

Beyond Police Stenography: How Disembedding Enables Critical Crime News Work

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Abstract: Prior research finds that crime journalists reproduced criminal justice organization standpoints through close working relationships with law enforcement. How do crime reporters relate to police sources today? Drawing on interviews with 58 journalists across 40 local newsrooms in 24 U.S. states, I find that disembedding from law enforcement organizations restructures many reporters' source relationships, creating conditions under which some journalists enact a distinct professional identity through occupational activism. I argue that the critical crime journalist role is distinguished by a commitment to alternative sourcing practices, structural framing, and reinterpreted objectivity. Informants connect critical orientations to repeated exposure to official dishonesty and the influence of Black-led social movements against police violence. Critical crime journalists amplify civilian and prisoner voices and engage in contextual reporting, treating coverage as a vehicle to shift how readers understand criminalized people and the criminal justice system more broadly. These findings extend scholarship on occupational activism into crime journalism and identify pathways into this form of empirical and expressive occupational activism.

Past research finds that crime journalists reproduced criminal justice organization standpoints. Reporters worked within police departments or court buildings, and embedded reporters' sympathetic orientation toward law enforcement followed from close working relationships (Chermak 1995). Embedding provided reliable access to information, and reliance on official sources bolstered newspapers' credibility. Practices that privileged official sources and punitive frames created consensus for punitive policy (Beckett 1999, Enns 2016). Yet this model may not capture the full range of contemporary journalist-source relationships.

Drawing on interviews with 58 journalists across 40 local newsrooms, I document a broader range of orientations and practices than prior literature suggests. Some crime journalists stretch or contest local organizational scripts with the stated aim of shifting public discourse on crime and punishment. These practices are enacted through occupational activism: socially transformative action pursued through one's occupational role (Coley and Schachle-Gordon 2026). To explain these dynamics, I introduce the critic as a distinct journalistic role (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Critics reinterpret objectivity to expand the boundaries of credible sources and authoritative explanation, emphasizing systemic harms over episodic deviance. Their activism takes a distinctive form because journalism is both an empirical and expressive occupation: critics' efforts to elevate marginalized voices also contest the evidentiary infrastructure through which official sources have historically claimed authority (Hall et al. 1978, Lawrence 2000).

I find that most interviewees no longer work within criminal justice organizations—a structural shift I call *disembedding* that restructures reporters' source relationships by increasing autonomy from law enforcement and creating incentives to build ties with alternative sources, who impose a countervailing set of rewards and penalties for coverage. Informants who articulated critical orientations connected their professional identity to two sets of experiences.

First, repeated exposure to law enforcement dishonesty, an epistemic pathway that originates within the occupation itself. Second, normative pressure from Black-led social movements against police violence, which shifted the discursive and political opportunity structures (McCammon 2022) for crime news and provided ideological resources journalists could draw on to envision and negotiate equitable practice. When critical journalists have the autonomy to do so, they treat coverage as a vehicle to shift how readers understand criminalized people, amplifying civilian and prisoner voices and engaging in contextual reporting to challenge official narratives.

This study extends scholarship on occupational activism into crime journalism, a domain historically defined by official deference even amid broader adversarial turns in the profession (Ericson et al. 1987, Lawrence 2000, Schudson 2018). The critical motivations and practices I document are surprising given that my sample primarily consists of white journalists working in legacy news organizations. Comparable practices have been documented primarily among journalists of color or those working at historically Black newspapers (Fields and Newman 2020, Roychoudhury 2023, Oliver et al. 2024). By identifying the structural and biographical pathways through which demographic insiders come to enact occupational activism, this study complements recent work documenting the outsider-within pathway in journalism (Garbes 2026). Because media coverage mediates the effect of protest on public opinion of police (Reny and Newman 2021), the practices detailed here have the potential to shape public understandings of punishment more broadly (Moreno-Medina et al. 2022, Duxbury 2023).

Conceptual Framework

Occupational Activism and Critical Crime Journalism

Workers across occupations creatively enact their jobs to advance social change (Cornfield et al. 2018, Coley and Schachle-Gordon 2026). Occupational activism is distinct from social movement activism in that it can be individual rather than collective, enacted through daily work routines, and need not be sustained over time. The concept draws attention to how workers use the discretion available in their occupational positions to reshape organizational outputs and, potentially, the broader sociopolitical context.

Journalists exercise considerable discretion over source selection, narrative framing, and story prioritization—yet that discretion is constrained by organizational routines, hierarchies, and source relationships. Garbes (2026) shows how journalists of color in public radio engage in values-centered occupational activism, leveraging their outsider-within status to challenge the white racial frame governing story selection and audience construction. This study examines a parallel but distinct phenomenon: the emergence of critical orientations among crime reporters who are predominantly white and employed by legacy news organizations. I argue that structural conditions, epistemic experiences, and discursive shifts help explain how some reporters come to enact occupational activism in local organizational contexts that have historically resisted norms institutionalized elsewhere in the profession.

To clarify the form that occupational activism takes in crime reporting, I distinguish among three *journalistic roles*: stenographer, watchdog, and critic. Journalistic roles are discursive constructs that practitioners internalize, contest, and enact to manage core occupational dilemmas regarding legitimacy and autonomy (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Roles consist of *orientation* (professional norms and individual values) and *practice*. Scholars have identified types such as mouthpiece, storyteller, watchdog, and adversary (Hanitzsch and Ornebring 2019), but existing typologies do not capture what I observe in local crime

newsrooms. Stenographers emphasize collegial ties with law enforcement and report official accounts with minimal reinterpretation. Watchdogs expose official wrongdoing but typically treat misconduct as episodic and exceptional, reacting to scandals rather than scrutinizing routine practices. Neither role entails the creative enactment of one's occupational position in pursuit of social change. These roles are developed with reference to scholarly literature (see Section 2.3).

[Table 1 about here]

Critics, by contrast, are occupational activists. They adopt a structural lens, depicting criminal justice harms as systemic rather than aberrant, draw on alternative sources to recognize marginalized people and improve their standing in news discourse, and proactively seek opportunities to question everyday criminal justice practices (Lowery 2021). Reflecting on her editors' reluctance to publish stories sympathetic to criminalized people, mid-career criminal justice reporter Amanda conceded that readers were unsympathetic, but questioned the argument: "If you don't tell it, they have no chance to become more open minded about it." Critics theorize their work as a vehicle for shifting how readers understand criminalized people and the systems that govern them—an orientation that motivates the sourcing and stylistic practices documented in the Results. They introduce explanatory frames and marginalized perspectives into coverage with the stated aim of shifting public discourse. In so doing, critics go beyond what their role institutionally prescribes. Yet critics maintain professional boundaries. They do not participate in protests, and they often frame their advocacy as improving journalism's commitment to accuracy and independence rather than abandoning objectivity (Chappell and Rispoli 2020). Critics reinterpret objectivity: accuracy and independence remain central, but neutrality no longer entails deference to officials.

Relative to watchdogs, critics pose a more substantial challenge to institutional authority, and distinctively endeavor to amplify the voices of marginalized people (particularly those who are criminalized). Lawrence (2000: 90-91) identifies the limits of the watchdog ideal: despite its adversarial self-presentation, watchdog journalism operates within a legitimating logic, exposing episodic misconduct and malfeasance while reinforcing incumbent social values. Watchdogs treat wrongdoing as an unusual deviation from a system that otherwise functions well and remain oriented toward official sources rather than members of marginalized communities.

The typology is organized around the critic role, which is the theoretically novel category. Stenographer and watchdog are included as conceptual contrast cases that clarify the critic's distinctive features and establish that role heterogeneity persists in contemporary crime news work. They are not intended as exhaustive categories for classifying the sample.

Among the 58 journalists I interviewed, I observed critical role orientations in 23 transcripts, critical practices in 32 transcripts, watchdog orientations in 9 transcripts, watchdog practices in 12 transcripts, stenographer orientations in 4 transcripts, and stenographer practices in 6 transcripts. I coded role orientations when informants explicitly articulated a professional motivation corresponding to one of the ideal types, and coded practices when they described concrete reporting behaviors corresponding to that role, regardless of whether they articulated the associated orientation. Several informants articulated none of these three role orientations. The residual includes reporters whose orientations did not surface clearly in the interview given variable question content, as well as informants whose self-descriptions did not map onto the typology—for example, storytellers with opportunistic motivations who described episodic interest in criminal justice scandals without articulating a stable orientation toward institutional authority. The categories are not mutually exclusive: reporters who recounted long careers

sometimes described "evolution" from stenography to a critical role orientation, and participants might describe practices across the spectrum of the typology. Given the abductive design and semi-structured interview format, these counts are suggestive rather than estimates of prevalence (Small and Calarco 2022: 63-67).

The gap between critical orientations (23) and practices (32) is consistent with the framework developed below: structural conditions and discursive shifts can produce practice changes among journalists who do not articulate transformative intent. Such practices are best understood as norm diffusion—source-diversifying practices, for example, can spread through occupational activism or through other mechanisms my research design cannot always adjudicate. Throughout the manuscript, "critical orientation" refers specifically to internalization of the critic role. Journalists who adopt critical practices without articulating the critic role's orientation are not described as having a critical orientation. All informants who articulated critical role orientations described enacting related practices (verifiable through reference to published stories).

Although adversarial coverage is not new to journalism, the critic role has not been documented in daily crime reporting. The critic role resonates with Black press traditions of structural crime coverage (Fields and Newman 2020, Roychoudhury 2023) and with the activism Garbes (2026) documents among journalists of color (see also Schmidt 2024). But it is observed here among primarily white legacy newsroom employees, suggesting that pathways into occupational activism extend beyond the outsider-within experience.

Journalism as Empirical-Expressive Occupation

Cornfield and colleagues (2018) distinguish expressive, governance, managerial, and humanistic forms of activism. The first three are occupationally located, while the humanistic organizer is oriented toward grassroots self-determination in the broader community. Journalism most clearly fits the *expressive* category because journalists are storytellers whose activism operates via social criticism, persuasion, and consciousness-raising. Recent work elaborates the strategies through which expressive occupational activists pursue social goals, including narrative strategies that shift audience perceptions of marginalized groups (recognition work) and power strategies that redistribute authority within organizations (Letourneau et al. 2026).

Yet journalism is also *empirical*. Some occupations exercise authority through the production and validation of factual claims, adjudicating what counts as credible knowledge. Scientists are the archetypal case: sociologists of science have shown that scientific authority is sustained through institutionalized norms of evidence and organized skepticism, boundary-work that demarcates science from non-science, and field-specific epistemic cultures (Merton [1942] 1973; Gieryn 1983; Knorr Cetina 1999). Journalists likewise establish authority over the factual representation of public events through immediacy and verification (Carlson 2017; Usher 2018; Anderson and Schudson 2019), making journalism a hybrid case in which expressive and empirical work are both central to occupational authority.

Crime coverage represents marginalized groups while also adjudicating public factual disputes between group members and powerful institutional actors with opposed interests—the "primary definers" of crime and punishment in public discourse (Hall et al. 1978). When a reporter elevates the epistemic standing of prisoners over corrections officers, recognition work and epistemic contestation are combined. In such cases, affirming the social worth of criminalized people simultaneously undermines official legitimacy. This zero-sum dimension of

empirical work shapes the form occupational activism takes in crime journalism and helps explain the organizational resistance critics encounter when pursuing it. Demanding better evidence can constitute a political intervention regarding whose accounts are treated as credible. I use empirical occupational activism to describe this form of role enactment: workers pursue social change by contesting the evidentiary standards and credibility judgments through which their occupation produces authoritative knowledge.

Critics therefore articulate intent in more than one register, often shifting between them depending on context and audience. Journalists describe explicitly transformative commitments to shifting public discourse on crime and punishment, often with reference to the historical practice of the ‘white press’ organizations they work for. Yet the practices enacted to achieve these goals may also be justified by professional quality—appealing to accuracy, credibility, and independence to win organizational arguments with colleagues or managers who do not share transformative intent. As public skepticism of law enforcement has grown, coverage that amplifies official accounts may carry newly salient institutional and personal credibility risks. Garbes (2026: 154) frames related concerns as a matter of organizational “citizenship”: news workers “care about the organization’s mission and their belonging within it.” Thus, occupational activism is observed not only through open struggle and resistance, but also “how these workers create meaning in their organizational roles”—in other words, how their enactment of values-driven practice creates a sense of satisfaction and belonging in local legacy news organizations (Garbes 2026: 155).

Opportunity Structures: Disembedding and Movements Against Police Violence

What conditions make the critical role possible in contemporary crime reporting?

Scholarship on occupational activism identifies opportunity structures—political, organizational, and discursive—as key determinants of whether and how workers pursue socially transformative action (Coley and Schachle-Gordon 2026, McCammon 2022). Frontline workers are most likely to exercise discretion when they enjoy autonomy from direct supervision and organizational constraint (Lipsky 2010). In crime reporting, organizational and discursive opportunity structures have shifted substantially over the past two decades.

Critics in crime journalism face a distinctive structural condition: they contest a domain-specific deviation from broader professional norms rather than profession-wide orthodoxy. Gomez (2026) examines weight-inclusive healthcare practitioners whose activism requires unlearning a weight-centric paradigm pervading healthcare education and training. Critics, by contrast, often cite journalism school pedagogy as motivation. They are bringing a resistant occupational domain into alignment with standards institutionalized elsewhere in their profession. That alignment requires active contestation when the crime beat's local organizational defaults retain force—and the resistance critics encountered, even when appealing to professional norms broadly accepted outside this domain, is evidence that the domain-specific script was still active. Where adoption of new norms is smooth, we would not expect the organizational conflict that some critics describe.

Crime reporting historically operated as an organizational hybrid (Pache and Santos 2013): reporters were physically embedded within police departments, and distinct norms dominated this domain even as the broader profession moved toward adversarial orientations. From the 1920s through the mid-twentieth century, journalism's authority rested on what Schudson (2018) calls "Objectivity 1.0"—sourcing official documents, reinforcing neutrality and

detachment (Tuchman 1972; Schudson 1978; Gans 1980). Objectivity underwrote authority by signaling the "subordination of journalists' views to those of their sources" (Anderson and Schudson 2019: 25) and established jurisdiction over the interpretation of public events (Abbott 1988; Carlson 2017). Although a more skeptical paradigm emerged by the late 1960s (Schudson 2018), embedding preserved the earlier model in crime news. Criminal justice organizations served as "primary definers" (Hall et al. 1978), with official affiliation conferring credibility (Ericson et al. 1987; Lawrence 2000). Embedding provided low-cost information flows while giving police leverage to manage coverage (Chibnall 1977; Fishman 1980), a capacity institutionalized through public information officers by the early 2000s (Surette 2001; Chermak and Weiss 2005). Reporters identified with police sources, sometimes shielding them from editors (Chibnall 1977; Ericson et al. 1987; Mawby 2010)—a pattern mirrored in embedded war reporting (Lindner 2009). Adversarial reporting threatened the symbiotic relationship enabling access (Chermak 1995), and police misconduct was typically framed as isolated deviance rather than systemic harm (Chibnall 1977, Lawrence 2000). This structure preserved episodic, source-dependent coverage even as journalism elsewhere embraced longer, interpretive formats (Chermak 1995; Hirschfield and Simon 2010; Fink and Schudson 2014).

By the mid-2010s, this organizational form began to dissolve. Police departments expanded direct communication capacity through social media (Mawby 2010; Tiry et al. 2019; Hughes and Palen 2012), reducing their demand for media relations. The NYPD evicted police reporters from its office space despite news organizations' protests (Nolan 2023). Reporters' removal from the hybrid police-news organizational form constitutes *disembedding*—a structural shift that simultaneously reduces access to law enforcement and weakens some of the access-based penalties that once discouraged critical coverage. For some reporters, diminished

access to law enforcement creates incentives to build ties with alternative sources whose legitimacy pressures reward rather than discourage critical coverage.

Disembedding alone is not a sufficient condition for occupational activism. Increased autonomy enables discretion, but the direction in which that discretion gets exercised depends on what framings are available and perceived as legitimate. Here, the concept of discursive opportunity structure is useful: ideas in the broader culture that are perceived as sensible, realistic, and legitimate facilitate the reception of particular framings (Koopmans and Olzak 2004; McCammon 2022). Black-led social movements against police violence, culminating in the George Floyd uprising, shifted the discursive opportunity structure for crime reporting by rendering structural critiques of policing newly legitimate within mainstream newsrooms (Smith 2020). The George Floyd uprising refers to the wave of protests against police violence that swept the United States following the filmed murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, representing one of the largest protest mobilizations in U.S. history. Although Black-led protest long predates Black Lives Matter and the George Floyd uprising (Oliver et al. 2022), these more recent protest movements have exerted substantial influence on broader discursive and political opportunity structures—in particular, white residents' attitudes towards police (see Reny and Newman 2021).

Earlier research suggests that movement influence on crime journalism in the white press was limited. Events like the Rodney King beating occasionally opened space for systemic critiques, but these frames came from rarely cited community groups and were quickly undermined by newspapers' prioritization of police-proposed reforms (Lawrence 2000). Coverage of police killings, Black movements, and routine police practices largely remained deferential through the 2010s, framing protests as riots while privileging police perspectives

(Hirschfield and Simon 2010; Chermak et al. 2014; Stone and Socia 2019; Brown and Harlow 2019; Brown 2021; Gaede and Oliver 2025).

The George Floyd uprising may have exerted greater influence. Content analysis shows a sharp but short-lived increase in scrutiny of police (Crowl et al. 2024), while interviews with journalists reveal efforts to reinterpret objectivity as compatible with empathy and structural critique (Harlow 2022). Some journalists contested objectivity norms, framing their advocacy as improving journalism's commitment to accuracy rather than abandoning objectivity altogether (Chappell and Rispoli 2020; Lowery 2021; Schmidt 2024). Dozens of newsrooms implemented policies limiting mugshot use (Wang 2021), and organizations like the Center for Just Journalism and Poynter developed new training curricula—forms of professional pedagogy that resemble the "movement schooling" documented in other contexts (Isaac et al. 2020, Coley et al. 2022). Prior work has not examined whether these discursive shifts extend to local crime news work.

Together, disembedding and shifting discursive opportunities make the critical role more viable in local crime reporting. Disembedding loosens the organizational constraints that bound crime reporters to official sources, while movement-driven discursive shifts supply the framings and normative resources that reporters draw on when exercising their expanded discretion.

These structural shifts may also produce practice changes outside occupational activism. Disembedding and discursive opportunity shifts may lead journalists to update verification, sourcing, or style practices without articulating transformative intent. The two mechanisms imply different empirical predictions: if practice change in crime journalism were driven exclusively by institutional diffusion, we would expect smooth adoption of new practices through editorial directives and organizational policy updates, with little evidence of workplace negotiation, editorial pushback, or contested role enactment.

Pathways Into Critical Orientations

If structural conditions make the critic role more viable, what explains which journalists occupy that role? Research on participation in social movements identifies attitudinal affinity, biographical availability, ties to other activists, and prior movement participation as predictors of mobilization (McAdam 1986; Schussman and Soule 2005; Isaac et al. 2020). Several of these concepts translate to occupational activism in journalism, though they require adaptation for a context where activism is pursued through daily work routines rather than collective protest.

First, social movements may shape journalists' orientations before they enter the profession or early in their careers. Cornfield et al. (2018) conceptualize occupational activism as a "biographical consequence" of social movement participation: activists carry values and skills from prior movement experiences into their subsequent careers. In the case of crime reporting, younger journalists who entered the profession during or after the Ferguson protests and George Floyd uprising were exposed to movement critiques of policing during formative career periods. Some younger reporters attended protests as participants rather than professionals. The *movement schooling* pathway also operates through the discursive opportunity structure established above: protest movements supplied the framings, vocabularies, and normative resources that journalism schools, professional pedagogy, and ambient cohort-period exposure transmitted to new reporters. Accordingly, some critics internalized a skeptical orientation toward official sources before they ever covered a crime story. Disembedding also plays an enabling role. Movement-schooled reporters arriving at newsrooms still organizationally embedded in police departments would have faced structural penalties discouraging the enactment of internalized critical orientations.

Second, journalists describe formative on-the-job experiences that reorient their relationship to official sources. Repeated exposure to law enforcement dishonesty raises fundamental questions about source credibility and the political stakes of amplifying false official claims. Gomez (2026) theorizes an analogous process in healthcare, where practitioners undergo resocialization that transforms their understanding of their field's basic precepts and motivates new practice orientations.

Unlike the movement schooling pathway, *resocialization* originates within the occupation. Exposure to official dishonesty has long been a feature of crime reporting, but embedded reporters typically lacked the autonomy to act on such experiences without jeopardizing source access. Disembedding creates conditions under which encounters with official lies can be acted on and degrades the exchange relationship that once made deference strategically rational. As police departments reduce their demand for media relations, even reporters who wish to preserve access through source accommodation may find that strategy no longer succeeds. Discursive opportunity then supplies the framings that make the political stakes of empirical work legible: critics come to understand that amplifying false official accounts is a form of harm that may dehumanize criminalized people and allow official injustice to persist without public consequence. These framings channel biographical experience toward structural critique by linking the empirical question of source credibility to the moral question of whose humanity is affirmed in public discourse.

Disembedding, social movement influence, and exposure to official dishonesty can also produce practice change without generating critical orientations. That distinction separates broad field-level practice diffusion from the role-based activism of critics who explicitly tied their professional identity and statements of transformative intent to these experiences.

Whether critical practices can be enacted depends on organizational conditions. Beat assignment is a key determinant of occupational discretion: breaking news reporters work under tight deadlines with limited autonomy, while some criminal justice reporters and investigative reporters enjoy the time, discretion, and sustained source relationships required for critical work. Career stage matters as well. Particularly successful and experienced reporters enjoy greater autonomy and authority, and can more credibly contest editorial directives—a form of leverage unavailable to early-career reporters, for whom the crime beat is often an entry-level assignment (Ericson et al. 1987). Recent occupational activism research similarly emphasizes that values-aligned workers may nevertheless be unable or reluctant to act when structural and cultural constraints limit their capacity to press for organizational change (Wingfield 2026). When critics attempt to change newsroom practices, they operate as “insider activists” (Briscoe and Gupta 2016) who leverage organizational knowledge to negotiate with managers, appealing to shared professional norms to authorize desired practices. This negotiation is easier when critics can point to movement-legitimated framings that have gained traction in society and the broader profession.

In summary, critical orientations in crime reporting emerge through two potentially overlapping pathways: movement schooling and resocialization through encounters with official dishonesty. Each pathway depends on the opportunity structures established in Section 2.3. Whether critics can successfully enact their preferred practices depends on organizational conditions—particularly beat assignment, career stage, and the availability of editorial allies.

Data and Methods

Design and Recruitment

I designed this study to examine crime journalists' motivations and practices in local newsrooms, focusing on source relationships. I recruited reporters and editors from local print newsrooms in populous U.S. cities, excluding nonprofit newsrooms and alt-weeklies with ideologically aligned readerships. I prioritized mainstream organizations because they likely exert stronger influence on punitive attitudes, particularly given that post-George Floyd opinion shifts were bifurcated by partisan media consumption (Reny and Newman 2021).

My recruitment strategy resembled "sampling for range" (Weiss 1995, Small 2009) or "theoretical sampling"—focusing on "finding a variety of participants who are well positioned to reveal the practices, mechanisms, and relationships your research seeks to explain" (Gerson and Damaske 2020: 46). I sampled across metropolitan newspapers and varied job descriptions within crime news. I identified participants through article searches (using keywords like "crime," "police," "shooting") and staff directories.

I was previously acquainted with nine participants before I attempted to recruit them. I reached these participants via social media, text message, or email. I contacted 229 journalists in 62 newsrooms and interviewed 58 (25% response rate) across 40 newsrooms in 24 U.S. states. I interviewed ten breaking news reporters, ten court reporters, twelve public safety/criminal justice reporters, six investigative reporters, ten police reporters, and ten editors. As data collection progressed, I modified recruitment to focus on underrepresented groups.

[Table 2 about here]

Participant characteristics (Table 2) were similar to national estimates despite not aiming for representativeness.¹ 48 out of 58 respondents participated in the demographic survey. National survey data suggest that the majority of crime reporters are men (53%) and white

¹ Respondents could choose more than one racial/ethnic, gender identity, or sexuality descriptor, so proportions reported in Table 2 do not always add up to 1.

(77%), and my sample skews younger, although national data also include television and digital outlets (Tomasik and Gottfried 2023). Interviews lasted 1.68 hours on average and ranged from 45 minutes to three hours. Interviews were conducted via video call between 2022 and 2024, save for one in-person interview. I recorded and transcribed each interview. All quotes are verbatim; brackets indicate my edits. Participants could not review drafts.

The IRB approved this study as exempt. I negotiated confidentiality given the small, identifiable target population, using pseudonyms and removing organizational identifiers. I remove pseudonyms for particularly identifiable vignettes. I cannot share interview transcripts, but I can share my recruitment outreach template, interview guides, and code list (Appendices).

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employs sequential interviewing: each case improved my understanding of the research question, and different questionnaires were employed across cases (Small 2009). Interview guides ensured comprehensive data collection while allowing follow-up questions. To increase data quality and mitigate recall bias, I prompted participants to discuss specific recent events (Tavory 2020, Lareau 2021, Small and Calarco 2022) and requested links to exemplifying stories for triangulation.

I coded interviews iteratively to refine categories and locate confirming/disconfirming evidence (Lareau 2021), indexing transcripts after every fifth completion using qualitative software (Deterding and Waters 2021). I developed substantive codes and analytic memos, drawing some from literature (e.g., "source organizations," Chermak 1995) and generating others inductively. Early memos narrowed research questions and adjusted interview guides (Lareau 2021). Robert and Patricia's experiences with law enforcement lies became "index cases,"

leading me to develop "source credibility" codes and probe instances where source trustworthiness evaluations changed (Timmermans and Tavory 2022). When I recognized empirical patterns, I sought disconfirming evidence (negative cases) and presented impressions to participants to assess generalizability and recall relevant experiences (Lareau 2021), contributing to the written heterogeneity of this report (Small and Calarco 2022).

Results: Shifting Opportunity Structures in Crime Reporting

The following sections present findings from interviews with crime journalists, organized in two parts. Section 4 details the opportunity structures that informants identified as important in shaping professional identity and practice, whereas Section 5 describes specific practice changes and their relation to the critic role.

Disembedding Limits Access and Reduces Official Source Reliance

Most crime reporters I interviewed do not work within criminal justice organizations. Just one informant reported working in a (mostly empty) police department media office, and two court reporters mentioned that they occasionally took advantage of media offices in courtrooms or knew competitors who did so. Informants generally worked from the newsroom or from home, occasionally making trips to crime scenes, government buildings, or residences (e.g., family members of shooting victims). Some reporters described how police departments stopped opening the “front” region of their organization to the media (Ericson et al. 1987), reducing reporters’ ability to access sources. James, a late-career criminal justice reporter who articulated a critical orientation, compares his early-career routines to the present:

I think departments have been scared shitless. There's a new ethos of public relations in government where people just never talk to you. [...] I look back to the early 2000s [...] I would go back into the squad room and sit down at a conference table with a stack of police reports, and the lieutenant detective would come in and out, and I'd be like, 'Hey, what happened in this one?' [...] The desk sergeant's now behind a Plexiglas shield.

Unlike accounts of 20th century crime news work, none of the journalists I interviewed described police reporters from different newsrooms sharing an office in police headquarters and favoring police communications goals over newsroom editorial priorities. Reporters often saw public information officers (PIOs)—criminal justice organization communications staff—as adversarial gatekeepers who blocked access to information. Matthew, a late-career breaking news reporter, suggested that police departments use PIOs “to protect themselves from having to answer questions.” Lisa, a mid-career court reporter, explained that following a dispute over a story, a PIO retaliated against her by refusing to speak to her ‘off the record,’ returning one-word responses ‘on the record,’ and offering suppressed information to competitors.² PIOs may draw on prior experience working as journalists to manage reporters they work with—some informants noted that PIOs used to work in their newsrooms.

These barriers pushed critical reporters to find new ways to enact their occupational role. “We do have time to talk to activists and other people, because it's not like my day is filled up with chatting with police officers and whatever, because they just don't do that,” quipped Linda, an early-career police reporter who articulated a critical orientation. Indeed, eschewing

² “Off record” conversations cannot be quoted in news articles, and all conversations with reporters are considered “on record” unless a source requests “off record” or “on background” and the reporter agrees. “Off record” conversations can help reporters assess the veracity of tips they’ve received, negotiate on-record interviews, gain context for information they’ve collected, and so on.

relationships with officials and favorable coverage of criminal justice organizations in favor of relationships with criminalized people, activists, and advocates could produce benefits for critics. Chris, a mid-career criminal justice reporter who expressed a critical orientation, explained how he reaped the benefits from “branding” himself through his pattern of coverage:

I never have relied on a police agency for access. I've always been of the mindset that the stories I am allowed to do by freeing myself from that expectation, it far outweighs any benefit that I would get from even entertaining it. I think I might have written one, maybe two, “beat sweeteners.” [...] Whatever benefit you get from that, I think, is far overshadowed by the benefit you get from doing aggressive reporting, that signals to people who've been abused by police, or current police, that you are interested in holding the sheriff accountable. So very quickly, I think people started to recognize, ‘oh, this guy covers reform efforts, jails, and prisons,’ and I have had so many people tell me that they're telling me stuff that they would feel comfortable telling me but they would never feel comfortable telling other reporters.

Many informants felt that police departments have gained leverage in the police-media relationship through their use of social media. Because many readers today encounter news via social media rather than print papers or news websites, law enforcement agencies can now communicate directly with the public. “In the ‘90s, the sheriff's office, I could go in there pretty freely,” Matthew said. “But those days are over, thanks to social media, most of the police agencies have found a way to migrate everything to Twitter releases or Facebook.”

Informants broadly agreed that PIOs were insufficient as far as police sources were concerned, and reporters who said they lacked strong relationships with police sources often

framed it as a professional shortcoming. A handful of reporters assigned to relevant beats told me they were able to perform their duties without almost any law enforcement source relationships. “If you cover cops, tips are really, really hard,” said Donald, a mid-career reporter working a new police beat who felt frustrated after a few years of being stonewalled by local police. “I assumed that whether this story made them look good or bad, cops were going to be invested in the product of journalism. I don’t think I was right.”

Official Lies Violate Journalistic Norms

Some informants described repeated exposure to law enforcement dishonesty as formative experiences, attributing their growing skepticism of official sources to repeated dishonesty. One reporter recalled how newsrooms had disseminated a false narrative from Chicago police regarding the 2014 Laquan McDonald shooting, which persisted until an autopsy and body camera footage revealed otherwise: “There’s no way to say that that was not a bald faced lie... Now, I try to take everything with a grain of salt.” Robert, a mid-career court reporter who articulated a critical orientation, explained how prison agency lies motivated his efforts to enact critical sourcing practices: “The DOC [department of correction] has denied everything [prisoners] have raised. The sheer volume of information we received independently from family members just contradicted what the administration was telling us. [...] The DOC has been nowhere near as reliable a narrator as we used to give them credit for.”

Informants also experienced formative instances of manipulation through sources’ strategic use of half-truths. John, a late-career criminal justice reporter, described how a local corrections union manipulated local newsrooms to serve their political ends:

You will see slashing and stabbing stories skyrocket when they don't like the commissioner. [...] Editors will always take zero context [...] They'll never have what led up to the incident. [...] Somebody was withheld food for a day, then attacked the officer. You're not getting the true story from the union. But you are getting, like, 'inmates are wild maniacs and out of control and animals and they're not human beings.'

Relative to his early-career days, when he worked closely with corrections union sources and rarely considered contradictory perspectives, John explained: "I've really evolved... if I look back at my coverage... I never did much from the angle of the inmate themselves." He went on to explain that his reputation of stenographic practice led a local advocate to refuse to speak with him for a story ("you're so in the bag for the jail unions"). At the time of the interview, he enthusiastically identified as being committed to the "jails beat" so that "things would change." He proudly shared an example of a recent story humanizing a man who had been arrested and incarcerated hundreds of times as a demonstration of the "societal failure" of the criminal justice system, contrasting it against competitors' coverage which placed blame on judges and legislators for allowing "frequent fliers" to exit incarceration repeatedly. Instead, John focused on the question of "why are they getting in?", undermining the very premise of repeated incarceration and allowing this particular man to speak in an interview as a complex person outside of his criminal record (see White, Stuart, and Morrissey 2021 for an elaboration of differentially available complex personhood in crime news).

Informants who never articulated a critical role orientation also enacted critical practices in response to official lies. Anthony, an editor, described his newsroom's "adversarial relationship" with a prison agency: "They lie. They're not straightforward... I guess I'm a little

biased, I give those prisoners the benefit of the doubt.” Amplifying police lies imposes credibility costs amid declining police legitimacy. Susan, an editor, explained that local police had “a long history of not being honest.” This lack of legitimacy motivated her newsroom to “try our best to not just write what’s in the news release.” Thus, enacting critical practices can preserve journalistic authority, and informants who adopt such practices may not articulate transformative intent.

The enactment of critical practices in response to official dishonesty could require workplace resistance or struggle. Patricia, an early-career police reporter who articulated a critical orientation, told me that she applied to that position because “the paper really did a lot of favorable coverage to the police department” and had, in her view, failed to adequately internalize lessons from the Black Lives Matter movement—and so she pitched herself as a potential remedy to that problem.³ After she got the job, she was given an assignment to cover a police report on protests which “painted protesters in an extremely negative light and had inaccuracies about protesters harming police” after an editor learned that a competitor had published something about it already. Patricia tried to decline the assignment, but was ordered to comply. When she questioned the ethics of reporting the police narrative, her editor responded: “Just like the Mueller report, we report out what it is, and then we do the follow-ups.” Patricia objected: “We should get it right the first time, not just regurgitate it.”

Patricia's account illuminates the limited choices available to reporters when editorial requests harden into directives. Patricia refused to write the story, but was ordered to comply. Her second tactic was to propose changing the assignment into a government accountability story which implicitly questioned the veracity of the police account. But this effort was

³ Three other informants who had also worked at the same newspaper confirmed Patricia's impression about the durability of the decidedly uncritical local crime reporting script (as one reporter put it, “very cops heavy”).

ultimately rebuffed. If a reporter in Patricia's shoes had wished to press the issue even further, she may have been able to have her byline removed from the article. Michael, who also articulated a critical orientation, described his discomfort regarding a story profiling a victim of police violence:

What we came away with was a story that was effectively his criminal history [...] I said, get my byline taken off of that story, because I didn't feel good about it. [...] And now I think it would be easier for me to make that argument, that by running a story like this, we are implicitly signing off on police violence and telling readers he deserved it, right? You're subtly telling the readers that this action might have been justified. [...] That's one of those criticisms that I definitely agree with people on, where they say that reporters did the work of vilifying people that were killed in police encounters, and that that was just the playbook for years and years.

Informants' ability to prevent the amplification of law enforcement lies varied based on their organizational position and professional prestige. Michael didn't feel that he was able to prevent his editors from running the story altogether. But he did hint that he may have been able to pick that battle later in his career. Particularly successful and experienced reporters enjoyed greater autonomy and authority in the workplace. If the mismatch between their role orientation and the newsroom's practices was large, they were willing to exit the organization entirely. Early-career reporters often lack the reputation or security required to pick such battles. The crime beat was historically a training position for early-career reporters (Ericson et al. 1987), and new reporters today are often ushered into the breaking news desk. So, while a veteran reporter might have the power to push back, many news workers would not.

Movement Schooling and Discursive Shifts

Many informants who articulated a critical role orientation linked their professional identity and practices to social movement critiques of policing. The George Floyd uprising catalyzed open discussions of norms and practices, leading to working groups, community meetings, training courses, and updated editorial handbooks (see Smith 2020). Dozens of newsrooms implemented policies limiting mugshot use following the protests (Wang 2021).

Some informants traced their interest in crime news to protest movements. “I started covering criminal justice in 2016—after Freddie Gray, after Michael Brown, after Trayvon Martin,” Chris explained. “What made me so interested in criminal justice was this awakening that was happening in that time period. And so I came into this field with a very skeptical point of view towards what people in authority say.” In Chris’s view, “good journalism” meant careful examination of “people in power telling you what they want you to cover.” Police press conferences were a focal point in that respect. Chris proudly recounted a story he wrote undermining a misleading narrative about a victim of police violence:

They smeared this guy. They were like, ‘Oh, he was naked, and we think he was homeless’ ... You know, he wasn’t homeless. He was not naked. His clothing was knocked off by the force of the impact by the police cruiser.

In his view, amplifying misleading statements from police would have helped officials excuse the killing by depicting the victim as disposable. More broadly, Chris recounted his overt struggles against his colleagues’ insistence on what he saw as outdated occupational scripts—debates over whether he was obligated to report on daily gun violence, or whether he

could pursue what he saw as a more interesting and ethical line of reporting that interrogated systemic responses to violence. “If you were to shadow a violence interrupter... that is so much more valuable than covering a shooting, because you can get at the same issues in a way that also outlines a potential solution to them that isn’t just locking people in cages.”

Younger reporters are also more likely to be exposed to protests and attendant “injustice narratives,” which could affect their public service orientation (Walker 2020, Minkin and Barroso 2020). Sandra, an early-career police reporter, describes the origins of her critical orientation and her concerns about how her work affected perceptions of criminalized people:

I was in college around the time that Ferguson happened, and that was a huge part of what people were thinking about when I was in journalism school. We talked a lot about this idea that cop narratives are often incorrect [...] I was in college when Freddie Gray was killed. [...] I went to protests before I was a reporter [...] So my interest in, ‘this is a messed up system that deserves a lot more scrutiny,’ came out of a lot of those things. [...] This newspaper] has this really racist history of reporting on [...] Black people as criminals, cops as being good.

Some informants attributed changing practices to broader post-Black Lives Matter and George Floyd shifts, reflecting on how their reporting highlighted problems in Black communities while prioritizing law enforcement over Black residents. Even reporters without explicit critical orientations described the normalization or diffusion of critical practices.

Late-career breaking news reporter Steven explained: "After George Floyd, we started questioning [...] Are we rubber stamping the police justification for shooting that person?" Lisa explained how she saw sourcing practices changing after George Floyd:

It really underscores the importance of not relying on police narratives entirely. [...] I think, in traditional coverage, there's been a lot of discounting of witness accounts, because that's coming from poor Black people. And mostly white reporters tend to distrust that, especially when it conflicts with police narratives. I think George Floyd shifted that a little bit in ways that hadn't happened before, to where there's now more doubt on police and less doubt on witnesses.

Andrew, a mid-career investigative reporter who frequently worked with incarcerated sources, reflected on how his critical orientation and practices were becoming more common in the profession:

I think there's been a reckoning, post Michael Brown, post George Floyd, that you can't take what the police say as gospel, and you have to be critical about what's put out there, [...] They're human beings, behind all this stuff. [...] It's not criminal super predators [...] I see it with the younger people that I work with, there's certainly more of an understanding of, we need to be skeptical. [...] Locking people up may not be the best thing that actually solves the problem. We've been doing this for a long time, and we still have the same problems that we've had.

Discursive and political shifts bolstered critics' advocacy for distinct practices. Michael explained that activists' increasing "political clout" made it easier to argue for including them in coverage and persuade editors who previously saw activists as a "small fringe group."

Journalists experienced direct pressures via left-leaning Twitter criticism. Social media pile-ons can motivate reporters to avoid stenography, though participants' responses varied:

internalizing criticism, becoming thicker-skinned or more apathetic, or more rarely, retrenchment. “Most of the time it was, you're not being a PR arm for my cause, therefore, you're bullshit,” Susan said. “If these people care that much, they're going to call me, they're going to email me [...] And I've found that that rarely, if ever happens.”

Though scholarship suggests journalists shifted from state mouthpieces to adversaries by the 1970s (Schudson 1978), interviews reveal crime journalists are still actively negotiating a critical orientation after being disembedded from police organizations. Critical informants' motivations were shaped by repeated experiences parsing law enforcement lies and Black protest movements. In the next section, I describe practices enacted by disembedded crime reporters.

Results: Enacting Practices

Breaking the Plexiglas: Building Relationships From the Outside

Stenographers, watchdogs, and critics can all benefit from relationships with official sources. Even in disembedded contexts, not all informants reported difficulty connecting with police. After I recounted James' experience of the sergeant behind a Plexiglas shield, a competitor quipped: “I don't think that the cops are inaccessible... if you just show your face and know who to ask the questions to, half of the job of a reporter is showing up to stuff and knowing where to look for stuff.” Nevertheless, building relationships with official sources in a disembedded context necessitates an array of tactics, both new and old.

Buttering up. One such tactic is to become known as a reporter who can be trusted to protect the organization's interests. Mary, a late-career police reporter, expressed a broadly stenographic orientation—the crowning achievement of her career, in her view, was building deep and mutually beneficial relationships with police sources, and she waxed eloquent about

how much she enjoyed witnessing intense police operations firsthand (a privilege earned by her hard work building trust with sources). Mary explained that she avoided “burning” her police sources by promising to read them their quotes before stories were published. “Third story, I go out, I’m with them, hanging out. I’m like, I’ll call you and I’ll read your quotes,” she said.

“They’re like, ‘Nah, [Mary], you don’t have to, we trust you. It’s fine. You know, write whatever you want.’” Mary explained that her colleague on the investigative team alienated sources by publishing a story that slammed the department for failing to investigate sexual assault: “I was told, the chief of police will not be speaking to that reporter ever again. And they were like, ‘We really wish you were the one who had written that story.’”

Buttering up doesn’t always work, even for genuinely sympathetic reporters. When I asked if he had ever tried to write a ‘beat sweetener’ (puff piece), Donald explained that the tactic had failed, despite his apparent stenographic orientation:

I think that if reporters can gain access to cops to get their perspective, after three, four or five years of just being almost like, instinctively shunned [after George Floyd], then that’s good journalism [...] I’m very sympathetic when I speak to cops, I come in with good faith. I trust them. I tell them I trust them. [...] You know, I truly believe they’re our first responders. And I truly believe that the majority are good people who are doing these things for the right reasons, but I still have not been embraced. [...] I have published a few stories that do make the department look okay. And I’ve gotten nothing. Honestly, I’m truly wondering if cops even read the news.

As Donald's rebuffed efforts show, reduced police demand for media relations may completely shut down reporters' efforts to negotiate access—even when a reporter's stated intent and history of reporting provide no reason for police to fear being burned.

Critical journalists sometimes drew on relationships built through earlier stenographic work. Early in his career, John built strong relationships with corrections union sources through deferential reporting, accumulating both substantive knowledge of the beat and personal ties to union leaders. These resources later facilitated the critical reporting he produced once his orientation shifted. John's case illustrates a career-developmental dynamic rather than a convergence in practice—he moved from one role to another over time, and the early-career relationships became raw material for work pursued under a different orientation. It may be difficult for a reporter who began their career with adversarial reporting to portray themselves as a potential ally of the source organization, which suggests one reason why early-career stenography can serve as a resource for later critical work.

Rubbing elbows. Informants affirmed the importance of routine in-person interactions for building trust, and reporters with a wide variety of role orientations stressed that the best relationships were formed over longer time horizons and should not be viewed by the potential source as immediately transactional. Rubbing elbows can be understood as an effort to recreate the routine in-person social interaction that allowed for strong source relationships in embedded crime reporting. Mark, an early-career court reporter, described the benefits:

Being in arraignment court is how I meet court officers, who then let me know when a cop was arrested, and the DA [district attorney] didn't tell anyone. 'The cop is being arraigned in an hour and a half if you want to come through and catch it.' [...] Being there every day is how you develop that relationship that gets you that future story.

Critical reporters who lacked deep source relationships built through buttering up faced a comparatively steeper hill. After she told me about her experience investigating a police violence scandal, I asked Patricia how she went about developing sources for stories like that.

I did the citizens' police academy on my own time, I would go to community events where high ranking commanders would be at [...] [I would go] to these people for stuff that wasn't super confidential [...] Maybe it was something about their crime reduction plan. I would call up the assistant police chief and say, [...] 'Can you walk me through it?' [...] The person felt like they were giving me information. And then it would reflect in the story. [...] And then the next time it's a little bit more, juicier information.

Bypassing restrictive media access policies required a long-term strategy of rubbing elbows while concealing critical intent. This practice is not easy to implement for journalists who lack the time or autonomy to slowly build relationships in particular organizations or locations. Some breaking news reporters admitted lacking solid source relationships and were more likely to consult press releases than build source relationships while bypassing restrictions.

Building a reputation. Beyond rubbing elbows, reporters mentioned snowball effects wherein their reporting history led to tips from 'inside sources' who wanted to punish organizational deviance or air grievances. This worked for watchdogs and critics who needed insider information to report on scandals. "I like to call them enlightened law enforcement who understand my role as a watchdog," said late-career court reporter Paul, who often worked with law enforcement whistleblowers and lawyers to report on police and corrections scandals that

were implicated in federal litigation.⁴ As previously mentioned, Chris explained that becoming known for covering "reform efforts, jails and prisons" led to insider tips partly because few competitors shared similar interests. Thus, although Donald questioned whether cops even read the stories he wrote, other reporters reaped rewards from their reporting.

Seeking New Voices

Some crime journalists are bringing new sources into their reporting, from activists to prisoners. "I think police have given us many high profile reasons not to take their word," said William, an editor. "It has made us more likely to try to reach out to a lot of different people."

Activists. Activists have not historically been sought out by journalists because journalists avoid 'interested parties'—activists have an agenda, and they typically only enter news discourse to promote it (Ericson et al. 1987). William explained that his colleagues historically viewed activists as "loud and obnoxious" in their promotion of "out there" political views. But recently, he said, "We're not going to so easily dismiss activists as sources of information." This avoidance of 'interested parties' tracks with the historical objectivity norms of stenographers and watchdogs, who prefer sources with formal organizational affiliation. Nevertheless, some non-critical editors are increasingly open to activist sources. Editor Charles echoed this shift: "Activists are good if you explain who they are and what their agenda is."

Journalists may struggle to operationalize activist sources because activists lack formal organization. This was problematic during decentralized police violence protests. "It was really

⁴ Paul elaborated on his professional identity and aims: "I go out and I look for those kinds of cases, and I write about them to make people take a hard look at their actions—police departments and government officials and institutions—and make them you know, take a hard look at themselves, like a little publicity to get the juices flowing." Paul's aim is institutional accountability for discrete failures rather than the systemic critique and narrative reorientation that defines the critical role. Accordingly, his key sources are whistleblowers and lawyers rather than the prisoners, activists, and civilian organizations that critics cultivate.

hard to figure out who the hell was in charge,” said Jennifer, a mid-career police reporter. “You had this person with a megaphone, that person with a megaphone, and they're yelling at each other, as much as they're yelling at police—so it's like, whose march is this?” Still, informants detailed efforts to build activist relationships and produced examples of stories relying on such relationships—most obviously required for reporting police violence against protesters. Patricia, who articulated a critical orientation, described her painstaking effort to build relationships with anti-police violence activists (despite her paper’s “damaged relationship with activists” due to “past coverage issues”) and lamented her superiors’ concerted efforts to sabotage the piece (“the story painted the activists in too positive of a light”).

Crime reporters may lack the leeway to expand their beat’s scope to include activists. Some newsrooms created new positions to cover protests, with titles like “equity reporter” or “injustice reporter.” Thus, even if activists’ news representation increased, those changes may not influence crime news coverage. Reporters' ability to platform activists also depends on perceived influence (i.e., political opportunity structure), which varies. Early-career breaking news reporter Nancy explained why activists in her city “took some hits recently”:

After George Floyd's murder, politicians were really wanting to respond [...] Activists were given a look behind red tape and had a lot of work with politicians, and power. They were sources more often [...] But especially in [this city], we've had a shift focused on policing as the cure-all [...] Police accountability folks have just not been as vocal, had less power, and less respect from the community.

Civilian individuals and organizations. Whereas activism often lacks formal organization, civilian organizations are highly legible for news workers. Local nonprofits and

advocacy organizations are particularly appealing to reporters who aim to explain complex policy interventions. Michael noted previous crime reporters were "subservient" to police sources, leading to "problematic coverage" (like the previously mentioned instance Michael experienced, where relying solely on police sources led to a story that effectively justified a police killing). This awareness—combined with the fact that “writing something critical” led local police to “freeze him out” from easy access to police sources early in his career—motivated his efforts to build relationships with different source types, particularly nonprofits or civilian agencies. “If I hear about something that's been deemed a gang shooting, my first call isn't going to be to the gang investigator, my first call is going to be to one of these street outreach folks that I think are far more attuned to what's actually going on in the streets,” he explained. Thus, even for stories that are in the traditional crime news ambit (gang shootings), Michael argued that civilian sources may produce more accurate and useful information than police sources. The accuracy of such stories mattered to Michael because they shape readers’ perceptions of the people and communities who were most often affected by social problems like interpersonal violence, homelessness, or substance use. This goal also echoed Chris’ stated preference for “shadowing” civilian violence interrupter sources rather than police, as the resultant coverage would teach readers about alternative solutions to interpersonal violence.

Prisoners. Critics saw incarcerated sources as both an important marginalized community to represent in news stories as well as an empirical resource to improve the accuracy and impact of their reporting. Recalling his work on an investigative series that resulted in a prison being closed, Robert explained: “I think of my job as trying to focus on the plight of marginalized communities, but also convincing those who aren’t in marginalized communities to care about that.” The relationships he built with prisoners and their families over the course of his career

helped to change the newsroom's verification procedures (i.e., allowing prisoners' claims to stand alongside or directly contradict corrections agency claims in news copy).

Historically, prisoners have not held significant standing in news discourse (Ericson et al. 1987). Critics lobbied to increase the prevalence of prisoner sources in their reporting by appealing to professional norms (Briscoe and Gupta 2016). In the relatively rare cases when reporters did cover incarcerated people, the norm was that stories typically began through litigation (civil rights lawsuits). This norm is linked to professional evidentiary standards. "Oftentimes those lawsuits will have backup documentation [...] there is evidence for these accusations. It's just kept by the prison system, and the prison system isn't going to give it to us," Charles explained. "So what the lawsuit does is it breaks loose those documents that lend some credibility to the accusation that's being made."

Beyond difficulty obtaining documents for prisoner allegations, readers may see incarcerated people as inherently less credible. Since prisoners often cannot be ethically identified for fear of retaliation, newsroom norms for quoting prisoners overlap with broader anonymous source norms.⁵ Yet these policies may not be evenly applied. "When you're a felon, you're a felon. [...] A lot of people are not going to believe you," said Joseph. "Even if I believe you, I still have to figure out a way to put that story together so that the readers believe you, right?" Sarah, a mid-career criminal justice reporter who articulated a critical orientation, confirms these disparate standards:

I did find that I often had to make a little bit more of a case for it. I had to point out [to my editors], if we have X number of sources saying the same thing, if that were in the

⁵ Evidentiary standards are more uniform when prisoners are not awarded anonymity in news coverage. For example, if a reporter reaches out to a prisoner regarding a police officer's involvement in their criminal conviction, that prisoner is presumably speaking "on the record" (read: not anonymously), and therefore is not expected to e.g. produce documents verifying their claims.

free world, you wouldn't have any hesitations. [...] I had to have a higher standard of proof to write about something happening in prison [...] if I would need X number of sources to tell me about some abuse or injustice that happened on the street, I would need X plus three for something in prison.

Elizabeth, an editor, explained that instead of “X plus three,” she expected a universal rule of threes for corroboration—a claim made by sources unwilling to speak on the record could be reported if it was made by at least three people. Another editor, David, further emphasized the role of evidence in corroboration: “If a source comes in and has the receipts, evidence to corroborate what they're saying, and essentially will have done some of the reporter’s legwork for them already—that goes a long way towards establishing them as a trustworthy source.” News workers require supporting evidence to vet factual claims denied by official sources, both because it can mitigate legal exposure and because it maintains the news outlet’s authority in the eyes of readers. The importance of documents for source credibility sheds further light on Robert’s explanation of the “changed calculus” for prisoner sources after the COVID-19 pandemic. Sarah noted that during the height of COVID, contraband phones became more prevalent in state prisons; fewer staff showed up to work, and fear of catching COVID from prisoners meant that there were fewer cell searches.

In 2019, they would have gotten it raided and confiscated in a week. Now, they could keep it for nine months, which meant nine months of consistent contact and ability to take pictures and to tell me what's happening. And I think that that increased access to phones really helped prison reporters everywhere document what was going on.

Sarah's contraband phone observation helps explain why Robert's newsroom changed tack. It wasn't just that DOC was newly perceived as dishonest—they were lying in press conferences while reporters received huge quantities of reportable evidence disproving the spin. In this sense, official dishonesty facilitates the enactment of critical practices. Nevertheless, reporting claims made by incarcerated sources (outside of litigation) is one critical practice that rarely seems to occur without specific intent to amplify the voices of incarcerated people. Prison reporting can easily slip through the cracks in resource-constrained newsrooms if no reporter makes the case for it. Informants who had built relationships with incarcerated people broadly agreed that the work was time-consuming and difficult; Andrew likened it to a kind of professional privilege, given that his position as an investigative reporter only carried a mandate of ten stories each year.

Negotiation over prisoner sourcing can extend beyond individual stories to sustained editorial contests over beat scope. One reporter who articulated a critical orientation described an ongoing back-and-forth with editors who wanted to reduce the quantity of prison coverage:

[My editors] were like, 'Dude, stop writing so many stories about prison, like, can you find something else? We can't put prisons on the front page every day.' And I did expand some into other adjacent issues. So I started covering jails and juvenile justice and things like that. But when I still continued to get those complaints, then I started doing a thing where I would go back to them and be like, 'Okay, you want less prisons. Here are my next 10 stories. Which of these do you not want?' And they'd be like, 'Oh, yeah, no, you're right. Those are good. So just, okay, keep doing it.' And then, eventually, I had a story that had enough impact that I stopped getting pushback.

Editorial pushback at the categorical level (less prison coverage overall) was therefore contested at the story level (which of these specific pieces would you spike?), with each individual story defensible on its own professional merits. The reporter's strategy converts a categorical fight into a series of individual fights they were more likely to win, and the cumulative effect is sustained coverage that the categorical directive would have foreclosed. The eventual settlement—pushback ending after "a story that had enough impact"—also indicates that critics' positions are sometimes legitimated less through rhetorical victory than through organizational recognition of the work's value. Robert and Andrew described policy impact as a key legitimating factor for prison coverage; Amanda and Chris described audience engagement metrics serving a parallel function, as editors are typically tasked with satisfying corporate metrics directives (Ben-Menachem 2026a). Critical practices in crime journalism are negotiated through incumbent norms—critics wanting to improve prisoner source standing appeal to managers' role orientations to secure organizational permission for desired practices (Briscoe and Gupta 2016). In sum, critical crime journalists brought new sources into reporting and saw particular success with civilian organizations and prisoners.

Contextualizing Criminal Justice Organization Claims

Crime journalists employ various tactics to “stress test” law enforcement statements. While this practice is often reported among news workers who articulate critical role orientations, informants with a wide variety of orientations see more extensive verification of law enforcement claims as a way to preserve credibility amid declining trust in law enforcement.

Seeking corroboration. Susan sought corroboration when publishing stories discovered through police sources. “We try our best to not just write what's in the news release,” she said.

“We’ve just developed a big policy where we don’t just quote scanner audio because we know it’s—not unreliable, but we do try to use it as a secondary layer of verification.” Corroboration generally comes from sources with news standing or evidence that could withstand lawsuits: non-police witness statements, body camera footage, scanner audio, or official documents. Informants who mentioned body cameras agreed that they facilitated efforts to undermine police spin. “Anytime there’s a police involved shooting, and they have body cameras, you’re always going to request that stuff,” said Linda, who articulated a critical orientation. “Because you want to see it for yourself—you can’t trust police.”

Though informants agreed additional verification layers were essential tools, they described how police departments fought to restrict adversarial organizations’ access to auxiliary evidence. After one reporter responded to police tear gas use against protesters by tweeting scanner audio, the department stopped allowing local media scanner access. Late-career investigative reporter Daniel, who expressed a critical orientation, lamented lacking real-time scanner access and stressed that previously, scanners could circumvent police spin: “You call PIOs and they say ‘it just happened, we don’t have information.’ And you’re just sitting there waiting for them to spoon feed it to you.”

Style changes. Critical crime journalists also saw newsroom style policies as an opportunity to change representations of police and criminalized people. Barbara, an editor who expressed a critical orientation, explained why she pushed for her desk to change the phrasing of police quotes: “When you say in a story, ‘police said,’ some readers will take that as a fact, as gospel. [... Now] we say ‘Police allege,’ you know, ‘X shot Y in an argument over a card game.’ And that way, it’s just a signal. Like this is an allegation, it’s not the truth.” This push for stylistic precision is characteristic of critics’ efforts to undermine misleading police narratives. Similarly,

Barbara had successfully lobbied to stop using mugshots in most breaking news reports—or, arguably, she executed a successful coup (“we started doing it on the breaking news desk without telling anyone because I like to operate on ‘ask forgiveness, not permission’”) that was later codified explicitly by her superiors.

Another stylistic change (often demanded in public crime news critiques) refuses the "exonerative tense" or passive voice in police violence descriptions. “We say ‘an officer shot a guy,’ right, the only time we use ‘officer involved shooting’ is if that's all they will say,” Charles explained. “We’ll say, ‘Alright, who shot whom?’ And they say, ‘We're not saying that,’ in which case, we'll say in quotes, ‘they said there was an officer involved shooting,’ and then the very next sentence is, ‘they did not say who shot him.’ This kind of change could influence audience perceptions of culpability (Moreno-Medina et al. 2022). Newsroom style policies therefore become sites of contestation where critics and sympathetic editors attempt to mainstream skeptical reporting practices, since reporters cannot unilaterally change copy norms.

Contextual reporting. Some editorial responses to law enforcement narratives are more robust. Michael explained he favored publishing false law enforcement comments but stressed reporters' obligation to properly evaluate such statements. “Even if the [police] union is saying like, off the wall shit, and it's nonsensical. Okay, maybe you follow it up with a graf,⁶ like a voice of God graf that says, well, in fact, what they're saying is complete bullshit. But you are getting them on the record, right?” Here, Michael endorses what scholars call contextual journalism (Fink and Schudson 2014). This is part of why John was so frustrated with short-term surges in spot coverage of violence against corrections officers—he felt that readers lacked the proper context to understand the significance of each news item (or lack thereof). Reporting ‘just the facts’ allowed corrections officers to make the case to news readers that abuse of incarcerated

⁶ Journalist jargon: “Paragraph.”

people was justified by their lack of humanity. Michael made the case for contextual approaches to police violence reporting, defined against stenographic norms: “It was like, we're going to tell you all about this incident that happened, but we're not going to connect the dots. I think that does a disservice to people [...] that were genuinely shocked at the level of anger and resentment that exploded after George Floyd's death.”

Journalists can do more than seek additional corroboration or add caveats. Critical informants argued that helping readers see the bigger picture maintained independence from law enforcement agendas. Of course, this reporting cannot be performed immediately following police shootings. Contextualization is time-consuming, which may contradict competitive pressures (see also Ben-Menachem 2026b)—and breaking news reporters have less time and autonomy compared to criminal justice or investigative reporters. Still, more prestigious or experienced reporters (particularly those expected to publish less frequently) may successfully challenge incumbent practices. Thus, the pressures of the 24-hour news cycle often mean that initial reports default to an episodic or stenographic frame, with the deeper, systemic analysis of the critic only emerging days later.

Discussion

This study documents occupational activism in an organizational domain historically resistant to it. Crime reporting was long defined by embedding within police organizations and reliance on official sources—conditions that discouraged the creative enactment of occupational roles in pursuit of social change. Yet many of the journalists I interviewed described critical orientations and practices that go beyond the local organizational prescription of their role: amplifying criminalized voices and contextualizing law enforcement claims with the stated aim

of shifting public discourse on crime and punishment. By documenting this orientation among predominantly white reporters in legacy local newsrooms, this study extends scholarship on occupational activism into a distinct empirical domain and identifies structural and biographical pathways into occupational activism that complement the outsider-within pathway documented among journalists of color (Garbes 2026).

The findings illuminate how structural conditions create the opportunity for the critical role to be enacted. Disembedding increased journalists' autonomy from law enforcement, who previously constrained their discretion by threatening reporters' access and standing with police sources. Disembedding weakened these penalties without fully eliminating the need for official information, pushing reporters to develop alternative source relationships. However, autonomy alone did not determine the direction of reporters' discretion. The George Floyd uprising and preceding Black-led protests against police violence shifted the discursive and political opportunity structures for crime reporting, rendering structural critiques of policing newly legitimate within mainstream newsrooms and providing ideological resources that journalists could draw on to envision equitable practice. Together, disembedding and discursive shifts constitute an enabling context—loosening organizational constraints while supplying the framings that connect critical practices to the political stakes of crime news work.

The study also identifies distinct pathways through which journalists come to adopt critical orientations, extending theories of participation in occupational activism. Some younger journalists described what amounts to movement schooling: sustained exposure to protest critiques of policing during formative career periods that endowed them with skeptical orientations toward official sources before they ever covered a crime story. Other journalists described a distinct pathway rooted in professional resocialization (Gomez 2026): repeated

encounters with law enforcement dishonesty destabilized their trust in official sources and motivated the search for new interpretive frameworks and reporting practices. These pathways are not mutually exclusive, but they are analytically distinct and may operate on different career timelines.

Whether critical orientations translate into critical practices depends on organizational conditions that shape occupational discretion. Beat assignment emerged as a key determinant: breaking news reporters worked under tight deadlines with limited autonomy, while criminal justice reporters, investigative reporters, and editors often enjoyed the time and sustained source relationships required for critical work. Career stage mattered as well—experienced reporters could more credibly contest editorial directives, while early-career reporters on the breaking news desk often lacked the standing to push back. When critics did attempt to change newsroom practices, they appealed to shared professional norms to secure organizational permission for desired practices. This negotiation was facilitated by the post-George Floyd discursive environment, which made it harder for editors to dismiss structural critiques as fringe. The variation I observe across organizational positions underscores that occupational activism requires sufficient discretion within the organizational division of labor.

Existing role typologies recognize watchdog and adversary orientations (Hanitzsch and Ornebring 2019), but these do not fully explain the critic role. Whereas watchdogs expose episodic misconduct while often reinforcing institutional legitimacy, critics frame routine criminal justice practices as systemic harms through alternative sources, reinterpreted objectivity, and structural explanation. The distinction matters because it clarifies what is new: not adversarial journalism per se, which dates to the 1960s and 1970s (Schudson 2018), but adversarial journalism in the crime beat of legacy local newspapers. Embedding preserved

deferential norms in this domain even as the broader profession became more skeptical. Broad professional legitimacy is not a sufficient condition for the local organizational enactment of the critical role: someone still has to do the work of instantiating new norms in a particular newsroom, and that work varies in form depending on organizational position, career stage, and professional prestige. For some critics, new practices had to be fought for through sustained negotiation and workplace resistance. For others, they had to be built from scratch in newsrooms where no local template existed. The professional field may offer resources to facilitate critical role internalization and enactment (in no small part due to the advocacy of journalists of color), but occupational activism helps to explain the localized enactment of the role.

The critical role resonates with Black press traditions of structural crime coverage (Fields and Newman 2020, Roychoudhury 2023) and with the values-centered activism Garbes (2026) documents among journalists of color in public radio. That I observe it among primarily white legacy newsroom employees suggests that the conditions producing occupational activism in crime journalism extend beyond racialized experience, even as the outsider-within pathway likely remains a powerful route into critical practice. Movement schooling and on-the-job politicization through encounters with official dishonesty are likely available across the profession, and journalists of color may experience them alongside the outsider-within dynamics Garbes (2026) theorizes. What is distinctive about this sample is that demographic insiders to legacy newsrooms are accessing critical orientations through these pathways. Future work might investigate how these pathways intersect—the confidentiality promises I made to informants often prevent me from discussing their racial-ethnic identity alongside consistent pseudonyms.

This study extends Cornfield and colleagues' (2018) typology of occupational activism by identifying an empirical dimension of occupational activism alongside expressive, governance,

and managerial occupations. Journalism is best understood as a hybrid empirical-expressive occupation, exercising influence through both empirical verification and narrative representation. This hybrid character generates distinctive activist configurations, including empirical activism: contesting the evidentiary infrastructure through which the occupation exercises social authority. Future research might examine purely empirical occupations as well as other hybrids. Social science is a particularly productive case: debates over participatory research methods, positionality, standpoint epistemology, and the devaluation of "me-search" are contests over whose knowledge counts as legitimate evidence and over sociology's own social function (Burawoy 2005; Harris 2020; Smith 2023), plausibly a form of empirical activism with direct parallels to what critics enact in crime journalism.

Finally, this study documents potential mechanisms through which protest frames enter mainstream discourse. Scholarship on agenda-setting (Amenta et al. 2009) and agenda-seeding (Wasow 2020) emphasizes that protest's political impact is mediated through news coverage, and existing research links crime news consumption and framing to punitiveness, blame attribution, and partisan divergence in police attitudes (Beckett 1999; Enns 2016; Moreno-Medina et al. 2022; Reny and Newman 2021; Duxbury 2023). By documenting how some journalists adopt and enact movement-adjacent frames through their daily work, this study identifies occupational activism as one such mediating mechanism. If the critical practices documented here became more widespread, they could plausibly contribute to public opinion shifts regarding crime and punishment—catalyzing support for reform (Olzak 2021, Wright II et al. 2023, Dunivin et al. 2022) or backlash (Ebbinghaus et al. 2024). Future work might examine whether specific stylistic shifts—from "police say" to "police allege," or from passive to active voice in descriptions of police violence—affect public trust or interpretive judgments.

This study has several limitations. The abductive, cross-sectional design documents journalists' stated orientations and self-reported practices rather than published news content, and cannot gauge prevalence across U.S. newsrooms, demonstrate changes over time, or establish effects on organizational practice. Sample composition may produce selection effects in either direction—critically oriented journalists may have been more willing to participate, while legacy newsroom sampling likely underrepresents critics relative to nonprofit or Black press outlets. These countervailing pressures complicate inference about population prevalence but do not affect the paper's analytic claims, which concern the identification and theorization of the critic role rather than its frequency. Future research could employ longitudinal designs, content analysis, or representative sampling to assess whether critical crime journalism represents broader professional change, and comparative work across newsrooms varying in racial composition would clarify how the structural and biographical pathways documented here interact with the outsider-within pathway (Garbes 2026).

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Table 1. Crime Journalist Roles

Characteristics	Stenographer	Watchdog	Critic
Relationship to occupational role	Enacts role as institutionally prescribed	Enacts role as institutionally prescribed	Goes beyond institutional or organizational script to advance social change
Dependence on law enforcement access	High; official access is central to role enactment	Moderate; official and legal insiders remain important, but adversarial tips also matter	Lower; alternative source portfolios reduce dependence
Basis of professional mission	Identify criminality/deviance in society and participate in punishment	Identify criminality/deviance within criminal justice organizations	Identify and explain harmful criminal justice practices (and promising alternatives)
Framing of misconduct	Episodic; deviance located in society	Episodic; deviance located within organizations	Structural; harm located in routine practices
Types of sources consulted	Law enforcement, victims, witnesses, lawyers, policymakers	Law enforcement, whistleblowers within law enforcement, lawyers, policymakers, occasional witnesses	Law enforcement, victims, witnesses, lawyers, policymakers, activists, nonprofits, experts, prisoners
Target of legitimacy pursuits	Journalists, criminal justice organization sources, the public	Journalists, criminal justice organization sources, the public	Journalists, policymakers and administrators, activists, the public
Impact assessment (external to journalism)	Sufficient harshness of criminal justice actors and assertion of order against deviance in society	Discipline or prosecution of deviant criminal justice actors, related organizational practice changes	Shifts in public understanding of criminalized people and punishment; organizational practice change and policy reform towards decarceration

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n=48)

Variable	Mean Value
Age in years	35.00
Years in journalism	13.27
Years in crime journalism	9.56
Race (Proportion)	
Asian (East)	0.02
Asian (South)	0.02
Black / African-American	0.02
Hispanic / Latino, Latina, Latinx	0.12
Native American / Alaska Native	0.02
White	0.88
Gender (Proportion)	
Man	0.44
Non-Binary	0.04
Woman	0.52
Education (Proportion)	
High School	0.02
Associate's Degree	0.02
Bachelor's Degree	0.73
Master's Degree	0.23
Sexuality (Proportion)	
Bisexual / Pansexual	0.12
Gay	0.02
Lesbian	0.04
Straight	0.81