"GOOD MORNING, COVID!"
The inertia of journalistic imaginaries
in morning shows' online comments

Abstract

This textual analysis examines meanings of comments to Facebook posts of three breakfast programs as COVID-19 entered England in 2020. This analysis suggests that during this time of crisis and uncertainty, users' – even if trolling, interacting through incidental media use, or commenting as regular contributors to the pages – relied on traditional and lasting interpretations of conventional journalistic standards in their discourse surrounding "soft news" content, which speak to the potential for the future of journalism via an "inertia" of conventional journalistic imaginaries that survive the blurring of news genres and approaches.

Keywords: breakfast shows; COVID-19; Facebook; inertia; morning shows online comments; "soft news;" television

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread into England, where this study is based, social contestation surrounding its cause, survival, and what was necessary to protect populations became a mainstay of daily news coverage (Newman et al., 2021). In turn, UK breakfast or morning shows – usually regarded as paying attention to unserious news such as hairstyles and fitness (Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012) – became a space for up-to-date information, particularly after the British government announced lockdown orders, with topics ranging among scientific, medical, and political explanations of and for the rules (McGrath, 2020; Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos & Fletcher, 2020a), topics classified in scholarship as "hard news" (Digital News Report, 2016).

At the start of the pandemic in the UK, gone were morning shows' takes on fashion and entertainment, those stories replaced by "harder" presentations of how the virus could affect individuals and the nation, as well as what lockdown restrictions would mean for families, businesses, and social institutions. Go*od Morning Britain* (GMB), for example, added a regular section for Dr. Hilary Jones, a former columnist for the tabloid *News of the World* to advise on the latest medical and science information. On *Jeremy Vine* (JV), the show's namesake used an inflatable yoga ball to create an on-the-floor timeline of pandemics. And on *BBC Breakfast* (BBC)*,* presenters told personalized stories of social inequalities. These shows – and their social media feeds – also became popular for discourse surrounding the UK's plan to leave the European Union, a move known as Brexit (Waterson, 2020); in the UK, Facebook proved to be especially popular for up-to-date information and discussion surrounding news issues (Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos, & Fletcher, 2020b; García-Perdomo, 2021).

Over time, each of these shows' Facebook pages became digital places (AUTHOR, YYYYa) for exploring and explaining medical and scientific meanings associated with the lockdown and their pages' significant social value. And there, commenters – whether they be trolling (Wolfgang, 2018), interacting through incidental media use (Vergara, Siles, Castro, & Chaves, 2020), or commenting as regular contributors to the pages – recalled traditional and long-lasting normative standards of journalism with which they analyzed the journalistic aspects of these "soft news" programs, which this study examines. For example, on one BBC Breakfast's Facebook page post featuring "person-on-the-street" videos about their opinions on government regulations, users commented that the reporting lacked depth: "Very disappointed with BBC breakfast … can't help feeling disappointed with your flower power news and little questioning of the government 😢 extremely sad" (BBC, 2020a). Other posts across morning shows went even further in their comments, stating the content was either too critical, speculative, or sensational and led to morning shows contributing to a lack of proving solutions, forming social cohesion, reducing speculation, and holding the powerful to account.

Through this textual analysis of user comments that applied traditional "hard(er) news" qualities and characteristics to assess content on a "soft(er) news" platform, we argue that such comments represent an "inertia" of longstanding journalistic imaginaries that have survived an increased hybridity of news. Commenters appeared to be assessing morning shows' content based upon imaginations of idealistic, even nostalgic, notions of what journalism was, is, or could be. Moreover, these imaginations were reminiscent of notions of "good journalism" (Fürst, 2020), and dominant and long-standing constructs and standards against which citizens should – or could – measure journalism (Iggers, 2018; Palmer, 2018). Here, we argue that these imaginaries of standards – namely that journalism is to be relevant and constructive, not overly negative but critical of the powerful, that which rebukes sensationalism and speculation and embraces transparency and impartiality in its means for social and civic engagement – remain salient with audiences, despite the massive hybridity of journalism and the blending of "hard" and "soft" news and the increasing hybridization of legacy and new media (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020). To be clear, in this analysis, we do not intend to assign intentionality to the users' comments and critiques of the content; however, we do find this study a means by which to contribute to ongoing discussions about the changing field of journalism from the perspective of audience (Dafonte-Gómez, 2018).

We begin by outlining industry shifts toward "softer" news, the form that is the morning show and the construct of "good journalism," which is relevant to this study's framework. Next, we discuss the complexities of social roles and behaviors of users and journalists on social media in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic during which this study took place, before presenting an analysis of user comments and responses to morning show's Facebook posts through the lens of "inertia." We conclude with the article's contributions and areas for future research.

The "Softening" of News, its Complications & the Morning Show Genre
According to the Anglo-American canons of journalism that dominate scholarship (Mutsvairo, et al., 2021), there are sharp divisions among journalistic forms. The term "soft news"

incorporates various forms of media content, from entertainment and sports news to lifestyle, "human interest," and coverage that is not considered extremely urgent. In contrast, the term "hard news" has historically been reserved for coverage considered more serious, including issues of politics, crime, social policy, and timely events (Patterson, 2013). The delineation of these forms of media content has also been ascribed to media outlets: Hard news is generally affiliated with mainstream elite sources, such as *The New York Times* and *BBC World News*, while "soft news" is thought of as appearing mainly in newspaper tabloids and lifestyle magazines, TV programs focused on entertainment (ie TMZ) and morning shows, such as *Good Morning America* (US) and *Good Morning Britain* (UK). However, these classifications that were once thought as distinct – *this* is "soft" and *that* is "hard" – has been in flux, identified first in contemporary times by journalists and scholars who expressed concern about a rise in "soft news" connected to shifting journalism priorities in an increasingly competitive media marketplace where "hard news" has suffered a setback by news outlets wishing to attract audiences (Jones, 2009). Such a shift to "soft news" continues amidst the expansion of social media, streaming, and other digital platforms (Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012).

Breakfast, or morning, shows have historically straddled the line between "hard" and "soft" news (Harrington, 2010), sometimes offering depth-coverage of a particular issue and breaking news (ie, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US were captured and discussed on national morning shows there). However, morning shows – which in the UK during COVID-19 remained a space for increased viewership and competition between programs (Williams, 2019) – have widely been designed to entice audiences through its feel of "liveness," "dailiness," and approachable style, often featuring inviting and entertaining personalities as presenters (for more, see Wieten & Pantti, 2005) to create discussion (Ruggiero, 2019). Historically, content that appears on these programs also tends to be "soft" in its focus on lifestyle, cooking, social affairs, entertainment, and reaction or opinion on recent news (Dahlgren, 1995); yet, broadcasters have been aware of the interests of morning show audiences to "newsy" content, sometimes even graphic news, that brought about the "breakfast test" in journalism of both "soft" and "hard" genres that find a "tasteful" balance between difficult images, language, and sensationalism that might be more suitable for audiences (and their families) later in the day (McKinley & Fahmy, 2011). Others have developed emerging categories related to substance and venue, to include for example a classification of "general news" that straddles the hard/soft dichotomy but is focused on immediacy (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010).

Including and beyond the morning show genre, soft news has been shown to not be absent of social benefit, as its social-ness has been found to improve some aspects of civic life and even political learning, though these potential contributions do not belay concerns from dogged journalists and scholars that the form undermines the legitimacy, authority, and democratic functions of journalism (Baum, 2002; Urrutia, Zalbidea, Camacho, & Pastor, 2019). It is the blurring of the lines of "hard" and "soft" news content amongst today's journalism that makes morning shows under study here relevant for understanding the potential meanings of "inertia" of journalistic imaginaries for what the future of journalism could be despite hybridity. Identifying this inertia is particularly interesting as audiences were navigating blending standards and presentations of content related to medicine, science, and politics on a platform

and in programming traditionally reserved for the "softer side." <mark>Below, we contribute to the complexities of journalism's hybridity.</mark>

Journalism's Digital (& Social) Environment: From Watching to Reviewing Journalism
Recent turns to understanding digital news audiences has opened new veins of research and practice, particularly in terms of turning audiences into engaged actors who influence content, as well as critique it (García-Perdomo, 2021). One of the areas of critique, especially via social media, has been user commentary about the information news delivers, how journalism operates amidst a society's power structures (Author, YYYYb; Loosen, Reimer, & Hölig, 2020; Mellado, et al, 2017). Even with altering and evolving new media news environments through digital technologies, popular imaginations of journalism, including of the field's conventional journalistic standards and practices, including verification, fact-checking, transparency, and innovation are reproduced through popular and professional cultures (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015). As journalistic genres merge, blend, and blur in terms of their "softness" and "hardness," there is a question about the degree to which audiences interpret and assign particular journalistic traits of the myriad of journalistic options available today (Meijer, 2013).

The notion of "good journalism" (Fürst, 2020), which has largely been discussed in terms of audience metrics and newsroom debate about what "good" is – whether it be assessed by audience engagement, story selection and placement, or other digital traits and measurements – has elsewhere been mirrored in research that suggests "good" journalism is not sensational, seeks "truth," is impartial in its coverage of the powerful, is not overly negative, contributes to social cohesion and civicness, and involves treating subjects of its reporting fairly (Iggers, 2018; Palmer, 2018). Scholars have long also found audiences tend to attribute journalism to its democratic function while online news audiences turn to comments and social media in an attempt to democratize the act of journalism itself by providing commentary, fact-checking, debate, and criticism of journalistic content (Craft, Vos & Wolfgang, 2015). Users' comments have been found to, among other things, hold journalists to account to build a social community, to troll and harass, or to merely comment as a digital passerby (AUTHOR, YYYYc; Vergara, Siles, Castro, & Chaves, 2020). And while understanding user intentions are certainly important for exploring online worlds, this paper is concerned with the explanations used in their collective commentary to critique "soft news" content on social media, where comments are a cultural text to be analyzed critically (Salgado & Bobba, 2019). An overarching context for this analysis that takes into account the changing journalism landscape, social media, and the social and cultural politics of journalism in early 2020 is presented next.

Pandemic as Journalistic Panacea?: Online Critiques During COVID-19
As with other forms of media, morning shows' COVID-19 content during the period of this study was appearing amidst a context of international mis- and dis-information -- largely rooted in discourse surrounding the Donald Trump presidency in the US, rising populism in Latin America and across Europe, and Brexit. In turn, journalistic information underwent increased audience scrutiny, particularly journalism's legitimacy, perceived political "bias," and overall authority (Palmer, Toff & Nielsen, 2020), even as users increased their screen time (Newman, et al.,

2021). Specific to Western COVID-19 news coverage, audiences became critical of over-coverage of economic and business news rather than that which focused on the impact on everyday life (Masullo, Jennings, & Stroud, 2021). News avoidance also emerged as a trend among some audiences who were inundated with information, especially via social media (Groot Kormelink & Gunnewiek, 2021; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Contestation arose among news users who in recent history have turned to social media during times of crisis (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017), sought from journalism approaches to problem-solving (McIntyre, 2019) and means to social cohesion (Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2017) but also increasingly elicited became both disillusioned with and interpretive of mainstream journalism in its coverage of the pandemic and related government policies, contributing further to a fragmentation of media and audience (Author, YYYYd). As this we began this study, for example, research suggested that 30 percent of those in the UK considered the news media had not been "critical enough" of government responses to the virus, while 28 percent believed news media had covered the government fairly, and 29 percent reported that media had been "too critical" (Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos & Fletcher, 2020a).

In our readings of morning show Facebook posts and comments, we were driven by the means by which users rationalized such critiques of journalism, albeit on posts from traditionally "soft news" programs. Therefore, to examine the types of journalistic characterizations of the content read for this study, we are guided by the following questions: First, "Upon what standards of journalism did Facebook pages commentors characterize morning shows' content during the rise of COVID-19 and government lockdowns in spring 2020?" and, second, "In what ways might comments about the morning shows' online content evidence the steadfastness of conventional journalistic standards in a changing journalistic landscape?" Following our presentation of method, our analysis will not attempt to answer how and why users commented as they did, but focuses on the articulations of the comments, themselves, to reveal the "inertia" of lasting, conventional journalistic imaginaries that users applied within the hybrid media environment.

Method

To explore users' commentary on journalistic qualities of morning show reports related to COVID-19 and 2020 lockdown, we turned to shows' public Facebook page posts for textual analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017) through which to interpret potential meanings of normative journalistic practice and journalistic culture (Berkowitz & Eko, 2007). We selected the following UK morning shows that air weekdays before 10 a.m. and have public Facebook pages, as Facebook was a popular source for information on the UK lockdown (Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos & Fletcher, 2020b):

- *Good Morning Britain* (GMB). The show's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/GMB) during the study's timeframe featured the program's images and videos of interviews with citizens, scientists, medical professionals, and government officials about COVID-19 and the lockdown policy. Until March 2021, the show was co-

hosted by Piers Morgan, once a CNN journalist and editor of *News of the World* tabloid, who also was a contestant on Donald Trump's *The Apprentice*.

● *BBC Breakfast* (BBC). The show's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/bbcbreakfast) during the study's timeframe highlighted video of interviews with citizens, medical professionals, scientists, and government officials and a couple of sentences about the clip's focus on COVID-19 and government policies. The program, billed on its website as "a daily morning news programme" (BBC, 2020b) was co-hosted by Charlie Stayt, who appeared in reality shows, including *Jailbreak* and *Are You Telepathic*.

● *Jeremy Vine* (JV). The show's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/JeremyVineOn5) during the study's timeframe included stock images of the host, Jeremy Vine, or the show's logo and posed questions about a segment of the show that users could view via a URL. Vine is a public personality who once appeared as a contestant on *Strictly Come Dancing* and who hosts a radio talk show on BBC Radio 2. The Facebook page peddled its phone number for audiences to join "celebrity panellists [*sic*] for topical debates."

We began our analysis by searching each shows' public Facebook page for the term "lockdown" between April 1 and June 1, 2020, initially scanning the posts and user comments to capture a sense of the themes of coverage and user comments. Following our initial discussions on the project, we then each manually read user comments and in order to conduct a deep reading of the texts (Tonkiss, 1998) identified a total of 108 posts that garnered more than 100 comments where users specifically discussed the shows' content, presenters, and mention of media systems and journalistic production during the pandemic. Once posts were collected, we interrogated the texts through thematic analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017), paying specific attention to users' critiques of the show posts' tone, accuracy, expertise, relevance, and format – elements similar to what have been examined for similar purposes (Craft, Vos & Wolfgang, 2015). To be sure, we should note that while we position the paper as operating with a timeframe of COVID pandemic, we are not as interested in analyzing the users' comments specific to the pandemic, but to the morning show's coverage of the crisis and governmental lockdown that had become a mainstay of the shows' content shared online.

In conducting this analysis, is equally important to understand that user comments (as individual texts and conversations between users) are complex and carry layered meanings (Craft, Vos & Wolfgang, 2015). As such, we each manually reviewed the posts and comments selected for the study over a period of weeks to discuss potential contributions to theoretical development and to discuss the emergent themes. Through these readings, we found user comments to be surprisingly robust in their replication of conventional journalistic ideals, discussing aspects of each theme simultaneously; however, we have assigned and explicated the comments within the themes that we believe are most representative to the overarching (and overlapping) messages relevant to this study (ie AUTHOR, YYYYb). It is also important to note that these comments may not come from users who view the morning shows and/or are commenting for a variety of reasons (Dafonte-Gómez, 2018); therefore, we reflect upon their

comments as cultural text that serves as a "social response" to user engagement with online content (Guo & Sun, 2020).

Analysis & Discussion

In this section, we present our analysis of Facebook posts and comments and note here, again, that we do not argue that the posts are programs were "hard-hitting" journalism (Brennen, 2009) nor that the distinct and unique themes identified below do not operate independent of one another. Rather, we argue these themes represent, however the users may contradict each other in the diversity of their critiques (Meijer, 2013), the ways in which users relied on an "inertia" of longstanding journalistic imaginaries of conventional standards traditionally associated with "hard" news on the "soft news" platform.

Commenting for Problem-Solving Content

In this study, users were consistent in their concerns that "negative" news that did not provide solutions to problems broke-down a sense of shared experience where positivity would have helped in collective dealing with the pandemic and related lockdown conditions. Through the lens of "inertia," we argue that comments seeking problem-solving from the hybridized content reflects the standing imaginative power of "ideal" journalistic standards – including problem-solving (McIntyre, 2019) – even on morning shows that were increasingly "soft news"-cum-"hard news." Commenters were especially critical of the new form of content as being overly critical. One *JV* post (2020a) in April, for example, asked these questions: "Do you trust that politicians have the coronavirus in hand? ... is the crisis running away from those in charge?"[i] In response, one user commented, "Can we please stop all this negative press. We need something more positive to cheer us all up," while another user commented on the appropriateness of the program's question during the crisis, by writing, "Asking this sort of question (Channel) 5 is irresponsible. We all need to pull together and the government and support services are doing their best."

And, just as negative reactions to online news content may speak to overarching desires of particular types of content that audiences demand, such commentary also addresses what users considered to be emotional content that became unhelpful for audiences during crisis (Masullo & Kim, 2020). In this study, users responded personally and emotionally to the tone of posted content, including a *BBC* post in April (2020c) about elderly in care homes that included the following text: "'When we're in the full PPE we can't even feel that skin-on-skin' The untold story of care homes and the coronavirus…" The post included a four-minute video opening with an elderly woman blowing kisses and a family member speaking about her grandmother's death. One user took particular issue with the post's "soft" and "negative" qualities: "The BBC are an absolute disgrace; when we need hope and uplift it's nothing but doom and gloom iced with a fierce determination to undermine the government at every oppertunity. I'm out!"

Recent notions of "doom and gloom" in discussions of online journalism has led to concern over "doomscrolling" and news avoidance (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021), the former being a concept not

absent in the rhetoric and behavior discussed by commenters in terms of how morning show hybridized content was dealing with COVID-19 news. Perceived negativity of program posts appeared in user reactions when they said the posts lacked detailed information or failed to bring people together in positive ways, as though the users in their critiques were relying on idealistic notions that "good journalism" writ large solved social problems without hyper-negativity and focuses on civil and civic means of discourse (Iggers, 2018). To a "BREAKING" post on *GMB*'s (2020a) Facebook page about a government official accused of ignoring lockdown rules, for instance, one user commented on what they considered the program's divisive coverage: "The Media has paralysed the population into paranoia and excessive fear to go outside , let alone breathe. This needs to stop." Yet another user posted: "Can the press please move on to more important questions... like when are operations and consultations back on, when will dentists and GPs be open. For crying out loud, especially The BBC and ITV reporters are doing my head in." Relatedly, another *GMB* post (2020b), this one about the PM's daily press briefing, was followed by user debate due, in part, because of what some users referred to as "negativity" of discourse; users referred to each other as being "dismissive," accused "illegal immigrants" for COVID-19, and argued politics. One user, called on the morning show to provide greater online mediation, writing that there are "far too many nasty people on here...isn't GMB not moderating this group???????"

Across the programs' Facebook pages, commenters' critiques spoke to the lasting inertia of conventional and idealistic journalistic standards that they applied in their takes on COVID-19 coverage, as they identified a hyper-negativity in coverage as overshadowing problem-solving and other idealized notions of journalism, despite its current "soft/hard" flux (Wasserman, 2019).

Critiquing Content for Relevance in Creating Social Cohesion

User comments across the programs Facebook pages analyzed for this study revealed a lasting influence of "good journalism standards" of relevance and providing social cohesion with which users measured content. These standards became ammunition to critique the potential of morning shows' altered content to create constructive discourse and to hold the powerful to account (Meijer, 2013) while also creating a sense of community during crisis (Carey, 2008). "Get [*GMB* morning show co-host] Piers [Morgan] onto this," wrote one user to a *GMB* post in May (2020c) that features a one-minute video with a celebrity doctor and text about government plans to ease lockdown, for example. The user continued that Morgan "has the questions" to "see if any decision can be rationalised…." Relatedly, users across shows commented that posts merely touching the surface of a topic did little to engage with the information about the pandemic, leading them to question the validity of interviewers and their questions. On a *JV* post in April (2020b) that asked users whether the UK health minister should stop setting targets for testing, for example, a user criticized the show's relevance for asking that question: "Another stupid question! I stopped watching this 'show' last week, and my spirits are much higher already!" On an April post by *BBC* (2020d) about public efforts to thank "key" and "frontline workers," one user shared an appreciation for performing public recognition but called for more reporting related to the crisis and lockdown: "Respect to all NHS

Staff, Supermarket staff, delivery drivers, Care Workers and ALL key workers BUT come on BBC Breakfast, you are really struggling for news now. I switched off when you started reporting on washing dirty scrubs!"

Recurring user comments suggesting that morning show content may have been doing more harm than good connected the shows to larger imaginaries of bias amid "mainstream media" in which media are said to hold an "invisible agreement" between presenters and politicians to present biased news (Palmer, Toff & Nielsen, 2020, p. 1975). Commentary on relevance – or newsworthiness, perhaps – appeared across the show's pages specifically in reaction to posts about schools. Responding to a *BBC* post in June (2020e) of home footage of children, teachers, and union leaders talking about their feelings of going back to school, one user commented on the lack of relevance and depth of the program's coverage. "Still nothing on special needs children in mainstream school what the plan for them," the user commented. "I find out this week on what happening with my kids school but why they not showing this on the news." In some cases, users were quite overt about what they characterized as non-relevant news contributed to social problems in addressing the crisis. On an April post from *GMB* (2020d) featuring video of co-host Piers Morgan discussing whether government officials should be first to be tested for COVID-19, one user took issue with the relevance – and helpfulness – of the question: "Piers im sorry to say that you are part of the problem & not the solution anymore? What happened to you ay? ."

Across the three shows, user comments indicated that posts' lack of forming a cohesive and relevant approach to solving problems of the pandemic and lockdown policies did not assist in creating a sense of social cohesion and collective action expected in "soft news" (Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2017) that also failed to come to light in lasting notions of "good journalism" (Fürst, 2020), which might be a little "harder." As this analysis is beginning to reveal, users' appeared torn between the expectations of morning show content and its traditional focus and the changing "hard(er)" news topics being presented. Below, we further illustrate the effect of "inertia" of journalistic imaginaries in terms of how commenters critiqued content for its sensationalistic and speculative approaches.

Commenting Against Sensationalism & Speculation
Users' comments consistently critiqued content they characterized as sensationalized and speculative (Huxford, 2003) surrounding surface-level and politicized coverage as they reached to "good journalism's" standards of providing content with expertise and legitimacy (Craft, Vos, & Wolfgang, 2015). On one May *BBC* post (2020f) about the science behind protective masks, for example, one user compared the expertise of the post's journalists with those covering other aspects of the pandemic. "Why don't you send this journalist to the Daily Briefings?" the user commented: "It would make more sense than sending your political journalists. They, quite frankly, do more harm than good. COVID19 should be a medical/scientific issue. These ridiculous, hateful, divisive journalists have politicised it." To an April *GMB* post (2020e) about updated information on the lockdown from the PM and a link to a *GMB* site with commentary by co-host Piers Morgan, one user commented on Morgan's approach and expertise and called

for a government boycott[ii] of the show, writing the host has "no expertise in anything he says but he is going to say it wether its right or wrong to get sime viewings…" On a May *JV* post (2020c) speculating whether the government was correct in reopening retail shops led to one user writing: "These journalists have driven people to suicide, they need stopping," having "whipped [the public] into a frenzy by the press spouting rubbish."

Across the three Facebook pages, users made connections between what they characterized as an inundation of surface-level coverage and sensationalistic discourse that negatively influenced some users' sense of the shows' legitimacy. As one *GMB* user commented on a May post (2020c) featuring vox pops and text about the dangers of visiting beaches: "Please report other news not just Coronavirus. And stop scare mongering and stirring the pot. It seems journalists aren't happy unless you're reporting doom and gloom." One April *JV* post (2020d) speculated about public sentiment on government handling of the crisis. In the posted video, host Jeremy Vine asked the nation's transport secretary what might happen with the virus in three weeks, why the lockdown was needed, and when the lockdown would end. Commented one user: "… if you have actually read most of the comments on there you'll have seen that most people are not worried about it don't really think it's necessary to know right now what's happening but instead just banging on regardless." Users especially commented on what they characterized as shows' sensationalized political infighting. For example, one *JV* post in May (2020e) of a still image of the UK PM speaking to cameras with text asking, "Has [PM] Boris Johnson done enough to clear up confusion about new lockdown rules?," drew user comments that highlighted critiques of media "bias," writing: "MSM (mainstream media) are stirring up a frenzy of unnecessary panic in their reporting."

The range of comments discussed in the analysis thus far have captured the interconnectedness of user discourse on and for social cohesion from morning shows' online content and their characterizations that sensationalism, speculation, and politicization undermined what could have been meaningful content to influence a sense of collectivity, cohesion and problem-solving, traits conventionally expected from "hard," not "soft," media content (Kilgo, Harlow, García-Perdomo & Salaverría, 2018). Below, we present the final theme in which users turned to the online platform to criticize, shame, or otherwise encourage programs to serve the public good through inertia of ideal notions of "good journalism."

Commenting on the "Hard(er)" Traits that Make "Good Journalism"
Throughout this analysis, commenters seemed to be balancing their expectations of "soft news" from the morning shows with the "harder(er)" turn that emerged during the pandemic where users subscribed to the imaginative power of idealistic standards, or "good journalism" (Fürst, 2020). At the same time, as we discuss in this section, users took issue with content when they considered it to be "too negative," redundant, obfuscating social and civic components of the show content, and sensational via insider politics – aspects that go against an inertia of "good journalism." For example, one user wrote this on a May *BBC* post (2020f) that included a short video about opinions related to lockdown rules and visiting beaches:

> I have been watching BBC Breakfast for years. I like the presenters and it has always been informative. However I am disappointed that you have not been asking the government challenging questions on their actions . ... Therefore I am now tuning into Good Morning on [ITV] because they ARE challenging the government. ... You are meant to be journalists not a government mouthpiece. Please do better and I will return.

The balance of "hardness" and "softness" in the tone and tenor in user commentary is, of course, a finding that on the surface that reveals the complications of today's hybridity; yet, this analysis is moreover interested in the veins of reasoning and interpretations of "good journalism" that commenters applied in their critiques. For instance, one user focused on what they considered to be perhaps a "too soft" journalistic presentation of issues: "Madness. You, the BBC, need to question [opinions against the lockdown], not blindly accept and promote what will result in a further death sentence for thousands and more damage to the economy." Users on other show pages also took programs to task for their reporting on rationales for (and for following) restrictions. Indeed, users seemed to question whether the morning show had appropriately balanced the "hard" and "soft" approach. On another April *GMB* post (2020d) that included former PM Tony Blair, who was critical of the current government's COVID-19 plans, a user commented that the morning show might "have a serious rethink on how they approach covering Coronavirus. I think they are grossly misjudging the mood of the public with their constant abuse and attacking interview style of government."

Furthermore, users indicated a balance between "hard" and "soft" had not been met. In May, to a *GMB* post (2020e) about medical doctor who "interprets the government's latest advice to mean you can meet in a group of six people in total from a maximum of two households," one user commented: "Rahhhhhh! 😡😡😠😠 so angered by this team! This is where I would like Piers and Su to step in and ask him why!!" A May *JV* post (2020f) led to similar critique when users suggested the show failed to scrutinize government positions on regulations. "Was amazed this morning at your total bias," one user wrote on a post featuring an image of the Palace of Westminster building in London and that asked users whether England should work with its other UK countries in lockdown restrictions. "… all you could do was try to make it a political issue by solely referencing Scotland as doing things different from the masterclass in England. This is a repetitive formula in your shows and frankly unpalateable under current situation."

That commenters frequently discuss and debate political issues is common (Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2015) is not lost on this analysis; yet, such comments that connect "soft" programs to conventional "hard" journalistic standards – including that the shows operate *against* public interest – deserves attention. One May *GMB* post (2020f) that reported on confusion about lockdown regulations, led to this user comment, for instance: "It really isn't that confusing!. ... Once again the media are trying to catch the govt out with their ridiculous pathetic questions. They are the one's trying to confuse the public!" On a May *JV* post (2020g) that asked, "Is it okay to shame your neighbour for missing the clap for carers? … would you judge your neighbour if they failed to show up?," one user commented: "Zzzzz, I've just got to stop watching this programme."

This section of the analysis solidifies the paper's argument – that users, despite their differing opinions on the quality of the content shared by morning shows – recognize longstanding, conventional, even if idealistic, standards of journalism which they applied in their commentary. Below, we discuss the study's implications from highlighting tension between the imaginative power of journalistic ideals, practice, and audiences' abilities to critique.

Conclusion

Our paper operates under the premise that the hybridity of "hard" and "soft" news has perhaps not negatively influenced audiences' abilities to recognize the notion of "good journalism" even as infotainment, sensationalistic journalism, and new forms of digital products have shaken the foundation of recognizable news ecosystems. At its core, this study interrogates the discourse of comments on online morning show posts about "serious" issues of COVID-19 and lockdown in the UK for their consistent application of idealized constructions of "hard news" as a benchmark against which to measure "soft news" content online. We use this analysis to evidence the lasting impressions of "hard(er)" journalistic standards that remain amidst the blurring of hard/soft news and genres. The implications of this study are five-fold. First, for the practicing journalist and normative scholar, that audiences of "soft news" content, such as morning shows, recognize conventional and long-standing notions of journalism could be a relief of fears that hybridity has undermined dominant perceptions – and perhaps expectations – of "good journalism." Second, this study provides an area for future research into the news senses and legitimacies of "soft news" audiences, belying an assumption that such users are unable or uninterested in conventional journalistic standards even when interacting with "soft news" platforms. Third, scholars should further consider the role of "soft news" in relaying information – not just entertainment – in building social cohesion and security, including during crisis and uncertainty. Fourth, we find value in the notion of journalistic imaginaries and its potential "inertia" that may fuel audience expectations of media content, its forms and functions. Our data showed that audience members did not refer to a shared, unified idea of an idealized journalism, but rather heterogeneous normative imaginaries, and future research would do well to examine this further. This has implications for the intersections of journalistic norms and values and shifting audience expectations in an age of journalistic hybridity across digital platforms. Scholars and journalists alike have in recent years examined audiences' trust and belief of journalistic content, and it might be fruitful to further explore from what sources and lived experience audiences gain their beliefs and expectations of "good journalism" to produce and research the power of news for the future. Lastly, we query whether tensions related to this hybridity is exacerbated during times of high uncertainty and perceptions of risk, as was experienced during the pandemic context within which this data was collected. Future research should explore how these contextual factors may influence those expectations, trust in and perceptions of journalistic legitimacy.

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[i] We reproduce program posts and user comments verbatim.

[ii] UK officials did host a ban of *Good Morning Britain* from April to November 2020.