Retroactive causation and the temporal construction of news: contingency and necessity, content and form

BLACK, Jack <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1595-5083>

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Dr. Jack Black, Academy of Sport and Physical Activity, Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, Sheffield Hallam University, Collegiate Hall, Collegiate Crescent, Sheffield, S10 2BP

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Jack Black, PhD

Academy of Sport and Physical Activity, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

Abstract

This article affords particular attention to the relationship between memory, the narrativization of news and its linear construction, conceived as journalism's 'memory-work'. In elaborating upon this 'work', it is proposed that the Hegelian notion of retroactive causation (as used by Slavoj Žižek) can examine how analyses of news journalists 'retroactively' employ the past in the temporal construction of news. In fact, such retroactive (re)ordering directs attention to the ways in which journalists contingently select 'a past' to confer meaning on the present. With regard to current literature, it is noted that a retroactive analysis can highlight two important dialectics within the practice of news journalism: 1) the relation between contingency and necessity; and, 2) the relation between content and form. Indeed, it is argued that this theoretical account offers a novel approach to examining the significance of memory in news journalism as well as the inconsistencies which underscore journalism's memory-work. It is in accordance with such inconsistency that broader reflections on time, temporality and our relations to the past can be made.

Introduction

It has been widely noted that the practice of journalism holds particular importance for examining the role of memory in sociological analyses of time and temporality (Borer 2011; Hoskins 2004; Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014). Through 'mediating' the past and by temporally ordering the past, present and future, news journalists are able to interpret, frame and construct popular narratives of history via mnemonic practices that assign meaning to memory (Aaltonen and Kortti 2015; Black 2015; Black and Whigham 2017; Edy 2006; Le Han 2017; Sonnevend 2016; Zelizer 1992, 2008a). However, while it is evident that news discourses draw upon the past to make sense of the present (Black 2015, 2018; Zandbwerg et al. 2012), closer examination of the temporal construction of news can reveal a past-present dynamic (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016), from which 'The past offers a point of comparison, an opportunity for analogy, an invitation to nostalgia, [and] a redress to earlier events' (Zelizer 2008c, 384). As a consequence, it is the 'effects' of temporality in news narratives which underscores journalism's 'memory-work' (Zelizer 2008c see also Edkins 2003; Hook 2012; White 2000).

With regard to exploring this effect and by turning to the work of Slavoj Žižek and his adoption of the Hegelian notion of retroactive causation (Žižek 2000, 2008a, 2012, 2015, 2016), this article critically examines how research on journalism's memory-work can be considered in relation to the temporal framing which underscores Hegel's retroaction. In clarifying this notion, Žižek explains that:

> The key philosophical implication of Hegelian retroactivity is that it undermines the reign of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: this principle only holds in the

condition of linear causality where the sum of past causes determines a future event – retroactivity means that the set of (past, given) reasons is never complete and 'sufficient,' since the past reasons are retroactively activated by what is, within the linear order, their effect. (Žižek 2012, 213)

Indeed, it is argued that such implications posit a number of important contentions regarding the temporal ordering of 'past' and 'present' in news discourses and to the use of memory in the temporal construction of news. Specifically, Zizek's use of retroactive causation will be employed to examine how memory is constituted in both the content and form of news discourses as well as forming part of the dialectical framing of contingency and necessity.

In what follows, attention will be given to the relationship between memory, the narrativization of news and its linear construction (Halbwachs 1992; Neiger et al. 2011; Olick 2014; Zelizer 1992, 2008a, 2014). While there is undoubtedly a burgeoning literature of empirical evidence examining how news narratives are embedded in the use of memory, as well as to the ways in which discourses of the past can prove conducive for constructing an understanding of contemporary events, for Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 'The temporal dimensions of news narratives *per se* have received little attention, and the limited comparative research in this area has focused on the three main temporal orientations' (past, present, future) (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016, 142). To this end, the second section of this article will provide a considered appraisal of how these authors provide a deconstructed account of the temporal construction of news (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016). Notably, this consideration will draw attention to the prevalence of a past, present, future temporality

in the authors' own orientation – one that serves to locate the construction of news in relation to broader processes of 'memory-work'.

In contrast to this, the final part of this article will introduce the notion of retroactivity, as used in psychoanalytic accounts of the subject (Edkins 2003) and as applied by Žižek (2000, 2008a, 2012, 2015, 2016). Though this final section will consider how news journalism can be predicated on a retroactive causality, it will also identify how such retroaction rests upon two important dialectics within news construction: 1) the relation between contingency and necessity; and, 2) the relation between content and form. In conclusion, it is argued that this approach offers a novel account of the significance of memory and the importance in critically examining news journalism's memory-work (Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014, 2016). While the relative merits of this approach will be considered in relation to the construction of news, it is important to note that this remains, at present, a theoretical introduction. Though examples from news journalism will be drawn upon, it is the intention of this article to draw together key themes from memory studies, philosophy and histography in the study of news narrativization.

Memory, News and Journalists' 'Memory-Work'

Various studies have highlighted that the practice of news journalism can have a significant impact on the ways in which national societies remember past and present events (Neiger et al. 2011; Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014, 2016), with certain collective memories proving an essential feature of journalism's 'communicative relay' (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014; Carlson and Berkowitz 2014; Zelizer 2008a, 2008b, 2014). Despite the fact that news stories are primarily concerned with portraying

'present' events – the 'here and now', rather than the 'there and then' (Neiger et al. 2014) – the role of the journalist is one that is grounded in a 'double time', with journalists required 'to both present up-to-the-minute news and place that news into its historical context' (Berkowitz and Raaii 2010, 366 see also Zelizer 2008a).

Indeed, when considering the relationship between journalism and collective memory, news journalism can be considered as a primary example of what Halbwachs (1992) referred to as a 'social framework of memory'. Olick explains how, 'in Halbwachs's early writing, … he noted that it is hard to say at a temporal distance whether what one remembers is what one really experienced or whether what one remembers has incorporated intervening materials and events' (Olick 2014, 28). As a result, 'collective memory needs some degree of social framing', with Halbwachs 'insisting that social frames had to be set in place and circulated across groups in order for memory to operate' (Zelizer 2014, 41). In doing so, Halbwachs draws attention to the ways in which 'memories are expressed in terms of meanings' (Edkins 2003, 32).

Here, the importance of language, as highlighted by Edkins (2003), offers a notable segway to examining the role of news journalists in representing and framing news stories, and to the meanings that these framings can generate. Edy and Daradanova have demonstrated how 'collective memory influenced reporters' search for information and thus the material available for constructing stories (Edy and Daradanova 2006, 148), as well as influencing the types of narratives employed to present 'new' information. This is evident in media coverage of national commemorations (Zandbwerg et al. 2012), political elections (Berkowitz and Radii, 2010), sporting events (Black 2015; Black and Whigham 2017; Whigham and Black 2018) as well as the anniversaries of terrorist attacks (Reading 2011) and natural disasters (Robinson 2009). Therefore, given this, Zelizer notes that:

Though memory and the past are neither necessary nor critical to understanding the contemporary news story, … journalists produce investigations of the present that are illuminated by some foray into the past. *The inclusion of the past helps illuminate the centrality that the past plays in helping journalists make sense of the present.* (Zelizer 2008a, 85 [italics added])

In fact, if, for Zelizer, the relation between Halbwachs and 'the news is obvious' (Zelizer 2014, 41), then the way in which this relation is practiced belies a far more ambiguous approach. For example, if there is 'a "social framework of memory"' and that the memories 'of individuals are shaped in profound ways by journalism' (Olick 2014, 27), then, the journalist's capacity to shape our memory stands in contrast to the concern that 'The past … remains one of the richest repositories available to journalists for explaining current events' (Zelizer 2008a, 82). That is, do journalists' construct memory or simply draw from it?

Accordingly, while 'The inclusion of the past' can help 'journalists make sense of the present', what remains significant in Zelizer's account is how 'journalism … produces a variety of journalistic forms that allow for the present and past to be discussed in some kind of *simultaneous relay*' (Zelizer's 2008a, 84 [italics added]). This is echoed by Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt who 'extend … the traditional three-way temporal distinction (past–present–future), and explore the grouping and the interplay of different layers of time in news stories' (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016, 141). In effect, these temporal layers emphasise the importance of narrative in serving to delineate between past and present and, in the case of news, to the 'narrative elements' that help provide a degree of coherency to the ambiguity of the past (Conboy

2007). This chimes with the previous discussion of Halbwach's (1992) focus on language and the social frameworks that are required to make sense of memory.

Indeed, while the social construction of memory, 'echoes the work required of journalism – specifically the narrative activity by which journalists buttress interpretation, minimize inconsistency, validate facts, corroborate sources and confirm the information contained in their reports' (Zelizer 2014, 41), it also reveals an inherent contention. Specifically, if the work of journalism is, as Zelizer (2014) reveals, a practice that seeks the 'minimization of inconsistency', then 'A recognition of journalists' work as engaged with memory' stands in a clear contradistinction to 'journalists' own rhetoric of what they claim to do' (Zelizer 2008, 381). For the purposes of this article, such a contention can be exposed when drawing attention to, on the one hand, journalism's role in *constructing* collective memories, as noted by Halbwachs (1992), and, on the other, the extent to which journalist's seek to *withdraw* from a repository of collective memory. This disparity in the relationship between journalism and memory is an important one: primarily, because it helps to elucidate on the significance of journalism's 'memory-work'.

Consequently, it is the contention of this article that this disjuncture reveals an inherent inconsistency in how journalists conduct their 'memory-work' in the process of news construction. Though it would also seem that this contention underscores the aforementioned literature (Olick 2014; Zelizer 2008a), the opportunity to explore this disjunction offers a valuable insight into the ways in which accounts of the past and, moreover, our memories of the past, are 'never complete and "sufficient," (Žižek 2012, 213), but retroactively conferred through an inconsistent process of 'memory-work'. What is important, however, is that such work echoes a 'past' which is itself

inconsistent and thus open to ideological critique. It is the importance of this temporal inconsistency that the following discussion will consider.

Time, Temporality and News Narratives

For Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, the significance of time and temporality proves integral to the construction of news narratives, affording a 'systematic categorization of its narrative patterns' while also providing 'a comparative assessment of the roles it plays in relation to public time' (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016, 140). However, despite such assertions there has been little attention given to examining how time plays a significant and constructive purpose in forming news narratives. In view of this, Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt draw upon a 'qualitative and quantitative content analysis of print and online news items in the United States and Israel' (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016, 140) in order to examine how this sample employs and adopts particular temporal strategies in the construction of news. Notably, their research offers a unique insight into the fundamental use of time as an 'organizing axis' (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016, 140), drawn from the adoption of 'temporal indicators' and 'linguistic classifications of tenses' (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016, 142).

By identifying 11 temporal layers in their sample of news narratives, the authors organise these layers into five 'clusters'. These five clusters refer explicitly to how past, present and future directions underscore the construction of news. For example, they identify a temporal spectrum in news stories ranging from a 'focu[s] on the present and its proximal temporal regions (the immediate past and future)' (cluster 1); 'the recent past' (cluster 2); 'the deeper past (the distant, long-range, and midrange past)' (cluster

3); 'the near to the foreseeable future' (cluster 4); and, 'the distant and unknown future, extend[ing] over the most speculative narratives' (cluster 5) (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016, 155). With these five clusters, Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2016) are able to locate and identity how ongoing-current events (cluster 1) and recent developments (cluster 2), occur alongside examples of journalistic contextualization, commemoration (cluster 3), agenda-setting (cluster 4) as well as speculation, which proves a formative role in shaping public knowledge of certain events (cluster 5). These practices are presented through a temporal axis that organizes, but, more importantly, narrativizes the construction of news. In so doing, the authors are able to locate the practice of news journalism along a particular temporal framework, which both extends and elaborates upon the significance of temporal news framing.

Certainly, though the authors make wider comments on the temporal differences between print and online news, and while emphasizing how different temporal layers could be formulated along a spectrum ranging from the 'distant past' (more than 10 years ago), the 'present' and the 'far and unknown future' (more than 10 years or the conjectured future), it is clear that their formulations remain embedded and tied to a *linear temporality* grounded in past, present and future. That is, while their study seeks to move beyond conventional temporal articulations, their temporal spectrum simply extends these articulations by increasing the linear duration of how past, present and future are conceived. Indeed, whereas their temporal 'layers' may intermingle within a specific narrative, what is ignored is how such temporal layering underwrites the construction of news, that, when considered in relation to 'memory' and news narrativization, relies upon a 'retroactive' ordering of news discourses. It is in this way that greater attention can be given to the 'narratological qualities' of news construction

and the temporal significance of memory in such narratives (Neigher and Tennenboim-Weinblatt 2016).[1]

Notably, if we are to expand upon the relationship between the construction/narrativization of news discourses, the effects of temporality and the use of memory, then it is clear that the adoption of memory affords a particular temporal 'mode of causality'. Farhat et al. highlight that, 'collective memory proceeds from a constant cognitive causality, by symbolically reviving the event that triggered the phenomenon that needs to be explained' (Farhat et al. 2014, 394). This causality forms an integral part of 'historical cognition [… and] the importance of temporal order' (Bruckmüller et al. 2017, 265). Often, this importance is grounded in a 'linear evolutionary logic in which the lower stage already contains *in nuce* the seeds of the higher stage, so that evolution is just the unfolding of some underlying essential potential' (Žižek 2000, 107). Of greater concern, however, is that such causal linearity continues to hold, 'despite arguments from scientists and philosophers since the beginning of the twentieth century that this notion of time does not make sense and does not square with what we see' (Edkins 2003, 34). Moreover, if 'The centrality of narrative … has always been a distinguishing feature of the news apparatus' and that 'since the inception of collective memory as a concept, narrative has been viewed as one of the major devices in its social construction' (Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014, 6); then, a consideration of *how* 'Past, present and future are … merged into atemporal permanence' (Kopytowska 2015, 357), can be prescribed. To do so, this article will consider the significance of contingency and necessity in news discourses and its effects upon the content and form of news. Indeed, such a consideration can reveal how 'the present is not only present, it also encompasses a perspective on the past immanent to it' (Žižek 2012, 218). This is brought to light when we examine how

the 'struggle for ideological hegemony', which often occurs around particular events (Žižek 2008a, 107), presents a retroactive framing that allows us to extrapolate upon the inherent inconsistencies that underscore journalism's memory-work.

In what follows specific attention will be afforded to examining how a retroactive approach to the temporal construction of news can be theoretically applied in studies of news journalism. Certainly, the following elaboration is not meant as a critique of previous research, and, specifically, Neiger and Tenneboim-Weinblatt's aforementioned work. Rather, what this discussion hopes to provide is a radically alternative approach to the examination of news discourses as grounded in retroactive temporality. Specifically, this will highlight how the temporal construction of news in the practice of journalism (journalists' memory-work) serves to dialectically manage contingency and necessity as well as content and form.

Retroactivity in journalism

Retroaction occurs when a certain 'effect' presupposes its own 'causes', resulting in the reassembling of the linear 'cause-effect' relation (Hook 2012). Here:

> Life occurs in terms of what the theory of autopoietic systems refers to as an emerging property. Something emerges which then retroactively causes its own causes. You don't have simply cause and effect. You have a cause that somehow retroactively posits, causes, its owns presuppositions. (Žižek and Daly 2004, 138).

First used in the work of Freud (2002), the term was later adopted by Jacques Lacan in his understanding of subjectivity.[2] In linking psychoanalytic accounts of time with subjectivity, Edkins highlights:

> When our speaking elicits a response, we recognise ourselves as subjects in that response. This recognition is belated when viewed through the lens of a linear temporality: it is not at the moment we decide to speak that we see who we are, but only a moment later, when we get a response. The response tells us not who we are now, since we are no longer that – we have already changed. It tells who we were, at the moment when we spoke. This is the sense in which we never *are*, *we only ever will have been*. (Edkins 2003, 13 [italics in original])[3]

Whereas this Lacanian approach to subjectivity emphasises how 'being is ungrounded', it nevertheless 'relies on a particular, constituted notion of linear temporality', albeit belated (Edkins 2003, 15). As a result, both the social and the subject are always retroactively posited ('will have been').

Indeed, this dialectical ungrounding and (retroactive) grounding of the subject and the social is echoed by Hook (2012, 235), who draws attention to 'psychical time': a 'nonlinear conception of time means not only that we appreciate the simultaneity of past and present but also that we understand the role of retroaction'. This is extended in Žižek's (2015) application of retroaction to historical analysis. Drawing upon 'the crucial Hegelian notion of positing the presuppositions: the dialectical reversal where something emerges and then retroactively co-opts or treats its own presuppositions as posited by itself' (Žižek and Daly 2004, 137-138), Žižek argues that the past can only be read 'retroactively', so that, in the present, it is 'ontologically "in-complete", a set

of traces without meaning and thus open to later reappropriations' (Žižek 2000, 107). The significance of this is that in the case of news journalism, such reappropriation can hold particular importance.

For example, if 'we are all the time "rewriting history", retroactively giving the elements their symbolic weight by including them in new textures' (Žižek 2008a, 59), then, 'appreciat[ing] the simultaneity of past and present' (Hook 2012, 235) can help to elucidate on how 'journalistic forms allow for the present and past to be discussed in some kind of *simultaneous relay*' (Zelizer 2008a, 84). Furthermore, rather than viewing the journalist as separate from the past, this posits that journalists actively 'intervene' in a past that is neither fixed nor determined, but inconsistently forged in relation to a present that it frequently gives meaning to (Edy 2006; Žižek 2008a).

Certainly, such assertions are well considered in work that has examined the temporal construction of news, the significance of memory and the role of news journalists in drawing upon 'the past' in order to make sense of the present (Edy 2006; Neiger et al. 2011; Sonnevend 2016; Zelizer 1992). However, what the above discussion has sought to highlight and, more importantly, served to bring together, is how the construction of news is grounded in a past-present dialectic whereby the representation and framing of both the past and present is constituted by examples of tension, antagonism and even ambivalence. Indeed, while this is evident in the various ways in which news journalists seek to make sense of, and, give meaning to, present events (Sonnevend 2017), such tensions are also apparent when 'key meanings and values in society become confounded and ambiguous' (Berkowitz and Raaii 2010, 366). These moments can present a 'break' with the past from which the retroactive intervention of news journalism plays a key role in the event's framing. Hook asserts that such actions can be 'potentially "unselfing" – inasmuch they involve an effective

unmaking of one time (be it past, present, or future) by another' (Hook 2012, 236). This is apparent in Bruckmüller et al.'s contention that:

> the most surprising historical events are those – often 'firsts' – that irrevocably change our assumptions about what we can take for granted. For example, women's right to vote may have seemed unthinkable at the beginning of Western democracies and its introduction meant a remarkable change for contemporaries. (Bruckmüller et al. 2017, 266)

As noted by Hook (2012) and Bruckmüller et al. (2017), such 'irrevocable' events point to the significance of contingency and necessity when (re)interpreting the past in accordance with present circumstances. In considering this possibility, Žižek asserts that:

> it is not enough just to analyze the standard notion of historical progress. Rather, one should also deploy the limitation of the ordinary 'historical' notion of time: at each moment of time, multiple possibilities are waiting to be realized; once one of them actualizes itself, the others are cancelled. (Žižek 2008b, 67)

What becomes apparent in such instances is how, in the case of news journalism, such possibilities are reflected in a dialectic of contingency and necessity (Vighi 2014; Žižek 2008a, 2012, 2014, 2015).

Retroactivity: contingency and necessity

The notion of contingency has been widely debated in discussions on historical epistemology; most notably, in the work of Hannah Arendt (Arendt 2006). For Arendt, historical accounts can often 'ignor[e] the powers of action – its unpredictability, and its "beginning character"' (Walsh 2013, 252). In doing so, there is a failure to consider the mechanics of change (Burke 1992), from which contingent possibilities open new opportunities, while closing others. This highlights the dialectical nature of any reading of the past and how, for Hegel, 'whatever (contingently) happens, whichever turn things take, a teleological order is established retroactively which changes contingency into necessity' (Žižek 2017, 248). In comments pertaining to the work of Walter Benjamin, Žižek clarifies this Hegelian approach by noting that 'it is not that the past events are secretly directed by a hidden force steering them towards a predetermined future. The point is rather that the future is open, undecided – *but so is the past*' (Žižek 2016, 356 [italics in original]).

Accordingly, what Žižek (2012, 2015) derives from Hegel, is the ability to perceive contingency as inherent to any necessity, so that necessity, or, what we perceive to have been a necessary choice, is grounded in contingency. Vighi notes:

> in order to appear as necessary …, a contingent event must 'change the (way we perceive the) past'; it must create its own conditions of possibility by retroactively 'choosing' a chain of events that supports it, making it appear inevitable. (Vighi 2014, 134)

This retroactive ordering directs attention to the significance of news journalism and journalists' use of memory and the *contingent* 'selection' of 'a past' by journalists to

confer meaning on the present (Edy 2006; Zandbwerg et al. 2012). What is important here is that:

> The core of the dialectic of contingency and necessity lies in revealing not a deeper notional necessity expressing itself through contingent empirical reality, but the contingency at the very heart of necessity – not only the necessity of contingency, but the contingency of necessity itself. (Žižek 2015, 26).

As noted, such an approach does not propose an inherent 'necessity', but rather, seeks to draw attention to how 'necessity' is predicated on a contingent reality from which the possibility of an event's non-occurrence, forms a constitutive part of the event's occurrence. That is to say:

> in order to properly grasp an event that 'really happened,' one has to locate it in its series of superpositions (what might have happened instead of this event, but didn't), i.e., we have to include in the event the way it 'related to itself' (to other possible versions of itself) (Zizek 2017, 49).

This line of thought posits that the reality of any event rests upon including the numerous contingencies that could have altered the event and the way it 'really happened' (the event's necessity). Certainly, this does not discount the actual event, but instead, serves to emphasise how a series of superpositions form an important, yet widely ignored, feature of the event itself.

Therefore, in grasping how a certain event 'really happened' it becomes clear that our notions of reality are allied with those 'other possible versions of itself' that

constitute the reality of an event (Zizek 2017, 49). Moreover, this contrasts with approaches that attempt to establish a 'contingent empirical reality', as evident in the work of Foucault, who 'fail[s] to distinguish between the positivity of a given discursive formation and the negativity of its generative principle which cannot appear among the elements of that formation' (Vighi and Feldner 2007, 153).[4] In such instances, a Kantian separation occurs between a particular discourse and that which undermines it. Consequently, while one is left with a world of discourses that are 'performatively enacted', yet also, 'historically contingent' (Vighi and Feldner 2007, 153), such contingency is always located 'outside' any discursive scheme. Instead:

> Žižek's Hegel tries to conceive of necessity as something that is no longer the opposite of contingency – as something that underlies contingent process and always stays the same. *Rather necessity is something that is itself infused with contingency* – and thus necessity is something that is a mode of becoming rather than a mode of being; the being of necessity is becoming. (Feige 2017, 199 [italics in original]).[5]

This infusion is enacted when contingency is perceived not as a 'fate' which occurs from outside (Vighi 2014; White 2014), but when 'the choices one makes are always-already interventions into contingency, into fate itself' (Vighi 2014, 145). This asserts that the choices we make and, by extension, the choices that news journalists make, are a necessary contingency which retroactively form their meaning through the contingency of their emergence. Here, meaning 'is not grounded in reasons, but in the circular sense that it *retroactively posits its reasons*' (Žižek 2015, 21 [italics in original]). Therefore, when Žižek contends that 'the content of … self-experience is a

narrativization in which memory traces already intervene', we can also observe that, in the case of news journalism, 'the content of' an event's reporting rests upon 'a narrativization in which memory traces *already intervene*' on behalf of the journalist (Žižek 2017, 118).

With this in mind, we can begin to observe how journalistic intervention is always-already an intervention into the relative contingency of a news story (Zandbwerg et al. 2012), which is retroactively presented against the necessity that is achieved when contingent events are temporally located in relation to past causes (Žižek 2012, 2015). This contingency is evident in the various ways in which news journalists and other media personnel, *contingently* 'select facts' and then 'insert them into cultural-interpretive frames' (Zandbwerg et al. 2012, 66). In conjunction with Halbwachs's (1992) 'social frameworks of memory', such 'cultural-interpretative frames … bestow meaning' through the necessity of a past reality which provides, an equally necessary, narrative coherency (Zandbwerg et al. 2012, 66). To this extent, Vighi asserts that:

> When we are faced with a contingent event or symptomatic 'opening' of a given situation … the freedom we suddenly have to reconfigure our past in order to change the future is fully legitimated as freedom only *by our choice of content*, in other words, by the narrative that we are able to conjure up in the strategic battle that will decide *which past will determine us*. (Vighi 2014, 141 [italics added])

While Vighi (2014) draws attention to the 'choice of content', such choices are inherently political, so that for news journalists any choice – any selection and use of

the past – results in other 'pasts' being ignored (Lundberg 2015; Parr 2008). It is in this sense that the suturing of contingency and necessity in news discourses, is never a 'self-enclosed totality that successfully erases the decentred traces of its production process' (Žižek 2001, 58), but that these traces can reveal tensions in content and form. This can be seen when we examine not what the narrative content and the formal structure 'represents', but what it seeks to repress.

Retroactivity: content and form

If we consider content as referring to a news story's narrative – the adoption of a particular social framework which illustrates the 'basic facts' of the story (who, what, where, when and why) – then form refers to the particular way in which these elements are structured and ordered. Here, Zelizer notes that:

> journalists do a kind of 'double-time' on the events that they report, allowing them to correct in later coverage what they missed earlier: thus, they adapted earlier reportage of both McCarthyism and Watergate into stories that better fit their evolving understandings of the events. (Zelizer 2008a, 84)

Accepting that any report can be 'adapted', emphasises how the content of news reports is often constituted by a 'lack', which is retroactively re-written and adapted in accordance with present contingencies.[6] It is here that 'the very gap between content and form is … reflected back into content itself, as an indication that this content is not-all, that something has been pressed/excluded from it' (Žižek 2017, 243). Indeed, given that news reports maintains a lack in content ('the *first draft* of history' – not the final

draft) and that any attempt to frame a news report reveals an excessive range of interpretations (the numerous modes of journalism expression); then, what we see in the case of news journalism is a clear 'dialectic of lack and excess' whereby the failure in content (lack/excess) is rendered through its retroactive form (Žižek 2002, 47). Here, 'The gap between form and content is properly dialectical', so that:

> We attain the level of the proper dialectical analysis of a form only when we conceive a certain formal procedure not as expressing a certain aspect of the (narrative) content, but as marking/signaling the part of content that is excluded from the explicitly narrative line, so that … if we want to reconstruct 'all' of the narrative content, we must reach beyond the explicit narrative content as such, and include some formal features which act as the stand-in for the 'repressed' aspects of the content (Žižek 2017, 187-188).[7]

These 'formal features' are apparent when, according to Zelizer:

> Recounting the present is laced with an *intricate repertoire of practices that involve an often obscured engagement with the past*. This renders journalism a key agent of memory work, even if journalists themselves are *averse to admitting it* as part of what they do. (Zelizer 2008a, 85 [italics added])

What becomes apparent in Zelizer's (2008a) account is how 'an obscured engagement with the past' is achieved when this engagement is excluded and/or 'obscured' from the form ('averse to admitting it as part of what they do'). In fact, Zelizer adds that 'form [becomes] a leading sign of memory's presence, even if journalists do not admit as

much' (Zelizer 2008a, 83). There is a sense here that an acknowledgement of memory can mark a return of what is repressed (Freud 2002); reflected in the (im)possibility of acknowledging that the 'intricate repertoire of practices' obfuscate a more uncomfortable, underlying truth: that content will, at some point, be corrected (Zelizer 2008a, 83 see also Carpentier and Trioen 2010). This is noted by Sonnevend (2017), who highlights how, in news coverage of the missing Malaysian plane MH370, news journalists sought to draw upon the past as part of their eagerness to cover the event, even when their information was limited. By 'turn[ing] to past events to fill the information gap' (Sonnevend 2017, 81), Sonnevend explains how 'The past offered journalists … seemingly end-less resources' (Sonnevend 2017, 86).

In this example, the presence of memory marks an 'empty place' in content; a lack which returns in retroactive form, conveniently disclosing meaning through memory (Edy 2006). Echoing Sonnevend (2017), this is evident in news coverage of national events where the commemorative function is delivered through an almost excessive and often contradictory range of collective memories, each bestowing meaning and significance on events which often perpetuate their own significance (Black 2015, 2017, 2018; Edy and Daradanova 2006; Whigham and Black 2018). Indeed, if, according to McGowan, 'images and memories of the past serve as the ideological justification of the present' (McGowan 2004, 153), then these examples illustrate how such justification is achieved via a retroactive 'symbolization' which shifts 'incomprehensible loss', or, in this case, a lack in content, to some form of posited 'meaning' (Žižek 2008a, 107).

In sum, the gap between content and form is made apparent in the formal use of collective memories which retroactively provide meaning for the news journalist. This suggests that it is not enough to analyse the content of journalism's memory-work, but

that a closer reading of the form is also required (Zelizer 2008a; Žižek 2017). At the same time, the above discussion should not be perceived as a critique of news journalism *per se*. Rather, it may be the case that retroactivity provides news journalists, most notably investigative journalism, a privileged position in identifying *what* is repressed in the content of a news story. That is, what aspects are hidden, obscured or obfuscated by the story itself?

Conclusion

The above discussion has served to build upon research in memory and journalism, offering a novel theoretical approach to the ways in which journalists retroactively use the past as a formative part of their practice: what Zelizer (2008) refers to as journalists' memory-work. Theoretically, this article sheds light on how news reports can '"stretch" temporal perceptions … produc[ing] a "past continuous" timeframe' (Zandbwerg et al. 2012, 76), from which journalists retroactively align (past) cause with (present) effect. In building this approach, specific attention was afforded to the relationship between contingency and necessity as well as content and form. Indeed, ascertaining the form in which journalism's content is retroactively constituted, can redirect attention to the contingency of social life (and its subsequent reporting) and, more importantly, to the contingency of both the past *and* the present (Benjamin 1999).

This significance is underscored when we consider *which pasts continue to remain with us*, and more importantly, when we align this 'past' with the 'work' of journalists. Here, topics such as the holocaust or the history of imperialism within Western Europe can, through a retroactive analysis, provide a sense of 'added reflexivity' to understandings of the past (Elsaesser 2014). Indeed, while these topics:

now imply the deconstruction of any fixed subject position, including those of 'victims' and 'perpetrators,' it does not preclude the texts from partaking in a less conscious or indeed less self-conscious 'guilt management' on behalf of particular constituencies of readers and audiences, especially if one remembers that it is most likely some unresolved dilemma in the present, rather than the past for its own sake, that their memory narratives want to bring to light (Elsaesser 2014, 293-294).

These 'memory narratives' re-direct attention to the significance of memory *in* news journalism as well as the significance of journalists' relation *with* memory, especially when considered in light of 'post-truth' debates and to the ways in which journalism remains grounded in values of 'objectivity' (Carpentier and Trioen 2010). In fact, it is this memory-journalism relationship which helps to highlight how the effects of journalism's memory-work posits a disjuncture between the role of journalists in constructing memory *and* the role of memory in aiding journalists. What this reveals is a form of memory-work that remains inherently tied to the temporal inconsistencies that both mark and shape our relations to time, memory and the past. What this article proposes, therefore, is that these relations can be observed and analyzed through the lens of retroactivity.

To this end, the above discussion serves to emphasise the importance of journalism as a context for exploring the contingency of past and present (Elsaesser 2014). It is this sense of contingency which is found in Benjamin's 'tiger's leap into the past' – a reference to 'rescuing the heritage of the oppressed and drawing inspiration from it in order to break into and halt the present catastrophe' (Löwy 2016, 87) – as

well as Mead's (1959) focus on the role of the 'novel' in accounting for temporal change. These approaches can be considered with regards to how collective memory and our relations to the past are, in the context of the narrativization of news, reproduced through a contingency which is retroactively transformed into necessity ('will have been'), and in the extent to which analyses of news' retroactive form can reveal disavowed actions and forms of repression in the content of news discourses (Edkins 2003; Elsaesser 2014; Hook 2012).

Ultimately, what this article proposes, is that the relationship between news journalism and memory – and, more widely, studies on the use of memory, past narratives and temporality in journalism practice and the media – can be considered in relation to how 'the past is open to retroactive reinterpretations' (Žižek 2017, 160). As Žižek argues:

> This does not mean that we cannot change the future; it just means that, in order to change our future, we should first (not 'understand' but) change our past, reinterpret it in a way that opens up toward a different future from the one implied by the predominant vision of the past. (Žižek 2017, 160)

Locating the role of news journalists in this process will prove beneficial for academics studying journalism and the media as well as scholars exploring the significance of time, temporality and memory.

Notes

[1] Notably, the authors do cite previous studies which have examined the importance of memory and the role of journalists in both contextualizing, precontextualizing and discursively manipulating temporality in news reports, but, these are only given passing reference (see Jaworski et al. 2003; Oddo 2013; Tennenboim-Weinblatt 2008, 2013).

[2] The term has also been used in analyses of film, most notably, in the work of Elsaesser (2014).

[3] We can see this same approach reflected in the 'free choosing' of a sexual identity, that, once chosen, temporally constitutes the necessary 'always been' of the subject's identity (Žižek 2017).

[4] Vighi and Feldner add that 'In the Foucauldian universe there are no cracks, no loopholes, no extra-discursive platforms from where freedom could enter' (Vighi and Feldner 2007, 153).

[5] Žižek's (2012, 2015) Hegelianism is revealed in a Hegelian reversal, whereby contingency and necessity are dialectically inscribed in themselves.

[6] As noted in a previously referenced quote by Zandbwerg et al. journalists select from a 'never-ending flow of occurrences, to place those events within a context, and to construct around them a meaningful continuum' (Zandbwerg et al. 2012, 68)

[7] In extending this argument, think of the strange 'Holocaust Comedy' genre in film. In films such as: *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin 1940) and *Life is Beautiful*

(Roberto Benigni 1997), it is almost as if the excessive tragedy of the holocaust can only be made accessible through the form of comedy.

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