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A Game Worth the Candle? French Journalists and Their *Illusio* in the Face of Disinformation

Pauline Renaud

City St George's, University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Ongoing disruptions to information ecosystems place unabated pressure on journalists to identify false news stories. In France, the 2017–2022 period epitomised such challenges, as they had to grapple with an outpouring of disinformation through increasingly sophisticated methods. As economic, organisational and political pressures often leave them with inadequate resources to counter the issue, why do journalists still believe their job is worth doing? To answer this question, Bourdieu's concept of *illusio*, summarised as the idea that "the game is worth the candle/the effort", has been applied in guiding interviews with 15 participants working for French mainstream news organisations. Findings hint at a shift in the traditional buttresses of journalistic *illusio*, many no longer considering that they have the capacity to influence in the current information disorder. Crucially, most of the interviewees admit questioning the impact of their work, in particular since the COVID-19 pandemic, which points to a gap between ideals and practice. While self-reflection is always beneficial in a profession traditionally reluctant to consider its own shortcomings, understanding the factors that erode this *illusio* is key at a time when a journalist's career in France only lasts, on average, 15 years.

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Introduction

What continues to motivate journalists to do their job in the information disorder, as their authority and autonomy have become increasingly compromised? Defined as the ongoing pollution of information ecosystems (Wardle, 2018), the current disorder has been crystallised by the convergence of several factors in the past two decades, including sophisticated new communication technologies, the booming development of social media, political polarisation, declining trust in institutions, and the proliferation of mediated voices (Carlson and Peifer 2013). Far from suggesting that an "information order" ever existed, the current crisis has, nonetheless, brought into sharp focus the trust challenges faced by legacy media (Bakir and McStay 2018). Exacerbating this are populist leaders weaponising the term "fake news" (Farkas and Schou 2018) to discredit journalists and organisations critical of their policies.

CONTACT Pauline Renaud pauline.renaud.2@city.ac.uk

With the authority of journalism becoming more and more contested (Carlson 2017), news professionals have encountered difficulties in fulfilling their Fourth Estate function, understood as the "mission to inform, engage, analyse, uncover, report events and issues of public interest and to hold power to account" (Felle 2016, 87). Additionally, technological advancements—such as AI and related deepfakes—have placed journalists in a David vs. Goliath situation, whereby inadequate resources mean their ability to tackle the flood of disinformation is inversely proportional to societal expectations to do so. The dilemma is both material and epistemic. Journalists, globally, consider that a main part of their professional duty is to correct false information (Hanitzsch et al. 2011) and that journalism is, in its essence, a discipline of verification (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021). In the current information disorder, where news is constantly dislocated and recreated by various actors of the social space—including politicians, Google and Meta, and influencers (Ekström and Westlund 2020)—journalists' epistemic claims to be the main producers of news content are increasingly called into question. Their ability to provide accurate and timely information is, similarly, compromised. The search for truth, thus, becomes a curse (Esquénazi 2014).

At stake is the ideology of the journalism, which acts as a cement by bonding individuals together. As argued by Bourdieu (1996a, 11), "each profession produces a professional ideology, a more or less mythologized representation of itself, the group of journalists like all the others". Developing this, the French sociologist put forward the concept of *illusio* to examine "an agent's emotional and cognitive 'investment' in the stakes involved in any field or, simply, the belief that the game is worth playing" (Benson and Neveu 2005, 3). Journalists' *illusio* acts as a stabilising power for the field, reinforcing the group's and individuals' motivations (Vos 2016, 386). This *illusio*, to maintain its bonding effect, supposes a degree of alignment between ideals and practice or, in other words, "journalists' autonomy and freedom over their work to put in practice at the individual level what they think are the most important roles of journalism" (Mellado et al. 2017b, 7).

In France, discussions and concerns over the field's autonomy have long endured. Placing journalism at the intersection of several external logics, Bourdieu (1998a; 2005[1995]) considered that economic and political constraints both weigh heavily on the profession. Given that such pressures are in constant flux, the current information disorder provides a new angle from which to examine relations between French journalism and external actors. Studies have, for instance, considered the impact of regulatory initiatives against disinformation on journalistic autonomy (Benedetti 2018; Huyghe 2018), in particular President Emmanuel Macron's anti-fake news law passed in late 2018. Autonomy has also been impacted by new relations between French newsrooms and information intermediaries, such as Google and Meta, partly as a result of fact-checking partnerships put in place ahead of the 2017 presidential election (Huyghe 2018; Joux and Pélissier 2018). As the disinformation phenomenon underlines interdependences with a variety of political actors, attention must turn to how fresh tensions around journalists' authority and autonomy affect their belief that the game is still worth the candle. In a competitive and cacophonic media ecology, regularly disrupted by geopolitical and technological challenges, the objective of this research is to understand how journalists can continue to position themselves as trusted fact-checkers.

The following section reviews the literature on *illusio,* as well as on disinformation and fact-checking in the French journalistic field to highlight how the Bourdieusian concept merits renewed attention. Following this is a presentation of the qualitative research method used to operationalise the research questions. Interviews with 15 journalists working for French mainstream media show that their *illusio* persists but is mainly buttressed by their belief in their civic duty. Additionally, this *illusio* is showing signs of erosion, as several participants admit to a feeling of disenchantment about their day-to-day practice since the COVID-19 pandemic. As journalists face mounting pressures to identify fabricated stories, the discussion and conclusion suggest paying greater attention to the emotional toll the phenomenon has on them.

Literature Review

Illusio in the Journalistic Field

Until recently, the notion of *illusio* rarely featured in discussions about the sociology of journalism, unlike other Bourdieusian notions such as *field*, *capital, habitus* and *doxa* (Hellmueller, Vos, and Poepsel 2013; Hovden 2012; Monnier 2018; Schultz 2007; Vos 2019). In the past few years, however, the concept has experienced a resurgence in interest, as researchers have applied it to examine, for instance, the expectations of young reporters (Nölleke, Maares, and Hanusch 2022), the role conceptions of Iranian journalists (Ranji 2022), as well as the formation of a belief in journalism as a worthwhile career in the late nineteenth century (Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2023). As such, *illusio* is closely related to role conception, which considers how journalists conceive their roles, as opposed to role enactment or performance, which is interested in how these roles translate into practice (Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017a).

Bourdieu first mentioned *illusio* in 1979 in *Distinction*, a report about the state of French culture, using it as a synonym for belief in the constitutive game of a field. However, the sociologist only started developing the concept from the 1990s (Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu 1996b), writing at the end of that decade: "Taking part in the *illusio* … means taking seriously (sometimes to the point of making them questions of life and death) stakes which, arising from the logic of the game itself, establish its 'seriousness'" (Bourdieu 2000, 15). *Illusio* can, thus, be understood as the set of beliefs that structures a particular field, mobilising agents and fuelling their competitiveness (Petrikas 2019). Neveu (2019) gives the example of war reporters willing to risk their lives in the name of journalism's civic role. Similarly, Vos (2016) points to individuals seeking the thrills of reporting—by chasing exclusive stories and big interviews—without questioning the aims. According to the scholar, this attitude demonstrates that "agents have surveyed the field and considered the field worth fighting for" (Vos 2016, 386).

Core to the concept of *illusio* is that any game involves costs and implies rewards (Bourdieu 1998b). Powers and Vera-Zambrano (2023) have found that the material and symbolic rewards that originally underpinned the belief in journalism as a worthwhile career consisted of a quick, reliable and sufficient pay, the possibility of expression, a connection to broader social values, a capacity for influence, and an adventurous and exciting lifestyle. While most imply a degree of autonomy, these rewards are also linked to the question of authority. Leading an exciting professional life in the nineteenth century

included the possibility "to rub shoulders with the captains of industry and walk the corridors of political power" (Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2023, 10). Today, still, being a journalist often means having access to people and events that are out of reach for most other people (Delporte 1999).

Within the French context, this consideration is key, as the journalistic and political fields were once intrinsically related (Caron 2018; Champagne 2005[1995]; Chupin, Hubé, and Kaciaf 2012). Rieffel (1984) highlights how some journalists and politicians continue to share social origins, educational backgrounds, personal and family relations, as well as common interests. Similarly, Kuhn (2010, 367) talks of "functional proximity" to describe the interplay between actors of both fields, who operate in a relatively small Paris-centric world. This proximity to power grants authority and, for some, represents the symbolic reward that underpins their belief that journalism is worthy of their efforts. This aspect also helps understand how *illusio* is linked to the notion of *capital*. Individuals with the most social, cultural and/or economic capital are also often the ones with greater access to these inner circles of power (see Gaxie 2017). *Illusio* is also closely related to the concept of *habitus*, which is described as having a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu 1998b). By helping journalists to navigate changes and challenges, such as enabling them to integrate new digital related-practices without, seemingly, much effort (Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022), the *habitus* preserves their *illusio*. They may believe their response to a crisis, such as disinformation, is instinctive when it is, in fact, historically and culturally shaped (Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022).

The material and symbolic rewards that support the *illusio* reinforce both individuals' and the group's motivations. As such, the concept acts as an endogenous force for the field, providing it with structure and stability (Vos 2016). This stability is, however, susceptible to disruptions. Journalism, as any other field, must contend with exogenous forces, in particular political, technological and economic ones, which limit its autonomy and question its authority. However, the lack of autonomy makes the gap between ideals and practice inevitable (Mellado and Van Dalen 2014); journalists' *illusio* may show signs of strain, as a result. Certain crises may also affect individuals' belief that the game is still worth the candle.

French Journalists in the Face of Disinformation

Charon (2023), in his study of young journalists in France, has found that one of the reasons for their disenchantment with the profession is the constant scramble to produce information in a short timeframe: "Hard news leads to imposed work without room for initiative, without real editorial autonomy … This rhymes, too often, with "the race for information" at the origin of shortcomings due to a lack of verification and perspective in the fake news era" (Charon 2023, 53). The issue with disinformation is not a recent one. However, according to Bakir and McStay (2018), five main features of the current digital media ecology have contributed to amplifying the phenomenon: the economic decline of legacy news organisations in the past 20 years; the immediacy of the news cycle; the rapid production and spread of user-generated content; the increasingly emotionalised nature of online discourse; and the capitalisation of social media and search engines' algorithms.

In France, the 2017 presidential election campaign signalled a change in magnitude while crystallising the growing role of a number of actors in fuelling disinformation, besides politicians. Activists, influencers and technology giants, such as Google and Facebook/Meta, all contributed to the influx of fabricated stories that targeted the different candidates. This culminated with the Macron Leaks—the hack and leak of then-candidate Emmanuel Macron's campaign emails on social media—two days before the second round of the election. Journalists found themselves with limited time and resources to determine the authenticity and origin of the content leaked. Despite suspicions that Russia was behind the hack, the perpetrators were never formally identified. Since then, disinformation has continued to cluster around events and crises, such as the "yellow vests" protests that started in late 2018, and the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. In the face of a global "infodemic", journalistic practices and routines showed their limits (Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022). With often no prior knowledge about the virus, and reduced access to reliable sources and means of verifying content, reporters found themselves at greater risk of contributing to the information disorder.

These events have meant greater challenges in not only verifying information but also in maintaining their authority over this traditional journalistic prerogative (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021). In a media ecology characterised by an increasing number of actors, practices, and discursive forms (Carlson and Peifer 2013; Ekström and Westlund 2020), news professionals are perceived as having no more legitimacy in providing information than any other citizen. The Internet and social media have given everyone the opportunity to "become a medium", challenging the legitimacy of journalists' status "as mediators in the public sphere" through a disintermediation process (Chupin, Hubé, and Kaciaf 2012, 100; see also Joux and Pélissier 2018). Alternative voices have, in recent years, been competing with established news organisations for the production of information. In France, the most successful is Hugo Travers, known as HugoDécrypte, who produces news videos aimed at younger audiences and was recently granted a press card despite criticisms about his status as a journalist (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's Digital News Report 2024).

Eroding advertising revenue as a result of greater competition, and the subsequent growing precarity of the profession, have also undermined journalistic authority, questioning its ability to position itself "as the arbiter of what is right, true, and good" (Vos and Thomas 2018, 2001). Sarelska and Jenkins (2022, 2) note how the pandemic intensified some of these challenges, including "a bleeding business model exacerbated by emerging technologies causing increasing competition for advertising dollars, and audiences increasingly moving away from traditional media". As such, hurdles are not only material, they are also epistemic in that they challenge the field's ideology, which partly pivots on assertions that journalists provide accurate and verified information to the public (Carlson 2017).

Aside from the question of authority, the impact of disinformation on journalists' *illusio* must also be examined from the perspective of autonomy. Hallin and Mancini (2004) once placed, with some reservations, France under the Polarized Pluralist model of media system, characterised by a high degree of state intervention in the media field and a low degree of distance between politicians and journalists. However, "a somewhat stronger tendency toward journalistic professionalization and concerns for journalistic autonomy distances France from the core of the polarized pluralist tradition", notes Pfetsch

(2014, 165). Those working for the public service, in particular, regularly seek to affirm their commitment to independence as demonstrated by the strikes that took place in May 2024 against President Macron's plans to reorganise *France Télévisions* and *Radio France*. Despite "criticisms from politicians across the party spectrum" (Kuhn 2019, 69), public service radio and television, which are deeply embedded in the media landscape at both the national and regional levels, consistently lead trust surveys (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's Digital News Report 2025). Conversely, privately-owned news outlets fail to score more than 50% in these surveys, with the exception of *Le Monde* and the regional press.

Nevertheless, the French media have been increasingly dominated by powerful multinationals, highlighting the fact that, despite economic difficulties and trust challenges, they continue to be perceived as "an important vector of influence and notoriety by certain captains of industry" (Rieffel 2017, 197). As such, and despite aspirations towards greater autonomy, the profession is "structurally condemned" to operate under political and economic pressures (Champagne 2005[1995], 50; see also Caron 2018). In his comparison of how journalists in France and Germany perceive political influence on their work, Maurer (2019, 1254) demonstrates that "working in a French context increases perceived political influence in media coverage in general".

Fact-checking and the Struggle for Authority and Autonomy

Scholars (Benedetti 2018; Huyghe 2018) highlight how the issue with disinformation has been used to further justify political encroachment on journalistic autonomy, as illustrated by President Macron's law against the manipulation of information. Passed in late 2018, the bill empowers judges to order, during election campaigns, the immediate removal of news content they consider false. Notwithstanding difficulties in applying it, the law has drawn criticisms for the risk of censorship and threats to fundamental freedoms it poses. For Benedetti (2018), such legislation embodies presidential efforts to assert authority over the media while questioning theirs as legitimate purveyors of information.

Against this, fact-checking of political statements as a journalistic genre has enabled certain outlets, including *Le Monde* and *Libération*, to maintain their credentials as newspapers of record (Rieffel 2017), by reasserting their authority over audiences, social media and political powers (Bigot 2018; Joux and Pélissier 2018; Monnier 2020). Through its commitment to accuracy, transparency and critical distance from sources, fact-checking has become an opportunity for the profession to rebuild its legitimacy, repositioning journalists as trustworthy actors of the public sphere (Joux and Pélissier 2018; Singer 2021), all the while reinforcing their own *illusio*.

Fact-checking took off in 2008 with *Libération*'s Désintox unit, followed shortly after by *Le Monde*'s Décodeurs. Such processes gained credibility during the 2017 presidential election campaign, when collaborative projects such as CrossCheck—a fact-checking project that brought together Facebook, Google and 37 newsrooms—as well as AFP Factuel (between *AFP* and Facebook) emerged. However, fact-checking partnerships with technology platforms have also led to dissension within the profession (Joux and Pélissier 2018), between those supporting such initiatives as necessary firepower in the fight against disinformation, and those opposing them, often on moral grounds. As highlighted by Nicey (2022, 74), while such partnerships have enabled newsrooms to gain

access to digital giants' tools and to benefit from a new source of revenues, they also "reinforce an "integrative and asymmetrical" relationship whereby journalists specialised in verification of online information serve as a guarantee while providing both their reputation and their expertise". These concerns led newspaper *Libération* to end its collaboration with Facebook in 2020, citing the wish to preserve its editorial independence vis-à-vis the private company (Moullot 2021).

As such, crises, such as the current information disorder, "constitute a privileged means of grasping the networks of interdependence in (and with) which journalists are involved" (Chupin and Nollet 2006, 28). Examining the interplay between disinformation and perceived autonomy and authority provides a new perspective from which to analyse gaps between ideals and practice and how French journalists position themselves in the current media environment. Guiding this inquiry—including how such gaps may, in turn, affect one's belief that the game is still worth playing—are two research questions:

RQ1: What are the main elements buttressing journalists' *illusio* in the face of disinformation?

RQ2: How do journalists' difficulties in countering disinformation affect their *illusio*?

Method

To answer the research questions, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists over a 10-month period. They were asked to reflect on their role and practice in the face of disinformation over the 2017–2022 period. This period, bookended by two presidential elections, has crystallised this issue in France, starting with the 2017 vote as well as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022. Interviews are extensively used by scholars to examine how journalists make sense of their role in the face of a particular event (Balod and Hameleers 2021; Padovani 2022). Such a method may not capture, in totality, the cultural factors that shape their intentions, partly because "what journalists say they do is not always what they actually do" (Perreault and Hanusch 2022, 15). Additionally, answers are often incomplete—as they may, consciously or not, withhold some information—and are subject to the researcher's own interpretations. That said, interviewing remains "one of the most effective methods for collecting rich data on newsroom practices and attitudes" (Koliska and Assmann 2021, 2734).

Initially, a dozen journalists were identified, having been purposely sampled based on their knowledge of questions of disinformation. Gender, beat, seniority and position were also considered. These aspects are key in Bourdieusian sociology, which is interested in agents' positions within any given field. A "snowballing" technique (Becker 1963) was also used, whereby participants were asked if they would recommend a colleague for this research. This is particularly useful when looking to interview certain individuals who would, otherwise, be difficult to reach. The final sample consists of 15 journalists, ten men and five women. Data saturation was reached at the fifteenth interview, that is when no new key information or themes emerged (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Although the number of respondents is limited in comparison to quantitative studies, it nonetheless significantly surpasses McCracken's (1988) recommendation of eight participants in the context of qualitative, semi-structured interviews. The first round of interviews ran from September 2021 to March 2022. A second round of interviews took place between May

2022 and July 2022, with seven of the journalists from the original sample. Although all the participants had initially agreed to be interviewed twice, only some of them were contacted again based on their initial responses, as well as the researcher's need to elicit more details from their experiences. The objective was also to understand how journalists' reflections might change over time and in relation to certain events, such as the 2022 presidential election and the war in Ukraine.

The chosen news organisations consist of the six daily, national, generalist and paid-for press outlets in France, which are available both online and in print form. They include *Le Monde*, *Libération*, and *Le Figaro,* which are all newspapers of record in France, in that they are among the oldest publications in the country, and their production is considered both authoritative and independent. Added to these are *La Croix,* which is a Roman Catholic newspaper established in 1880, *L'Humanité*, close to the French Communist Party, and *Le Parisien/Aujourd'hui en France*, which is a national publication with local and regional editions. Also included in the research corpus are two pure players with singular identities and business models: *France Info*, the public broadcaster's website; and *Mediapart*, launched in 2008 as an independent, investigative online newspaper. TV and radio media were not included in this sample in an attempt to compare journalists with a seemingly similar *illusio*, one where public exposure is less of a core feature.

Despite differences in political, organisational/medium, and economic profile, these organisations have in common the production of general news on a daily basis and for a national audience, making their journalists suitable for a controlled comparative analysis. As mainstream outlets, they also form part of the orthodox pole of the field in that the information they produce tends to adhere to traditional journalistic norms and expectations such as accuracy, fairness, honesty, and autonomy (Hovden 2012). Far from being representative of the entire French media landscape, they, nonetheless, benefit from a form of prestige, as well as greater agenda-setting and legitimating powers (Benson and Hallin 2007). Additionally, all eight newsrooms are located in, or near, Paris. As observed by Benson (2006), journalistic capital consists in socially recognised legitimacy which, in the case of France, includes geographic location. Traditionally, Paris-based newsrooms have formed part of the media elite and, as such, their discourse often possesses a greater degree of symbolic capital and authority, embodying "a system's dominant professional ideals" (Benson et al. 2012, 26). Therefore, studying the perceptions of journalists working for this perceived influential, yet disparate, elite aims to elicit greater implications for the field, overall.

The sample of interviewees per publication is as follows: *Le Monde* ($n = 2$); *Libération* ($n = 2$); *Le Figaro* ($n = 2$); *France Info* ($n = 2$); *La Croix* ($n = 3$); *L'Humanité* ($n = 1$); *Mediapart* ($n = 2$); and *Le Parisien* ($n = 1$). They consist of three media journalists/editors, four fact-checkers/editors, one political journalist, two economy reporters, one investigative reporter, one journalist/community manager, two health/science journalists, and one tech journalist (see Table 1). The decision to include fact-checking journalists stems from the need to understand how their *illusio* might differ from journalists who are not as familiar with these processes, given the initial resistance fact-checking specialists were faced with in newsrooms. Discussing the emergence of fact-checking as a new genre, Bigot (2018, 114) notes how the "mechanical" aspect of this practice moves away "from the tradition of French political journalism, more historically versed in analyses and opinions than in the factual processing of information". As fact-checking became more established

Table 1. Interviews.

Interviewee	Media outlet	Years of experience[a]	Job title[b]
Journalist 1	*France Info*	15+ years	Fact-checker, editor
Journalist 2	*Mediapart*	15+ years	Journalist
Journalist 3	*L'Humanité*	15+ years	Journalist, editor
Journalist 4	*La Croix*	15+ years	Journalist, editor
Journalist 5	*Libération*	15+ years	Fact-checker, editor
Journalist 6	*La Croix*	Less than 15 years	Journalist
Journalist 7	*Libération*	15+ years	Senior reporter
Journalist 8	*France Info*	Less than 15 years	Journalist
Journalist 9	*Mediapart*	15+ years	Journalist, editor
Journalist 10	*Le Figaro*	15+ years	Editor-in-chief
Journalist 11	*Le Monde*	Less than 15 years	Reporter, fact-checker
Journalist 12	*Le Figaro*	15+ years	Editor-in-chief
Journalist 13	*La Croix*	Less than 15 years	Journalist
Journalist 14	*Le Monde*	15+ years	Reporter, fact-checker
Journalist 15	*Le Parisien*	Less than 15 years	Journalist

As of November 2022.
At the time of the interview(s).

within French newsrooms, albeit at the price of some tensions, these specialised reporters acquired a unique form of authority in challenging, head-on, politicians' discourse (Bigot 2018). All the participants are seasoned professionals, the number of years of experience ranging from eight to 32 years. Except for two journalists, all participants waived their right to anonymity. In the interest of consistency and clarity, all have been anonymised in the findings and efforts have been made to limit identification risks by removing some of the characteristics from Table 1 (gender, precise number of years of experience, and beat with the exception of fact-checking).

In the first round, the interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1 hour and 24 minutes each. They were conducted over the phone ($n = 13$) and via Microsoft Teams ($n = 2$), partly due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions. In the second round, journalists were interviewed over the phone ($n = 3$), via Microsoft Teams ($n = 1$) and in person ($n = 3$). The interviews lasted between 26 minutes and 1 hour and 31 minutes each. A few broad themes—disinformation, practices, roles and responsibilities—underpinned the standard list of 16 open-ended questions. These were supplemented by follow-up questions to address gaps identified by the researcher. Despite following a script, the semi-structured nature of the interviews meant the interviewees were, in each round, given the opportunity to talk freely about issues that came up naturally in the conversations.

The interviews, recorded with the participants' informed consent, and the help of a voice recorder, were conducted in French and translated into English by the researcher using, as a first step, Google Translate. In a second phase, the researcher, who is a native speaker of French, closely read the translated texts and checked for errors and inaccuracies. Finally, all quotes selected in the findings were, once again, carefully reviewed. The first phase of inductive coding for the 16.5 hours worth of interview transcripts consisted in immersing oneself in the material. Using NVivo 12, the objective was to identify recurring discursive tropes—for instance, precarity, trust, capacity for influence—before organising them in a table, cross-referencing them by interviewee and by question. The second step was guided by the concept of interpretation (Magnusson and Marecek 2015), used to understand the meanings individuals ascribe to events and actions and how they negotiate them, as they seek to achieve cognitive consonance between their

beliefs and behaviours. This socio-discursive approach points to a shift in journalistic *illusio*, as some of the buttressing features of this concept are quasi absent from the interviewees' discourse, but also to an erosion of this *illusio*.

Results

Emphasis on Civic Duty: A Shifting Illusio

Powers and Vera-Zambrano (2023, 1) have identified a "capacity for influence" and a "connection to broader social values' as some of the main features buttressing "the belief that journalism constituted a social game worthy of one's energies" in late nineteenth century France and the USA. Results for this present research, however, show that the capacity for influence—or that reporters can "move public opinion and alter reputations" (Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2023, 11)—is almost entirely absent from the interviewees' discourse on their role against disinformation. An editor working for *Le Figaro*, nonetheless, considers that the profession acts as a beacon of "re-information" in an otherwise treacherous public sphere: "Paradoxically, the more we live in a fuzzy world, the more it redirects people towards recognised brands … Information that is verified, real and claimed as such will become scarce and, therefore, will gain value". Similarly, an editor at *Mediapart* suggests that mainstream news organisations occupy a central position in the current media environment insofar as they adhere to traditional practices of verification and investigation. Highlighting the crucial role of journalists in debunking claims made by French biology researcher Didier Raoult on the benefits of hydroxychloroquine against COVID-19, she says: "There have been journalistic investigations to show that this physician, this powerful figure, was wrong. That goes far beyond fact-checking".

For most participants, in particular those in senior positions, persistence of their *illusio* is discernible in their emphasis on the intrinsic value of their role in the public sphere. At the turn of the century, "the belief that journalism was worthwhile became reinforced through a translation of the *illusio* into a discursive register that touched upon larger moral, aesthetic, and political horizons" (Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2023, 12). A similar belief can be observed when an editor at *France Info* argues that in a public sphere where "journalists' voices have become inaudible", it has become "even more essential to stick to the values and ethics that make journalism, to maintain our position in this society, where everything turns into hysteria". Through the recurring use of the term "professional", participants attach social importance to their work. A second reporter at *Le Figaro* argues that "to be informed, you have to go and see professionals, as you would see a doctor when you need medical treatment", without expanding on what being a professional entails. This notion, therefore, assumes a shared, yet vague understanding of journalism that separates them from laypersons (Cornu 2009).

This connection to broader social values is also evidenced in the emphasis on their watchdog role. According to a fact-checker at *Le Monde*, the publication "tries to be an effective watchdog, although we cannot do much to restore confidence in institutions". Similarly, an editor at *L'Humanité* considers that the newspaper consistently focuses "on content, on the substance of things, as watchdogs of our society, to try and fight disinformation and provide up-to-date, first-class, and committed information for a

committed audience". Innovation is, according to the editor at *Mediapart*, the most effective way for legacy media to continue fulfilling this function: "Our evolution towards a mix of written and audiovisual content has been strong. *Le Monde* and *The New York Times* do amazing things in video. Maybe one day, we will no longer know that *Mediapart* comes from the written press."

On fact-checking, participants believe that the practice is useful not so much to convince audiences about whether a story is true or not, but to reaffirm that journalism remains a key element of healthy democracies. A reporter from *Le Figaro* describes fact-checking as a "ridiculous dam against the flood of disinformation" but considers it can provide the media with "additional credibility" and help "rebuild a bit of eroded trust with audiences". For some, fact-checking is, therefore, not so much helpful against false news, as it is in giving people the illusion that the media can act against this phenomenon. Similarly, a fact-checker and editor at *France Info* emphasises the importance of trust in buttressing the profession in the current information disorder: "You still need this counterpoint, this little bit of truth that exists somewhere on the Internet and that can be used as a reference point in the face of disinformation". For a journalist at *Le Parisien*, meanwhile, it is important to provide arguments to those who have doubts but do not have the time to check, because "there are people who trust us".

Against disinformation, findings show that, for many participants, their role conceptions partly hinge on imaginaries about what journalism can potentially do (Krzyżanowski 2014) as opposed to what the profession can actually do. While this attachment to broader social values continues to buttress the participants' belief that the game is worth the candle, their realisation of a loss of influence hints not only at a shifting but also an eroding *illusio*.

Since the Pandemic: An Eroding Illusio

The COVID-19 pandemic crystallised, for several of them, concerns about the actual impact of journalism. This feeling of disillusion about the reach of their practice is mainly present among fact-checkers and health specialists. A reporter from *La Croix,* who covered the pandemic, considers that she sometimes felt "a little hopeless". According to her, "even with facts", journalists cannot get through to people: "I can only inform people who want to be informed … Disinformation has grown to such an extent, especially on Twitter … It's disheartening considering the work we do". Similarly, for a fact-checker at *Le Monde*, "we can't leave dangerous discourse unverified, but I've come back from the idea that we can re-inform people."

An ensuing concern is the disintegration of their gatekeeping prerogatives. According to a fact-checker at *France Info*, "there's a desire to bypass the media, to speak directly on social media, to do without mediation or intermediaries for fear these might distort their words or, to put it simply, counterbalance them". He considers that COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine highlighted the fact that traditional news organisations were "a bit outdated", in comparison with how influencers communicate with audiences: "On TikTok, influencers spread their conspiracy theories to millions … The same communities that were against the COVID-19 vaccines are now lying about the war in Ukraine, slipping from one conspiracy to another, and saying that the news media hide the truth." In a similar vein, a

reporter at *Mediapart* considers that "the function of journalists as filters between public discourse, be that of a business or some form of power, and audiences is disappearing. All these entities do without journalists to directly reach the public". He continues: "Journalists are losing their credibility, as people no longer know which way to turn … The truth is actually no longer valuable, and this is quite dramatic."

Increased competition and polarisation of the French media ecosystem, fuelled by disinformation, are to blame for this loss of influence, according to the editor at *L'Humanité*: "Nowadays, any information is worth as much as any other. A number of people, such as the yellow vests, do not have access to quality information … What we lack today is the audience. With a newspaper at €2.20, it's difficult." The responsibility of news professionals in spreading false information—as they, for instance, echoed the government's recommendations against wearing face masks at the start of the pandemic—has further polarised the public, says a journalist at *France Info*: "Dialogue can sometimes be complicated because some people are so entrenched in their radical, conspiratorial thinking … Their anger is very strong because they imagine us colluding with political authorities." Her colleague goes on to suggest that criticisms from the public show a lack of understanding of *France Info*'s nonpartisan positioning. Similarly, for a journalist at *Le Monde*: "The fundamental problem today is that, for citizens, the media are not a fourth power but a kind of relay of government speech", a perception that firmly established itself during COVID-19, according to the participants.

Several reporters also highlight how, since the pandemic, the issue with disinformation has taken a more personal turn. Given the rise in verbal attacks and smear campaigns on social media, and growing defiance from relatives and acquaintances, a fact-checker at *Le Monde* considers that COVID-19 turned the phenomenon into a personal crisis. Similarly, a health journalist reflects on how false information on the subject of immunisation affected him personally, as relatives started questioning the quality of his work. This echoes Lewis' (2020, 685) observation that journalists during the pandemic were compelled to grapple with "the complexity of covering crisis and trauma while also experiencing it [themselves]". Meanwhile, a fact-checker at *Libération* points to the ongoing difficulty in affirming their authority not only in relation to the public, family and friends but also vis-à-vis their colleagues, despite the newspaper leading the fact-checking movement back in 2008. Recalling criticism about having to verify, again, their own articles after publication, he says: "Our problem at *Libé* is that our fact-checking service is seen as a medium within the medium … It would be a little smoother, internally, if there were an ombudsperson who did this [self-regulation] work". Lamenting the overall lack of recognition for fact-checking during the pandemic, despite being "as essential as war reporting or investigative journalism", a fact-checker at *Le Monde* talks of professional fatigue: "I don't see myself doing fact-checking for long. It's a shame because the question of true and false is fascinating. But fact-checking, as such, is an extremely frontal role, with people who are very aggressive, and often on shaky details."

This eroding *illusio* is also the result of increasingly sophisticated disinformation methods, and the use of AI, in particular since the war in Ukraine. A fact-checker at *Le Monde* explains that faced with a flood of user-generated content and with few means of verifying it, "we simply gave up, we could not prove the truth about these videos in such a limited amount of time. It was ultimately decided that this should be dealt with by correspondents/specialists in Ukraine". Confirming this, a second journalist at *Le*

Monde highlights how they "are forced to work extremely quickly against a flood of bogus disinformation … We are condemned to always work in a very short timeframe". An editor at *L'Humanité* also points to deteriorating working conditions as a factor for the spread of false narratives: "News, nowadays, travels much faster than when I started in 1995, and there is much less time spent on verifying information. As journalists, we sometimes get fooled by news, which ends up being fake".

Economic pressures on both organisations and individuals are considered the greatest threat to quality journalism while contributing to disinformation. "The press has declined in quality because there aren't enough editorial staff … Young people avoid journalism because they are scared for their future," says the editor at *L'Humanité*. Addressing organisational constraints, the two reporters from *La Croix* highlight how certain fact-checking practices threaten their autonomy. The health journalist, for instance, considers that news professionals "shouldn't write about what doesn't exist and, therefore, waste time and money on things that don't exist … We go against our very job of explaining what's going on in the world". In similar terms, the second *La Croix* journalist regrets that "although our primary mission is to verify information, we now have to seek false information on social media that may influence the public debate, precisely to debunk it".

Discussion and Conclusion

Since journalism became established as a viable profession at the turn of the twentieth century, its *illusio* has been acting as a cement for the field, reinforcing journalists' belief that the game is worth playing despite low wages, economic and political pressures and new technologies that demand constant adaptability. Certain crises and phenomena may, however, chip away at this *illusio*. This is the case with disinformation, which the global pandemic and the war in Ukraine have made particularly tangible. The results have highlighted the challenges journalists face in defending their authority and autonomy as fact-checkers in a digital, global and increasingly competitive media ecosystem. Table 2 summaries the main findings for this research with a particular focus on the concept of *illusio*, as well as insights on the questions of *capital* and *habitus*.

Regarding the first research question on the buttresses of journalists' *illusio*, this study demonstrates that verifying information to produce truthful accounts remains strongly associated with one of their main duties in their professional imaginaries. Already in 1989, French reporters had placed "avoiding stories with unverified content" as their main role, whereas for American and Brazilian journalists, this aspect only ranked third and fifth, respectively (Hersckovitz 2005). The persistence of this *illusio* in relation to the verification of information is noticeable when an editor at *Le Figaro* suggests that fact-checking can help "rebuild a bit of eroded trust with audiences", especially when conducted by "recognised brands". Findings from Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's Digital News Report 2025 indeed confirm that the public broadcaster, long-established regional newspapers and *Le Monde* remain the most trusted brands, whereas more recent news media such *CNews*, *BFM TV* and *HuffPost* rank far lower. From this discourse emerges a dichotomy, already identified by Schapals and Bruns (2022, 12), "between journalists' palpable concerns about the rise of "fake news' and their firm confidence that the present moment of crisis could be turned into an opportunity for journalism", including preserving its authority.

Table 2. Journalists and field theory concepts.

	Field theory concepts		
Journalists	*Illusio*	*Capital*	*Habitus*
Fact-checking journalists	Erosion of *illusio* due to limits of practices and repeated attacks, challenged *habitus*	Fact-checking used as journalistic capital enhancement strategy (mainly *France Info*)	Challenged *habitus* against scale of disinformation and sophisticated tools
Health journalists	Erosion of *illusio* due to limits of practices and repeated attacks, challenged *habitus*	Scientific knowledge not used as capital enhancement strategy	Pandemic challenges *habitus* (no knowledge about virus, unreliable sources)
Other specialisations	Erosion of *illusio* present but less obvious	N/A	N/A
More than 15 years' experience	*Illusio* at its strongest among editors, more professionally secure, despite challenged *habitus*	N/A	Challenged *habitus* due to lack of familiarity with digital innovations
Less than 15 years' experience	Eroded *illusio* due to gaps between ideals and practices	N/A	No evidence of challenged *habitus*
Larger outlets (newspapers of records, *France Info*, *Le Parisien*)	No difference in terms of *illusio* between journalists working for larger news organisations and those working for smaller ones	Emphasis on greater journalistic capital for *France Info* journalists; no evidence for other media	N/A
Smaller outlets (*Mediapart*, *La Croix*, *L'Humanité*)	No difference in terms of *illusio* between journalists working for larger news organisations and those working for smaller ones	Emphasis on lack of economic capital (*L'Humanité*) but greater journalistic capital (*Mediapart*)	N/A
Women	No difference in terms of *illusio* between women and men despite emphasis on lack of economic capital	Greater emphasis on (lack of) economic capital (individual and organisational)	N/A
Men	No difference in terms of *illusio* between women and men	No particular emphasis	N/A

This discourse is mostly present among senior reporters who often have greater financial and professional security, as well as authority, and are, therefore, less disillusioned about their practice. In their interviews, the civic duty that journalism fulfils becomes a leitmotif to insist on its continued relevance in the current information disorder when, for instance, debunking claims made by Raoult on hydroxychloroquine. In their study of German news outlets' responses to attacks on their institutions, Koliska and Assmann (2021, 2742) highlight that the discursive insistence on core journalistic norms aims to strengthen beliefs in the institutional myth. As such, the *illusio* continues to be buttressed by a connection to broader social values (Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2023).

The belief that the game is still worth playing is also strong in the discourse of the journalists at the public broadcaster, who repeatedly stress their "public service mission". Despite unabated political pressure, as illustrated by attempts from the president and government to weigh in on the appointment of managing editors (Maurer 2019), responses from the *France Info* reporters hint at the resilience of their *illusio*. Maurer (2019) has shown that French journalists perceived greater political influence on news content than their German counterparts did. In the face of disinformation, however, the participants in this present research seem particularly concerned about how

audiences perceive this political influence. Affirming their editorial autonomy, as limited as it may be, helps reinforce their own belief in the rules of the game.

In response to the second research question, journalists' *habitus*—that is their ability to respond to challenges in a quasi-automated fashion—was, during the COVID-19 pandemic, challenged to a point where it affected their *illusio*. Reduced autonomy stemming from inadequate economic and organisational resources against sophisticated disinformation methods contributed to a deterioration of their *illusio*, as the participants admitted feeling increasingly disillusioned about the impact of their work. The journalists who expressed the most difficulty in navigating between ideals and practice were found among fact-checkers—who tend to be younger and have a more idealised and autonomous conception of their profession (Bigot 2018)—as well as health specialists, to the point where they expressed feelings of disenchantment. Having to sift through an influx of false news while having little prior knowledge about the virus were cited as some of the main factors.

These were compounded by an impression of disintermediation, as politicians, influencers and news entrepreneurs bypass them to directly reach out to audiences on social media and, in some cases, spread false information. Sarelska and Jenkins (2022) indeed confirm—in their study of journalists' responses to COVID-19 disinformation in Italy, Spain and Bulgaria—that the pandemic heightened public distrust vis-à-vis the profession. Not only did the search for truth become a curse (Esquénazi 2014), but so did efforts to reestablish trust between journalists and their audiences. The rise in verbal attacks from the public and greater defiance from relatives contributed to turning the issue of disinformation into a personal crisis. Additionally, having access to the inner circles of power—which for some journalists underpins their *illusio* (see Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2023)—lost some of its appeal and relevance during the pandemic as certain sources in the political field became sources of disinformation. The failure by both public health institutions and governments to provide reliable, timely information—partly due to the lack of existing knowledge but also to cover up issues such as mask shortages—left news professionals unable to best fulfil their verification duties.

Additionally, fact-checking continues to face hostility from some journalists, which they see as inferior to their own practice. The editor at *Mediapart* considers that "there are other subjects besides fact-checking. Journalism is about reporting what's happening at the Belarussian/Polish border, for instance". Although fact-checkers have, over the years, acquired some authority, within newsrooms and among the public (Bigot 2018), the *France Info* editor argues that fact-checking "is a process that scares young journalists because it is often thankless. You must be on top of everything to settle between truth and falsehood. But then, you are seen as condescending".

That said, journalism continues to attract young people. According to the *Commission de la carte d'identité des journalistes professionnels* (CCiJP), 34,051 press cards were delivered in 2023, the first increase in 10 years. Charon (2023, 41) observes how the feeling of being useful remains one of the main incentives to join the profession; young journalists in France are driven by the opportunity to explain and convey information. However, this research shows that the capacity for influence—see Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2023—often rapidly ebbs away from their imaginary. The results align with findings by Charon and Pigeolat (2021) who, listing the reasons why individuals leave the field after 15

years on average, cite disillusion and a loss of meaning in their day-to-day practice, alongside financial precarity and difficult hours.

The realisation of the difficulty in "re-informing people" has, for some participants, resulted in the exploration of new avenues for the retention of their discursive authority and consolidation of their own professional ideology. A fact-checker at *Le Monde* has, for instance, reintroduced meaning in his work by writing more in-depth stories on disinformation, and the mechanisms through which people adhere to such false stories, as opposed to producing short verification articles. By conducting longer investigations, the journalist has been able to leave the newsroom more often to meet sources, thereby rekindling the idea of leading a meaningful professional life. However, the opportunity to adapt practices may be the privilege of few at elite media.

Thus, another area that merits attention is how the impact of disinformation-related challenges on journalists' *illusio* is closely related to economic considerations. Several of the participants expressed concern about increasing organisational pressures threatening their independence and ability to combat the issue. Always asked to produce and fact-check more stories to keep up with actors of disinformation, the journalists admitted to feeling, at times, disconnected from the role they initially wanted to play. Despite the participants being salaried employees working for established news media, several of them also addressed the question of their own precarity. They highlighted that the high turnover created by experienced journalists leaving the profession contributes to the current information disorder. Women, in particular, pointed to the interplay between financial difficulties at the individual level and the quality of the work produced. This may be because women journalists in France are far more likely to face precarity than men (Charon 2023). While this research shows that the promise of reliable pay is no longer a key element of the *illusio* (Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2023), it also demonstrates how deteriorating work conditions negatively affects the belief in the game.

Future research may consider examining what remains of the *illusio* for those who have left, or are considering leaving, the profession. Although seldom used in the literature, the Bourdieusian concept constitutes an innovative perspective from which to analyse the impact of certain crises and events on journalists. Studies may also be interested in investigating, using a larger sample of interviewees, how the *illusio* vary, depending on the organisation they work for and their employment contracts. While the chosen news outlets benefit from strong journalistic and/or economic capital and, therefore, authority within the French media landscape, findings cannot be fully extrapolated to the entire field. However, similarities in terms of views and conceptions in an otherwise diverse sample (gender, seniority and beat), point to general beliefs about the role of journalists in the current information disorder. Many, indeed, no longer consider that they have a capacity for influence, highlighting how the pandemic has contributed to widening the gap between professional ideals and practice in the French field.

Finally, this study focused on the situation in France over a limited period. Nevertheless, the findings—and the theoretical approach used to examine them—can help inform and explore similar issues journalists may have been confronted with in other countries at the time. Given the global impact of disruptions such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, it may be that how French reporters made sense of their role against disinformation resonates strongly with that of their peers in other media systems. Additionally, this research reaffirms the importance of taking into account the lived experiences of

journalists through a qualitative approach, including their ability to adhere to their own normative expectations, when considering the challenges faced by the profession in the twenty-first century.

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Ethics Approval

This research has received ethics clearance (ETH2021-0415) from the Journalism Departmental Research Ethics Committee at City, University of London.

ORCID

Pauline Renaud http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5615-3474

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