeats a pattern: an internal X vs. Y becomes "our X" vs "their Y". It is a semiotic strategy that achieves several goals. It fosters group cohesion by smoothing over an internal tension, transforming it into a unified stance against external actors, and it legitimizes the profession by ideologically positioning the undesirable pole of the dichotomy outside its borders.

This insight proves particularly useful when examining boundary work in journalism. Like science, journalism's self-perception is marked by internal contradictions and tensions. These include conflicts such as objectivity versus interpretation, immediacy versus mediation, speed versus accuracy, and the balance between public service and commercial profit, among others. These internal oppositions are not merely destabilizing; they are often strategically employed in boundary work to differentiate journalism from other communicative or cultural practices. For instance, journalists commonly distinguish themselves from bloggers or social media

influencers by highlighting their dedication to objectivity and verification – values that may be debated within the profession but are projected outward to create a professional "other" (see, e.g., Singer, 2005).

Through the lens of recursiveness, we interpret these examples to show how ideological tensions within journalism are not simply liabilities to be resolved but are semiotically mobilized to reinforce professional identity and cultural authority. By projecting internal oppositions onto the external landscape – casting others as the embodiment of journalism's perceived excesses or deficits – journalists reaffirm the coherence and authority of their field. Recursiveness, then, is a core semiotic mechanism underpinning many instances of journalism's boundary work, allowing it to transform internal ideological ambiguity into external legitimation and differentiation.

3.3 Erasure and paradigm repair

The concept of paradigm repair, as developed in journalism studies – notably by Bennett et al. (1985) – refers to the discursive strategies employed by journalistic institutions when their professional credibility or normative commitments are called into question – typically in the wake of error, scandal, or external critique. Rather than prompting fundamental structural change, journalistic scandals tend to trigger processes of paradigm repair that culminate in an explicit reaffirmation of dominant professional norms, through the individualization of error and the expulsion – both symbolic and material – of the transgressor from the community, thereby preserving the stability of the paradigm. There are numerous examples in the literature. Some of the most well-known are those by Eason (1986), Hindman (2005), and Carlson (2009), which document the response of the U.S. journalistic community to famous cases of fabrication and fake news, but many others exist (see Villagrán Sánchez & López Pan, 2025, for an extensive overview).

The repair work that follows the scandal or crisis, in effect, re-stabilizes the paradigm by managing reputational risk while preserving the profession's epistemic authority. This process can be fruitfully understood through the lens of erasure, the last of the key semiotic mechanisms of ideological differentiation outlined by Gal

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and Irvine. Erasure involves the systematic omission or simplification of elements that complicate or contradict the dominant narrative. As Gal and Irvine (1995) put it: "Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme may go unnoticed or get explained away" (p. 974). In the context of paradigm repair, erasure functions ideologically by minimizing the structural or systemic implications of journalistic failure. Deviations from professional norms are often portrayed as isolated incidents – individual lapses in judgment, "bad apples" (Cecil, 2002), or temporary breakdowns – rather than as symptoms of deeper institutional contradictions or biases. This selective framing effectively erases alternative interpretations that might challenge the legitimacy of the broader journalistic paradigm: "[T]his individualizing focus suggests that press failures are inherently individual failures remedied by better adherence to professionally ascribed norms" (Carlson, 2014, p. 45).

By rendering deviant individuals, dissenting perspectives, or systemic critiques invisible, erasure plays a crucial role in maintaining journalism's symbolic boundaries and cultural authority. It allows for the reassertion of normative ideals without requiring meaningful reflexivity or transformation. Viewed this way, paradigm repair is not merely a defensive reaction but an ideologically structured process of erasure that helps uphold professional identity and trust, even in the face of potential disruption.

4 Discussion and conclusions

By approaching collective memory, boundary work, and paradigm repair not as isolated areas of study, but as interrelated ideological devices through Gal's and Irvine's semiotic processes of social differentiation, we arrive at a more integrated and nuanced understanding of how journalists' discursive practices operate to ensure both professional integration and the legitimation of journalism's epistemic and cultural authority (see table 2 below). These two operations – integration and legitimation – correspond directly to the principal functions that Ricoeur attributes to ideology. Through collective memory, journalists establish a shared narrative of the profession's past that reinforces a coherent identity across time. Through boundary work, they distinguish journalism from adjacent or competing practices,

thereby defending their epistemic jurisdiction. Through paradigm repair, they manage disruptions or crises in ways that preserve institutional continuity.

However, as Ricoeur warns, ideology is not solely a constructive force. Alongside its integrative and legitimating functions, ideology also carries a deformative potential – a capacity to distort symbolic representations in order to resist change and preserve authority. Indeed, it is the second function of ideology – as a mechanism for legitimating authority – that reintroduces in Ricoeur's scheme the potential for distortion and obfuscation that has been associated with the concept since its origins in Marxist thought. Ricoeur notes that this negative aspect of ideology becomes particularly problematic when the gap between what is actually done – action, praxis – and what is said to be done – representation – is strategically exploited, allowing actors or institutions to project a normative image that conceals, obscures, or reconfigures their actual practices. This deformative potential of ideology is not accidental, but structural: it stems from what Ricoeur identifies as an inherent resistance to change within ideological systems. In this way, ideology can function both as a cohesive symbolic structure and as a conservative force that resists critique and transformation.

Nevertheless, there is a conceptual priority of the integrative function of ideology over its distorting character. As Mesbahian (2008) notes in his commentary on Ricoeur:

> Ideology becomes distortive at the point when the integrative function becomes frozen, when it becomes rhetorical in the bad sense, when schematization and rationalization prevail. Ideology operates at the turning point between the integrative function and resistance [to change]. (Mesbahian, 2008, p. 39).

Thus, ideology is activated and becomes explicit – and with it, the possibility of distortion – when the ideological system is threatened by a potential loss of identity or authority. By contrast, during periods of stability, ideology remains submerged and implicit. This dynamic is consistent with one of the central corollaries of the literature on paradigm repair, clearly articulated by Vos and Moore (2020): the constitutive elements of the journalistic paradigm – where they speak of a paradigm, ideology should be read here – come to the surface only when the profession enters

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into crisis. In this sense, it is no coincidence that strategies of memorialization, boundary work, or paradigm repair – all practices that are ideological in nature, as shown above, and all carrying a distorting, idealizing, and simplifying potential, as we will see below – have gained prominence in recent scholarship. This rise has occurred in a context in which the boundaries of journalism have become particularly porous, and answers to questions such as "What is journalism?" or "Who is a journalist?", as noted in the introduction to this article, have ceased to be stable or self-evident. In short, this is a moment in which the need to sociologically demarcate journalism has become ever more acute.

Each of the three dimensions of ideology identified by Ricoeur – integration, legitimation, and deformation – can be loosely mapped onto the three discursive practices explored in journalism studies: collective memory work most closely corresponds to the integrative function, boundary work to legitimation, and paradigm repair to deformation. This mapping, however, should not be understood to imply a strict one-to-one correspondence. Rather than operating in isolation, these ideological dimensions are deeply intertwined, and their influence can be seen in all three discursive practices.

Collective memory work, for example, serves primarily to reinforce professional cohesion by narrating a shared past, but it also contributes to legitimizing journalism's cultural authority and can at times distort historical understanding through selective commemoration: iconic events are foregrounded as symbols of journalism's democratic virtue, while episodes that reflect institutional complicity or failure are often downplayed or omitted – a form of erasure within memory – thereby promoting unity at the expense of critical reflexivity. Similarly, boundary work, though focused on legitimizing journalism by distinguishing its epistemic jurisdiction from adjacent fields, simultaneously fosters internal cohesion and may also involve distortive projections of professional contradictions onto external "others" when internal strains or ambiguities are projected outward onto competing media actors. Paradigm repair, most closely associated with the deformative aspect of ideology, often re-stabilizes journalism's authority after moments of disruption by framing failures as isolated incidents rather than as symptoms of deeper structural issues. Hence, across all three cases, these practices do not merely reflect ideology's functions in isolation,

but rather embody their complex interplay: they contribute simultaneously to identity preservation, public legitimation, and, at times, symbolic distortion, thereby illustrating how ideological discourse in journalism both sustains the profession and constrains its capacity for self-critique and transformation.

Table 2

Semiotic processes of differentiation and their relation to journalism studies

Semiotic processes (Gal & Irvine)	Concepts in journalism studies	Ideological functions (Ricoeur)
Iconicity	Collective memory	Integration (identity preservation)
Recursiveness	Boundary work	Legitimation (authority justification)
Erasure	Paradigm repair	Deformation (resistance to change)

Source: original.

In sum, this article contributes a novel theoretical approach by incorporating Ricoeur's theory of ideology into the field of journalism studies. While the discursive practices of collective memory, boundary work, and paradigm repair have been studied independently within journalism scholarship, this work offers a new conceptual synthesis by interpreting them as an ideological project in the Ricoeurian sense. In doing so, it highlights the interdependence of integration, legitimation, and deformation as operations embedded in the profession's key modes of public self-description and self-representation.

Moreover, proposing a characterization of journalism as an ideology also makes it possible to address one of the classic problems in journalism studies: how to define journalism's professional identity in the absence of the formal attributes that traditionally delineate the nature and boundaries of professions – namely, specialized, mandatory, and regulated academic training; official certification or licensure; binding ethical codes with enforcement mechanisms; and a legal monopoly over professional practice. This absence, which complicates the definition of

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journalism as a distinct activity and makes it difficult to draw clear boundaries around who can be considered a journalist, has been confronted by journalism theorists through a range of non-essentialist approaches – that is, perspectives that share "a view [that] de-emphasizes formal factors of journalistic identity by stressing cultural factors that create collectivity among journalists" (Carlson, 2007, p. 167). Our proposal to conceptualize journalism as a knowledge-producing praxis structured by a professional ideology is not intended to stand alongside these characterizations as merely another option. Rather, it is offered as a common foundation underlying them all: a fully developed concept of ideology, such as the one advanced here, makes it clear that the notions of collective memory, boundary work, and paradigm are all partial expressions of a single structuring logic that integrates them and renders them intelligible as a coherent whole.

We would like to conclude this article by noting a potential limitation. Our argument has been developed primarily in dialogue with scholarship from the Anglophone field of journalism studies; we have not engaged with literature from other contexts or from peripheral regions. This choice responds to a clear justification: the three discursive practices with which we sought to engage – collective memory, boundary work, and paradigm repair – have been explored predominantly within Anglophone journalism studies. Looking ahead, an important avenue for future research lies in the empirical application of this framework to examine realities beyond the "Anglo-American imaginary" of journalism (Zelizer, 2018).

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