Of essential workers and working from home: Journalistic discourses and the precarities of a pandemic economy

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Abstract
This article considers how reporting about work during the COVID-19 pandemic operated as a field of discourse that challenged the ideological workings of neoliberalism. By documenting the risks and stresses workers of all classes faced during the first year of the pandemic, the reporting began to question neoliberal capitalism as socially unsustainable. Drawing on a corpus of 151 long-form articles and commentary, we show how journalistic discourse structured relationships between different classes of workers and implicated institutions for failing to properly mitigate the risks associated with COVID-19, even though the discourse largely centered on professionals working from home. As the reporting substantiated the precarities revealed by the pandemic as social facts, it challenged presumptions that undergird neoliberal ideologies, though it remains to be seen whether journalism will discursively re-center neoliberal logics in the wake of the pandemic.

Keywords
Work from home, essential workers, COVID-19, journalistic discourse, neoliberal ideology, critical discourse analysis

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On 4 June 2020, a video of New York City police arresting a food delivery driver for violating curfew went viral. Someone had ordered takeout during the city’s COVID-19 lockdown, and as police arrested the driver, he tried to explain he could be out because his work was classified as essential. He was released without penalty, but the moment led to much media commentary, as it symbolized the pandemic economy’s absurdity:

The fact is the courier wouldn’t have had this interaction at all had someone not placed a delivery order close to the end of curfew…Ordering food in might be even more necessary in these times of restaurant closures and coronavirus, but when there’s a curfew involved, it’s outright dangerous. (Saxena, 2020: para 4).

The moment draws attention to the risks workers, especially frontline and gig economy workers, have taken on during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also speaks to the casual demands individuals make of each other in the digital age, while obscuring technologies and institutions in structuring relationships across worker classes. The COVID-19 pandemic is a massive public health crisis that has exacerbated social inequalities, and stories like the opening anecdote have become commonplace, drawing attention to just how fraught contemporary life’s demands have become.

As the global economy was disrupted and American unemployment reached historic levels throughout 2020, the tenuous positioning of labor classes felt more visible than at any point in recent memory. Though many white-collar professionals were able to work from home to avoid exposure, they did so under duress. Meanwhile, workers in fields deemed essential bore increased COVID-19 exposure risk, often left to choose between navigating risky conditions or unemployment. It is no exaggeration to say Americans have had less support from government and private industry during the pandemic than the citizens of other industrialized nations (Sarlin and Rhule, 2020). Yet, in reporting about work during the pandemic, the continued refrain is that though the situation is unsustainable, managing it is crucial for individual livelihood and the broader economy’s health.

News media and journalistic commentary played an important role in synthesizing the economic precarity wrought by COVID-19 as a social fact. These texts comprise a discursive field where conditions are made sense of, often in ways laden with prevailing ideological structures. To that end, this article considers how explanatory journalism and commentary worked to make sense of labor inequities during the pandemic. In interrogating this journalism, we show how it sustains certain economic relations by presenting the unequally distributed labor risks and stresses borne by the pandemic as a natural condition that individuals must, and can, deal with to survive, especially as institutional actors have failed to help mitigate risks.

Neoliberalism, risk, and work preceding the pandemic

If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has made apparent the insecurity workers of all classes face. Many scholars and commentators have recounted broader cultural shifts under neoliberalism, but decades of policy aimed at shrinking governments’ capacity to
intervene in the economy and social welfare has created structural conditions constraining pandemic responses (Harvey, 2007; Watkins, 2020). Neoliberalism has worked as an ideological project limiting the political imaginary, pushing citizens to accept individualized responses to political problems and social crises, imagining themselves as economic agents responsible for their own well-being (Brown, 2015). Some commentators have argued because of the pandemic, “Neoliberal capitalism has been exposed for its inhumanity and criminality, and COVID-19 has shown that there can be no health policy without solidarity, industrial policy and state capacity” (Saad-Filho, 2020: 482). As the pandemic continued, perspectives on neoliberalism have grown more complicated, as “in consequence of the pandemic, the vast majority of people find themselves in a similar contradictory position of having to assert their existential interests and fundamental rights in the institutions that subvert them” (Sumonja, 2020: 9). The structural conditions that preceded the pandemic persist, and it is worth turning attention to how they position individuals in relation to society.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how risk has become increasingly individualized. Risk is an externalized condition of modern existence made legible through forms of knowledge production (Giddens, 1990). But, as Beck (1992) argues, the individualized assumption of risk is implicitly connected to the quantification and financialization of social life, offering a means for knowing which institutional responsibilities can be shifted to individuals. The distribution of risk is an exercise in power that has accelerated during the digital era—individuals are offered increased technological control over their own lives, but fewer social resources for exerting that control (Dean, 2005; Terranova, 2004).

Concurrently, various ideological projects have worked to make the individualized assumption and management of risk a common and desirable condition, especially among working professionals. As Neff (2012) shows, the assumption of professional precarity among technological workers is often accompanied by the promise of future wealth and opportunity, aligning with the forward-looking, affective goal-setting of ideological neoliberalism (Ahmed, 2010). An assumption of financial peril often accompanies entrée into the digital economy’s more prestigious careers, eliding structural conditions that promise long-term security for only a few (Lane, 2011). Such is the root of an entrepreneurial subjectivity that asks individuals to intuit market dynamics and economic logics (Szeman, 2015).

The platform economy is one set of material arrangements underscoring the proliferation of an entrepreneurial, neoliberal subjectivity. It takes form via smartphone applications such as Uber, DoorDash, Postmates, and TaskRabbit, among others, services that match workers with consumers through cloud-based technologies and algorithms (Rosenblat, 2018; Vallas, 2019). Platforms promise greater control over one’s work and finances, but also hide the costs individuals incur to participate, obscuring precarious realities (Smicek, 2016). Though ideologies of hope and aspiration may characterize the professional class, an increasing lack of control over one’s employment has become the norm for large swaths of this platform-abetted gig economy (Duffy, 2015; Moore, 2018). These workers not only have less control over their working conditions, but are also subject to surveillance that exacerbate unequal relations between workers and customers (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). As (Gregory, 2021) discusses, COVID-19 has shown how
much risk has been shifted to on-demand workers, especially as platforms obscure these risks from consumers. Platforms reinforce power imbalances between worker classes, “equipping a purchaser of products and services as ‘middle management’,” producing a labor “paradigm [that] effectively outsources managerial responsibility away from government and commercial enterprises and onto the individual” (Stark and Levy, 2018: 1214). The platform economy embodies the neoliberal approach to labor management, especially as companies remove themselves as intermediaries in deference to technologies, thus absolving themselves of the responsibility to provide worker protections (Rosenblat, 2018).

**Journalistic discourses and neoliberal ideologies**

Because this article considers news reporting about work as a site where neoliberal ideologies circulate, it is worth attending to how journalism works as a discursive field. As Phelan (2014) shows, journalistic texts engage in a “market realist” discourse, situating economic conditions as an incontrovertible fact. Attending to discourse, particularly the techniques and assumptions that render something common sense, offers a useful means for interrogating neoliberalism’s ideological work, particularly as untenable conditions are rendered knowable and manageable (Dahlberg and Phelan, 2011). Journalistic texts illustrate Hall’s (2011) insights into the contradictory nature of ideologies: “Ideology works best by suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments—finding what Laclau calls ‘systems of equivalence’ between them” (731). Specific journalism genres deploy different epistemological and representational techniques to produce knowledge about events and issues under specific conditions (Buozis and Creech, 2018). For COVID-19 and work, explanatory reporting and commentary constitute what Foucault (1976) calls a “grid of intelligibility,” making social reality legible to power and creating a field of discourse that situates individual subjects in relation to that power.

Journalism’s truth aspirations make it a special site of discourse, as it connects verifiable facts to broader narratives, fomenting ideological common sense. As a mode of truth production, journalism works to establish the facts from which broader narratives about American life emanate (Dent, 2008). This is especially true in stories of economic crisis and decline, which valorize working class suffering as foundational to American ideals (Kitch, 2007). News reporting aspires to what Barthes (1972) calls “depoliticized speech,” performing an obligation to present reality as is (256). However, as Van Dijk (1988) shows, objectivity operates as a discursive position within journalistic conventions, preserving the authority to articulate reality to public life. Though Tuchman (1972) calls the performance of objectivity a “strategic ritual” to preserve journalistic independence, it also clarifies journalism’s unique role as a discursive field, establishing which facts matter and to whom. Interrogating journalistic discourse offers a guide for intuiting material conditions within social life, often in ways that acknowledge the seeming instability of contemporary conditions (Fursich, 2009).

At the same time, it is necessary to consider journalism’s specific, complicated relationship with work and labor, including the professional precarity reporters confront.
Throughout the 20th century, news reporting was often hostile to labor (Glende, 2020). As Martin (2019) demonstrates, market incentives have encouraged news outlets to pursue more upscale audiences, thus pushing stories of the working class slowly off America’s news pages since the 1960s. Labor reporting has largely been subsumed under business and economic reporting, reframing work as an abstracted condition to manage (Benson, 2005; Nerone 2009). The conditions that make contemporary journalism precarious can be traced to decisions made in a specifically American context, especially as the work of journalism itself has grown more precarious in the digital age (Christin, 2020; Deuze, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Journalists, especially those in digital newsrooms, face a casualization that has only grown as the industry’s economic crises become more acute (Cohen, 2019). Though journalists faced untenable work pressures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Finneman and Thomas, 2021), their reporting maintained an almost ideological neutrality when it came to the specifics of work, with journalistic conventions rendering labor a subject of dispassionate interest (Martin, 2019).

**Methodology**

Our analysis focuses on a corpus of reporting comprised of explanatory reporting and commentary about work during the pandemic published across national newspapers, broadcast outlets, magazines, and websites over the course of 2020 and into early 2021. We gathered 151 articles from outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *New York Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *ProPublica*, CBS News, NBC News, National Public Radio, *Slate.com*, *Wired.com*, and *VICE.com*. We chose a sampling of outlets that are national in their ambitions and focused on explanatory reporting not pegged to a breaking news event. Most articles were produced by full-time journalists or staff writers, though novelists, essayists, academics, and think tank staff also authored commentary articles. Furthermore, we chose outlets whose ideological positioning at least aspires to objective neutrality, though several outlets (*Slate, The Atlantic, Vice*) at times espouse a preference for liberal policy positions. Many of the articles in our corpus possessed a notably gendered component, which we made the focus of a separate study (Maddox and Creech, 2021). We read these materials, engaging in Hall’s (1975) “long preliminary soak” to understand patterns and logics across articles, establishing the consistencies, contradiction, and gaps that characterize an ideological project stretched across texts (15). While Hall’s “long preliminary soak” metaphor might invite laziness, Hall himself presented the term as an opportunity for how “discourse analysts need to ‘hear’ (must learn to hear) recurring appeals in different contexts” (Steiner, 2016: 104). We identified recurrent forms of reporting and discursive techniques, and considered how they centered certain identities and issues as salient, as well as how they articulated relationships between individuals and larger structural conditions.

Such an analysis is an ideological critique, examining how journalistic discourse lends representational power and explanatory authority to certain sets of facts. As Phelan (2015) argues, ideological critique of mediated discourse has a muddled history; researchers have shied away from explicitly critiquing journalism as productive of inequitable materialist relations. However, it is our contention that by looking at how journalism makes material
conditions sensible, we can push beyond normative assertions that witnessing reality alone is enough to address inequities, instead, echoing Banet-Weiser’s (2015) acknowledgement that as journalism makes injustices plain, it becomes a site of continued discursive contest.

**Analysis**

Several epidemiological facts surround reporting about pandemic work, and much discourse works to account for these facts and provide moral and ethical guidance for navigating them. COVID-19 has, in the United States, affected browner and poorer communities more than others, and much of the reporting foregrounds this (Centers for Disease Control, 2021; Godoy, 2020). Furthermore, many essential and frontline service jobs at most risk of COVID-19 infection are staffed by individuals who identify as African American, Latin American, and Asian American (Lancet, 2020). In the reporting, these facts coalesce into class divisions inflected with the inequities of race: “The past few weeks have exposed just how much a person’s risk of infection hinges on class. Though people of all incomes are at risk of being laid off, those who can work from home are at least less likely to get sick. The low-income workers who do still have jobs… are likely to be stuck in close quarters with other humans” (Khazan, 2020a: para. 2). Not everyone in the discourse is on equal representational footing, but by attending to whose experiences are foregrounded and how, we can see how this reporting ideologically structures and makes visible class relationships.

**Essential workers’ assumed risks**

A significant amount of reporting in the corpus focuses largely on the plight of so-called “essential workers,” especially those in minimum- and low-wage jobs that cannot be performed remotely. Writing in The Atlantic, Pinsker, 2020a captures the unequal exposure to risk implicit in the distinction between essential workers and everyone else:

> In the coming months and years, there will really be two pandemics in America. One will be disruptive and frightening to its victims, but thanks to their existing advantages and lucky near misses with the virus, they will likely emerge from it relatively stable...The other pandemic, though, will devastate those who survive it, leaving lasting scars and altering life courses.

> Which of these two pandemics any given American will experience will be determined by a morbid mix of ...demographic predestination—shaped strongly by inequality—and purely random chance (paras 3–4).

> This sense of implicit inequality pervades much of the corpus, functioning as a condition the reporting works to substantiate or contextualize. The risks faced by low-wage workers are often contrasted against the anxieties and loss of control felt by professionals working from home.
Perhaps because of this distinction, essential workers are often valorized as the heroes keeping society running. For instance, Washington (2020) celebrated Houston’s grocery workers at the beginning of lockdowns: “These grocers had—right along with their counterparts in emergency services—helped keep their cities running” (para. 9). Author and professor Park (2020), who began taking on shifts at her parent’s grocery store in New York City, reflected on her experience: “Under the new state order, grocery stores were deemed one of the few essential businesses allowed to remain open. Our neighborhood would depend on us—I think I can say this without exaggeration—to stay alive” (para 5).

These realizations substantiate a reality at the core of the discourse, that the burden of navigating the pandemic “is not distributed equally: besides nurses and doctors, caregivers and delivery people, grocers are on the front lines. They don’t get to work from home,” and because of this fact, “God forbid that we’re anything but grateful” (Washington, 2020: para 4). Such assertions often anchor articles that highlight the value of certain kinds of pandemic work, often in a tone that balances hardship and necessity, offering anecdotes illustrating the need for broader societal appreciation of this worker class.

One New Yorker article in particular acts as a useful case in seeing how valorization is balanced against harsh realities. In it, one New York City bus driver, Gronnerman (2020) narrates a viral video the driver recorded for his fellow Metropolitan Transportation Authority workers:

“Brothers and sisters,” he said, standing in the aisle of the bus, “I want to thank you all for stepping up and coming to work today and showing what leadership looks like. We are performing an essential and invaluable task.” He reminded his co-workers that they were not only delivering hospital personnel to their jobs. “What about the person that needs dialysis? What about the person who needs regular cancer treatments?” he said. “We are helping all of these people live and survive this global pandemic.

He went on, “Ordinarily we’re not appreciated. We’re not valued. Let’s face it: the squeegee man of the crack era is held in greater regard and higher esteem than a New York City transit bus operator….” (paras. 2–3).

But, as the pandemic started to feel more controlled, bus drivers again became the target of ire: “’We were being lionized as heroic 3 months ago’,’’ Gronnerman quotes her source as saying, before denoting all the ways transportation work had returned to “business as usual,” as the city’s residents continued to “mistreat the people who helped you get through it” (para. 60).

Compared to other essential workers, gig worker experiences are especially stark. One driver, quoted in a VICE article, addressed his instability directly: “All kidding aside we (the drivers) will be in big trouble in a couple of weeks with this virus...We have to work even when sick because we don’t make enough to ride it out” (Ongweso, 2020: para. 3). Meanwhile, delivery company DoorDash touted the daily $.78 fee it would pay drivers to compensate for time spent disinfecting surfaces in their cars (Truong, 2020). Reporting focused on delivery and rideshare driver experiences draws attention to how the platform...
economy exploits precarious individuals while promising economic mobility, a promise made untenable by the pandemic. (Fan, 2020) narrates one individual driver’s experience: “A young Algerian driver, wearing an N95 mask that he had bought online weeks ago… told me, ‘I fought so hard to come here, but right now I’m basically a front-line worker in the middle of a pandemic’” (para. 12). Another driver, reflecting on how the promise he felt when he first started driving has collapsed, states, “you realize that all the years they are working are actually a gamble…And, when disaster hits, you instantly lose the bet” (para. 14).

Compared to delivery drivers and frontline employees, laborers in the meat and agricultural industries have a much less visible presence in the corpus, but when they do appear, their working conditions are morally and materially repugnant. For instance, a ProPublica investigation into meatpacking industry pandemic preparedness claimed in August 2020 that, “more than 39,000 meat and poultry workers have tested positive for COVID-19, and at least 170 have died,” and found “public health departments across the country received numerous complaints that supervisors were telling workers to come back to work while still symptomatic and threatening to fire them if they didn’t” (Grabell and Yeung, 2020: paras. 12; 40). Meanwhile, VICE reported on a Tyson pork processing plant in Waterloo, Iowa where management “allegedly created a…betting game on how many employees would contract the coronavirus…all while encouraging them to work in crowded, unsanitary conditions” (Dowd, 2020: para. 2). These workers face abject risks, but are also often granted less interiority in the reporting than others. The less visibility afforded to these laborers creates an inadvertent essential worker hierarchy, with some struggles are highlighted over others. Reporting on the seeming inevitability of precarity serves a macabre purpose, establishing how indifferent and inhumane certain work can be. Acknowledging essential workers’ risks, and contrasting it to the experiences of many working from home professionals, is crucial for contextualizing the middle-class subject at the core of much of this discourse.

**Centering the middle-class subject**

While reporting about essential workers’ experiences largely highlights collective risk, reporting about those who can work from home is much more individualized, psychologized, and, not surprisingly, domestic. The coronavirus remains a threat in this reporting, but is more abstract, beyond the walls of one’s home. Instead, the psychological and emotional impacts of working from home are centered: managing space with spouses and roommates, keeping focus during Zoom calls, setting work boundaries with oneself, and the uneven burdens borne by professional women. (Callahan, 2020; Compton, 2020; Garbes, 2021; Thurrott, 2020).

The reporting narrates how work has colonized the domestic spaces and psyches of white-collar professionals and largely focuses on how these workers comport themselves: as employees, as bosses, as technology users, and as consumers of gig economy labor. Thus, this reporting discursively centers a presumed middle-class subject as pandemic work’s psychic core. These workers are the focus of new routines and imagined futures, where “the ‘job’ as we know it might never be the same” (Khazan, 2020b: para. 4) and
domestic space becomes “a hectic blend of labor and family life” (para. 7). This formulation, though, presumes a domestic life that can make way for work, but, as Cooper (2020) observes, the “structure of life for many parents during the pandemic—more to do at home, kids highly visible during Zoom calls, flexible work hours—creates the exact conditions under which biases against mothers get unleashed” (para. 4). Adjusting to remote work is understood as a strain, and the stresses are balanced against potential benefits, as “a desolate and lonely experience that often saps creativity and collapses the narrow distance between labor and downtime,” is contrasted to “a boon to social life, family life, egalitarianism, neurodiversity, and the planet itself.” (Thompson, 2020: para. 16). Much of this reporting frames working from home as an “inevitable” future accelerated by the pandemic.

Thus, a complicated “work from home” ethos emerges, especially as “bringing a bit of workplace-like structure into the home can feel unnatural” (Cauterucci, 2020: para. 10). Several articles assert that even though remote workers labor under untenable conditions, the pandemic poses epidemiological and economic harms individuals must to mitigate and manage (Gogoi, 2020; Green, 2020). While examples of bosses and managers with unreasonable expectations fill the corpus, many commentators call for flexibility. Though, as Green (2020) argues, managers often subvert individual’s autonomy regardless of flexibility:

One problem people are already encountering: A lot of managers have no idea how to manage remote workers. As a result, they implement bizarrely tyrannical restrictions—telling their staff to leave their webcams on all day, for example, or instructing people to alert their manager every time they leave their desk for a bathroom break...The underlying message is clear (and insulting): We don’t trust you to work when we can’t see you.

Managing flexibility, both for individual workers and bosses, is a prominent feature of the corpus, but, as Sharma (2014) has noted, flexibility is often a luxury afforded to only a few and often requires access to an unobtrusive technical infrastructure that obscures just how much less flexibility others have. The assumption that one has access to the resources allowing for flexible work often comes off as overtly classist. For instance, one piece of advice for creating boundaries between work and personal life presumes an individual can afford separate devices for work and for socializing: “Working on only your work devices, and doing personal stuff on only your personal devices — your party laptop, if you will—establishes a habit and boundary that reinforces the separation between what each device is for” (Herrera, 2020: para. 30). Other reporting, focused on the ways pandemic-induced remote working has accelerated a trend of “More young, well-paid and well-educated people...relocating permanently from big metro areas” to desirable smaller cities with more affordable housing, draws attention to how mobility has been one of the hidden privileges afforded to work from home professionals (Marcus, 2020: para. 4). Despite reporting that presents moving and mobility as a lifestyle choice and privilege, more detailed perspectives reveal a panicked calculus. Consider the words of a father and seminary student who left New York City amid rising infections:
After he saw the lines at the grocery store, Mr. Mealer went into “dad-survival mode,” he said, loading the family minivan. “I packed all the food we had. I packed all the medicine. I grabbed the fireproof box with our passports. We drove through New Jersey and I bought one of those things for the roof that you can put more crap in” (Kurutz, 2021: para. 8).

The implicit panic foregrounds the tension between the felt dangers of living in the pandemic, and the reality that one may have access to resources that help mitigate those dangers. At the same time, and as Gregg (2011) demonstrates, the work from home ethos is largely imbalanced along gendered lines, as domestic spaces are often remade to accommodate the affective, subconscious demands of work, placing the onus on women to reorganize home life in the face of work’s demands.

Other articles deepen class divisions by offering ethical guidance for consuming others’ labor; that is, guidance on tipping, food delivery, and grocery delivery (Chaudhry, 2020; Lazarus, 2020; Pinsker, 2020b). The ethics of consuming others’ labor are placed in strictly financial terms: “It can be argued that as long as people take on such work willingly, and are treated well and compensated fairly, there’s nothing inherently wrong with this...How much of a premium should be charged when some people literally may be putting their lives on the line to get you groceries and toilet paper?” (Lazarus, 2020: paras. 4–5). For those who can afford to consume others’ labor, the complicated ethics of that choice are most apparent when it comes to ordering food:

I’m not sure there have been any good choices at all: dine indoors, try to keep your mask on whenever a server’s nearby. Dine outside, make sure the tables are far enough apart. Dine at home from takeout boxes an underpaid delivery driver brought to you. Do none of these, and your favorite restaurant closes, putting its employees out of work, probably without a sufficient social safety net (Canavan, 2021: para. 2).

That these realizations most readily come in reporting and commentary about food is telling, in that it is a moment where the interdependence inherent in meeting basic needs is most apparent, and that acknowledging this interdependence is an ethical, if individual, imperative.

As a counterpoint, other articles direct attention to the casual, sometimes thoughtless ways customers behave, making explicit how easy it is for some to ignore the risks essential workers take on. Consider again Park’s (2020) perspective:

Two young guys came shopping together but checked out separately. I rang up their identical and respective purchases of instant-ramen-noodle packets and energy drinks. They socially distanced from each other, but one stood less than a foot away from our employee who was packing their bags. They continued their roomie conversation right over the bag-packer’s head, as if he wasn’t even there….A father and his daughter come into our store every day to buy one or two things, a couple of times a day. They do this out of boredom, I suppose, and I wonder if they realize they are exposing themselves, and us workers, with each trip (para. 12).
Such a passage carries a clear ethical connotation and evidences an emerging pandemic moral hazard: Those privileged enough to avoid risks can do so without taking into account how their actions may place those with fewer resources or less flexibility at risk.

When analyzed alongside reporting chronicling remote workers’ subjective experience of the pandemic, this commentary makes explicit a dual role occupied by the middle-class subject: wealthy enough to consume others’ labor in some cases, while remaining subject to risks and stresses that make their own lives feel untenable. The detail with which news outlets document middle-class and upper middle-class professionals’ experience is perhaps a byproduct of the fact these outlets largely produce news for and about wealthier and whiter parts of society (Usher, 2021). In her New York Times commentary, Anne Helen Petersen (2020) captures the broader fallacy of centering working professionals: “A vast majority of people who were in ‘good’ jobs—stable, well-paid, with benefits—before the pandemic have managed to maintain those good jobs. Doing the job might have become more difficult, but the job itself has largely remained steady” (para. 22). What is obscured about this class of workers, then, are the systems and infrastructures granting them stability. There is an opportunity to think about work across class, “to make sure that future doesn’t just worsen the ever-widening divide in American society between those promised a new vision of the good, balanced life, and those for whom ‘flexibility’ means effacing your wants and needs and dreams…to the fickle demands of your employer” (para. 25). Doing so, though, implicates the institutions, platforms, and corporations whose policies and practices largely structure pandemic work.

Platforms, institutions, and mitigation

Throughout the corpus, gig economy platforms, corporations, and governmental agencies appear as institutional actors with some degree of responsibility for mitigating pandemic risks. Institutional failures are often crystallized in reporting and commentary about the restaurant industry: “The [restaurant] industry and its workers have been left to hang by a thread…2.5 million jobs lost, and countless dead. These failures are rooted in one of America’s most toxic core beliefs: that the economy matters more than the people who create it” (Canavan, 2021: para. 7). Governmental indifference is a common target, and the reporting draws attention to how institutional inaction courts wide-scale individual risk: “The government called restaurant workers ‘essential’ to the economy. Unfortunately, that designation also meant that they were expendable as bodies encountering a deadly virus” (para. 8). This focus on the consequences of neoliberal policy is rare in American journalism, but can lead one to infer that journalistic conventions and commentary are adjusting to account for systemic conditions (Hallin, 2019; Phelan and Salter, 2019).

If so, this awareness of structural issues appears only occasionally. Though institutional responsibilities are acknowledged, dysfunction is often assumed, especially among platform companies. Most often, reporting draws attention to the profits delivery companies like Amazon, Instacart, Grubhub, and Doordash have enjoyed while not doing more to help their contractors and employees mitigate exposure to COVID-19 (Marx, 2020; Smith and Garcia, 2020). Assertions such as “Some workers say they have had
trouble getting the protective gear they’ve been promised. They also want the companies to be more transparent about how many employees have fallen ill, or even died, from COVID-19” are common (Bond, 2020: para. 18). Tech companies appear as uniquely exploitative actors, the risks their business models place on gig employees taken as matter-of-fact: “Some gig workers say the system creates a perverse incentive for cash-strapped contractors to stay behind the wheel, despite the risks to themselves and others they come in contact with” (Marshall, 2020: para. 9).

For remote workers, an individual’s boss, as opposed to an entire economy, is more likely to be described as callous. This is best seen in advice directed at managers, often telling them to shift their expectations: “If you are the boss, you need to pump the brakes in 2020 and 2021. Anyone who runs a company should recognize that an enormous number of their employees simply cannot be as productive…as they typically are” (Kois, 2020: para 4). Such an individually focused appeal, though, has its limits. Though it intuits the incentives of an increasingly competitive economy as counterproductive to surviving a pandemic, it focuses its intervention on individuals, asking them to demonstrate compassion, conflating structural incentives with managerial agency. Such advice also draws attention to how little agency even white-collar professionals have over their work lives, as captured in the following kicker from Khazan (2021), at the end of an article outlining the conditions necessary to counter pandemic-induced burnout: “Place fewer demands on people, give them more control over how to handle those demands, and provide support to handle them. All three are within your boss’s power” (para. 25).

Again, the differences between white-collar workers and essential workers is stark, but a lack of autonomy over the risks and the stresses they feel unites their experiences within the discourse. Occasionally, the shared lack of autonomy draws attention to the ways governmental inaction places increasing pressure on individuals. Khazan (2021) catalogs government shortcomings in a way that is worth quoting at length:

Where employers are unable or unwilling to give people a break, the government could step in. Unfortunately, it has failed to do that. As meatpacking workers began dying at the beginning of the pandemic, the Trump administration allowed plants to increase their line speeds, making it harder for workers to socially distance. Many states still don’t have a mask mandate, putting frontline workers at risk. The federal government does not require that private-sector employers provide paid sick leave or family leave (para. 8).

This litany of policy failures, though rarely articulated in the discourse, draws attention to the consequences of neoliberalism as a cultural logic and policy paradigm. Companies are left to mitigate the crisis for their employees, contractors, and customers, often doing less than they can or should because of profit motives, while individuals are expected to manage their own conditions in novel and innovative ways.

The absence of institutional mitigation is a final, unifying theme in the discourse, and one that highlights neoliberalism’s failures, but also works to demonstrate how different worker classes are connected. As Riley (2021) argues, pandemic-induced “isolation depends on a vast network of cooperative labour that makes it possible...Only this collective work allows us to ‘isolate’. Isolation is thus both an expression of the division
of social labour and a class and racial phenomenon resting on specific material conditions” (para. 1). Paradoxically, when institutions fail to provide the conditions necessary for survival amid a crisis, the relationships between various classes of workers become more immediately visible. As Cartus et al. (2021) write, “It has never stopped being true, at any moment over the past 13 months, that the risk to the most privileged and insulated members of our society is a direct function of the risk that less privileged workers have been forced to assume” (para. 11).

**Conclusion**

Institutional apathy is a prevalent undercurrent in the journalistic discourse, as platforms’, corporations’, and the American government’s failures to protect individuals is a recurring theme that makes sensible the social, ethical, and material connections binding disparate classes of workers in the face of absent institutions. The journalistic discourse is itself largely paradoxical, though. Reporting drawing contrasts between frontline workers and work from home professionals is foundational to the corpus, while also illustrating tension between the individualistic strains of isolated living and the collective work necessary to better mitigate pandemic risks. Though this analysis has focused primarily on class divisions and connections, there is more work to be done considering how reporting on race and gender dynamics drew further attention to the unequal ways precarity and risk are distributed during the pandemic. As we explore in a companion study (Maddox and Creech, 2021), untenable conditions have pushed women, especially women of color, out of the workforce, but journalistic discourse has continued to center individual experiences over collective responses or structural critique.

Focusing on how the reporting makes sensible relationships within the broader economy, we are left considering how modes of journalistic documentation and witnessing are imperfect moral solutions to inequitable conditions, especially in the face of institutions that cannot be compelled, through journalism alone, to act to construct society in more humane ways. As Chouliaraki (2008) asks, “can the spectacles of suffering...go beyond wishful thinking and lead to forms of public action?” (831). In the case of COVID-19, the question remains unsettled, though the corpus about the conditions workers face does work to substantiate precarity, and corporate indifference to that precarity, as material facts the institutions of public and civic life must address.

We are hopeful that, throughout the corpus, a neoliberal focus on individual agency is not the assumed norm, offering potential seeds for a necessary shift in journalistic practice. For instance, framing stories in ways that draw attention to cross-class connections and non-economic relations offers one way of accounting for the ways structural conditions manifest. At the same time, reporting and commentary drawing attention to policy decisions and cultural logics centering a harsh economism as a natural organizing principle for society elucidates the kind of common sense assumptions that have made work precarious, untenable, and dangerous during COVID-19.

More reporting centering both work’s material and structural conditions is needed, especially as the social strains revealed by the pandemic call into question many assumptions that sustain neoliberalism. At its most revelatory, the reporting maps a series of
relationships between essential workers, more privileged remote workers, institutional actors, and the economic forces structuring their experiences. Though the reporting centers certain subjectivities over others, it also draws attention to how work has been made untenable by larger societal stresses. However, as Banet-Wesier (2015) notes, journalistic visibility and shifts in journalistic discourse do not automatically translate to larger, structural change. It remains to be seen whether journalistic discourses will fully abandon neoliberal presumptions in the wake of the pandemic, or whether those discourses will shift again, sustaining neoliberalism by casting the conditions revealed by the pandemic as irrefutably unpleasant, but also something society and workers were ultimately capable of weathering.

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