

REVISITING PROFESSIONALISM IN THE ERA OF CURATION JOURNALISM AND NETWORKED COMMUNICATIONS

Dandi Supriadi¹

Gungum Gumilar

Herlina Agustin

Rinda Aunillah Sirait

Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran

Abstract

The freedom of expression and the public sphere are always become the main issues in the democracy. These issues might be the reason for the change in the development of the mass media industry. It is observed that the domination of mainstream media corporation as information distributors has been declining significantly. On the other hand, the audience who was considered as the passive group in the mass communication process has become more active and taken over the position. This change mainly appeared as a result of technological advancement that created the possibility for the public to be involved in the distribution of information.

The phenomenon creates blurriness regarding the relationship between the journalist, who usually is the leading player in the information dissemination business, and the audience. Because of the technology, the audience is now able to choose its news sources, to select the information, and even to publish its own stories. The condition forces mainstream media to embrace the development and widen the engagement with the public. One of the strategies is to apply an advanced format of reporting and news presentation so-called curation journalism. Curation journalism is one of the phenomena of contemporary media practice that relates to the public participation. It occurred at the time the media audience gained its chance to be more active in finding information and distributing their own news within the existence of social media. The development was so massive and inevitable, which eventually forced the media to embrace it by curating the scattered social media contents and make them as their news' materials. This method has promoted the audience into a different role not only as a reader but also as a stringer or field reporter. In some ways, the media seem to lose their authority by letting unprofessional people be their newsmakers. The condition then raises the question about the professionalism of the journalists in the era of networked communication.

¹ Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dandi Supriadi, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran or at email: d.supriadi@unpad.ac.id

This article discusses a study on the adjustment of journalistic professionalism to cope with the development of public participation. The study revisited the existing theories of professionalism and compared it with the current condition of media practices. It was done by applying descriptive qualitative method. The primary objective is to discuss the new concept of journalistic professionalism within the more active society. The methodology refers to literature review on conventional professionalism theories in general discussion as well as journalistic studies. This article compares what is stated in the traditional theories and the real situation in the journalistic practice, especially in the current online media industry and the development of the user-generated content (UGC) that related to the public participation in social media and curation activity. The study brings some example of how mainstream media embrace the public sphere by opening channels in which the audience can actively involve in news production.

Based on the analysis, it is clear that in the digital era, professionalism in journalism is not only related to the technological change. The development has also influenced the working culture that also, to some extent, changed the characteristic of the media institutions in which the journalist work. Regarding the change, this study finds that some significant arrangements need to be implemented, such as revising the journalistic code of conducts and adjusting the role of the journalist as the gatekeeper. The existing code of conducts that has become fundamental guidance for traditional journalists was mainly developed in the traditional journalistic culture in print media era. Therefore, the interactivity of the audience has not become an issue of concern. Consequently, the gatekeeper position was only looked like the role to select and filter news materials, which then put them together to support the media's agenda. These job descriptions are not suitable anymore with the condition of the active audience. The theories need to be revisited because journalists now are not only gathering information from the communities but also work together with the public and contextualized what people say on their own publications. In conclusion, journalists have to maintain their responsibility and accountability in the middle of the UGC's development and public participation trends. Journalists need to clarify their position as professionals in the age of contemporary media.

Keywords: Professionalism, Curation Journalism, Social Media, Public Participation

Revisiting Professionalism in the Era of Curation Journalism and Networked Communications

This article presents a discussion regarding the adjustment of professionalism in the practice of journalism today. It could be argued, even though the advancement of technology as well as the democratic environment has granted the public more power in determining the news, it does not reflect that journalism has perished. Schudson and Anderson state, considering the professionalization of journalist's work, the norm of objectivity and the manner for being a journalist, it is clear that journalism has a specific jurisdiction and a form of professionalized knowledge (Schudson & Anderson, 2009: 88-101).

The objective of this study is to clarify the position of journalism as a profession in the middle of public participation development. The base of the inquiry lays on the circumstances where digital technologies and social communication networks are undoubtedly affecting many aspects of journalism. Vineet Kaul states that, inevitably, more active and fragmented audiences are now dominating the media landscape (Kaul, 2013: 125-143). Consequently, journalism is facing a significant challenge from the public that is far more active in consuming and even producing information. The rise of social media and the instant publishing platforms like blog or podcast services that so-called *user-generated content* (UGC), arguably, has caused the condition.

Nasrullah observes that social media is a perfect place for publishing UGC (Nasrullah, 2015). For example, it is common today to find ordinary people's postings on Instagram that show photos of some tourism sites or restaurants. These contents are actually endorsing the commercial places by giving "free" information to the public. Because of that, survey research by Buffer concludes that UGC has become more effective than conventional promotion. One of the findings shows that UGC has gained people's trust seven times more than advertisements (Buffer, 2018). It means information from the public could become more influential than the one from mainstream media.

The situation could be considered as an inevitable phenomenon and has created significant anticipation from the mainstream media and journalism. The development shows a considerable movement in the newsroom which allows more access for the public to be involved in the news production. It has altered the traditional functions and routines of journalism. The audience is now taking a more active role in the journalistic process. Some even call it as the invasion towards the newsroom. Critics came from media scholars and practitioners, saying that journalism has lost its professionalism and authority. Quandt, for example, criticizes that as a real profession, journalism cannot be handed over to non-journalist people because it requires special education, skill training, and regulations (Quandt, 2011: 158).

As a response to this development, a contemporary practice that has the potential to engage broader public participation has become considerably standard in the world of online journalism today. The practice is called curation journalism. It refers to the process of gathering and selecting a variety of information as raw materials from dispersed public's voices in social media and instant publishers, which are then confirmed, contextualized and published by mainstream journalists as a completed news story (Guerrini, 2013: 7-9; Knight & Cook, 2013:

121-122). In some levels, this practice is in the same meaning as the traditional concept of gatekeeping. Shoemaker, Vos, and Reese formulate a gatekeeping process as “selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news” (Shoemaker, Vos & Reese, 2009: 73). By looking at this formula, this study argues that curation journalism has actually brought back the role of gatekeeper in controlling how media present the reality to the public.

This role is apparently a significant element to measure journalism as professional work. The basis of the debate is actually the crucial responsibility of journalism to maintain the freedom of speech as well as the public rights to know and to inform. As argued by McQuail, to be able to carry this responsibility, journalism needs to fulfill the standards of quality (such as the respect of truthfulness, independence, fairness, decency, and so on and so forth), to contend harmful effects, and also to serve some public purposes (McQuail, 2013: 174-176). Hypothetically, such responsibility would not be conducted well without professionalism. This circumstance is the rationale behind the necessity to revisit professionalism in the contemporary practice of journalism.

Research Methodology

This study of professionalism in the contemporary practice of journalism has been conducted in the manner of a descriptive research method. Arguably, considering the objective of this study, this method could be regarded as a part of qualitative research. Glesne (2006), as quoted by Devadas (2016: 73-87), describes that qualitative research is the attempt to understand phenomena from various perspectives, to contextualize subjects involved, and in many cases to change social circumstances. However, a descriptive research method has more specific goals. Descriptive research is used to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics, and more focused on what has happened rather than the process, even though sometimes it is unavoidable to discuss more in-depth to that area (Nassaji, 2015: 129-132).

It is crucial to revisit the theoretical perspectives of professionalism and describe what elements should be adjusted to anticipate the ongoing contemporary practice in journalism. Therefore, this study views specifically the adjustment of professionalism in the world of online journalism as a phenomenon with some significant characteristics. Regarding this objective, the descriptive method as mentioned above will be carried out by conducting a literature review on the conventional theories of professionalism, both in general meanings and journalistic studies. It is done by specifying the traditional theories of professionalism and comparing them to the current practices of media and journalism, especially those that related to the public participation in social media and curation activity. Hence, the descriptive research method is applied here because this study does not investigate the process of the adjustment, which requires more research after the discussion of the characteristics concludes.

Results and Discussion

Professionalism Revisited

Before explicitly discussing professionalism in journalism as a profession, it is important to revisit the definition of 'profession' itself firstly. Schudson and Anderson, who contextualize this term in a journalistic context, quote Freidson's statement to explain the point:

If 'profession' might be defined as a folk concept, the research strategy that appropriates to it is phenomenological. One does not attempt to determine what a profession is in an absolute sense so much as to how people in society determine who is professional and who is not, how they "make" or accomplish professions by their activities.

(Freidson, 1983 in Schudson & Anderson, 2009: 89)

By quoting Freidson's argument, Schudson and Anderson are suggesting that notions of professionalism are socially determined and that one should, therefore, examine the social determinations of how professions are defined and enacted in social practice. In other words, there will be differences and also some degrees of subjectivity.

This argument emphasizes the factors needed to put a particular practice into a position of a profession that has many privileges among society members. The influential factors are knowledge and skill specialization. According to Freidson, two general ideas distinguish the knowledge and skills by professionalism:

The two most general ideas underlying professionalism is the belief that specific work is so specialized as to be inaccessible to those lacking the required training and experience, and the belief that it cannot be standardized, rationalized or commodified.

(Freidson, 2001: 17)

On this basis, theoretically, it is necessary for a profession to reach the level of specific knowledge and skills by enacting special training. A profession needs to be imminent from others; therefore the society would be able to take the particular benefit from it.

This argument is relevant to the idea of journalism as a profession. Regarding its objective, journalism certainly has a distinct purpose within the society from other professions, especially with the belief that journalism carries a responsibility to maintain people's rights to know and to be informed. Subsequently, the duty requires professional training as well as clear ethical boundaries or code of conduct.

Key characteristics of this professionalization are pictured in some constructed ideal-typical values. Deuze highlights, to be recognized as a profession, journalists need to fulfill five significant characters (Deuze, 2005: 442-464). First, they need to be able to provide a public service, such as independent 'watchdogs' who actively collect and disseminate information. Second, journalists must be able to be impartial, neutral, objective and fair. Third, journalists must have a certain level of autonomy, freedom, and independence in doing their tasks. Fourth, journalists have to maintain the concepts of the news, which are immediate, accurate, actual and quickly distributed to the audience. The last character is that journalists need to be sensitive about ethical aspects related to their tasks. In the same fashion, Hallin and Mancini approach these

journalism's characteristics by focusing on three dimensions of professionalization: autonomy, distinct professional norms and public service orientation (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 34-36).

The dimension of autonomy occurs when journalists need control at the time they do their tasks. Actually, unlike professions who base their autonomy on a specific and exclusive character of special education like doctors or lawyers, journalists do not have what Hallin and Mancini call an "esoteric" knowledge. In other words, anybody from any background can be a reporter. Moreover, journalists work in a mass industry, while the other two professions are more flexible for providing personal services. However, following Hallin and Mancini's argument, journalism still has autonomy, especially at the point when someone is hired by a media company and practice specific job descriptions that differentiate his or her tasks from other occupations.

The second dimension, distinct professional norms, happens when journalists differentiate their work from other professions by managing their specific directions, process, and performance. Hallin and Mancini quote a statement from Collins (1990), which says that journalists as professionals have to "organize themselves 'horizontally' with a certain style of life, code of ethics, and self-conscious identity and barriers to outsiders" (35). These norms are applicable in other professions like lawyers or doctors, and actually also can be related to journalism. In doing the tasks, there is specific guidance that self-controlling the way a journalist behaves and achieves his or her goals. Journalistic code of ethics is something that very familiar around the world. Even though each place has different terminologies, the moral and the purposes of this code are actually the same, such as protecting the public's interest, safety and always fulfilling their need to know.

Public service orientation is the last dimension that points out the direction of professions towards an ethic of public service. This dimension is related to journalists' task in maintaining the public's trust. Comparing to other professional occupations with their esoteric knowledge, this ethic of public service could be more significant in the case of journalism. Journalists do not have the exclusivity; therefore they base their autonomy and authority on their claim to serve the public interest. One of the applications of this ethic can be seen on the mechanisms of journalistic self-regulation. In some systems, these mechanisms are formally organized in the form of "press councils" or "audiovisual councils". These mechanisms sometimes operate informally, but still, have considerable power.

Arguably, the dimensions above contribute to an overall set of journalistic principles on which the practice can be based. The principles may become critical considerations at the core of professional practice. This consideration is probably the best reason why journalists are constrained by laws, regulations, and practicalities related to news production. The objective is not to protect the news objects but also journalists themselves (Fleming, 2006: 2-3), considering journalists, theoretically, need to maintain their practice under those ethical considerations.

Gatekeeping: Adjusting the Principles

Based on the theories of traditional professionalism, it is understandable if some practitioners of journalism were still thoughtful to open the access of newsroom to the public. Nonetheless, the impact of UGC applications on social media is unavoidable. In reality now, especially in the practice of curation journalism, UGC holds a very significant role in news production since the newsroom relies on stories posted by the public. The only concern is to integrate these contributions from the public without disputing journalistic values.

Some mainstream media now actually have tried to embrace this public's activation by opening social channels for public participation. There are community forums in a blog format run by the media to facilitate the public's voices. In Indonesia, we could observe some examples like *Kompasiana* (under *Kompas.com*), *Indonesiana* (under *Tempo.co*), or *VivaLog* (under *Viva.co.id*), which are allowing the public to publish textual information, opinions, comments or videos regarding social issues. However, this type of participation is not considered as journalistic products. The blogs are monitored and maintained by specialized division apart from the newsroom, usually under the marketing department. Therefore, public participation is allowed actually not as a primary element in the news production, but for marketing purposes. It will be beneficial to improve audience engagement or to increase the number of web access. Because of this, the media will have an adequate bargain position in front of potential advertisers.

As for news department, UGC on social media indeed has a valuable impact on enriching the information. However, if we observe how Indonesian online media usually present the news, the editors only include the contents of social media implicitly. It means the materials are just supporting data for the story. In other words, the public voices were curated, rather than directly quoted. The voices were collected and selected, then rewritten by the journalist in a proper journalistic language. This policy might occur to protect the quality of the information from unreliable data, as well as to allow the journalist to add context to the quotes.

Arguably, this is how to put the practice of curation journalism and public participation into professional consideration. There is a need for adjusting traditional theories in journalistic professionalism because it has not included the interactivity and technological aspects of the contemporary media development there. The traditional code of ethics such as timeliness, continuity, and composition need to be understood with different attitudes. Indeed, the new circumstances in journalism are not making the process simpler, especially in maintaining the objectivity, fairness, and impartiality. These are what journalists as professionals will do in their role as curators who select the information from the public and contextualize what they have chosen. In other words, curation is actually a new perspective of doing the gatekeeping process.

As discussed by Shoemaker, Vos, and Reese (2009: 73), the gatekeeping job needs to be held by professionals. This necessity occurs because the task requires high responsibility in preparing the most rigorous information for the audiences. As shown in Figure 1, the role of gatekeeper becomes significant in practicing curation journalism because journalists must be very cautious in selecting information from social media.

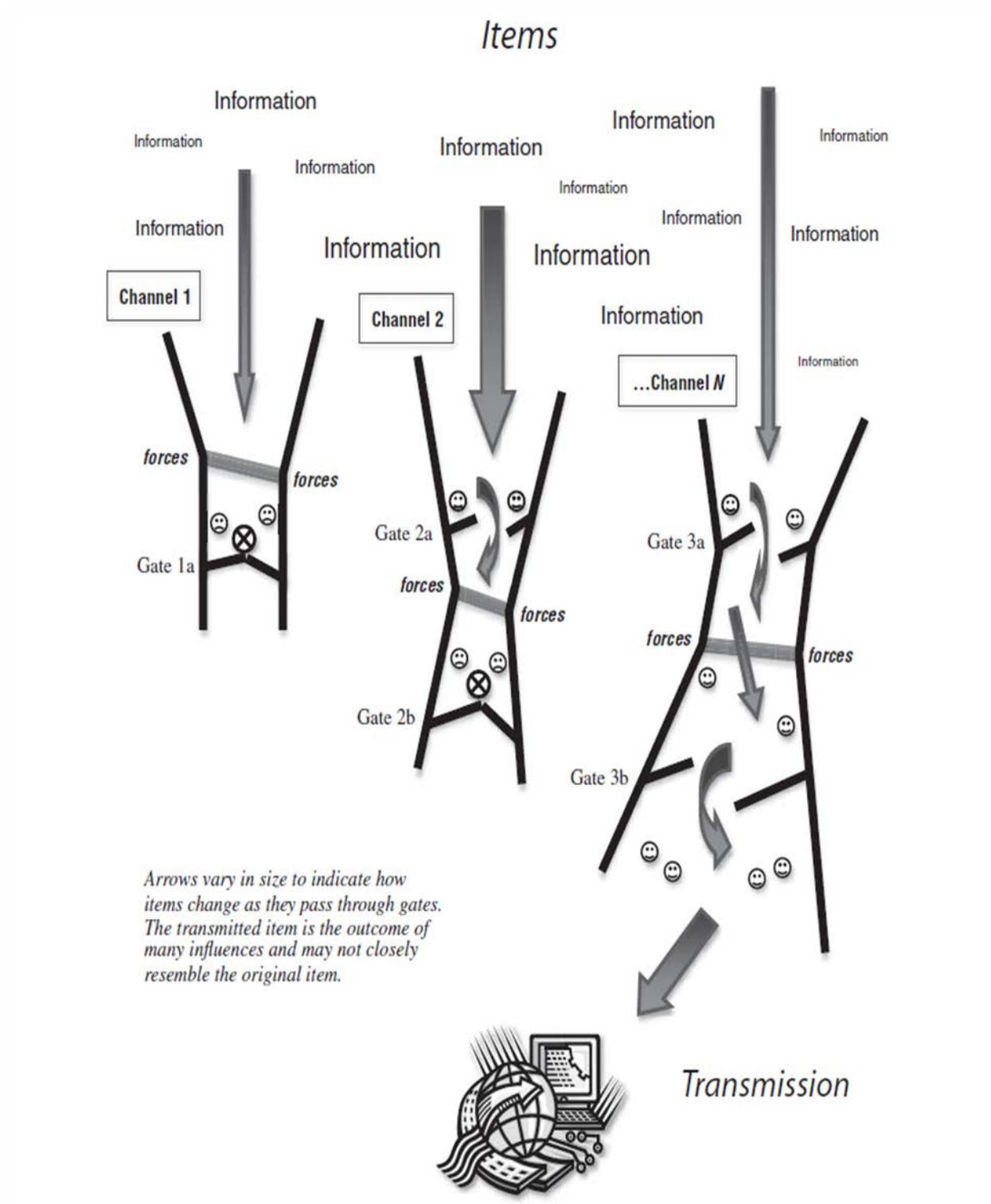


Figure 1 The essential elements of gatekeeping studies

(Source: Shoemaker, Vos & Reese, 2009: 73)

Curation emphasizes the significance of verification and research, to guarantee the quality of information taken from the public. As Knight and Cook argue, social media contents are only supplemented elements for the work of the journalist, instead of being the primary material in the news production (Knight & Cook, 2013: 14). Therefore, the most proper role to be held by the journalist in curation is a gatekeeper, not just a collector or aggregator, because the news must have the journalist's own perspective. The media cannot generate curated information automatically without the right context.

Conclusions

Based on the attempt of revisiting the professionalism concept, as well as discussing the contradiction between the existing theories of professionalism and the current curation process through UGC, this study concludes that journalistic professionalism is still there to keep public participation on the track of trustable journalism. The existing code of ethics that resonates some traditional principles need to be adjusted because the situation of the information flow between the media and the audience is different in this era of contemporary media. However, some basic principles cannot be changed, such as maintaining the objectivity, fairness, and impartiality, which reflect the professionalism of journalism itself.

Curation journalism is actually the new format of professionalism in this era of contemporary media. This practice keeps the journalist to be responsible and accountable for spreading accurate information amongst the trend of UGC and public participation. By embracing the networked technology, curation journalism has brought back the role of gatekeeper to maintain responsibility. Conclusively, the role of gatekeeper is the ultimate way for journalism to preserve its liability as the defender of the public's right to know and to inform. This role also emphasizes the significance of being professional because the attempt would not run well without preserving professionalism.

References

- Buffer. (2018). 2018 social media trends report: 10 key insights into the present and future of social media. Retrieved from <https://blog.bufferapp.com/social-media-trends-2018>
- Deuze, M. (2005). What is journalism?: Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered. *Journalism*, 6(4), 442-464.
- Devadas, B. (2016). A critical review of qualitative research methods in evaluating nursing curriculum models: Implication for nursing education in the arab world. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(7), 119-126.
- Freidson, E. (2001). *Professionalism : The third logic*. Polity P.
- Guerrini, F. (2013). *Newsroom curators & independent storytellers: Content curation as a new form of journalism new form of journalism*. University of Oxford, Oxford.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge Cambridge University Press.
- Kaul, V. (2013). Journalism in the age of digital technology. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 3(1), 125-143.
- Knight, M., & Cook, C. (2013). *Social media for journalists: Principles and practice*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage Publications.
- McQuail, D. (2013). *Journalism & society*. London SAGE.
- Nasrullah, R. (2015). *Social media, perspectives of cultural communication and sociotechnology. [media sosial, perspektif komunikasi budaya dan sosioteknologi]*. Bandung: Simbiosis Rekatama Media.
- Nassaji, H. (2015). Qualitative and descriptive research: Data type versus data analysis. *Language Teaching Research*, 19(2), 129-132.
- Quandt, T. (2011). Understanding a new phenomenon: The significance of participatory journalism. In J. B. Singer, A. Hermida, D. Domingo, A. Heinonen, S. Paulussen, T. Quandt, Z. Reich, & M. Vujnovic (Eds.), *Participatory journalism: Guarding open gates at online newspapers* (pp. 155-176). West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, A Jon Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Schudson, M., & Anderson, C. (2009). Objectivity, professionalism, and truth seeking in journalism. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen & T. Hanitzsch (Eds.), *The handbook of journalism studies* (pp. 88-101). New York; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Shoemaker, P. J., Vos, T. P., & Reese, S. D. (2009). Journalists as gatekeepers. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen & T. Hanitzsch (Eds.), *The handbook of journalism studies* (pp. 73-87): Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.