

Introduction

The article is an exploratory investigation of Italian journalists who cover issues that deal with organized crime of mafia type. Considering the growing importance of *mafia studies*¹ in the political, economic, and social sciences, this article covers a gap that exists in the overall scientific literature on *mafia journalism*, on which subject there is only a handful of Italian publications. The article investigates mafia journalists' accounts of practices, organizations, and relationships with sources, also doing so in relation to the most striking news reports that they have produced. By means of their accounts and news reports, this article explores their general conceptions of the work that they do and the features that they attribute to mafia journalism. The study also explores the extent to which mafia journalism may be regarded as *an autonomous beat*. The assumption is that journalists working on mafia-related issues share a common sense of their work. The range of activities attributable to mafias covers various areas from economics to politics, from violent crime to corruption. Nevertheless, mafia journalists maintain a clear distinction between working on politics, economics, corruption, and crime, on the one hand, and mafia-related issues on the other. This background shapes a sense of belonging that can be termed a *mafia beat*.

Utilizing an institutional discursive approach (Carlson 2015; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Koliska, Chadha, & Burns, 2020), this article presents an investigation and interpretation of mafia journalism as a *discursive* newsbeat, even if 'mafia journalism' is not recognized as an institutionalized beat within newsrooms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 journalists working for Italy-based regional and national news outlets. Italy is the country where mafias originated and where mafia journalism has developed into its contemporary forms. This study sheds light on how *mafia journalism* is understood and experienced beyond the traditional newsroom beat structure by those journalists who produce it and how they discursively define its features.

The results of the research reported in this paper show that mafia journalism is a very distinctive and well-identified field. Journalists who are part of it (and are recognized as part of it) discursively agree on some key issues and share deep expertise on how to work in the field. They maintain some fundamental elements, and a general agreement on what media and what journalists have fuelled them. They are also particularly responsive on certain issues such as the threats and challenges that mafia journalism faces. Being a *mafia journalist* is therefore a social dimension balanced between journalists' discursive conceptions of their work and practices targeted on *mafia journalism*.

The article begins by describing its theoretical framework: that is, the *institutional discursive approach* (Carlson 2015; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). It applies this approach to explain how mafia journalism may be regarded as a beat despite the fact that within Italian newsrooms there is no beat

devoted exclusively to mafia journalism. The article then presents a working definition of mafia journalism. The last three sections describe the methods, set out the results, and draw conclusions.

1. Theoretical framework

The discursive constitution of mafia journalism

In their successful effort to determine a discursive turn in journalism studies, Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) start from the assumption that there are many analyses of journalists' conceptions of their work and roles; however, those analyses all prove to be thin from a theoretical point of view. Hanitzsch and Vos instead propound an understanding of journalistic roles as: "discursive constructions of journalism's institutional identity, and as a struggle over discursive authority in conversations about the locus of journalism in society" (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Their proposal of a *discursive turn* considers journalism and journalistic roles to be ontological objects that are discursively constituted. They thus extend the institutionalist approach to the study of journalism (Cook 2006; Ryfe 2006), giving institution a material shape due to the discursive construction of journalistic roles. Discourses are key to the maintenance of institutional role which is undertaken through a repertoire of discursive actions and strategies to define the journalistic constitution itself as well as repairing when external conditions change (see Koliska, Chadha & Burns 2020). In this sense, mafia journalism and the journalistic roles that mafia journalists perform are ontological objects shaped first (but not only) by mafia journalists' discourses.²

Hanitzsch and Vos's (2017) reasoning is in line with that of Carlson (2015), who presents a theoretical model of the discursive processes that undergird understandings of journalism as a practice able to supply valid knowledge about events in the world. Carlson's interest is not only in role perceptions, but also in the legitimacy that journalists and their news reports receive. He treats journalism as a cultural practice tasked with delivering frequent, valid accounts of events. He uses the term 'metajournalistic discourse' to provide a descriptor of this discursive field defined by the practices that produce news texts, public expressions evaluating them, or the conditions of their reception. Carlson (2015) warns that the discursive justification of a profession (in the case of this article, the justification of a beat consisting of mafia journalism) involves both internal practitioners and external social actors. Research like that described in this article cannot assess what legitimacy interviewees receive from social actors external to journalism, but it can investigate how journalists perceive this legitimacy.

Whilst Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) define journalistic roles as part of a wider framework of meaning, Carlson (2015) emphasizes the idea of journalism as a cultural practice; his theoretical model connects the understandings of practices related to news production to meanings about journalism. Carlson (2015) urges the disentanglement and identification of meanings entrenched in those discourses. From this point of view, compared to Hanitzsch and Vos (2017), he stresses more the role of journalists' news products. Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) base their theoretical approach on the struggle centered on journalists, news outlets, and media organizations to obtain discursive authority in conversations about journalism's identity and place in society. They compile a detailed list of what makes journalism what it is; but they seem to neglect (or do not sufficiently stress) news reports themselves. For the purposes of this article, this means that, in order to capture the discursive features of the mafia journalism subfield and to become part of it, as researchers we must deal with the accounts that mafia journalists variously produce, including their news items. As Carlson puts it (2015: 350), the premise underlying this argument is that ways of doing journalism are inseparable from ways of understanding journalism and its products.

Mafia journalism as a beat beyond the newsroom

With the exception of a few cornerstones in the history of mafia journalism such as that of the newspaper *L'Ora* (Dovizio 2018), which may be regarded as a single-issue newsroom, journalists dealing with mafia matters have never set up an autonomous newsbeat within a traditional newsroom organization. The distinction among different beats is very volatile in the tradition of Italian journalism if not in the case of few major beats. Before the digitization process, all the main newsrooms of traditional media (the most important TV news and the most important newspapers) were organized in beats³. The digitization process has led several newsrooms to lose this type of organization, favoring others that are more fluid and hybrid (see author 2017). There is neither a "mafia beat" nor a "mafia sub beat" within newsrooms. Journalists who deal with issues concerning the mafia do so by coming mainly from two different beats: "courthouse beat" (when they start from local journalism) or "crime beat" (in this frame they prevalently work on mafia crimes). When an investigative beat exists (as in very few Italian newspapers), mafia journalism is part of it. Moreover, several journalists deal with the mafia outside traditional newsrooms and therefore outside the organization of the newsroom. This is why the products of mafia journalism are so differentiated (from documentaries to books).

Over the past thirty years⁴, it has become increasingly difficult to find Italian journalists who work exclusively or prevalently on mafia matters. As regards other journalists who work *also* on mafia-

related issues, whenever they are involved in newsrooms that still have a newsbeat organization, they are included in various other beats. These conditions mean that in order to understand mafia journalism as a beat, as a group of journalists covering a specific area, with its routinization of news-gathering (see Murray 2012), it is necessary to go beyond the newsroom and investigate not only its spatial dimension (such as the police, or a court of law in the case of mafia journalism) but also its social dimension (Broersma & Graham, 2012).

Matthias Revers (2015) considers how the use of Twitter can shape what he terms an *augmented* newsbeat. Twitter makes journalists aware of what other actors do, but it also enables one actor to make others aware of things that may be relevant. On the same reasoning, mafia journalism – and the journalists who feed it – as the results of this article show, shape what can be called a *networked newsbeat*. This is a very restricted group of journalists who have shared ideas about the topics with which they deal, who produce items of information with similar practices, and who often frequent the same environments as their sources in order to nourish the relationship with them. The use of the word ‘network’ is motivated by the intense collaboration among journalists who deal with the mafia, whatever news outlets for which they work, both to produce those items of information and to identify and legitimize them discursively. Two different characteristics must be considered here. 1) Mafia journalists compete as well as collaborate on topics they deal with; 2) mafia journalists are engaged in constantly (not only via news outputs) institutionalizing discursively the beat in which they work. For the latter point, consistency and collaboration are preeminent. Mafia journalists may disagree on the reconstruction of a certain fact, but they have no doubts that some events concern mafia journalism and others do not. A political journalist doesn't have to worry about explaining what it means to be a political journalist, the mafia journalist has to. This work is done jointly by the various journalists who deal with the issue. It is precisely in this sense that the beat is built as a network.

In accordance with the theoretical approach linked to journalism as a discursive institution, mafia as a network beat should be regarded as a field of symbolic and interrelated meanings that comprises different forms of discourse. This perspective does not entail comparing journalists' ideals with their actual ‘performance’, as many scholars have done (see Mellado & Van Dalen 2014; Tandoc, Hellmueller, & Vos 2013); instead, it entails considering that the news which they produce consists of meanings anchored in cultural contexts (Anderson 2020: p. 344). As Anderson (2020) states, texts are not free-floating pieces of culture; rather, they are embedded in specific modes of production that are only partially reducible to practices and general discourses about jurisdiction. Those *texts* and that networked way of producing and legitimizing them reinforce for journalists their membership of the group of those who engage in mafia journalism.

Put otherwise, when a journalist is legitimately identified as one who deals with mafia issues, s/he produces news items that inherently possess those meanings and characteristics that distinguish mafia journalism. Furthermore, given that the object of the reporting is continuously changing, it is more than urgent, as Carlson (2015) maintains, to understand mafia journalism as variable and contextually embedded, not as a universalized cultural form.

This study is unique because it employs the institutional discursive approach (Carlson 2015; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017) and a conception of newsrooms based on newsbeat organization as traditionally conceived, on the other. Methodologically, it links journalists' accounts with their news reports in order to understand how both contribute to the discursive construction and substantial existence of mafia journalism.

2. Integrating mafia journalism into journalism studies

Mafia journalism: a working definition

This study discusses a definition of mafia journalism linked to the everyday working experience of journalists. However, it is necessary first to provide a working definition. The term *mafia*⁵ has many different facets. Although its origin is recognized as being in Italy, it is now a term that is used internationally to indicate different contexts ranging from the USA, through Nigeria, to Turkey (see Santoro 2011).

The Mafia is both 1) a historical concept (the name for a certain configuration of social relationships and cultural traits to be found in Sicily and other Italian regions. This term has been created and used since the 1860s), and 2) a generic concept (a label hypothetically useful to identify and group together a few configurations which exhibit strong similarities to the Italian Mafias's social structures and cultures) [Santoro 2011: 2]

Nando Dalla Chiesa (2015), one of the most astute Italian scholars on this issue, identifies four distinctive characteristics of organized crime of mafia: a) it is characterized by control of the territory in which it operates; b) it creates a system of closely interrelated personal relationships; c) it uses violence as a decisive and 'ultimate' resource in conflict resolution; d) it has entrenched relations with politics. Combining the sociological definition of mafia (Dalla Chiesa 2015) with one of the most recognized (and normative) definitions of journalism (Deuze 2004), we may say that mafia journalism is characterized by different forms of information (news journalism, investigative journalism, reportage and data visualization) about organized crime of mafia type. It is produced in the service of the public; it is built on factual evidence that provides timely and relevant reports; and

it is delivered by professionals and/or organizations that have autonomy in their editorial decisions (see author 2019). This rather general definition makes sense when we further understand the above-mentioned definition of organized crime of mafia type.

Dalla Chiesa's definition (2015) requires four characteristics of mafia journalism.

- a) Its relationship with the territory. It is essential that the mafia journalist knows the territory in which the criminal organization originates and /or operates.
- b) The organizational nature of mafias. Mafia journalism must link the criminal event back to the organizational nature of the mafia. Mafia journalism does not investigate specific crimes, murders, or acts of corruption; instead, it investigates potential relationships that organized crime activates and of which it is the result.
- c) Violence and threats. Mafia organizations can use threats and violence against those whom they see as a hindrance to their goals. Mafia journalism is often such a hindrance. This dimension recalls a growing literature within journalism studies which investigates threats against journalists (Brambila 2017; Cottle, Sambrook, & Mosdell 2018; Sallie and Márquez-Ramírez 2018; Tumber 2006). Journalism studies have recently increased their interest in the harassment and threats that journalists receive. As Cottle and colleagues highlight (2016), journalism is becoming a more dangerous profession, where reporters and editors are intimidated and murdered. A growing body of research examines also the threats that journalists receive in democracies with territorially uneven public security and with high levels of corruption (both characteristics are inherently linked to territories where mafias are deeply rooted (Brambila 2017; Cain 2014; Cottle et al. 2016).⁶
- d) The cohabitation between the legal and illegal spheres. Mafia organizations are increasingly complex and ramified; they maintain constant links with the non-criminal world. As Hess (1970) highlights, a mafia must be considered a mode of social action that receives meaning from a regulatory system other than the rule of law, but which presupposes both a social agent and a structural configuration of social, economic, and political relationships. Dealing journalistically with the mafia also requires investigating the grey area between the criminal and non-criminal spheres, and routinizing an increasing number of sources from this area. Many studies show that traditional sources are still more likely to receive news coverage, but other sources have the power to influence news stories (Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith 2014). Journalists must go beyond official sources and deal with the grey area as well as with criminals.

Moving from an institutional discursive approach that analyzes journalists' discourses (including those related to the news that they produce) and considering key elements of the working definition of mafia journalism as discussed above, the research reported in this study addressed the following questions:

RQ1: How do mafia journalists discuss the four components (e.g.: territory, contextualization, threats, cohabitation between legal and illegal spheres) of the working definition of mafia journalism?

RQ2: What are the fundamental elements of 'mafia journalism' as a newsbeat?

Method

To answer these research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Italian (14 male 6 female) reporters from 20 regional, and national news outlets based through the country (North and South of Italy, with Milan and Palermo being the two most represented cities). The news outlets were prevalently print and broadcast media, but also a couple of online media and newswires. Making a rough estimate, in the Italian context, there are about fifty journalists who deal mainly (or exclusively) with mafia journalism. Then there is a group of journalists who "*also*" deal with the mafia. Compared to the number of those who consider themselves journalists in Italy (about 30,000) but also compared to other beats (the number of political journalists or journalists dealing with football exceeds the number of those dealing with the mafia.⁷

Selection of the interviewees was made following a desk analysis that determined who were the widely recognized journalists with regard to coverage of issues relating to the mafia. The desk analysis considered the journalism festivals in Italy, and some radio and television programs broadcast on those issues. In this regard, the author and an assistant researcher selected some prominent mafia journalists (a list of 6 persons). We contacted them all and asked them for an interview and/or to give us the contact details of journalists whom they considered important in the field of mafia journalism. The applied chain-referral sampling (Morgan 2008) procedure enabled us to interview twenty people. The journalists interviewed here are recognized by their colleagues and by the broader context of journalism (precisely festivals dealing with mafia journalism) as "mafia journalists". During this research, this definition was not always unanimously accepted. Indeed, some journalists prefer to be professionally identified simply as "journalists" without further meanings. For the overall research design I considered important that the journalists interviewed are considered as such (i.e. mafia journalists) by their colleagues and by the wider journalistic context (passing through festivals or initiatives that have to do with "mafia journalism"). These two

characteristics were guaranteed precisely by how the journalists were selected, starting precisely from their participation in contexts in which they were presented in that way and then moving on to the suggestions of those same colleagues. At the end the reporters I interviewed were able to furnish valuable insights into the subfield of mafia journalism as well as to describe significant direct experience.

We decided to stop interviewing journalists after this first round of interviews because we had reached a saturation point with respect to the fundamental elements that we wanted to analyze (Edwards & Holland 2013). The goal was to gain a consistent view of core elements such as the relations with sources, the relation with the territory, reports of threats. We opted for the semi-structured interview method because it is well suited to the exploration of attitudes, values, and motives, and because it can facilitate comparability by ensuring that all questions are answered by each respondent (Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

Table 1 Here

The interviews were conducted over seven months from January 2019 to July 2019. Each of them lasted between forty minutes (I and J) and two hours (B, C, L. N). The interviews were mostly carried out via Skype, except for N and G, which were conducted face to face. The semi-structured interview guide explored journalists' accounts about their careers, daily routines and practices, the organization of their work, their perceptions of mafia journalism, reports of threats and challenges. These questions were shaped in accordance with the tenets of the discursive constitution of journalism framework. Although the guide was rigorously respected, follow-up and *ad hoc* questions were asked to obtain clarification or the further development of ideas and concepts provided by the interviewees. The interview guide also included a reconstructive part. The reconstruction interview has demonstrated its validity in exploring different facets of news items (see the discussion by Godler & Reich, 2017). However, given the objectives of our research and its theoretical framework, on using this method we preferred the interviewees to independently choose one of their news report. The output from that journalistic product was then retrieved and compared with that reconstruction. We explicitly asked for an account of one of the most recent and important items of news or investigation with which they had dealt. 'Important' is a vague term, but the request was intentionally *vague* because the aim was to leave interviewees free to choose what they themselves considered relevant. That part of the interview guide also included specific questions about what sources the interviewees used, how they interacted with them, and the reasons why they regarded those sources as reliable. The methodological aim was explicitly to link their accounts

with their effective outputs. As Anderson states (2020), journalism is not just practices; it is also its news texts, and those texts are culturally charged. Those texts can obviously have an independent life, but what their authors mean and what they say about what they did to produce those news items is highly important. In this reconstruction part, the interviewees were also asked about when they felt comfortable in publishing their work. This question was closely related to the risks that they encountered when working on mafia matters. Excerpts derived by the reconstructive part of the interviews are identified by the term “rec” into the bracket.

All the interviews were recorded for transcription purposes. Due to technical reasons, Interview Q could not be recorded. During the interviews, as many notes as possible were taken. Generated and manually coded were close to 300 pages of transcripts reflecting themes and issues relevant to the research. The coding process began with the identification of concepts tied to the study’s theoretical framework, discourses about the characteristics of mafia journalism highlighted by the working definition provided above, and the sense of belonging to a newsbeat.

The discursive construction of a mafia journalist and mafia journalism

Following the two research questions, the results will first be presented along the four characteristics highlighted in the previous paragraphs. This means how journalists talk about their relationship with the territory, the issue of *contextualization*, threats, and finally how journalists account the fluid relationship in the activities of the mafia between legality and illegality. Then the second part explores what are the fundamental elements of mafia journalism.

Being a mafia journalist

Territory

The first component of the working definition of mafia journalism is the *territory*. The importance of the relation that journalists have with the territory where mafias exercise control was a key and recurrent topic during our research. Whether the journalistic investigation concerned political corruption or *ecomafie*, violent crimes or drug trafficking, the territory appeared fundamental in our interviewees’ accounts. Considering all the items of information that the interviewees chose, accounts of the investigative process were usually linked to the territory (A, C, D, E, H, K, N, T). This discourse appears more important especially due to the fact that when journalists talk about the ‘contemporary’ mafia they instead stress its transnational, opaque, and intangible nature.

Nevertheless, the effects of mafia actions on the local territory may be identified by listening to the voices of the people that inhabit it.

You make the difference by following the people in their territory, following them daily in what they do. You must have trusting relationships with those who know those areas, with the inhabitants, the shepherds, the farmers (A).

You have to talk to people. You have to go to the bars, you have to feel the city, you have to understand what its soul is, as a journalist you cannot live in an ivory tower. You have to mix, you have to be able to read the changes in the city. I'll give you a trivial example. If you realize that in the bars of the city where you used to find coffee X, you suddenly find coffee Y, you must immediately ask yourself some questions (H).

Territory is so important that it configures most of the attitude that the journalists interviewed had towards their work. As the above two excerpts show, discourses on the importance of the territory were structured on differentiation between mafia and civil society. In their discourses, the journalists took it for granted that what they do, their investigations, their reports serve to support civil society. Mafia journalism can help those who are harmed by the mafias, it can help their victims.

There are inquiries that are necessary, but there are also inquiries that you decide to do a priori, and my criterion of choice is: "How can I be useful? How can I help Mafia victims" (S)

When we tell our inquiries in public meetings, in schools or associations, in northern Italy we get a lot of support. In that way we spread awareness about the issue. The North begins to feel responsible for what is happening in the South, and how necessary it is to help those regions in some way (A)

The journalists were aware that their work may somehow help those who are harmed by mafia activities. They took part in the conflict; they were not detached observers. At the same time, it is also intriguing how this perspective applied to mafias. The accounts expressed the awareness that, in order to fight the mafia, other actors need to intervene (A, K, O, Q, T). Their point is that the mafia is too strong, so much so that it can afford to consider journalism as a mere annoyance.

I remember that once in a bar one of the people accompanying us through that district was approached by another person, who told him: "We know you're filming, but we don't mind." We understood that we were being followed, but we also understood that we did not bother them. (K, *rec*)

Other journalists had been there to conduct important inquiries, also with hidden cameras, but they had not prevented the mafia trafficking from continuing. For the mafias it sometimes causes less hassle to let journalists do their work instead of preventing them from doing so (O)

Contextualization

The endeavour to go beyond the single event (which is the second component of the definition mafia journalism provided above) induced the mafia journalists to enact a constant polarization between trust in and suspicion of their sources. Trust in sources is built through a long interaction. Suspicion, on the other hand, is what characterizes that relationship in the beginning. Consider as a paradigmatic example the relationship that mafia journalists have with prosecutors and magistrates. These are two sources that other beats would immediately take for granted (crime journalists or even political journalists tend to trust such sources). With the knowledge that the mafia is a complex organizational system, and in the awareness that mafia journalism should recount not just specific facts but the overall plot, journalists describe themselves as very suspicious of all the actors involved, even magistrates and prosecutors (B, L, M, N, T).

I received the injunction because someone gave it to me. What was his goal? Why did he issue that injunction? I have to be suspicious (T, *rec*)

There are many journalists who follow and report court proceedings. There are those who instead begin their work where that of the prosecutors ends. Sometimes, in fact, what is journalistically relevant is not necessarily relevant from a legal point of view. But a mafia journalist can be said to be really satisfied when the judiciary has to start working where he has finished (M).

This commitment to producing a journalism in which explaining the context sometime is more important than specific facts is also demonstrated by the openness that some journalists have towards the most innovative forms of digital journalism. (A, F, J, S). Those forms of journalism are specifically capable of contextualizing and providing accurate connections between events and not merely reporting specific facts.

Producing information on the mafia does not mean stopping at the first source. It means digging. Using tools that help you connect things. It is not a job that lasts only a day! Many examples of data journalism are excellent examples of mafia journalism (A)

Mafia journalism should not be done with only a subject, verb and predicate. In short, we need to understand the soul of people, to know how to recount the context of the facts. I tell you this from experience gained elsewhere. This is not a common denominator of Italian journalism. It is found in mafia journalism (N).

Threats

As stated in the method section of this paper, the interview outline included questions regarding threats. Nonetheless, the journalists interviewed often raised this topic even before the explicit question was asked, especially during the reconstruction part of the interview. The threats, dangers, and hazards that mafia journalists face appear to be intrinsic to their work. The interviewees, even when they minimized the incidents that occurred to them, or when nothing happened to them, they were extremely reflective on this issue. In this regard, we collected many different records starting with sentences like: “I breathe a sigh of relief every time I turn on the car engine and I’m not blown up” (H) to “It has happened that they come to threaten me. Sometimes I have been able to handle it myself: other times I have gone to the police. Other times I have found the car scratched, but until now I have been lucky” (F). What they tell is not a typology of threats, but the awareness that they have to take all possible precautions. This caution is not only related to avoiding physical dangers; it also concerns avoiding legal ones.

If you write the names and surnames of people close to the mafia, or of full-blown mafiosi, you must expect them to proceed legally, because you are pretty sure that you will receive a complaint. For this reason when you publish your news you need to be sure. You must be sure that in the case of a complaint during the trial you are unassailable (Q, *rec*)

The justice system of our country is a system that discourages press freedom, the "lite temerarie"⁸ that criminals often make for a hundred million euros, are incredible bullshit, and they are things that frighten. The local journalist that receives a complaint as such is not in a position to do his job. When you do your job the most important quality is doing your best to be unassailable (I).

Legal and illegal environments

This paragraph discusses the last component of the definition of mafia journalism, i.e. the one linked to the importance for such journalism of investigating the intersections between the legal and illegal spheres, using the interviewees’ words. Once again, the recurrent discourse is linked to the use of sources; particularly, the use of a multiplicity of sources. Mafia organizations are increasingly complex and ramified, and they maintain constant links with the non-criminal world. According to the interviewees, mafia journalism is identifiable where numerous sources are used, above all direct sources that are not publicly available (injunctions may be publicly available, as well as newswires).

I find it ironic that many news media often advertise journalistic mafia investigations based entirely on judicial materials. What we have learned as the first reporters to deal with mafias is exactly the opposite (J).

We always try not to stop at judicial acts, even though it’s not always easy. But is necessary looking for other sources. it is also important to dig further into the elements that have emerged. If we are talking about confiscated boats, find out

who frequented those boats, who was there in that harbour. You can start from the judicial investigation but you have to go and do a little more in-depth analysis. Also go and talk to victims of extortion, usury, when they are willing to do so (G).

Apparent here is the balanced use of traditional sources, which are still more likely to enter news coverage, with other sources that have the power to influence news stories, and their contexts. The sources cited during the interviews seem to characterize the prevailing discourse with respect to mafia journalism: prosecutors, magistrates, officials, turncoats, affiliates or their families, legal documents, company budgets, and so on. This list of sources also reinforces the idea that to do their job properly, journalists must acquire knowledge (especially for interviewees E, D, F) from the criminal world. The study and analysis of official documents is limited; it does not provide an accurate picture of what mafia organizations do.

Mafia journalism as a journalistic beat

This paragraph summarizes what can be defined as “fundamental elements” of the mafia journalism, that means what mafia journalists regard as the most important elements of mafia journalism and to be a *mafia journalist*. The interview transcripts contained numerous references suggesting that mafia journalists have a sense of belonging discursively characterized by the object of their work. *Beat* is a symbolic construction of meanings, stories, background. Mafia journalists have some core elements and a general agreement about what media and journalists have fuelled mafia journalism. The newspaper *L’Ora* was often cited by the interviewees as having invented modern mafia journalism (B, K, L, M, T).

L’Ora is a newspaper whose mission was to be focused on breaking the veil of silence that had to do with the mafia, before L’Ora the word “mafia” was not even pronounced in journalism, the function of L’Ora was to break this silence (M).

Also the stories of the many journalists killed by the mafia were often remembered: Mauro Rostagno, Beppe Alfano, Mauro De Mauro, Giancarlo Siani, Giuseppe Fava, Mario Francese, Giuseppe Impastato, Giovanni Spampinato were all remembered in various ways by the interviewees. Their stories, what they had done for journalism represents a starting point for the mafia journalists, even if they worked in a very different environment. Their stories were both an inspiration and a ‘code of conduct’ on the attitude that mafia journalists should adopt. Mafia

journalism as a beat is therefore a discursive construct which has in those stories common bases and core elements.

For my way of doing journalism, the education I received is fundamental, influenced by the incredible experience that was *L'Ora*. Although I have never worked with them in the same newsroom, I feel I have learned from journalists such as Farinella or Cimino. Like other journalists who deal with these things, I have solid reference points from which to understand how to work, how to set up an article, how the things I say should be about each other and always have a sense of the overall context (F).

That discursive rhetoric and that shared background are the starting points for belonging to the field of mafia journalism. They are the basis of its social dimension. As already discussed, however, the 'beat' also has a *spatial* dimension that extends beyond newsrooms. Among others, an event during the research may explain how the *spatial dimension* works. During a couple of weeks of the February 2019 I scheduled three different interviews. Two were with journalists who worked for major newspapers. However, it was impossible to contact them. The third interview was with an experienced journalist who no longer worked full time for any media organization. When we met him and told him about the fact I could not reach those two journalists, he said, "They had a tip-off. They will both be stationed somewhere waiting for the police to come to make a major arrest." The fact that mafia journalists share the spaces of the courts, the antechambers of prosecutors, that they are sometimes in sufficiently close contact to leaf through documents, was a recurring theme (B, D, G, M, O). Those spaces, those meetings, and those exchanges were certainly vehicles for that sense of belonging to the field of mafia journalism.

The sharing of the spatial dimension also took place outside production routines: festivals, public meetings, summer schools, were all occasions on which those recognized as mafia journalists met, strengthened their bonds and reinforced the meanings of mafia journalism, they tell what they do, which news reports they worked on, which inquiries. Those occasions also functioned as 'boundary work' defining who was recognized as legitimately belonging to that field. They operated as quality controls on what was produced. In short, those who produced certain items of information were considered to be journalists legitimately operating in the field of the mafia. The dimensions discussed in the working definition provided in the previous sections appear effectively to structure the discursive constitution of mafia journalism as a network beat: the importance of being where the mafia has some impact (A, C, D, E, H, K, N, T), the multiplicity of sources, the suspicious attitude with the most part of the sources (B, L, M, N, T), the inevitability of having to deal with threats and intimidation (H, F, I), the need to go beyond individual facts (E, D, F) these are all aspects repeated by the interviewees and which establish the boundaries of mafia journalism as a beat. An additional

element that goes beyond that definition is the activism of journalists, in the sense of taking sides with (Hanitzsch 2007), persons who have been victims of mafia abuse. In an intricate, complex framework, the journalists often identified with those undergoing the criminal acts of the mafia, the victims, and defended them.

Conclusion

This study has dealt with a critical as well as underexplored⁹ subfield that reveals a new perspective on dynamics related to the existence of journalistic beats. It started from consideration of journalism as a shared discourse (Carlson 20015; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). It analyzed mafia journalists' accounts and reports in order to grasp their discursive construction of identity, the ways in which they struggle discursively for their authority and their purpose in society. This study has deliberately highlighted homogeneous discourses instead of idiosyncratic and individual aspects (which obviously exist). The article started from a working definition of mafia journalism that comprised the importance of the territory, the need to return reports capable of linking the fact they told with the organized crime context, the handling of threats, and finally the need to create production routines able to interact with both the legal world and the illegal one. These elements proved capable of explaining how the mafia journalists interviewed understood their work and mafia journalism in general. In all the discussions collected, the territory was fundamental, the need to go beyond individual aspects and make connections was one of the aims of mafia journalists, the inevitability of dealing with threats was apparent, and the need to deal with a variety of sources was recurrent. Moreover, interviewees furnished evidence of certain common habits and professional practices, their relationships, and often their mutual help. Thus legitimized was the assumption that mafia journalists constitute a networked beat extending beyond the newsroom. The use of the term 'beat', which symbolically unites this group of professionals, was strengthened both by the fundamental elements mafia journalism (the example of the *L'Ora* newspaper or the story of journalists killed by the mafia) but also by the sharing of spaces (from courts to the various places in which important events take place, or place outside production routines). The networked beat created by mafia journalists is characterized by the intensity of the relations among journalists and by a shared conception of their work and mafia journalism in general. The results of our research show that mafia journalism is a very distinctive and well-identified field. To be part of it (and to be recognized as part of it), journalists discursively agree on certain key elements and share a basic expertise on how to work in the field. This definition is shaped by mafia journalists themselves in various contexts, including festivals or summer schools to which those journalists are invited

precisely as mafia journalists. Those contexts strengthen both the network and the modes of its narration.

Although the definition of 'network beat' appears effective for the context analyzed here (that of Italian journalists dealing with organized crime), it could become a definition applicable elsewhere. First of all when journalists work on issues that represent a serious threat or danger, in which the circulation of reliable information is scarce, situations in which collaboration is more profitable than the competition. Journalists who have dealt with the pandemic in this last period may have benefited from a more intense collaboration, from a search for more reliable sources, from a work aimed at defining and defending their role as a journalist. In another sense, the term 'network beat' could be used also for local or national topics that emerge in an era of crisis and cutbacks in the media, and then this network created informally would address a necessary topic, even beyond the newsrooms' organization (or publishers' willingness). In general the discursive constitution of a network beat would strengthen the process of *claiming jurisdiction* (Abbot 1988) and legitimizes both professionals' competencies and the knowledge produced.

Besides its main topic – that is, beats in newsrooms organization – this article sheds new light about an issue that is growing within journalism studies: namely, threats to journalists. This article takes up Hughes and Ramirez's (2018) suggestion of conducting qualitative studies able to furnish more complete data on journalists harassed within specific territories. The results presented shed light on threats that journalists receive in democracies considered more consolidated (as Italy should be). The most powerful influence that the mafia exerts on journalists stems neither from harassment nor from targeted violence, neither from outright bribes nor the use of clientelist monetary incentives. Instead, according to our interviewees, it arises from the use of constitutional and democratic tools such as legal lawsuits. In many cases, if not in all, the ability of the mafia to face a trial from both a financial and professional point of view (i.e.: having the best lawyers) is superior to that of any newsroom.

The research reported in this article had some limitations. In order to find homogeneous elements, it neglected elements that would have given greater diversity and richness to the findings.

Differences were apparent in how journalists tell the functioning of the different organizations (Mafia, 'Ndrangheta and Camorra). Marked differences are also apparent in the comparison between investigation in the Southern or Northern parts of Italy; and also in the comparison between what some interviewees called the 'ragged mafia' as opposed to the 'white-collar mafia'. Finally, although the theme of the relationship with politics was recurrent, it was difficult to include for the purposes of this research study.

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¹ To understand the role of mafias in the Italian economic, social and political context, but also their relevance in social sciences, see the edit recent by Allum, Marinaro and dSciarrone (2019). They also note that “there is a long tradition of books in English that trace the development of Italian mafias especially in the run-up to the great moment of crisis of 1992–94, when the Sicilian Cosa Nostra embarked on a terror campaign against the Italian state, when the political system collapsed under the weight of corruption scandals, when a new set of actors and strategies for dealing with mafias began to emerge” (Allum et al. 2019: 1). Nevertheless, very few works have unravelled the dramatic changes that have occurred in the quarter-century since then. Their book is just an attempt to fill that gap.

² Although the study analyses only a small portion of those discourses, linked to the specific purposes of the research reported, they obviously shape a larger group of elements and products that include public speeches, books, documents, different kinds of interviews, and so on.

³ According to a couple of journalists, who cover prominent roles in their newsroom, interviewed during 2021 to clarify furtherly some issues about the Italian beat division, the ongoing reorganization in terms of convergence between digital and non-digital products is restoring and reinforcing the beat division. It is a trend that must monitor in the future.

⁴ During the early 1990s, Italy witnessed a violent resurgence of mafia activity. In that period, two of the most important magistrates investigating the mafia were killed: Paolo Borsellino and Giovanni Falcone. Thereafter the mafia is said to have totally changed (Bolzoni 2018a; Ciconte 2019) and so too did the journalism that works on mafia related issues (Bolzoni 2018b).

⁵ Four main types of Italian mafias are generally recognized: *Cosa Nostra*, *Camorra*, *'Ndrangheta* and *Apulian mafias*. Although their activities are generally traceable to Italy, a stable mafia presence is reported in a few developed countries: mainly Germany, Canada, Australia, and the United States (see Calderoni et al. 2016).

⁶ In Italy the “Ossigeno per l’informazione – Oxygen for news” association monitors how many journalists suffer forms of intimidation. The association’s data determine that, from April 2020 to June 2020, 123 journalists experienced various forms of intimidation. Such attacks were directed against many different journalists and media outlets. Beyond physical attacks, those threats have also the symbolic power to change journalists’ ability to present themselves as authoritative sources of information.

⁷ In 2020 the “Observatory on Journalism” of the “Italian communication agency” (AGCOM) wrote a report that does not provide estimates on mafia journalists, but on the overall configuration of Italian journalists. The report is available at this link <https://www.agcom.it/documents/10179/20594011/Documento+generico+23-11-2020/41f9490a-44bd-4c61-9812-bf721b5c7cfe?version=1.0> (last access 20th May 2021).

⁸ “Liti temerarie” are denunciations whereby the denouncer is aware that he will lose the case in court. Nevertheless, the journalist must undergo a trial and must defend himself in this process, not infrequently by paying the expenses at least initially,

⁹ This observation is based on the evidence that in international scientific journals dealing with journalism (we considered *Journalism*, *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism Practice*, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, journals that publish nearly 60 articles per year) “mafia journalism” is almost non-existent. This research, which has a purely

exploratory value, was carried out by interrogating the archives with the following keywords: mafia, organized crime, criminal networks, and trafficking networks.