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Barack Obama’s rhetoric of racial reconciliation: The mediated message of the Fox News and CNN

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Abstract

The study investigates Barack Obama’s rhetoric of hope for America’s race relations improvement covered by Fox News and CNN especially from 2008 through 2014. The soundbites of both Fox and CNN discern Obama’s rhetoric primarily with the syndrome of Jeremiah Wright, Obama’s former pastor who has been perceived critical of America’s race relations. Fox News mostly adjudged Obama’s reconciliation approach short of conservative expectations, while CNN’s coverage cued toward hope for reconciling racial resentments.

Keywords: *Racial Reconciliation, Rhetoric, Obama, Jeremiah Wright, Fox News, CNN.*

Introduction

This study attempted to explore frames in the coverage of Fox News and CNN of Barack Obama’s rhetoric of hope for racial reconciliation that he invoked especially in relation to his declaration of presidential candidacy for 2008. Fox News and CNN along with other news outlets reported and analyzed Obama’s race-related speeches since that announcement. In this regard, Obama’s speech for “a more perfect union” at the Philadelphia National Constitution Center on March 18, 2008, particularly motivated the media to scrutinize it with special importance by characterizing or reframing the rhetoric (Walker, November 11, 2021; Fox, February 12, 2019; Abedin, 2017; Anderson, 2015; Perkinson, 2012; Rowland and Jones, 2011).

For Barack Obama, addressing the race issue was like “healing racism’s wounds” because to him America is “a promised land” (Walker, 2011). And healing of wounds is not impossible with the motto of “a more perfect union.” The scrutiny came up with critical media tones in different perspectives. At the beginning, for example, CNN framed Obama’s racial reconciliation rhetoric as “politically risky,” while Fox News termed it a “notable recalibration.”

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The exigency of hope for racial reconciliation also arose when Obama declared his candidacy in the Presidential Election 2008 on February 10, 2007 with an eventual flooding of the airwaves by the national media with images and soundbites of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama’s former pastor, who was perceived as a fiery critic of America’s race-relations. Wright’s remarks touched off a firestorm of criticism in the media and public. ABC News, joined by other news-outlets, started showing footage of a 2003 Wright-sermon in which he condemned America with words like: “God damn America” (Rowland and Jones, 2011). According to Pew Research Center, “The ‘inflammatory’ videos of Rev. Wright’s sermon clips were first broadcast by ABC News and Fox News Channel on March 13, 2008” (July 10, 2008). So, to quell the critics, Obama talked on racial tensions, and declared he had already condemned, in unequivocal terms, the statements of Reverend Wright that have caused much controversy and, in some cases, pain. He also retorted “Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely—” (par. 13, Transcript of Obama’s Speech at the Philadelphia National Constitution Center on March 18, 2008). At the same time, Obama also built on “common hopes” by saying: “that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren” (par. 5, Transcript). Obama spoke on his own guilt, the guilt of European Americans, and the guilt of African Americans. Obama’s moderate tone was as such:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8flxGDg6Nho>

Obama still maintains that types of mitigatory tones. Rhetorical critics, such as John Murphy (2011), Sweet et al. (2010), and Willie J. Harrell Jr. (2010) stated that Obama’s speeches on racial reconciliation, especially one he made at the Philadelphia Constitution Center on March 18, 2008, received significant attention from the public and the news media. The speech made it a “nightly spectacle” (Perkinson, 2012, p. 98) with a positive approach of racial reconciliation. That also created “the myth of postracism in America” (Teasley & Ikard 2010, p. 411). Some scholars called the “post-racial America” a media myth (Campbell et al, 2012, Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). According to Cobb (2011), racial reconciliation is a “fallacy” (p. 418), as he also said, “No We Can’t!” make it. Tim Wise teased: “Uh Obama” (2008). Ostertag and Armaline (2011) raised question: What could have been more predicable for a racist system, evolving toward the unseen shadows, than

the election of a “safe” African-American leader who in action would do little to threaten the power status quo and in simple existence would seemingly prove the end of racism itself?

Statement of the problem

Obama’s hope for racial reconciliation created a discernible combative moment of the era—between the desire and reality of an unbiased racial society. The conservative media outlets (even, liberal media to some extent) emphasize that the Americans are living in a post-racist society. This framing then, in turn, makes Obama’s consecutive calls for racial reconciliation unreasonable. In reality, there have been pressing problems of race-relations in the United States, especially in situation like police shootings (killings) of African Americans including minors (such as a 10-year-old boy) disproportionately even in the era of Obama. The media myth and perception, thus, tend to mislead the race-related history and contemporary discussions in America.

In the conjuncture of the media-myth and social reality the researcher investigated how Fox News and CNN, two nationally popular broadcast channels, mediated change or no-change in critical race-relations in the spheres of hegemonic White-supremacy and “interest of the ruling class” (Kitossa, 2011, p. 1) and what legacy Obama left behind with what impact. Study of Obama legacy is relevant since the (historical) assessment of the legacy of the 44th President’s two terms is already under review of many scholars in conferences through publications and is being covered by the media outlets (Zelizer, March 11, 2018). Even, in the run-up to the 2020 and the mid-term of 2022 elections, candidates looked at that Obama model how to replicate it for their own purposes. Caroline Yun of Harvard Political Review quoting Patti Solis Doyle, senior adviser to Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, said that earlier (September 19, 2019), while most news media outlets such as C-SPAN (October 28, 2022) continue reports of Obama’s campaign traits for the party causes. The study is also significant to critically examine the effectiveness of the news stories implicating the America’s “genealogy of race” relations (McCann, 2014, p. 481), which is still perceived as acrimonious.

This research, therefore, will contribute to expand examination of the effects of news reports and commentaries, which used Jeremiah Wright controversy to influence

audience attitudes and their evaluations of candidates, and color-lines. With the existing realities of racial tensions in the American experience, this study would facilitate invoking of a healthy dialogue on racial reconciliation and rethinking of mediating news on relative problems and possibilities that the researcher thinks is still a matter of “*de trop*” in America. To explore the media views about race-relations the study evolved two main questions:

RQ: 1. How did Fox News and CNN frame their coverage of Obama’s racial reconciliation approach?

RQ: 2. what were the racially biased inputs in the Fox and CNN reports?

Exploring answers of the questions, this research advanced three more sections. Next section (second) discussed some historical background of Obama’s race-related speeches, theoretical framework in the context of the media role, and methodological approach to analyze issues of concerns and selection of the media outlets. Third Section examined and unraveled the media coverage with available patterns of frames and tones in the media texts. Fourth Section (Conclusions) included limitations, implications, and options. Scholarly opinions have been used all through the research papers as needed.

Literature review

Exigency of Obama’s “Apologia”

Obama was articulate to take hold of the debate involving Jeremiah Wright in ways that would favor his chance of getting Democratic Party nomination in 2008. Many scholars, such as George, Jr. (2013) and Roberson and Connaughton (2010) opined that Obama’s “perfect union” speech was apologetic, especially for his relations with his former mentor-pastor, Jeremiah Wright, who is perceived as a fierce critic of America’s history of racism. Obama had to do this, because he was fallen into the dilemma of “double-bind” (Enck-Wanzer, 2011, p. 28). Darrel Enck-Wanzer (2011) explained that the failure to acknowledge racism left Obama open to critiques of African Americans, on one hand, and acknowledging racial issue or racism risked marking himself “different” in the eyes of White Americans, on the other. This might have jeopardized his election. Obama managed the situation craftily that induced many to designate him with charismatic quality (Trent et

al., 2011). Edwards III (2012) said that it was Obama’s ability to frame issues in ways that would favor his preferred policy options.

News media perspectives

When Obama declared his candidacy in the Presidential Election 2008, ABC News started (on March 13, 2008) showing footage of an Obama-pastor Wright’s sermon of 2003 in which Wright uttered “God damn America” followed by other news outlets, including Fox News, CNN. This posed threat to Obama’s chance for getting presidential nomination. Obama quickly denounced the inflammatory remarks of Wright, saying that they “were wrong; and I strongly condemn them” (Rowland & Jones, 2011, p. 130).

To neutralize the criticism, Obama adopted a “race-neutral rhetoric” (Utley & Heyse, 2009, p. 153) in his Philadelphia speech on March 18, 2008. Obama told the audience that he severed relations with Wright. He also introduced his idea of moving the country toward a more perfect union. Darsey (2009) terming Obama’s Philadelphia speech as famous “race speech” (p. 93), stated that after Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, Obama tried to address the race issue on the basis of equality in the form of “a more perfect union.” This speech of Obama drew attention, tension, praise, and criticism across the races, and the news media surrounding the longstanding race reproach in the history of America (Clarke et al., 2011). Also, Obama, Danisch (2012) observes, made “specific innovations within the pragmatist tradition” through the “Yes we can” slogan that activated “the value of hope” for racial reconciliation (Danisch, 2012, p. 164). Examining Obama’s race equality rhetoric, Murphy (2011) stated that Obama opened “an important line of inquiry regarding the relationship between social order and critique in this idiom” (p. 388). Rowland and Jones (2011), who studied “union speech,” along with texts of both the conservative and liberal media, found it as “the most powerful sacred secular narrative in American society, the American Dream” (p.127). Obama’s rhetoric brought about an “emergence of political Jeremiad” (Herrell, 2010, p.168).

In earlier days, according to Ridout (2013), most news outlets sought to provide news that was fair, objective and balanced, but “as the news media moved toward a more interpretative style of reporting in the 1980s, that political neutrality began to wane”

(Ridout, 2013, p. 1). On the other hand, the news consumers have their own choices of media applaud. So, how do they make a choice? Taking data from the Pew Research Center (2012) about media exposure of the audiences Stroud and Muddiman (2013) say that “our political beliefs govern our choices, a behavior known as selective exposure” (p. 6). Selective exposure creates polarized, less tolerant electorate and that leads the Republicans to watch the *Fox News* and the Democrats and Independents to CNN or MSNBC or other channels, such as NPR, PBS (Ladd, 2013, p. 34). A Pew Research Center survey also supports that (Mitchell, et al., 2014).

Theoretical framework for textual analysis

The study attempted for decoding and dissecting mediated messages of the news outlets, which used mainly race, class and culture issues. Because culture, race etc. reflect in the fragmented texts that can invent collective or discursive identity (McGee, 1980, Wanzer, 2012). Media texts are fantastic to impart values of rhetoric for an audience in unexpected ways. A value, Brummett (2013) defines, “is an enduring tendency that people have to think of types of actions, objects, and events as good or bad, sacred or profane, prosocial or antisocial, and so forth” (p. 62). Examination of textual fragments helps reconstruct the varied, complex, and conflicting ways in which individuals and groups invent community, and discriminatory views and ideologies. Calafell and Delgado (2004) argued that piecing together wide swaths of cultural expressions of identity “makes visible power relations among subjects by exploring the textual fragments of a culture” (p. 6). Cultural study scholars, such as Hall (2011), Ott and Mack (2014) observe media texts reflect hegemonic racial ideologies. Concentrating on the ways, media texts “invite consumers to accept whiteness as the norm in relation to issues of race” (Ott & Mack, 2014, p. 150).

This researcher also employed critical race theory (CRT), advanced by Delgado and Stefancic (2012), as a theme to challenge the mediated notion that the election of Obama signified racism’s decline, reversal, and/or end.

Research methodology

Data collection and analyses

ProQuest database is the main source of Fox and CNN news stories and articles. Some related broadcast pieces (which were not available from the ProQuest, especially those of 2014) were taken from the websites of the news organizations. The search from the ProQuest for items showed more than 30 items, but the researcher picked up only those related to Obama's direct approach of "racial reconciliation" in their texts and soundbites (10 Fox+10 CNN). The analyses of Fox and CNN items helped the researcher to "activate meanings for viewers" as LeDuff (2012, p. 44) viewed. According to Hasse (2008), textual analyses help understand perspective of writer/journalist towards the rhetoric of the speaker as the "news in nuce" (p.9), by which the author meant the dominant meaning of the news texts. Hasse (2008; SAGE Publications, 2020) further explained that perspectives of the writers/broadcasters make a double-decoding of the text (first by the speaker, then by the writer/broadcaster).

The researcher's decoding (as denotations and connotations) considered words, phrases, views, quotations, etc. of the texts that expose frames, tones, which, in extensions, include "Obama," "reconciliation," "Jeremiah Wright," "perfect union," "race," "black," "white" "equality," "rhetoric," "politics," "economy," and "elections," among others . The researcher organized the patterns to critically discuss and explain the key words in relation to theoretical and practical implications in the contexts of the American life. According to Erickson (2000), "Critical rhetoric is ... oriented to unpacking nonapparent power practices in the dominant ideology's fragmented discourses" (p. 139).

Critical readings of the media artifacts

The researcher discerned some preferred (dominant) patterns of features (frames and tones) from the coverage (news and special reports) of both Fox News and CNN, which include phrases like Obama and Jeremiah, Right and Wrong, Honesty, Color and Class, and *E Pluribus Unum*. These patterns of the televisual images helped the researcher interpret and explain the frames and tones of the texts about which Bonilla-Silva (2012) said, "transcripts" expose "pattern" of the "racial grammar" (p. 177).

"God damn"

Both Fox News and CNN dominantly mentioned Obama's long-time relation with Wright, a pastor who has been vocal against white domination on the blacks and that relation would make an inroad to Obama's possibility of getting party nomination and being elected to the White House. The focal point of a *Fox Special Report* conducted by anchor Brit Hume and his team (2008, March 18) after Obama's Philadelphia speech (on March 18, 2008) was Jeremiah's "firestorm" against America's race-relations and American hegemony through wars around the world. Fox News' focus was on the first presidential black candidate's nomination campaign in a country where racial distrust runs deep and unspoken, embarking upon the most significant public discussion of race in decades. According to Fox, the carnage that Wright started with "God Damn America!" is likely to persist because "many others are deeply offended."

CNN (03-18-2008), on the other hand, with its anchor Campbell Brown and Anderson Cooper on assignment, also termed Jeremiah Wright as "the fiery pastor of Obama's church" and his remarks as "offensive," about American domestic and foreign policy. According to them, "For Obama, who rarely talks about race, the speech was as sweeping as it was specific, as politically risky as it was personally revealing." According to Faye Wattleton (a member of the CNN program's political team), Co-founder of Center for the Advancement of Women, "... I think that Mr. Obama certainly did not disown his minister ... And I think that that will be used, as well, as an incendiary statement that Mr. Obama will ultimately have to answer." According to another CNN commentator: "I ... think him [Obama] is going to continue to have some problems. And ... this is a wound that's not going to go away quickly." Another voice: "White suburban voters are going to find the speech enormously appealing." Here, alike *Fox* commentator, CNN also thought that the Jeremiah problem would continue to recur.

However, unlike CNN, Fox News brought up Louis Farrakhan's issue to the fore. Fox raised a question like, how Obama presented himself as a man who would unite America through his words. At an earlier occasion (02-26-2008), Sean Hannity (Fox News host) raised a question: How about fundamental fairness? Would it matter to you [Bob Beckel, a participant in the discussion], if, in fact—because the church that Barack Obama goes to honor the Minister Louis Farrakhan. Honored him. A man that refers to the white man as the skunk of the planet Earth. How can he become a post-racial candidate, who

maintained relations, especially with Jeremiah for 25 years? Fox's question looks like, Obama is also an America-hater as his pastors are.

CNN brought views from its conversations, such as "there's not a radical bone in his [Obama's] body." A CNN commentator said, "And when you recognize that Oprah Winfrey went to that church ..., you understand that there's a range of people who go there. And Oprah Winfrey is anything but a radical in American society." According to Fox, Obama is a man in the stereotypical black "box," despite he spoke for "a more perfect union" and denounced Jeremiah. Fox views were like "God Damn Jeremiah" and Obama too, as opposed to Wright's term of "God Damn America." In this context, Fox "structures cognition, vision, and even feelings on all sort of racial matters... normalizes the standards of white supremacy as the standards for all sort of social events and transactions" (Bonilla-Silva, 2012, p. 173). Though some commentators of the CNN viewed Obama would still drag on Wright plight for a while, he "walked the listener [audience] through a remarkable exploration of race from both sides of the color divide, ..." — black (father) and white (mother).

Focusing on a few important features, CNN framed Obama rhetoric as "politically risky" still "dividing," but "striking," "daring" "reconciliatory." Fox News turned to a "notable recalibration" of Obama's speech (like doubting), alerted the Americans about not only Wright, but also Obama and middle-class, and their anger and carnage would continue to recur that "many might find objectionable." By "many" Fox suggested the conservative whites, in a style of draped-decoding. Because of Obama's relations with Wright and Farrah Khan, Fox raised a question: "Should [Obama] even be on the radar screen?" Fox, thus, played its "overtly ideological narratives in both its news and its opinion programs" (Jones, 2012, p. 179).

"Right" vs. "Wrong"

The national broadcast outlets, especially Fox subtly framed Obama's Wright-relations as a matter of "reverse racism," for which Obama delivered "perfect union" speech to ease up the criticism of his opponents (Perkinson, 2012; Rowland & Jones, 2011). For instance, Bill O'Reilly of Fox News (March 14, 2008) commented "because Barack Obama is running on his judgment, a big question pops up. How can you be close to a man who hates

America that much?” While, CNN started broadcasting Obama’s campaign speeches it did not mention race- relations issues directly, Hume, Hannity and colleagues (of Fox News) not only covered racial issues, they juxtaposed Obama’s “perfect union” rhetoric with his previous statements, including one interview Obama had with the Fox News a few days before March 14, 2008.

Brit Hume of Fox (2008, March 18) said “Only days after saying he never heard Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s most incendiary comments in church, Barack Obama conceded today that he had, indeed, heard many Wright statements he strongly disagreed with in church.” Hume added, but in an attempt to douse the Wright firestorm, Obama sought to place it all in a much larger context. Fox correspondent Major Garrett’s reports clarified that larger context by which Obama compared Wright’s “incendiary” with distrust of black people by Obama’s white grandmother.

Though Obama made an apologia by confessing his “wrong” association and consequent disassociation with Wright, he cannot escape “doubt” of the mainstream media. Perkinson (2012), in this context, argued that as a “ritual passage Obama hammers Wright!” in “defense of mainstream opinion” (p. 101). Both the media and Obama hammered Jeremiah Wright. But “Wright’s actual claim was never disputed. Without argument this attack on Jeremiah was an “ad hominem” (Perkinson, 2012, p. 99).

Honesty card

Fox News brought Obama’s fragmented performatives together to raise an “urgent political question, the one on which the fate of Obama’s campaign may rest”: “Did he say too little about Wright and too much about race?” According to Fox, it was “an attempt to douse the Wright firestorm” by Obama. Fox, itself answering its own question, in a subtle way questioned Obama’s honesty. Ron Christie (2012), who claims to be a conservative, did not accept the view that Obama addressed the race issue properly. Christie believed Obama’s speech on race was born of political necessity for his survival to remain in the race of the Democratic nomination for president than it was a desire for him to expand the intellectual debate or discourse on race issue. Trent et al. (2011), however, argued that Obama cleared his view (by no mention of race) in his Iowa primary speech: “Why I am running,” in which he mentioned healthcare, education, jobs, wages, Iraq war, and so on.

According to Trent et al. (2011), “... Obama’s message was aimed at assembling a broad enough coalition to win the election” (p. 191). Fox News brought some fragments of Obama speeches without referring to historical contexts of “white hegemony” over African Americans and causes of their anger and frustrations. Scholars, such as Young (2012) evoked Obama’s rhetoric as “color- blindness” (p. 501). Also, the news media, especially *Fox* not only played the role of color- blindness and conservative ideology, it also doubted Obama’s honesty and served it as a “counterweight” (Jones, 2012, p. 179) to liberal news outlets, such as CNN.

Color and class trade-off

Obama said in his Philadelphia speech: “I can no more disown him [Wright] than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother” (par. 21). Both Fox and CNN referred to Obama’s mixed body, Although Obama owns a bifurcated body, he “refuses to disown the pastor and compares his comments to those of his own white grandmother” (Fox News, March 18, 2008). Broadcasting the phrases, both Fox and CNN subtly played “passing” indirectly for Obama’s “mixed-body” for “white,” because he did not want reparation of “original sin of slavery,” rather blamed and framed the black politicians and pastors as angry. Mendible (2012) termed “passing” for [Obama-type] “blacks” (p. 13) as white, so that an African American man or woman could gain access to the privileges, citizenship, and freedoms granted by whites. Kelly (2011) found a meaning that connects “our faces to our souls” (p. 246). Borrowing from McGhee (1980), Kelly (2011) and Enck-Wanzer (2012) explained that race as “the people” functions ideologically by affecting the ways in which marked bodies and their attendant social structures are constructed, organized, and ruled. Jeffrey Bennett (2008) argued, while “passing” can be used as art of conveying or concealing, it is useful for waging protest and resistance by the subordinate.

“Race card”

Sean Hannity of *Fox News* (July 15, 2014) accused Obama of playing “race card” on policy issues. Hannity even accused Michelle Obama, who in May (2014) went to Topeka, Kansas, and gave a speech to graduates there during which “she warned that it’s common

still in America for people of color to be stopped on the streets simply because of their color.” On the same Hannity’s program, Cheryl Chumley of the *Washington Times*, mentioned that “The rhetoric coming out of the White House right now, the race card being thrown by Attorney General Eric Holder, is not new.” They also told the audience that in 2009, President Obama himself used his national platform to enter a local issue, slamming white police officers, characterizing them as behaving stupidly when they were simply responding to a call at a black Harvard University professor’s home. In this respect, the mass media rhetoric approached the issue as a psychological dilemma in Obama, a “bound man” trapped by his career and ambitions for which he has to retain his black-half to reach the blacks and white-half to go deep into the larger white world as well. This has a resemblance to Carstarphen’s (2009) citation of a reporter, named Washington, who called Obama tactics as “a thin line” (p. 418). About Obama’s color- lines, Enck-Wanzer (2011) argued, “Of course, Obama is in a bit of a double-bind ...” (p. 28).

Credence

Obama was able to create credence in the white minds (highlighted by CNN), by saying: Someone’s dreams do not have to come true at the expense of others. In this case of people’s socioeconomic welfare, the message fragments of the media and Obama conflated to a homogeneous image as a part of politics in the mass media, which crafted a double-decoding rhetoric by connoting Obama’s message texts, as Hasse (2008) emphasized. Trent et al. (2011), in this regard mentioned, Obama always emphasized jobs, wages, pension etc. (not racial reconciliation). Obama opted for the “sanitized version of the United States’ history of racial injustice” (Utley & Heyse, 2009, p. 153). Thus, Obama also mediated some “good” message through the media what the economists call “credence good,” something of “tangible value because of its authoritativeness and social attractiveness” (Hart, 2013, p. 214).

Obama seemed to become an extension of power structures and representative of modern capitalism, as Kock (2006) perceived about capitalistic reach. Taking on Obama, Kitossa (2011) also said he “assuaged the anxieties of European Americans and others while propagating the interests of the ruling class and the military industrial complex” (p. 1). Tension along the class vs race is still a phenomenological problem in the American

society. Ostertag and Armaline (2011) gave example from the Southern Poverty Law Center reports that noted “a rise in number and size of white supremacist groups because of continuing patterns of joblessness and economic decline among the white working class, especially in the south” (p. 265). On the other hand, Young (2012) viewed that “African Americans and Latinos are still disproportionately at the bottom of all economic and social well-being indicators in the United States” (p. 504).

Stone (May 16, 2014) citing Edward H. Levi, a Law Professor of University of Chicago, stated that black Americans are twice as likely as white Americans to live in poverty; they are twice as likely as white Americans to be unemployed; the median family income of black Americans is only 67 percent of that of white Americans; and the average white American family's net worth is 22 times greater than that of the average black American family. Ostertag and Armaline (2011) mentioning flaws of the U.S. criminal justice system, said, among about two million prison inmates, most are inner-city African American youths. Perkinson (2012) showed no progress in poverty eradication and race-equality. Obama himself confessed problems of poverty (stated by both Fox News and CNN, 2014). This apparently made an impression of Obama, in Perkinson’s phrase (2012), a “gotcha ... black man” (p. 97). Thus, Obama faced a dilemma of hope for race-equality. The analyses of the rhetoric of hope for racial equality and reconciliation exposed a critical syndrome, which both Fox and CNN quoted right from Obama’s speech: “the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one.” This idea of oneness is incised in its old assimilationist ideology of *E Pluribus Unum*.

E Pluribus Unum

Even though CNN contributors apparently posed to be emphatic to the causes of all Americans irrespective of colors, especially blacks, their axiom of *E Pluribus Unum* (many in one) is fundamentally iniquitous. The oneness (unitedness) is also the plea of Fox. This One World View of one nation advocates for assimilation (like cream soup melting into one pot) is an axiom that contradicts diversity, which is like a plate of tossed salad, not a melting pot. According to Okun (2010, p. 75-76), “assimilation generally requires the adoption of dominant culture ...,” by the minority groups. Assimilation also “requires an acceptance of the colonial/dominant culture, values, and lifestyle including reverence for its agents”

(Gabbidon et al., 2013, p. 435). Bonilla-Silva (2012) and Rottenberg (2008, 2013) found this problem inherent in the American attitude relative to national citizenry policy that posed a paradox to Americanness. McElya. (2011) observed, "The chorus of the Union" is "deeply vexing" (p. 179). For the sake of one nation, Americanness "melted away ethnic differences" (Schlesinger, 1992, p. 213).

Ron Christie (2012), a defender of the *E Pluribus Unum* (Americanness), said: Obama missed the opportunity to unify the people, rather he diversified them by calling upon "blacks and whites" as "ethnic groups" (p. 105). Calling it an Obama failure, Christie (2012) observed, "Now, tensions between blacks and whites ... [a] view as never before" (p. 3). According to Mendible (2012), the discourse of "Americanness" in the Age of Obama invokes "patriotic" themes associated with historically Anglo-American myths of cultural belonging. Mendible (2012) further stated, Americanness discourse repeatedly pines for a return to so-called "traditional American values" that upsurges racial discrimination.

E Pluribus Unum experienced the fault-lines even during Obama presidency, when for an example, a "racially-biased" killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, a suburb of Saint Louis, Missouri, had happened and Obama had to keep himself almost silent. On the backdrop of protests, riots, and violence in Ferguson for a few weeks the incident of alleged stealing a pack of cigarette by Brown once again laid bare "America's racial rift" (Deveney, 2014). Both Fox and CNN, along with other media outlets, covered the incident. Fox News headlined its news item: "The Ferguson police say Michael Brown was suspect in robbery," while CNN headlined it: "Ferguson police chief: Officer didn't stop Brown as robbery suspect." Greg Botelho and Don Lemon of CNN reported, the Ferguson police officer who shot Michael Brown didn't stop him because he was suspected in a convenience-store robbery, but because he was "walking down the middle of the street blocking traffic." Fox News' correspondents, Mike Tobin and Edmund DeMarche, came up with terms of "robbery" and "stealing" (about a dozen of times) and pushing "the officer into his squad car" in such a way that police (and the media itself) tried to establish the "criminality" of Brown that caused his death.

Fox News made its soundbites from its dominant socio-cultural perspective. Fox in "telling" of the incident, seemingly concentrated its efforts on dominant ideology by depicting black young men as violent and "aggressive." In McCann's (2014) language, it is a

projection of “thug” image that calls Martin’s and, or Brown’s “innocence” into question (p. 492), because “stealing,” “robbery,” and violence are the most important features of the media stories. C. Jenkin’s earlier studies (2012) showed that television highlights “their actions participating in what was described as deviant activity” (p. 30). The conflicts in Ferguson and elsewhere (such as killing of Martin in 2012 in Florida, cited in McCann, 2014) seem to still be shaped by the legacy of racist past that is now entangled in the inner workings of capitalist society. Many scholars, such as Griffiths (2012), Hall (2011), Litwack (2009), Lloyd (2013), and McCann (2014) imagine a scenario grounded in historical facts, such as the demise of Malcolm X (1925-1965), in face of the protests and riots in American cities. The scenarios seem at first hand profoundly fictional and irrespective of the fundamentals in history (Fasfalis, 2014; Fitts, 2014).

Mendell (2007) saw, Obama faced an “unfortunate” cultural phenomenon for not to be “down” enough to the “low-income and working-class blacks” and “his close association with the white power structure” (p. 186). Obama is rooted in the African American community, but not limited by it. Obama himself says “I am ... everywhere” (Mendell, 2007, p. 188). Musgrove (2012) in a softer tone argued that Obama had to dismiss the white view of “black paranoia.” (p. 9) and “brought the post-civil rights period to a symbolic close ...” (pp. 213-214). The study found, Obama had been using his race-related rhetoric prudently considering the contemporary politics in his strive to achieve what is good for the individual (here, it is himself) and community (dominated by the white majority).

“Obama Not Non-Partisan”

Sean Hannity of Fox News (02-26-2008) viewed that Obama’s relation with Wright would be a cancer on the Obama candidacy as was also a scandal. That is why “now he is in a panic” (Hannity). CNN (03-18-2008), however, found Obama walking toward “the end of reconciliation and justice.” The tone of Fox was that Obama was not a “non-partisan,” nor a “pigeon-holder.” Fox doubted about Obama’s leadership. He could not be in the center of America, because he played “race card.” According to Fox, Obama’s situation was not mere a problem, but also a scandal. Fox, thus also raised the issue how Obama became a post-racial candidate, when he was not unconditionally condemning J. Wright “cancer.” Silverstein (2011) called this type of media message as McCarthyite tactics, and

semiotically saturated via mediatization that addresses those at the peripheries (the electorate) of this highly professional milieu. Terming Fox News' performance as "performance of ideology," Jeffrey P. Jones (2012) said that *Fox* offered a "conservative ideological voice and doing so under the heading of 'news' is, at this date, an undeniable point" (p. 179).

Utley and Heyse (2009) opined, Obama's self-interest made "a tendency to reify harmful racist stereotypes" (p. 23). Thus, Obama's "Space" factor in case of the Republican attacks placed him squarely within the neoliberal racial project of "antiracialism" (which seeks to wipe out the terms of reference), not "antiracism" (Enck-Wanzer, 2011, p. 28). Making like a statement, Kitossa (2011) said, "I suggest the Presidency of Barack Obama will hurt African Americans" (p. 24). Being apparently mystified, Wise (2008) frets: "Uh-Obama" (p. 15) whose "brown-face," he thought, is "deceptive" that would hinder the future of approximately 90 million persons of color who include Black, Latino, Asian American, indigenous persons, and so on (Wise, 2009, p. 8). The news coverage by Fox and CNN of color-line, more or less, might continue as white-men "were born free" with a "leading position in society and wider political representation," while born are "the poor to work" under their dictation (Hall, 2011, pp.706, 707). The arguments suggest that the goal of Obama and that of the mainstream media intersected together (to some extent) to place Obama to the White House in a race-neutral situation.

Conclusions and recommendations

Focusing attention on the symbolic capital of "hope" that Obama and his presidency constituted especially for the Black community, this research exposed some potential pitfalls in the wholesale of post-racist thinking, particularly for the most economically vulnerable people. This study found that both Fox and CNN framed the Obama's speeches primarily with the syndrome of Wright's criticism of race-relations in America. CNN engendered some upbeat toward Obama's hope for reconciliation of racial discords, while Fox's tone rebuffed that almost. Fox perceived Obama's efforts as still selective to reduce the gap between the liberal and conservative expectations.

Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech for racial reconciliation was widely viewed as a key rhetorical moment in the 2008 presidential campaign (Dilliplane, 2012),

but the post-racism remained a media myth. Obama’s rhetoric faced discursive treatment especially from Fox News. Borrowing from Gramsci’s ideology of hegemony (1971/1980), Flores (2010) argued that the supremacy of a social group manifests itself as domination and as intellectual and moral leadership. In this sense, Fox tried to reinforce supremacy of white ideology, and project Obama as partisan, and not befitting in the mainstream, although Obama made his ascendance to the White House in 2008 and 2012, consecutively. According to this study, Obama made it possible through his motto of One World View of *E Pluribus Unum*. Though Obama is bold in criticizing the opponents highlighting problems related to issues such as gerrymandering and Social Security, his tones still, in general encompass all across the races. For example, from an Indian professor’s Twitter posting (Swain, November 6, 2022) as well as CNN, MSNBC (October 29, 2022), one can see that: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSoq5ZZUXMY>

Delimitation of race rhetoric of Obama covered by Fox and CNN excluded, among other issues, his global role and getting the Nobel Peace Prize. A few references from the print media made only a twilight. Moreover, economic fixtures just came up in reference to racial inequality in the Obama era. CNN noticed Obama played defensive. Fox emphasized the cohesive conditions of partnership needed to be taken by Obama.

This study makes a contribution to reconsider the paradoxical situation of Obama’s race rhetoric for improved conditions and the nature of reframing of those by the news media. This essay can be concluded by saying that Obama has had the capability to make his own space, but he would leave a controversial legacy on race relations as the 44th U.S. President. He might strive for narrowing down controversies in his post-presidential America encouraging more media coverage and follow-up research as well. Aligning with Grondin’s (2012) view, the researcher understands that television is an important locus of the culture and race wars and needs to be studied carefully because it plays a political and ideological role in mediating their re-enactment. When the politics and news industry tend to create an unrealistic phenomenon, such as utopia of “post-racism,” people need to rise up together to straighten that for a greater good.

Critical race theory (CRT) scholars, such as Delgado and Stefancic (2012) have focused on a vision of a greater coalition of the people of color who need cooperation among themselves for gaining greater strength that would embolden them to “push back”

white hegemony. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) raised a question: “Will minority groups learn to put aside narrow nationalism and binary thinking and work together to confront the forces that suppress them all?” (p. 82). Based on this question, future studies can help develop a positive transcendence between the suppressed “race” and “class” whose interests will intersect together. This can evolve a new framework of “critical race and class theory” (CR&CT), this researcher foresees.

Critical race and class theory (CR&CT) can be developed on the examples of some social movements, such as “Occupy Wall Street” that emerged as a movement with people of different colors, genders and political persuasions in 2011. Fuchs (2017) thinks that “The Occupy movement has made class an important topic” (p.12). Even the movement took a global turn at that time, though subsided later on. But its impacts created an impression of awaking of soul-searching spirit for other issues like protests against police killings led by Black Lives Matter participated by not only people of colors but also classes around the world in recent days.

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Are we all journalists in the AI age? Theorizing journalism amid news influencers, content creators, and provocateurs

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Abstract

The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents a transformative yet complex inflection point for journalism. This theoretical study examines how AI reshapes journalistic practices—from information gathering to content distribution—and analyzes the enduring relevance of 21st-century journalism amidst a dynamic media landscape populated by news influencers and content creators. Relevant to the 7th World Journalism Education Congress theme, Is it time to reboot journalism education?, this study explores theoretical concepts on the evolving role of journalists in the AI era, moving beyond the binary of replacement versus augmentation to embrace a nuanced view of human-AI collaboration. Drawing on scholarly perspectives, this theoretical study highlights the critical implications for journalism education, advocating for curriculum adjustments that foster AI literacy, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making. The study conclusion offers recommendations for integrating AI responsibly into teaching and practice, emphasizing the irreplaceable human elements of journalism, and outlines key lessons learned for navigating this evolving professional identity.

Introduction

*All that the sharpest critics of democracy have alleged is true, if there is no steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news. Incompetence and aimlessness, corruption and disloyalty, panic and ultimate disaster, must come to any people which is denied an assured access to the facts. No one can manage anything on pap. Neither can a people. -- American writer, reporter, and political commentator Walter Lippmann in *Liberty and the news* (Lippmann, 1920, p. 11).*

Lippmann's prescient words in the epigraph hold even greater significance in our age of artificial intelligence (AI). Driven by shifts in technology, societal expectations, and the rise of alternative forms of 21st century media, news spreads at near-light speed through

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tweets and texts (Ott, 2013; Monaghan & Tunney, 2010; Ott & Mack, 2010). In the 21st century digital ecosystem, media platforms permeate every aspect of our lives, occupations, play, and communities. This digital media ecosystem has forced legacy media entities and journalists to relinquish their dominance over knowledge, wisdom, and storytelling.

The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents a transformative yet complex inflection point for journalism. Relevant to the 7th World Journalism Education Congress theme, *Is it time to reboot journalism education?*, this study explores theoretical concepts on the evolving role of journalists in the AI era, moving beyond the binary of replacement versus augmentation to embrace a nuanced view of human-AI collaboration. This theoretical study examines how AI reshapes journalistic practices—from information gathering to content distribution—and analyzes the enduring relevance of 21st-century journalism amidst a dynamic media landscape populated by news influencers and content creators. Drawing on scholarly perspectives, this study highlights the critical implications for journalism education, advocating for curriculum adjustments that foster AI literacy, critical thinking, and ethical decision making. The study conclusion offers recommendations for integrating AI responsibly into teaching and practice, emphasizing the irreplaceable human elements of journalism, and outlines key lessons learned for navigating this evolving professional identity. The media landscape has experienced rapid and unprecedented transformations driven by significant advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This digital revolution has posed numerous challenges for traditional media companies, prompting a search for new solutions. Within this context, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as an integral part of the new media ecosystem, profoundly impacting journalism. AI refers broadly to the application of computing technologies that perform tasks traditionally associated with human intelligence, often leveraging machine learning to train algorithms to recognize patterns and make judgments. Its rapid integration is reshaping how news is gathered, produced, distributed, and consumed, ushering in a “digital transformation” of the news business. This report delves into the theoretical concepts underpinning the changing role of journalists in the age of AI, examines the continued relevance of journalism amidst new media actors, highlights the implications for

journalism education, and concludes with recommendations for navigating this evolving professional terrain.

As the Internet continues to reshape nearly every aspect of society, no institution has been more profoundly altered than journalism and distribution of information. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative investigations into changes in news production and consumption, this study examines how technology has transformed the media landscape and explores the changing identities and roles of journalists today. This study theorizes that the 21st-century media ecosystem has empowered everyone, *in theory through technology*, to practice journalism on their own accord, thereby eroding the predominant role of the journalist to disseminate news. The study explores how media platforms have disrupted traditional business models by providing consumers with instant access to news platforms, thus obviating the wait for specific timeslots to read the morning newspaper or watch the evening news broadcast.

Social media overtakes TV as main source of news in US, analysis finds

Media researchers identified in 2025 that Americans picked social media as their top news source over television for the first time in 13 years since 2012, when the RISJ has released its annual digital news report, according to Oxford's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ)'s 2025 RISJ Digital News Report (Newman, et al., 2025).

The RISJ Digital News Report concluded that most Americans were getting news from social media platforms, which have superseded good old television as Americans' most-used source for news. "The proportion accessing news via social media and video networks in the United States (54%) is sharply up overtaking both TV news (50%) and news websites/apps (48%) for the first time," according to the RISJ Digital News Report (Newman, et al., 2025, p. 11).

The RISJ Digital News Report identified widespread preferences for text over video news vary significantly by country. Part of that distinction seems tied to a country's wealth; Norway, Germany, and the U.K. are more pro-reading, while India, Mexico, and the

Philippines are more pro-watching” (Newman, et al., 2025, p. 19). The 2025 RISJ Digital News Report found “striking generational differences” in countries with strong reading traditions such as Germany, the UK, and all the Nordic markets. Younger groups, especially those aged 18–24, are much more likely than older ones to prefer watching – or listening to – the news. This suggests that over time publishers may need to adjust resources in the newsroom, to produce less text and more audio-visual content, the report recommended (Newman, et al., 2025, p. 19).

Research methodology

This study investigates this media trend in four research questions:

- **RQ#1:** In the 21st century media ecosystem, what factors have empowered everyone, *in theory through technology*, to practice journalism on their own accord, thereby eroding the predominant role of the journalist to disseminate news?
- **RQ#2:** How have non-journalists such as influencers, bloggers, podcasters, and provocateurs on media platforms effectively influence the news agenda? How do 21st century audiences meld media messages of multiple news platforms?
- **RQ#3:** How have 21st century media use trends, such as hostile media perceptions, affected the rise and fall of media trust in the United States?
- **RQ#4:** How have media platforms and the changing role of journalists, news influencers, and social media publishers disrupted traditional business models by providing consumers with instant and round-the-clock access to news platforms?

Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative investigations into changes in news production and consumption, this mixed method research study examines how technology has transformed the media landscape and explores the changing identities and roles of journalists today. We conceptualized a three-step research method to answer our four research questions:

Focus groups and survey of journalists, news influencers, social media publishers and news consumers to enhance our understanding of how news agenda setting affects media

trust and hostile media perceptions. Assess the news agenda setting role of media platforms by examining Gallup survey data with additional analyses to explore the effect of news media agendas. Empirically analyze social media use metrics, extensively indexed and archived *C-SPAN* videos, and analyze media content to enhance our understanding of contemporary news media.

Media researchers have traditionally concentrated on audience surveys to track the evolving role of journalism. Few studies have adequately analyzed the changing role of journalists in our democratic society. With empirical insights, this study theorizes the role of journalists, news influencers, and social media publishers in our democratic society. As media platforms re-shape how people consume information, we formulate our own levels of media trust.

Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative investigations into changes in news production and consumption, this study examines how technology has transformed the media landscape and explores the changing identities and roles of journalists today. This study theorizes that the 21st century media ecosystem has empowered everyone, *in theory through technology*, to practice journalism on their own accord, thereby eroding the predominant role of the journalist to disseminate news. The study explores how media platforms have disrupted traditional business models by providing consumers with instant access to news platforms, thus obviating the wait for specific timeslots to read the morning newspaper or watch the evening news broadcast.

Significance and relevance of research results

This study incorporates empirical concepts about the news media. The study empirically analyzes Gallup datasets to analyze trust in journalism among US media audience, social media use metrics, extensively indexed and archived *C-SPAN* videos, and audience surveys to enhance our understanding of how media audiences create personal and polarized communities. By merging quantitative and qualitative analyses of media metrics, classic cases, theoretical frameworks, and conceptual constructs, this study

presents original research on the evolving roles of journalists and journalism, divided into four primary parts.

The first section addresses the increasing difficulty of discerning professional journalists from citizen journalists and discusses conflicting views on the role of journalists in democracies worldwide. The second section elucidates the influence of media technologies in reshaping news practices, focusing on the convergence of democracy, social movements and civil society.

The third section theorizes the power and influence of media practices in the post-industrial journalism era, highlighting how media technologies have empowered individuals to exercise free speech and practice journalism without proper training while still enjoying the privileges granted to traditional journalists. The fourth and final section posits theoretically grounded implications for the future of journalists and news in our AI age.

Are we all journalists in the AI age?

The definition of “journalist” has evolved significantly in recent decades. Non-journalists such as *influencers*, bloggers, podcasters (*think of Joe Rogan*), and provocateurs on media platforms effectively influence the news agenda. For instance, citizens are breaking news and engaging in journalistic storytelling. *News influencers* are media platform publishers-creators who mimic the economic and cultural logics of online influencers to produce news content for participatory audiences (Hurcombe, 2024). News influencers encompass self-employed journalists as well as Substack writers, journalistic YouTubers and TikTok publishers, and Twitch streamers. News influencers have spawned a so-called creators’ economy of billions of dollars and affecting the journalism landscape around the world.

Traditional journalists, often seen as professionals trained in objectivity and accountability, now coexist with a spectrum of nontraditional media contributors such as citizen journalists, influencers, and even politicians (Wein, 2005). Digital and social media

platforms have amplified the reach of these alternative contributors, challenging traditional journalistic practices and redefining who qualifies as a journalist.

As James Carey (1997) noted, “journalists are constituted in practice” (p. 331). The 21st Century media landscape has empowered consumers to mimic journalistic practices. People are sharing news on TikTok, covering their communities on Facebook, live streaming from public events on X, breaking news on Bluesky, and writing insightful blog posts on issues like racial tensions. Some of these people are “traditional” journalists working on new platforms, but many are not (Stearns, 2013). These developments have sparked global debates about “who is a journalist and why” (Stearns, 2013; Knight et al., 2008).

Social media platforms have become a significant component of news dissemination and consumption in the “post-industrial journalism era” of the digital age. Platforms, such as TikTok, X and Bluesky, have shortened and intensified the news content cycle by breaking news online. For instance, during the 2024 U.S. election cycle, Democratic and Republican candidates bypassed traditional media production processes by launching their campaigns via online videos on YouTube and campaign websites. They then sparking widespread social media reactions by sharing campaign updates on X, Bluesky and Truth Social (*owned by Donald Trump*). These trends illustrate the changing role of journalism and journalistic practices, especially as politicians, corporations, and celebrities bypass traditional media to directly engage with the public through social media. While traditional media wield significant influence, it has become more of a secondary source in the digital age.

Theoretical concepts: The changing role of journalists in the age of AI

In the 21st century digital ecosystem, media platforms permeate every aspect of our lives, occupations, play, and communities. This digital media ecosystem has forced legacy media entities and journalists to relinquish their dominance over knowledge, wisdom, and storytelling. Non journalists such as *influencers*, bloggers, podcasters (*think of Joe Rogan*), and provocateurs on media platforms effectively influence the news agenda. For instance,

citizens are breaking news and engaging in journalistic storytelling. *News influencers* are media platform publishers-creators who mimic the economic and cultural logics of online influencers to produce news content for participatory audiences (Hurcombe, 2024). *News influencers* encompass self-employed journalists as well as Substack writers, journalistic YouTubers, and streamers on TikTok and Twitch. *News influencers* have spawned a so-called creators' economy of billions of dollars and affecting the journalism landscape around the world.

The integration of AI into journalism has introduced a complex set of theoretical considerations regarding the changing nature of journalistic work. AI is considered a "polysemous and problematic" term, often broadly invoked and associated with sentient machines, though it more narrowly refers to computer science focused on simulating human intelligence, particularly through machine learning. Nevertheless, AI is now an integral part of the new media ecosystem, offering value in overcoming core problems faced by contemporary journalism, such as combating fake news, assisting with editing, and personalizing content. By merging theory, practice, and current research on journalism in AI age, this study analyzed new theoretical paradigms to explicate how AI is redefining the role of journalists and news amid the intersection of media and democracy.

Evolution of journalistic practices and news concepts

AI has radically reshaped newsrooms, affecting all aspects of news production and dissemination. This evolution has led to the emergence of several new journalistic concepts:

Data Journalism refers to extracting useful information from data, writing articles based on it, and embedding visualizations for reader understanding. It represents a convergence of investigative research, statistics, design, and programming.

Metrics-Driven Journalism involves making sense of audience digital traces to influence decision-making throughout news production.

Automated Journalism, also known as robot journalism or algorithmic journalism, involves algorithmic processes that produce and disseminate text and images with minimal human oversight. Examples include automated earnings reports by Associated Press and financial news by Bloomberg and Reuters.

Augmented Journalism describes workflows where journalists use AI tools to enhance their capabilities, such as identifying content and sources, ensuring trustworthiness, and finding relevant news angles. This approach emphasizes that journalists retain responsibility for the final product.

Computational journalism is a broader term encompassing the application of computational methods and algorithms to journalistic tasks.

Exo-journalism conceptualizes AI's deepening impact by linking AI capabilities to journalists' productive routines and needs, enhancing skills and improving the final news product.

These concepts signify a shift where quantitative forms have become more prevalent in contemporary journalism, impacting its core production and consumption stages.

Human-AI collaboration vs. replacement

A central debate revolves around whether AI will replace or augment human journalists. A significant group of media educators and journalists feel AI technologies will enhance, rather than replace, journalists' work, suggesting AI does not pose a threat to professional journalism. While some industry leaders, driven by economic incentives, may view AI as a replacement to cut costs, professional journalists tend to defend the necessity of a core "human" element in journalism.

Studies suggest that only a small percentage of a reporter's (15%) and editor's (9%) job could be automated using current AI levels. Humans retain an edge in crucial areas like complex communication and expert thinking. AI cannot perform indispensable journalistic tasks such as reporting, listening, responding, negotiating with sources, or creatively

synthesizing information, though it can augment these tasks for efficiency and quality. In fact, AI often creates new types of work, including configuration, parameterization, knowledge management, and data production, leading to a “hybridization of humans and AI in journalistic workflows”. This means journalists are shifting from being mere content creators to becoming curators, verifiers, and explainers of AI-generated content.

“Alien Intelligence”

Spyridou & Ioannou (2025).propose the concept of “alien intelligence” to describe decision making processes in journalism designed by non-journalism professionals that fail to align with core journalistic values such as relevance, impartiality, accountability, transparency, analysis, social empathy, and advocacy. This concept underscores the risk that if media organizations do not work collaboratively with tech companies to carefully design AI tools, the pursuit of accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely information could be jeopardized. This highlights the importance of journalistic agency and power in shaping AI’s development according to normative ideals.

21st century journalism amid news influencers, content creators, and provocateurs

Journalism in the 21st century faces profound challenges while also finding new relevance through AI’s strategic integration. The rise of social media, content creators, and “provocateurs” has contributed to an “overabundance of information and sources,” a “credibility and falling trust” crisis, and a “business model crisis”. This context makes quality and trustworthy media outlets more important than ever to provide accurate information and combat disinformation.

Ethical and professional challenges

The widespread adoption of AI brings significant ethical and professional concerns:

Bias and transparency: AI systems often “learn” from training data containing historical inaccuracies and biases, leading to discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. The opacity of algorithms (often referred to as “black boxes”) makes it difficult to assess their impartiality and accountability. News organizations must be transparent about AI’s use, methodologies, data origins, and influence on editorial decisions to maintain public trust.

Misinformation and credibility: AI can be used to generate fake news and real-sounding stories that are untrue, potentially misleading the public and spreading disinformation rapidly. This raises questions about authorship and credibility, as audiences may not distinguish AI-generated content from human-written content.

Undermining creativity and human nuance: Critics argue AI outputs can be “formulaic” and “mediocre,” lacking the human touch, emotion, creativity, critical thinking, and nuanced interpretation essential for quality journalism. AI struggles with sarcasm, cultural contexts, and socio-political nuances, highlighting the irreplaceable role of human journalists.

Job displacement and workforce transition: Concerns persist about AI leading to job losses, particularly in routine reporting and data analysis. However, some argue AI creates new job opportunities. Ethical considerations require news organizations to handle workforce transitions and reskilling responsibly.

Editorial independence and oversight: AI can influence news selection and shape editorial judgments, raising critical questions about maintaining human editorial control and avoiding algorithmic bias. This requires human oversight in complex or sensitive reporting scenarios.

Normative goals of journalistic AI

Despite these challenges, AI offers significant opportunities to enhance journalism’s public service role. Lin and Lewis (2022) propose a “democratic realist” approach, arguing that journalistic AI should primarily aim to provide people with accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely independently produced information about public affairs. This

reframing centers normativity in the discussion about AI and journalism. To achieve these goals, AI can contribute across three primary stages of news work:

Information gathering: AI can detect trending stories, identify worthwhile topics, monitor data inputs for “hot” topics and emergent trends, and speed up verification and source identification. It can help surface alternative, oppositional, critical, disadvantaged, and marginalized viewpoints, overcoming human biases in source selection.

Selection and production: AI can assist with content generation for routine topics (e.g., sports results, financial reports), freeing human journalists for more in-depth investigations and qualitative reporting. It can also suggest edits, transcribe interviews, and assist with data analysis for investigative journalism.

Distribution and consumption: AI can personalize news content, tailoring feeds based on user preferences and contextual factors, aiming to increase engagement and relevance. When applied thoughtfully, it can reduce information overload and mitigate filter bubbles.

Ultimately, the goal is to leverage AI to “turbo-charge” journalists, enabling them to use their human skills more effectively, rather than solely focusing on productivity and profitability.

Relevance to journalism education

The rapid advancement of AI makes it crucial for journalism education to adapt and prepare students for this evolving media landscape.

Concerns for journalism education

Journalism educators face several prominent concerns:

Faculty expertise: A significant challenge is the lack of deep faculty expertise in AI. Many educators understand journalism’s theoretical frameworks but lack technical literacy regarding AI systems.

Academic integrity: The proliferation of generative AI tools raises concerns about student misuse for “cheating” and generating work without human intervention.

Ethical guidance: While a strong ethical orientation for AI use is deemed essential, the path to achieving this goal remains largely undefined in many programs.

Curriculum balance: There’s a tension between developing critical thinking skills and preparing students for industry jobs that might be affected by automation. Some schools might overemphasize technology at the expense of traditional journalistic skills like writing, finding story ideas, and storytelling.

Originality: Generative AI challenges the primacy of “original content” (ideas, first-hand observations, exclusive interviews) that is core to journalism’s professional self-understanding.

Opportunities for journalism education

Despite the concerns, AI presents significant opportunities for journalism education:

Developing new skills: AI integration necessitates journalists to acquire new technical abilities and competencies to direct technical specialists and manage AI systems. This includes skills in data analysis, factual verification, and understanding algorithmic processes.

Enhancing learning: AI tools can serve as valuable assistants for students, acting as tutors, research assistants, and idea generators. They can improve critical thinking and writing skills by providing prompts and facilitating data analysis.

Preparing for new roles: Education can prepare students for roles involving oversight, analysis, and ethical judgment in hybrid human-AI workflows, rather than solely focusing on content creation.

Promoting AI literacy: Journalism schools can play a crucial role in promoting AI literacy among journalists, editors, and the broader public, ensuring a deeper understanding of AI tools, their potential, and limitations.

Strategies for journalism education

To effectively address AI's impact, journalism education should:

Train students in AI: Incorporate AI literacy and ethical AI use into curricula. This can include specific AI courses or embedding AI across existing modules.

Develop faculty expertise: Encourage professional development for faculty and foster partnerships with other academic units (e.g., computer science) or industry experts. This helps bridge knowledge silos.

Formulate AI policies: Develop clear policies for AI use in newsrooms and academia, addressing ethical considerations, responsible data utilization, and academic integrity.

Reimagine curricula: Adopt a “proactive” approach to AI development, redesigning curricula to integrate AI as a tool that augments human capabilities while reinforcing core journalistic values. This involves deciding on a strategic aim for AI integration, focusing on what to achieve with AI rather than merely adopting it due to “fear of missing out” (FOMO).

Emphasize normativity: Shift scholarly attention from a techno-centric emphasis on applications to the “fundamental but overlooked issue of normativity,” focusing on what AI *should* do to serve journalism's democratic aims.

Implications for journalism education

Journalism education plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of the profession in the AI era.

Curriculum modernization: Journalism curricula must be updated to address AI technologies and their implications. This includes introducing concepts of automated, algorithmic, and data journalism.

AI Literacy and skills development: Enhancing AI literacy among journalists and editors is paramount. Students need training to acquire technical expertise and understand

AI's potential and limitations. This encompasses learning to use AI as a tool for research, idea generation, and efficiency, freeing up time for more substantive work.

Ethical frameworks and critical thinking: Teaching about AI's ethical implications, such as bias, transparency, accountability, and the risks of misinformation, is crucial. This includes fostering critical thinking skills to evaluate AI-generated content and identifying biases.

Human-centered approach: Pedagogy should emphasize that journalism is a deeply human endeavor, and AI tools are meant to augment, not replace, human creativity, empathy, and judgment. This helps address "automation anxiety".

Industry-academia collaboration: Journalism programs should forge partnerships with industry to ensure curricula remain relevant to real-world practices and to gain access to technological advancements and expertise.

Adjustments to teaching and practice

To navigate the delineated challenges, adjustments are needed in both teaching and journalistic practice:

Proactive curriculum development: Journalism schools should move beyond ad-hoc responses and develop comprehensive plans for AI instruction, integrating it programmatically into coursework.

Ethical guidelines in practice: Newsrooms must develop and adhere to clear ethical guidelines for AI use, ensuring transparency, accountability, and mitigation of bias. This involves defining responsibility for AI-generated content.

Fostering human oversight: Journalists should be trained to maintain editorial control and human oversight in complex or sensitive reporting scenarios. AI should be a tool to enable journalists to focus on in-depth investigations, on-the-ground reporting, and other core human journalistic activities.

Audience education: Journalists have a role as media-and-technology educators, guiding citizens through the uncertain landscape of AI-driven communication, helping them discern authentic and valuable information. This includes labeling AI-generated content to maintain public trust.

Strategic investment: Media companies should invest in technology and training for their teams, but with a clear strategy rooted in journalistic values, avoiding adoption driven solely by trends or economic pressures.

Findings & discussion

The age of AI is fundamentally reshaping the role of a journalist, prompting a re-evaluation of what constitutes journalism and who (or what) can rightfully produce it.

AI as an augmentation, instead of a replacement:

The primary lesson is that AI technologies are an added value that enhance, rather than replace, journalists' work. While AI can automate routine, repetitive, and data-heavy tasks, thereby increasing efficiency and speed, it cannot fully replicate the nuanced interpretation, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and ethical judgment inherent in human journalism. This calls for a symbiotic relationship where AI's data processing capabilities complement human journalists' critical and ethical insights.

Shifting focus to higher-order tasks: Journalists' roles are evolving from mere content creators to curators, verifiers, explainers, and investigators of AI-generated content. This frees them to concentrate on complex storytelling, in-depth investigations, and tasks requiring human insights and empathy that AI cannot provide, such as negotiating with sources or understanding cultural intricacies.

Navigating the ethical landscape: Journalists in the age of AI must become ethical arbiters. The proliferation of AI-generated content raises critical concerns about algorithmic bias, transparency, misinformation, and the erosion of public trust. This demands new ethical guidelines and a focus on algorithmic accountability reporting.

Journalists must be able to ask critical questions about how AI systems are designed and deployed, especially as AI integrates into various aspects of civic life.

Embracing new skill sets and lifelong learning: To remain relevant, journalists must upskill themselves in AI literacy, data analysis, and understand how AI works. This continuous learning is vital to leveraging AI effectively and safeguarding the profession's integrity.

Reasserting journalistic values for democracy:

In an era of rampant information, the relevance of 21st-century journalism hinges on its ability to uphold normative democratic goals.

Journalists, augmented by AI, can strive to provide accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely information about public affairs. This goes beyond merely producing content; it involves actively combating misinformation, fostering diverse viewpoints, and engaging communities meaningfully, thereby reinforcing journalism's crucial civic role amidst the noise created by influencers, content creators, and provocateurs. The journalistic act remains one of "telling stories about the human condition", requiring conscious and unconscious biases of human makers to be addressed, not merely shifted or obscured by technology.

Conclusion and recommendations

Are we all journalists in the AI age?

The integration of Artificial Intelligence into journalism represents a significant evolution, presenting both immense opportunities and critical challenges. AI is transforming news production by enhancing efficiency, automating routine tasks, facilitating advanced data analysis, and enabling content personalization. It can help journalists overcome challenges like information overload and business model crises, improving timely and relevant news delivery. However, this transformation is not without peril. AI poses pressing ethical concerns regarding bias, transparency, accountability, and

the potential for misinformation and deep fakes. The prospect of job displacement and the erosion of uniquely human qualities like creativity, empathy, and nuanced interpretation also loom.

The overwhelming consensus is that AI should be viewed as a collaborative tool that enhances, rather than replaces, human journalistic work. This approach necessitates a balanced and ethical integration of AI, ensuring technological progress aligns with maintaining journalistic integrity and fundamental values. News organizations must embrace responsible AI practices, prioritizing transparency, fairness, and upholding journalistic values. The future of journalism in the age of AI is one of collaboration, where technology enhances the capabilities of journalists while the essential human qualities of the profession remain central.

Lessons learned: AI in journalism: Augmentation, ethics, and education

The definition of a journalist and what constitutes as news in the age of AI is constantly evolving. Most of major media breakthroughs now reach us at warp speed via blog posts, emails, tweets, and texts in an ephemeral media stream.

The definition of a journalist and what constitutes as news in the digital age is constantly being redefined in our society. Most of major media breakthroughs now reach us at warp speed via blog posts, emails, tweets, and texts in an ephemeral media stream. Content creators mimic journalistic practices and produce news content on diverse platforms as Facebook, Instagram, Bluesky, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp, Nextdoor, and YouTube, to bypass traditional journalists and legacy media. This disintermediation of primary news channels has led to both compelling news based on factual reporting and sinister trends, such as accusations of “fake news.” While social media platforms have accelerated the pace of news dissemination, it has also contributed to the rise of misinformation.

This study perpetuates in print a wealth of research and insights to benefit students, scholars, industry professionals, government, and beyond. This comprehensive study

encapsulates these intriguing media developments, analyzes theories explicating such trends, and presents research that investigates the core challenges in our field. Informed by contributions from academics and media professionals, this topical and compelling study features detailed analyses of how newsmakers—such as presidential candidates and musicians—successfully manage their brands and news messaging. These newsmakers engage their audience across paid media (e.g., advertising), owned media (such as official websites), earned media (coverage in other publications), and shared media (e.g., Facebook or YouTube), delivering the right message at the right time, to the right audience, on the optimal platform. These trends offer fascinating theoretical perspectives, latest discoveries, and valuable insights for the industry.

The changing role of journalists and the nature of news content are of primary interest. The state of news and its future also concerns both media scholars and audiences, as the power and influence of the media have transformed democratic society (McChesney & Nichols, 2002). These transformations are particularly relevant to post-industrial journalism, which assumes that traditional media institutions will continue to lose revenue and market share unless they adapt by embracing new digital processes and methods (Anderson, Bell, & Shirky 2012, p. 13).

Theoretical frameworks of media practices should address not only questions of information and representation but also journalism's self-proclaimed values of balance and objectivity (Zelizer, 2004). As the Internet continues to reshape nearly every aspect of society, no institution has been more profoundly altered than journalism and distribution of information (Gant, 2007; McChesney & Nichols, 2010). As Eric Newton of the Knight Foundation states: "Without a doubt, the digital age has turned traditional journalism upside down and inside out. Almost everything is in flux: Who a journalist is, what a story is, when and where the news arrives and how we deal with newly interactive communities" (Newton, 2013, p. 11).

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Generation Z rejects journalistic “objectivity”: Post millennials are redefining news consumption

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Abstract

Unlike Generation X and boomers, post-millennials sparsely engage with traditional news sources. They deem irrelevant traditional news sources such as newspapers and magazines. They rarely watch television news or listen to news on radio. Relevant to theoretical perspectives for the 7th World Journalism Education Congress theme, “Is it time to reboot journalism education?” this study explores how Generation Z (Gen Z), often termed post-millennials or digital natives, is profoundly reshaping news consumption patterns and challenging traditional journalistic “objectivity.” Gen Z exhibits a strong preference for digital and social media, consuming news incidentally in bite-sized, visually engaging formats that are highly personalized. Their inherent skepticism demands transparency, verifiable facts, and demonstrated accountability over traditional trust-building mechanisms. This evolving landscape necessitates significant adjustments in journalism education and practice, emphasizing enhanced media literacy, adaptive content strategies, and a reframing of core journalistic values to meet the demands of a generation that values authenticity and relevance. We focused on the post-millennials (Generation Z), comprising people born in 1997 or after, because of distinct differences in their media use when compared to other demographic cohorts. While their news values remain the same, post-millennials are less concerned about news accuracy and pay more attention toward entertainment and interaction. They engage with technologies that present opportunities to create content as consumers.

Keywords: *Generation Z and their media usage; news consumption of post-millennials or Generation Z, media usage of post-millennials; attitudes and digital behaviors of Generation Z; mobile-first news; using smartphones to access news and information; using social media to access news and information*

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Introduction

“Mainstream news media as well as the economy and polity, in which the news media are embedded, have changed over the past decades and the arrival of the internet offers a chance to add different kinds of news” In a 2011 essay in *Journalism*, sociologist Herbert Gans author of 1979 classic work, *Deciding What's News*, posited a justification for revisiting *multi-perspectival news* which focuses on journalists' role in representative democracy (Gans, 2018; Gans, 2009). Grounded in German sociologist Karl Mannheim's concept of perspectives (1936), which argues people's positions and roles in society shape their societal perceptions, *multi-perspectival news* would enable news media to “depend less on top-down news from high level government” and, instead, “do more reporting from and about other levels and sectors of society” to explore and interpret the country and its problems (Gans. 2011, p. 2). As one of America's most astute social critics, Gans's analyses of news media expanded early sociological studies of 20th century news organizations. Gans drew upon significant works such as David Manning White (1950)'s analyses of the news “gatekeeper” and Warren Breed (1955)'s exploration into social control in newsrooms, especially relating to the publisher who could distort truth. Studies in news media sociology surged in the 1970s with classic works such as Edward Epstein's *News from Nowhere* (Epstein, 1974), Bernard Roshko's *Newsmaking* (Roshko, 1975), Gaye Tuchman's *Making News* (Tuchman, 1978), David Altheide's *Creating Reality* (Altheide, 1976), Herbert Gans' *Deciding What's News* (Gans, 1979) and Mark Fishman's *Manufacturing the News* (Fishman, 1980) Gans analyzed “everyday news, news workers, and professional journalism” to state: “Journalists have no monopoly on gathering and reporting new information; we all do so every day as we report our latest news to family members, friends, coworkers, and others” as (Gans, 2007, p. 161). The next section outlines the research objective of this study.

Statement of problem

In a 2014 essay, Gans recommended that, in an “increasingly unequal society” both the American news media and journalism should prepare for “possible alternative futures before one of them becomes the present” (Gans, 2014, p. 2494). To that end, post-millennials’ actions entail important implications for the future and changing definitions of news. Relevant to theoretical perspectives for the 7th World Journalism Education Congress theme, “Is it time to reboot journalism education?” this study explores how Generation Z (Gen Z), often termed post-millennials or digital natives, is profoundly reshaping news consumption patterns and challenging traditional journalistic “objectivity.” Gen Z exhibits a strong preference for digital and social media, consuming news incidentally in bite-sized, visually engaging formats that are highly personalized. Their inherent skepticism demands transparency, verifiable facts, and demonstrated accountability over traditional trust-building mechanisms. This evolving landscape necessitates significant adjustments in journalism education and practice, emphasizing enhanced media literacy, adaptive content strategies, and a reframing of core journalistic values to meet the demands of a generation that values authenticity and relevance.

This study theorizes how post-millennial media consumption habits are reshaping the news. Based on a 2025 meta-analytical research analysis of 22 key studies (published between 2017 and 2025), we provide an outline of Generation Z’s behaviors and the ramifications for deciding “what is news?” The studies were selected for their relevance to post-millennials’ media consumption, participation and production. Each study was analyzed to derive key theoretical perspectives and conceptual ideas, explicating relevant social, cultural and multidisciplinary implications to post-millennials’ engagement with the digital media. In addition, we analyzed Gans’ key works from 1979 to 2024 that enunciated Gans’ media critiques. Informed by these conceptual, analytical and empirical insights, this research study explicates three theoretical perspectives on how consumption habits of the post-millennial generation are altering the definition of news.

By embracing the visual, verbal and viral aspects of media, post-millennials are redefining news. Their propensity to participate in the news cycle shapes their rapidly changing preferences and usage patterns, as well as responses by prominent media outlets. News organizations see audiences’ power to decide when, where and how to create and access content. While values of some everyday social media users mirror a newspaper, a newscast or a radio hour, information about recent happenings is subject to a fracas of values in the global, digital public sphere. Journalists are participants, but no longer the foremost gatekeepers. The next section delineates cogent definitions of post-millennials or Generation Z and beyond, facilitating a better understanding of the group.

Literature review

Defining the post-millennial (Generation Z) demographic cohort

This study identifies age-specific generational segments based on Pew Research Center (2019) categories. The Silent generation was born between 1928 and 1945, baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964, and members of Generation X were born between 1965 and 1980. Dubbed as millennials, Generation Y designates people born between 1981 and 1996. As a demographic cohort, Generation Y was the first generation to attain adulthood by 2001, which heralded the third millennium, and were, therefore, called the millennials. Post millennials or Generation Z constitute people born in 1997 or after. With no chronological endpoint, the Generation Z age ranges vary by analysis and year of study, according to the Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, 2019).

In this study, we interchangeably use “Generation Z” and “post-millennials” because they refer to the same age group born in 1997 or after. The next section lists the key theoretical constructs explicating the news consumption habits of this generation.

The importance of studying Generation Z

In a 2007 essay, Gans observed “young people do not seem to exhibit much interest in journalistic news, other than what is supplied in teen platforms (Gans, 2007, p. 163). He attributed this trend to adult society has little use for them other than to do adult bidding, even after they are old enough to vote. Consequently, the adult news reported by professional journalists is rarely relevant” (Gans, 2007, p. 163). The rise of Generation Z warrants immediate attention from media leaders and researchers in fields as higher education (Selingo, 2018). News consumption habits of post-millennials or Generation Z, comprising people born in 1997 or after, have enamored media researchers exploring news usage among young people and broader societal changes in motion. Journalists like *Atlantic* staff writer Taylor Lorenz argue post-millennials seek who they know for “unbiased news.” They keep up with journalists themselves or news-related pages on Instagram, Snapchat or X (Twitter) (Lorenz, 2018, para. 7). Comfort stems from faces or brands they choose to follow, not legacy media personalities or brands accepted by broader communities.

Lorenz points to post-millennials’ confidence in social media’s power to positively shape broader media and political landscapes (Lorenz, 2018, para. 22). Online participation is Generation Z’s change vehicle. Although many post-millennials are too young to vote, they leverage visual platforms to make their voices heard. Opportunities are as basic as a poll question, to as multidimensional as a personal story featured in a multimedia project like *The New York Times*’ “Your Tales of Subway Hell” Post-millennials’ online microphones are larger than past generations, allowing for comments on ideas, policies and areas where they would normally lack a say (Lorenz, 2018). That platform advances the ability to report what is news – a limited public power 40 years ago. The next section lists the key theoretical constructs explicating the news consumption habits of this generation.

Study significance: Key theoretical constructs

Generation Z (or post-millennials) are the first demographic group born with widespread Internet access. In theorizing how post-millennial consumption habits are altering the definition, delivery and digital dimensions of news, this study revisits seminal concepts in Gans’ 1979 book, (*Deciding What’s News*,) to present key theoretical constructs on what is news. Specific details of each theoretical construct will be discussed later, but for convenience, here is a preview:

Second theoretical construct

The news preferences of post-millennials are challenging longstanding methods for delivery. Legacy media outlets are reconsidering their practices by reducing empirical reporting and incorporating unconventional forms of content that defy storytelling predispositions. Gans studied national media content to conclude that most news was about the affluent, with the working class breaking in with strikes and other disruption. In other words, the “knowns” retained well-known positions (Gans, 1979, p. 14). The “unknowns” featured in a fifth of the space with news of protestors, victims, violators, and other ordinary people (Gans, 1979, p. 13). The unifying significance of this study relates to its focus on news consumption habits of post millennials, with their engagement in visual, verbal, and viral aspects of media. These theoretical constructs signify important issues in news usage by post-millennials. Their habits are redefining “what is news?” as outlined in the ensuing three sections of this study. The next section enunciates key elements of the key theoretical constructs.

Key theoretical constructs: Post-millennials’ news use spurs industry innovation

The second theoretical construct indicated, “The news preferences of post-millennials are challenging longstanding methods for delivery. Legacy media outlets are

reconsidering their practices by reducing empirical reporting and incorporating unconventional forms of content that defy storytelling predispositions.”

The journalism world knows print is waning. A 2018 study by UNC School of Media and Journalism Professor Penny Abernathy found the U.S. lost almost 1,800 newspapers since 2004. The decay is continuing, and Generation Z might be the last to see news on paper. In May 2019, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* opted to end print editions except Sunday, while expanding free iPads to digital subscribers (Grabenstein, 2019). If print is not available for media outlets to communicate or consumers to learn, what will the future hold? Subscription packages for leading newspapers – the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* – position digital offerings first. The *Times* refers to print as “home delivery” – a departure from the physical paper. Post-millennials are known for their love of instant gratification, which fosters online-first thinking. Generation Z loves discussing, sharing, and interacting with digital-only articles. For the *Times*, the digital branding is “all access” and for the *Washington Post*, it’s “premium” – a barometer of digital’s importance in our futures. Even more revealing is the *New York Times*’ bundling of services without traditional news value – recipes and crossword puzzles – to spur growth in “basic digital” and “premium digital” subscriptions.

These observations impel media outlets to consider altered news delivery mechanisms. Breaking news can reach consumers via an email address or a phone number, not a subscription number. Post-millennials embrace feedback, comments, and reviews more than any other generation (Yadav & Rai, 2017, p. 111). Places where readers can comment are essential, as Generation Z loves to debate or share opinions digitally (Yadav & Rai, 2017, p. 111). In some cases, consumers only want these discussions on social media. Dialogue and engagement can occur independently from a media outlet’s website or primary revenue streams. The public can show affinity for a media organization without paying a cent. News outlets must have a strong command of social media, a critical pathway to share stories and reach wider audiences. Comments from an elected official or ordinary citizen can hold just as much news weight as a story with six months of empirical reporting. In minutes, a viral story or reader comment can surpass articles as the big news of the day.

How Generation Z uses media

Smartphone ownership and social media access are nearly ubiquitous. These platforms are the new face of news, with today’s teens shaping the revolution. Social media is their destination for communication, interaction, and entertainment. With immediate and unlimited information, almost half of teens are almost always online. They are flooded with advertisements, pop culture, status updates and local, national, and international news in between. Information no longer sits in its own space. From multiple computer tabs to smartphone apps aggregating content from several sources, readers no longer must invest undivided attention in one publication. With a few taps and keystrokes, teens can and do spread information to millions of people – Gans’ “unknowns” who were once hard to reach. Teens embrace platforms promoting their viewpoints and see that as a normal component of everyday life. Nearly 95% have access to a smartphone, and 45% said they are online “almost constantly” (Anderson & Jiang, 2018, p. 2). Social media and technology were prominent choices, with YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat as the most popular online platforms. The structure of a carefully crafted publication or broadcast is obliterated by start, stop, like or block buttons. Consumers have the power to turn a 30-minute newscast into a 3-minute online experience, without waiting for a live host.

As Gans noted, journalism always faced “the deadline” (Gans, 1979, p. 82). Even if the best reporter had tons of information, decisions were made within the time and space of a 500-word article or a 30-minute broadcast. Journalists made “suitability judgments, through which they winnow available information to select what they can cover” On verbal, visual, and viral platforms like Snapchat, “suitability judgments” come from like-minded social circles. Information may not be reported with classic empirical news values. Yet, with less faith in legacy formats, Generation Z feels a similar news effect.

Amid the facileness of online activity, even the most entertaining content is grappling with time and place. In sports, legacy media outlets like ESPN and *Sports Illustrated* hold presences on all the visual applications. In 1979, Gans cited how sources and journalists “must have access to each other before information can

become news” (Gans, 1979, p. 81). Today, athletes and teams dispel this point. The four major revenue sports – NBA, NFL, NHL, and MLB – all have their own television networks. They fill fans’ information needs with greater amusement than the traditional press. Games are discussed through stackable highlights and score updates. The “powerful” as Gans called it (the star athlete) speaks directly to the public (the fan) (Gans, 1979, p. 93). Journalists used to sit for hours, provide analysis, and decide stories to cover. But the endless flow of verbal, visual and viral media gives users power to select sources, including official businesses behind the product. Even hard news may be having its sports moment, as the Trump White House recently abandoned press briefings for 100 days (Stevenson, 2019). The consequences include changing perceptions for news consumers. What is “real”? What is “fake”? Does the “news” have to come from a credible source?

Generation Z’s preference for sensory journalism

Post-millennials’ hunger for participation and belonging in the news cycle shapes their rapidly changing preferences and usage patterns. Unlike Generation X and baby boomers, Generation Z sparsely engages with traditional media. Their news values include less concern about accuracy and more attention toward entertainment and interaction. The reaction of post millennials’ social media followings carry importance beyond the content sparking the discussion. The trustworthiness of those channels is not nearly as tested as the scripts from a legacy television station or edits from a newspaper staff. But the focus on creativity, engagement and interaction is beating credibility. Partners, a Boston-based strategic communications company, conducted an extensive 2018 study on younger generations’ news usage. Generation Z mirrored previous eras in the amount of news they receive through watching or listening versus reading, which is about two-thirds. Sharing an eye-catching top 10 play from ESPN’s Sports Center is as fulfilling as reading a reporter’s postgame coverage. Scores can be acquired through Google search, without an article or broadcast. Verbal, visual, and viral moments – the buzzer beater in basketball – can be

played over and over. They become the epitome of “what is news?” especially in a 24-7 digital zone of discussion.

Post-millennials are redefining news consumption

Rising substitutions for legacy media companies are modifying post-millennials’ content expectations. In a study based on teen interviews, Marchi (2012) delineated how they reject journalistic “objectivity” with Facebook, blogs, and fake news. Marchi explored how teens see, react and digest news in the digital era. Teen media use has advanced from traditional to alternative sources. Even adults they know are considered information channels. Word of mouth occurs in bursts on a smartphone, in far less time than a journalist writing, editing, presenting, and delivering a story. The post-millennials’ abundance of time on social media shapes their propensity for simultaneous news consumption. Marchi debunks perceptions of post-millennials’ diminished attention, through explication of how their motives vary from previous generations. This is even as social media thrives as a way of obtaining information. Generation Z’s approach is certainly differentiated, but with little evidence of a downcast perspective. Today’s teens deploy drastically different methods than adults’ traditional newsgathering plans. A recent study has concluded that young people today are not necessarily uninformed, but rather they are differently informed than previous generations, getting news via cell phone texts, email, social networking sites, and conversations with friends and family (Singer, Clark & Monserrate, 2009; Marchi, 2012).

As of March 2025, ESPN had 63.9 million X (Twitter) followers. The “network” bio read “Download the ESPN App,” with an arrow emoji pointing to an Instagram page. For a news platform celebrating its 46th birthday in September 2025, this is a significant departure from the first televised episode of Sports center on September 7, 1979. But it’s still a method of deciding what news is. Over the past four years, ESPN addressed dwindling subscribers and higher production costs by cutting around 400 positions (Drape & Barnes, 2017). Visual platforms fill the void and the public services

its own interaction with “news,” just by watching video of a monstrous dunk. While one stereotype accuses post-millennials of news indolence, that belief appears to be a misconception. Generation Z is often critiqued for not following current events, engaging in too much screen time or being “uninterested in ‘objective’ news” (Marchi, 2012, p. 256). Evidence shows “youth feel at ease zapping from station to station and ‘snacking’ on tidbits of news, gaining superficial knowledge of a broad variety of topics” (Marchi, 2012, p. 248) over obtaining in-depth analyses of a few stories. Youth tend to have “low credibility in mainstream news,” but are still seen “gathering news in alternative ways” (Marchi, 2012, p. 248). The move to follow a media organization on a social platform is as decisive as picking up a newspaper or turning on a TV channel. The values are different, but engagement is continuous, without constraints of time or place.

The reasons behind teens’ ignorance of traditional news platforms are clear. They see legacy media outlets as force-feeding stories in a certain way. Social media and late-night talk shows “provided clear understandings of current events, helping them to see what was at stake regarding a given event or policy” (Marchi, 2012, p. 256). Test clips of a Jimmy Fallon or Seth Meyers punchline alongside broadcast news segments on a difficult policy or contradictory story. The latter can be much harder for Generation Z to follow. The future of “what is news” may hinge on consumers’ ability to manage their own time. TV newscasts are devoid of the ability for viewers to mold what’s going on. Most post millennials “reported learning about current events from social networking sites such as Facebook, My Space, YouTube, and blogs” (Marchi, 2012, p. 251). While no surprise to the rest of the world, “teens felt that traditional news outlets force fed them stories in which they had no interest, so they preferred to self-tailor their news” (Marchi, 2012, p. 252). On social media, there’s a sense of choice – ten channels viewed at once. On YouTube, there’s a sense of control – a bar to scrub past unwanted content, without time lost to commercials. Legacy broadcast news can adapt, but not in its own way. Call signs (WNBC-TV) or channel numbers (News 4) ring hollow to live polls, quizzes, or other mobile-driven interactives.

While teenagers claim to ignore traditional TV, they may be more exposed than they think. Broadcast news lacks the appeal of competing platforms, described as “boring, repetitive, and irrelevant” (Marchi, 2012, p. 249). Dennis, a 16-year-old, pointed out “ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, they all have the exact same stories, even the same exact order” (Marchi, 2012, p. 249). But many teens whose parents or older friends watch TV news “listed these adults as their main sources” (Marchi, 2012, p. 250). If the adult watches, teens are essentially second-hand consumers. Post-millennials may not watch the broadcast, but they’re still seeking the news. Gans’ warned of a more complex world, where stories’ “goodness” is not dictated by the journalist as the selector (Gans, 1979, p. 177). To that end, the next section posits key elements of the third theoretical construct.

Changing expectations: Generation Z rejects journalistic “objectivity”

In a 2018 essay, Penny Rue, vice president for campus life and professor of counseling at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C., analyzed how Generation Z, which “is coming to college,” holds unconventional expectations compared to their predecessors. Rue recommended strategies to respond. Generation Z does not prioritize source credibility – a change in values revealing the need for greater education on reliable vs. unreliable outlets. The post-millennial bloc falls victim to “perhaps assuming that anything on the Internet is true” (Rue, 2018, para. 20). Rue jumpstarted efforts to help them “learn to evaluate the validity of research and consider the provenance of ideas” that preclude the spread of false information (Rue, 2018, para. 20). Guiding Generation Z on the line between real and fake is a key component of promoting accurate news. But the path is challenging when truth competes with other values, on digital channels where news competes with entertainment content.

The definition of “news” is also changing, with Rue providing viewpoints in nontraditional ways. On platforms like Reddit, people with no relationship and/or very different backgrounds converge around conversations. Those interactions can lead to

information sharing among strangers. While not traditionally seen as “news,” post-millennials are communicating with and consuming from each other. A friend’s comment in an online message board can answer the same question as a traditional newspaper lead or broadcast script: what’s the news?

How Generation Z consumes and curates news media

Two U.S.-based academic researchers, Carr and Bard analyzed how media branding influences post-millennials’ assessments of credibility, objectivity, and evaluations of the individual and information presented on a X (Twitter) feed (Carr & Bard, 2018). They found post-millennials can recognize brands, but not voices. Their experiment followed three iconic X (Twitter) users; NBC news anchor and journalist Lester Holt; former Fox News broadcaster and *opinionator* Bill O’Reilly and singer John Legend. They wanted to know: “do college-aged users recognize whether a tweet is coming from a professional journalist, an opinion broadcaster, or someone who is not a journalist at all (like a celebrity)? And how do these younger users assess the credibility of these different kind of users?” (Carr & Bard, 2018, p. 6).

As younger news consumers engage via social media, their confidence in who to follow is still raw. Journalists building a public platform are seen as more likable. But amid civility issues online, journalists’ use of those platforms sullies their credibility. “Interestingly, journalists who engage in social media are seen as more personally likable by users, but, at the same time, the fact that the journalists use social media makes them less credible to their readers” (Carr & Bard, 2018, p. 5). Online news sources are especially less dependable when information is from someone perceived as holding an opposing viewpoint.

These changes raise questions about the role of media skepticism – the recognition and evaluation of journalists vs. non-journalists (Carr & Bard, 2018). X (Twitter) is among Generation Z’s most revered news platforms. But it’s also difficult for determining source validity. Post-millennials are more likely to trust tweets from estimable journalists or news organizations. But most say they often overlook the

biography of those who tweeted out the news (Bard & Carr, 2018). Legend, Holt and O'Reilly have very different jobs, but also possess the same influencer check mark. While influencers hold immense weight online, they can spread “fake news,” without the consequences faced by the legacy press. Nearly 900 college-age participants from two different universities on opposite sides of the country were randomly assigned to view falsified X (Twitter) feeds attributed to O'Reilly, Holt, or Legend. For the experiment, the topic was the 2016 presidential primaries. Participants were then asked questions regarding their knowledge of and attitude toward source, media skepticism, source credibility and objectivity, evaluation of the source, evaluation of information and party identification (Carr & Bard, 2018, para 17).

Post-millennials have preferences for trusted media outlets and personalities. Holt was rated most credible, assumedly due to the NBC brand in his profile picture (Carr & Bard, 2018). Legend (a celebrity) had a higher credibility rating than O'Reilly (a journalist) (Carr & Bard, 2018). Although most participants were not familiar with Holt, they knew his news agency, NBC. While Holt is known as a more credible news anchor than *opinionator* O'Reilly, the NBC branding on Holt's page led to more distrust from participants. This occurred even though most lacked initial familiarity with either person. An “overwhelming” majority of participants did not know Holt, despite his role on the popular TV show, NBC Nightly News. Did the loss of journalistic norms and empirical reporting lead to lower recognition of a legacy newscast by younger generations?

Post-millennials are moving away from traditional news mediums and towards online/social media platforms. O'Reilly was more recognizable to those participants, but still completely unknown to 40% of respondents. However, three in four knew Legend. “[A]n overwhelmingly majority of college-aged individuals knew the celebrity but not the journalist” – a sign of influencers' rises above news professionals in the online world (Carr & Bard, 2018, p. 13). Recognizing renowned journalists is not a priority for a generation obsessed with convenience and efficiency. As legacy media staffs shrink and newsrooms evolve, answering the question of “what is news?” may

start with “who is the creator?” We’re in an era where “knowns” like Legend are more recognized than journalists deciding how to cover news about the singer.

Media skepticism among post-millennials

The idea of traditional unbiased, objective journalism is under siege amid the rise of digital and social content streams. Credibility would be assumed as a core news value, but post millennials want convenience and entertainment. Social media, where most post-millennials get their news, had a higher credibility rating than only Fox News – a brand carrying polarized baggage to the average news consumer (Bard & Carr, 2018). In 1979, Gans already knew the complexity of values in media: “Like other professionals, journalists practice an expertise that is not and cannot be purely professional” (Gans, 1979, p. 213). But in an era where the public can decide and create news, the absence of standards opens the door to disorder. *Media skepticism* is the degree of audience disbelief or doubt relating to media narratives or depictions. It occurs when the media loses credibility, and the audience deems some media messages as harming society. *Media skepticism* may be connoted to any level such as distrust in journalists, networks, or information (Carr & Bard, 2018). Even though post millennials recognized Legend at higher rates than Holt, numbers suggest they do seem to trust

Holt more – about 0.4 points higher than the celebrity on a five-point credibility scale (Carr & Bard, 2018). Researchers hypothesized that the NBC logo carries significant weight in credibility ratings. That is until a current 18-year-old enters college in 2030 and asks “What’s that peacock? I follow John Legend.” Most participants reported that they neither trust nor distrust the source, rating each person on perceived credibility and objectivity (Carr & Bard, 2018, p. 10). Participants viewed the journalist as more credible than the celebrity and the *opinionator*. The *opinionator* was voted least objective. The celebrity and journalist were rated more objective but were also surprisingly close in their scores (Carr & Bard, 2018, p. 11). Post-millennials’ lack of familiarity with a source like Holt should draw concern,

especially since he is a credible figure on a prominent legacy media platform. If following and familiarity lie with *opinionators* and celebrities, news for post millennials arrives at a skewed angle. Legend can be an advocate, but Hollywood is not the news industry. If legacy media companies lack standing as gatekeepers of information, the alternative is the wider Internet – a disruptive choice at best.

News credibility and a trusted social media presence

Carr & Bard studied factors affecting news credibility and found three distinct strains: *source credibility* (who provides the information), *message credibility* (the information itself) and *media credibility* (the way the information is conveyed) (Carr & Bard, 2018, p. 4). One must identify who is tweeting, the source of the tweet text and the original tweeter. Consumers often see tweets as truth, before taking time to investigate the post’s credibility. This contributes to the unabated rise of fake news. The ease of falsifying information online raises the importance of the value of trust – not only in reliable, accurate sources with empirical methods of reporting.

The credibility of news sources has generally declined over the last few decades, as expected. “Studies have shown that social media sites like X (Twitter) are perceived as less credible than traditional news sources” (Carr & Bard, 2018, p. 4-5). Digital distrust of journalists by social media users extends across all ages, but mostly Generation Z, which is online more often. At a very young age, they’re dealing with large-scale questions that may be unrealistic for minds 22 years old and under to answer. What will post-millennials desire from their news when they turn 32 or 42 years old? Will their experience in an uncertain climate of “what is news” lead to a clearer or murkier depiction of core 21st-century values?

Continued value of traditional news sources

Carr & Bard demonstrated the continued weight of traditional news sources (Carr & Bard, 2018). But they also present limits and boundaries of antiquated

systems. College-aged respondents lack familiarity with traditional news media. As newspapers close and consolidate, or podcast episodes outpace broadcast TV, younger generations lack exposure to longstanding journalistic mediums and providers. Post-millennials view entertainers and politically biased news sources, like Fox News, less credibly than fact-driven news organizations, like CNN (Carr & Bard, 2018). They do not view unfamiliar sources credibly but tend to form stronger opinions about sources they know. Podcasts – a self-tailored audio alternative to radio – are surging in popularity. But journalists are not always the voices leading the most popular podcasts about the news. Although news consumption has fallen more acutely for millennials and post-millennials than older cohorts, college students “retain several keys, traditional news consumption characteristics of the members of the older cohorts” even as “they may not consume broadcast of cable television news and are not even aware of the highest rated broadcast television journalist” (Carr & Bard, 2018, p. 15). But their news attention span is short. The Internet is organizing a borderless world, not just their local community. The next section enunciates limitations, caveats, and directions for future research.

Research methodology

As with any study, certain limitations to this research should be recognized when interpreting its implications, the contributions of the findings and the reported results. Although the strength of the study is its theoretical perspectives on how the consumption habits of the post-millennial generation are reshaping the news, other related aspects may guide future research. The present study had certain limitations, and our conclusions and the results on which they are based should be tempered by our research choices. This study analyzed news consumption habits of post-millennials based on a 2019 meta-analytical research review of 16 key studies (published between 2017 and 2019), mostly in the United States. It would be worth exploring how the Internet connects post-millennials across the geographical spectrum, creating more awareness and acceptance of news use in multicultural milieus or how post-millennials interact with news platforms in developed

and developing nations. Global connectivity is just one modern factor contributing to new definitions of news.

Further, it would be worthwhile to compare and correlate theoretical constructs from this study with other age-based groups such as the Silent generation (born 1928-1945), the boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (born 1965-1980) and Generation Y or the Millennials (born 1981-1996), or studies of these groups during Gans’ 1979 foray into *Deciding What’s News*. The next section presents the concluding part of this study with a discussion of key implications.

Findings & discussion

Building on media critiques in *Deciding what's news* (1979), Gans explored in *Democracy and the news* (2003) the crucial link between a weakened news media and weakened democracy. Gans contended that “with the advent of cable news networks, the Internet, and a proliferation of other sources, the role of contemporary journalists has shrunk, as the audience for news moves away from major print and electronic media to smaller and smaller outlets (Gans, 2003).

Based on seminal concepts in Gans’ 1979 classic work, we theorized in this study changes in the 21st century digital age. Three theoretical constructs explicated post-millennials (Generation Z) are redefining news, a responsibility once reserved for journalists as professional media gatekeepers. As Gans observed, “If journalism is defined as the gathering and reporting of new information to an audience then we are all journalists, for we devote much of our everyday conversation to transmitting new information to family, friends, fellow workers, and other audiences (Gans, 2007, p. 161). In many ways, Gans anticipated Generation Z’s shift away journalistic news. Gans postulated: “young people do not seem to exhibit much interest in journalistic news, other than what is supplied in teen platforms. This should not be surprising; adult society has little use for them other than to do adult bidding, even after they are old enough to vote. Consequently, the adult news reported by professional journalists is rarely relevant” (Gans, 2007, p. 163).

True to Gans’ assessment, Generation Z or post-millennials sparsely engage with traditional news sources. As the first generation born with widespread Internet access, they deem irrelevant traditional news sources such as newspapers and magazines. They rarely watch television news or listen to news on radio. While their news values remain the same, post-millennials are less concerned about news accuracy and pay more attention toward entertainment and interaction. They engage with technologies that present opportunities to create content as consumers. The research reported in this study leads to key conclusions, with important theories of how post-millennial consumption habits are reshaping the news. This concluding section lists implications of the key theoretical constructs related to the news usage of Generation Z and what it means for “what is news?” going forward.

Post-millennials are forcing legacy media outlets to reconsider news practices:

The second theoretical construct indicated: “The news preferences of post-millennials are challenging longstanding methods for delivery. Legacy media outlets are reconsidering their practices by reducing empirical reporting and incorporating unconventional forms of content that defy storytelling predispositions.” Not only do post-millennials differ in how they access the news, but what they seek out. Generation Z and millennials consider the same amount of news they consume as entertainment. Boomers consider half (Partners, 2018). Nearly 74% of post-millennials believe over half the news they consume is entertainment, compared to only two in five boomers (Partners, 2018). This is a demonstrable contrast to Gans’ 1979 observations of no dearth of hard news (Gans, 1979, p.34). Would it behoove media organizations to partner with entertainment providers for greater visibility on serious topics? Or are audiences so fragmented that media brands keep a narrow focus? The Internet’s global context makes these questions even more complex going forward.

Changing media interests occur alongside the growth of online news arenas, in regions previously reserved for entertainment. Post-millennials are challenging the role of broadcast television. Nearly 49% chose YouTube as a top platform, compared to

26% of Generation X and 12% of boomers (Partners, 2018). Millennials ranked YouTube similarly, but also newspapers and magazines higher at 31%. It's worth watching the youngest post-millennials' evolution. How will Generation Z habits change when they're as old as today's millennials?

The rotation of platforms also fluctuates. Almost a quarter of Generation X and baby boomers ranked YouTube in the top two and about half of Generation X ranked newspapers and magazines in the top two (Partners, 2018). Newspapers and magazines were only listed in the top two for 17% of Generation Z (Partners, 2018). Most baby boomers ranked magazines as their main news source, in contrast to only 17% of Generation Z (Partners, 2018). What new technologies could upend current generational distinctions, from Silent down to Generation Z?

Growing up in a digital age, post-millennials seek more visually appealing news sources. They allocate more time to platforms like Instagram and Snapchat than traditional news. Their digitally driven priorities have reshaped the path to success for content providers. Creativity, engagement, and interaction beat credibility, with way less text. Will a day come when print ceases altogether in the news cycle? The movement of today's digital world also suggests engagement more advanced than social media, such as AI, is on its way.

Redefining news consumption: The post-millennial influence

Generation Z, broadly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, are the first true “digital natives,” having grown up with the internet and handheld devices as intrinsic to their daily lives. This demographic is characterized by its digital proficiency, technological familiarity, and significant influence as consumers. Their deep immersion in digital environments has led to fundamental shifts in how news is consumed, challenging traditional media paradigms and demanding a re-evaluation of journalistic practices.

Gen Z's evolving news consumption patterns

Digital-First Preference: Gen Z accesses news through digital and social media platforms, with social media often serving as their primary source, surpassing traditional broadcast and print media. They are highly dependent on their mobile phones for news, reflecting the ubiquitous nature of these devices in their lives.

Incidental and “Stackable” consumption: News often “finds” Gen Z through their social media feeds, leading to a prevalent pattern of incidental news consumption. This is characterized by consuming information in short bursts, often involving superficial engagement like reading headlines and scanning content rather than in-depth reading. They desire news to be as condensed and fast as possible to manage information overload.

Visual and interactive content preference: Contrary to older generations, Gen Z shows a strong preference for visually engaging news formats, including multimedia, videos, infographics, and memes, over traditional text-heavy articles. They seek interactivity, desiring platforms where they can communicate their ideas and share comments.

Personalization and relevance: Gen Z expects news content to be highly relevant to their daily lives, personal interests, and even contribute to self-development. They desire customizable and adjustable platforms that offer control over how, when, and where they consume news.

The relevance of Gen Z's criticism of journalistic “objectivity”

Gen Z's exposure to a highly digitalized environment marked by widespread digital marketing, greenwashing awareness, and corporate skepticism has shaped their approach to trust in information. They are often described as a “validation generation,” prioritizing tangible experiences and information over traditional trust-building mechanisms. This perspective critically challenges the conventional notion of journalistic “objectivity.”

Scholarly perspectives on objectivity criticism

Skepticism and demand for proof: Gen Z approaches news with a deep-seated skepticism, particularly towards social media, demanding concrete proof over abstract promises. They are less influenced by traditional trust mechanisms and more by demonstrated accountability and openness.

Transparency and verifiability as core values: For Gen Z, trustworthiness is inherently linked to transparency, data, and social proof. They value clear communication, detailed explanations, and verifiable sources, often cross-checking information with peers or other sources. This pushes journalists to provide accessible evidence and third-party certifications.

Beyond detached reporting: Gen Z often finds traditional news content to be excessively negative, stressful, and irrelevant to their daily lives, preferring content that offers constructive perspectives or success stories. Their desire for emotionally resonant and personally relevant news challenges the detached, neutral tone often associated with “objective” reporting.

“Formality” and credibility: While they embrace new media, Gen Z still seeks formality and trustworthiness from news sources. They perceive an over-reliance on “special effects” or aggressive advertising within news content on social media as diminishing credibility. This implies that while engagement is valued, it should not come at the expense of perceived journalistic rigor.

Critical digital literacy: Despite being digital natives, many Gen Z individuals still struggle to critically analyze and authenticate online information, making them vulnerable to misinformation. This paradox highlights that innate digital fluency does not automatically translate to media literacy.

Relevance to journalism education

The evolving news consumption habits and critical perspectives of Gen Z underscore a profound need for adaptation in journalism education. The traditional

pedagogical approaches focused solely on print or broadcast journalism are insufficient in preparing future professionals for this dynamic media landscape.

Implications for journalism education:

Enhance Media and Information Literacy (MIL): Journalism schools must prioritize equipping students with advanced MIL skills to critically evaluate, analyze, and verify information from diverse sources, particularly online. This includes understanding algorithms, identifying biases, and discerning scientific content.

Integrate digital-first and multi-platform content creation: Curricula should emphasize producing content optimized for digital distribution, mobile devices, and social media platforms. This involves teaching multi-skilled journalism, cross-media publishing, and adapting narratives for various channels.

Refocus on core journalistic values in a digital context: While “objectivity” is challenged, the underlying principles of accuracy, transparency, accountability, and ethical reporting remain paramount. Journalism education needs to teach how to uphold these values in an environment prone to misinformation and personalized filters.

Foster critical thinking and ethical decision-making: Students must be trained to navigate information overload, challenge assumptions, and make ethical decisions regarding content creation and dissemination in complex digital ecosystems. This includes understanding the impact of AI on news production and distribution.

Emphasize audience-centric approaches: Future journalists need to understand Gen Z's preferences for content, format, and engagement, learning to craft stories that are relevant, concise, visually appealing, and emotionally resonant.

Promote collaborative and practical learning: Research-creation methodologies and virtual newsroom simulations can provide hands-on experience in producing news for diverse platforms, fostering collective decision making and ethical problem-solving.

Conclusion and recommendations

Gen Z's consumption habits represent a paradigm shift, driven by digital fluency, a demand for personalization, and a critical approach to information. Their skepticism towards traditional “objectivity” necessitates a redefinition of trust, anchored in transparency, verifiability, and demonstrated impact. Journalism education and practice must evolve to meet these demands effectively.

Adjustments to journalism practice

Prioritize evidence-based credibility: Brands and news organizations must provide clear sustainability metrics, third-party certifications, and detailed explanations to build trust, shifting from passive trust to active credibility.

Embrace interactive and visual storytelling: Focus on high-quality, relevant visual and video content, infographics, and short-form text that resonates with daily life and offers positive perspectives.

Deepen social media engagement: Actively engage with Gen Z on social media platforms, producing youth-tailored content that is visible, discoverable, and co-created with audiences through reviews and behind-the-scenes transparency.

Augment human journalism with AI: Utilize AI tools to assist with news discovery, personalization, and efficiency, while ensuring human journalists remain the final decision makers and ethical guardians of the news.

Implications for journalism education (Pedagogical angle):

Cultivate digital and media literacy: Develop curricula that train students to critically analyze, evaluate, and verify information from a multitude of digital sources, understanding the nuances of misinformation and algorithmic curation.

Integrate multi-platform production: Design courses that immerse students in creating content for websites, social media, podcasts, and mobile apps, emphasizing adaptive narratives and responsive design for diverse platforms.

Reaffirm foundational ethics in a digital context: Teach the immutable principles of accuracy, fairness, and accountability, while addressing new ethical challenges posed by AI, personalization, and the rapid spread of information.

Foster critical engagement with audiences: Encourage students to understand and engage with audience feedback, co-creation strategies, and the emotional impact of news, moving beyond a one-way communication model.

Prioritize “Why” over “What”: Instead of solely focusing on *what* news is, journalism education should emphasize *why* news matters, its democratic role, and how to make it relevant and impactful for a skeptical, digitally native audience.

Lessons learned on Generation Z’s criticism of journalistic “objectivity”

Gen Z’s criticism of journalistic “objectivity” is not a rejection of truth but a demand for a more transparent, verifiable, and contextually aware form of journalism that resonates with their lived experiences in a highly digitalized world.

Redefining trust: For Gen Z, trust is not an inherent quality of a legacy institution or an abstract concept of “objectivity.” Instead, it is earned through demonstrated accountability, openness, and the provision of clear, verifiable data. They are a “validation generation” that has grown up witnessing misinformation and corporate skepticism, leading them to demand “proof over promises.”

Beyond detachment to authenticity: Their preference for content that is personally relevant, constructive, and emotionally engaging challenges the traditional detached, often negative, tone of “objective” reporting. They seek authenticity and relatability from information sources, which is often perceived through interactive and behind-the-scenes content that reveals the human element.

Transparency as the new objectivity: Gen Z’s skepticism about information they encounter, especially online, compels them to verify sources and seek clarity of communication. This means that journalistic “objectivity” for Gen Z is less about a neutral stance and more about radical transparency in sourcing, methodology, and acknowledgment of potential biases, allowing them to make their own informed judgments.

Impact of information overload: Growing up in an “information bombarded ecosystem,” Gen Z prioritizes brevity and immediate relevance. If information is not concise or directly impactful, they quickly disengage. Their criticism of “objectivity” can therefore stem from news that feels too lengthy, abstract, or disconnected from their immediate concerns.

Influence of social and peer validation: Gen Z relies heavily on social affirmations and the credibility of sources within their networks when discerning information. This social aspect of validation becomes a part of their “objectivity” assessment, sometimes even to the extent that high interaction with no negative comments can be seen as “truth.” This highlights the need for journalists to engage with and understand these social validation mechanisms while upholding professional standards.

In conclusion: How Generation Z is challenging longstanding news delivery

In his analysis of Gans’ “valuable empirical contribution” in media sociology, Reese concluded that as the news media evolves to develop “new forms of professional and citizen journalism, and as they adapt to the online networked globalized society, the empirical investigation of ‘news work’ will be an even more important tool for understanding those changes” (Reese, 2009, p. 292). This study’s theoretical constructs signify important issues relating to post-millennials (Generation Z) are redefining news, a responsibility once reserved for journalists as professional media gatekeepers. Post-millennials manifest important trends. How post-millennials harness these tools matters for what a 21st-century newsroom looks like. “Will we even have one?” is an open question.

With their engagement in visual, verbal, and viral aspects of digital media, post-millennials manifest trends that are redefining news. As traditional media entities such as newspapers and radio struggle against digital platforms, news is being delivered to consumers' liking. Generation Z ranks social media as their most important source (59%) at more than double the rate of boomers (2030%) (Partners, 2018). X (Twitter), Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook were primary drivers, and social media's popularity among younger generations may stem from higher proficiency with technology. As predominantly visual outlets, Snapchat and Instagram dominated postmillennial news consumption with influential entertainment and visual cues, in the palm of their hands. Although the news apparatus or platform has evolved, the greater message for news remains the same – seize on consumers' need for convenience. The issue is whether Generation Z's changing values will significantly alter the nature – and presence – of news in a verbal, visual, viral world. For instance, most news entities now pay considerable attention to the impact of their news reporting on how many shared the news (Su, Liu, & McLeod, 2019)

To reach users' visual demands, news outlets must prioritize engagement within their delivery (Partners, 2018). During story ideation, journalists and media producers never had to employ so much interaction to attract younger audiences. They consume news with great speed and accessibility. Friends' personal stories come alongside a variety of news, sports, politics, entertainment, and other genres. Heavy use of images, slideshows, or videos, with few words, conforms to the visual world Generation Z is shaping.

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Speaking truth to power in the world's largest democracy: India's news media growth elevates journalism education

Aikat, D. & Jayendra, C.*

Abstract

India's media landscape presents a unique paradox of exponential growth amidst global decline in traditional media, influenced by complex interplay of globalization, political economy, and rising populism. Relevant to the 7th World Journalism Education Congress theme, "Is it time to reboot journalism education? This study explores these theoretical concepts, highlighting their profound impact on journalism practices and public trust. It argues that the evolving media environment necessitates a radical overhaul of journalism education in India. Drawing on research findings, this paper delineates the challenges faced by journalists, particularly concerning misinformation, digital harassment, and media subservience to political and corporate interests. This study concludes with practical recommendations for journalism schools, emphasizing curriculum reform, enhanced pedagogical approaches focused on verification and media literacy, and the cultivation of ethical, audience-centric journalism to rebuild public trust and strengthen democratic participation.

Introduction

India's media and entertainment industry is a vast and dynamic sector, often described as a "trillion-Rupee behemoth". Unlike global trends of declining newspaper circulation, India's print media continues to demonstrate remarkable resilience and growth. This distinctive trajectory is rooted in a complex interplay of economic models, socio-cultural dynamics, and strategic content approaches. However, this growth also presents a paradox: while increasing media outlets suggest plurality, deeper analysis reveals significant challenges to journalistic independence and credibility. This study examines the theoretical concepts that underpin India's media growth, their implications for journalistic practices, and the imperative need for evolving journalism education to address these contemporary challenges.

India's media landscape presents a unique paradox of exponential growth amidst global decline in traditional media, influenced by complex interplay of globalization, political economy, and rising populism. Relevant to the 7th World Journalism Education Congress theme, "Is it time to reboot journalism education? This study explores these theoretical concepts, highlighting their profound impact on journalism practices and public trust. It argues that the evolving media

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environment necessitates a radical overhaul of journalism education in India. Drawing on research findings, this paper delineates the challenges faced by journalists, particularly concerning misinformation, digital harassment, and media subservience to political and corporate interests. This study concludes with practical recommendations for journalism schools, emphasizing curriculum reform, enhanced pedagogical approaches focused on verification and media literacy, and the cultivation of ethical, audience-centric journalism to rebuild public trust and strengthen democratic participation.

India's proliferating news media inform, educate, empower, and entertain a surging population of 1.42 billion, which is roughly one-sixth of the world's people (Census Info India, 2017). India provides a captivating context to explore the nation's media landscape and its effect on democracy. As a non-western democracy, India's economic growth metrics are impressive. With an estimated nominal gross domestic product (GDP) of \$3.74 trillion, India's economy is the world's fifth largest after the US (\$26.85 trillion), China (\$19.37 trillion), Japan (\$4.91 trillion) and Germany (\$4.31 trillion), according to the International Monetary Fund's *April 2023 World Economic Outlook* (IMF, 2023). India's rise as among the fastest-growing economies in the world has been sullied by significant setbacks in press freedom and democracy. India ranked 161 (down 11 from 2022) of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF)-sponsored 2023 World Press Freedom Index, which ranks countries based on "the environment for journalism in 180 countries and territories and is published on World Press Freedom Day (3 May)" (RSF, 2023). The RSF ranked India 161 out of 180 countries in their 2023 World press freedom index even as most South Asia nations such as Bhutan (rank 90), Nepal (95), Afghanistan (152), the Maldives (100) and Sri Lanka (135) and Pakistan (150) ranked better than India, and Bangladesh (163) were ranked lower. The RSF does not evaluate nations on the quality of journalism but assesses degrees of media freedom at risk.

India's press freedom problems have continued over the years. In 2017, the RSF expressed concern over rising censorship in India's mainstream media. The RSF reported that Hindu nationalists were attempting to purge all anti-nationalist thought from the national debate and that. The RSF was concerned that individual journalists have increasingly become targets of smear campaigns on the Internet; these campaigns threaten physical repercussion and vilify their work. In its 2023 World Press Freedom report, the RSF excoriated oligarchs close to India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi for "media takeovers" that "jeopardized pluralism." (RSF, 2023). Modi's Bhartiya Janata Party (Hindi for "Indian People's Party") and political leaders, who led governments at the center and in the states, have restricted civil and political liberties, human

rights, and curtailed the freedom of democratic institutions as the press (Yadav, 2023). As the seventh-largest country by area and the world's most populous nation, India is home to both traditional and contemporary media entities that connect and converge people from diverse social, ethnic, religious and cultural origins. Contending that India's long argumentative tradition is vital for the success of its democracy and secular politics, Sen posited that India's rich history of heterodox doctrines, public discourse and cultural legacy has fostered diverse religious communities (such as Hindu, Muslim, Christian Buddhist, Jain, Jewish, Parsee, Sikh and Baha'i), as well as a venerable line of atheist and materialist thought, while nurturing classic thinking in science and mathematics, and all-embracing theories of governance (Sen, 2005; Sen, 2003).

Literature review

Theoretical concepts and India's media growth

Globalization has profoundly reshaped the Indian broadcast landscape, presenting both opportunities and challenges for journalism. On one hand, it has enabled Indian journalists to seek accountability from the government and has given audiences a broadcast voice. Despite market pressures, globalization created possibilities for broadcast journalists to demand government accountability and voice the concerns of marginalized people. This included increased access to, and coverage of serious social and political issues previously evaded by state-controlled news. The success of local and regional media also contradicts a simplistic media imperialism theory, suggesting that globalized media can be an agent of "radical and progressive democratic change". However, the same forces of globalization, coupled with market pressures, have also led to the "intense trivializing and commercialization of news". Critics argue that the global media's development according to a commercial model does not guarantee media autonomy or good-quality public information. In India, the increasing marketization of news is seen by some as creating a "façade of media plurality" while contributing to a "democratic deficit". Indian broadcasters, emulating Western models, are accused of eroding public service ethos through "hyper-commercialism" and producing "tabloid-style news". This commercialization, particularly evident in the rise of 24-hour news channels following economic liberalization in 1991, has shifted emphasis away from public service and democratic debates.

Political economy: Ownership, corporate influence, and propaganda

The political economy of media in India reveals a system where ownership and financial

interests heavily influence journalistic practices. After independence, Indian broadcasting quickly fell under state control, unlike print journalism which evolved unfettered. The economic liberalization of 1991 spurred exponential growth in the media industry but also led to hyper commercialization and concentration of ownership, triggering fears of diminishing media independence. Scholars highlight a close correspondence between politics and media in India, with influential members of the political elite exerting “sustained heteronomous pressure” on the journalistic field. This relationship is conceptualized as “contingent heteronomy,” where the media’s natural state is one of subservience to dominant political figures. Instances like the media’s shift from deference to the Gandhi dynasty to Narendra Modi illustrate this reorientation towards new power structures.

The convergence of corporate, political, and media interests has intensified, particularly with India’s neo-liberal shift. Large conglomerates with interests spanning various sectors, such as telecom and media, influence news content to protect their business interests. This corporate cupidity is seen as impacting news framing and discourse, often prioritizing profit over public welfare and leading to a decline in critical coverage. The concept of “paid news,” where media entities offer preferential coverage for financial incentives, further undermines journalistic integrity. The Propaganda Model, proposed by Herman and Chomsky (1988), is considered highly appropriate for understanding the Indian media landscape. This model posits that mass media serve as instruments of propaganda in capitalist democracies, mobilizing support for dominant special interests rather than facilitating public control over political matters. This results in homogenization of news content, a decline in diversity of viewpoints, and a focus on “advertising-friendly” narratives, particularly when critical reporting could jeopardize corporate investments.

Rise of populism, nationalism, and distrust

The rise of right-wing populism and Hindu nationalism since 2014 has introduced significant challenges to the Indian media. Journalists critical of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its Hindu-nationalist ideology face “anti-media populism,” characterized by widespread bitterness and an environment dangerous for journalists. This anti-media sentiment manifests through various discursive strategies, including discrediting mainstream media as “biased,” “corrupt,” “partisan,” “anti-national,” “anti-Hindu,” and for spreading “fake news” and “misinformation”. Terms like “presstitutes” and “sickular media” are used to demean journalists. Right-wing online portals such as OpIndia.com and Swarajya.com have emerged as prominent

“alternative news media,” explicitly positioning themselves against mainstream outlets to promote a specific ideological agenda. Moreover, political leaders like Prime Minister Narendra Modi increasingly use social media to directly connect with their followers, effectively bypassing and marginalizing mainstream media. Social media platforms have become potent tools for digital propaganda, misinformation, and hate speech, contributing to a polarized political discourse. This environment has led to a significant decline in public trust in news, attributed to perceived political bias, prioritization of speed over accuracy, and the circulation of unverified information. Journalists themselves acknowledge this trust deficit and express concern about maintaining their credibility amidst these shifts.

India's media landscape

With its influential middle class and robust media speaking truth to power, India rivals western democracies such as the US, UK, France and Germany. Compared to nearly 99% literacy rate in US, UK, France and Germany, India ranks low adult literacy rate of 77.7 % in 2017-18. India's Internet penetration is low (63%) in comparison with China (76.4%), United States (92.4 %), and the United Kingdom (96.6 %), according to latest available statistics from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies (ITU, 2023). India's news media represents a booming readership of 450.5 million circulation of print publications (RNI, 2023), the world's largest 315 million Facebook subscribers, the largest for any nation (Dixon, 2023), more than 27.25 million active users of X (formerly Twitter), the microblogging platform (Statista, 2023a), and more than 467 million viewers watching YouTube in India in July 2023 (Ceci, 2023). India is home to the world's largest number of 535.8 million monthly active users of WhatsApp, the popular global mobile messenger app, in 2023 (Gohil, 2023). In addition, India is home to 897 television channels, of which 350 were news channels, of November 2022 (Basuto, 2023). More than 210 million households now own a TV set in 2020, up by 6.9% in 2018 according to latest available 2020 estimates by India's TV monitoring agency Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC, 2021). The number of TV viewing individuals reaching 892 million up by 6.7% in 2020, from 836 million in 2018. This was an increase of 57 million individuals in 2020 (BARC, 2021).

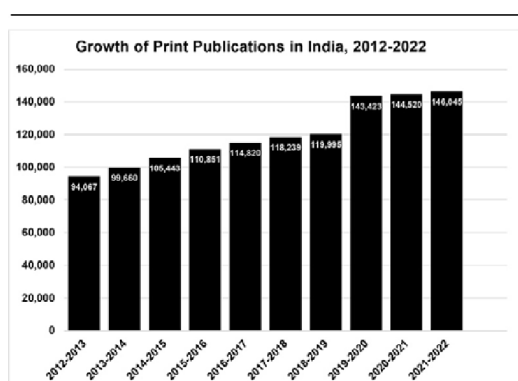
Print media thrives on meager Internet and rising literacy

In striking contrast to the sharp decline in print media readership worldwide, India's print

media have remained buoyant and, arguably, experiencing their most successful time in terms of journalism, profits, circulation, and growth for more than a decade. India has gained distinction as a nation where “print is king,” but “digital is coming on strong” (Kilman, 2015). India’s burgeoning print media industry is among the largest in the world (Rothermund, 2008; Cohen, 2002; Shekhawat, 2007; Panagariya, 2008; Acedia, 2009). The persistent growth of India’s print media can be attributed to two factors. One, low Internet penetration of 63% in 2023, up from 34.4 % in 2019, and two, a thriving literacy rate of 77.7% in 2022, up from 74.04 % in 2017, according to the 2011 Census (Census Info India, 2017). The number of print media publications in India increased by 1.1% in 2021-22, with a 1% rise in print media circulation, according to the latest available India’s Ministry of Information and Broadcasting data compiled 31 March 2022 (RNI, 2023).

In March 2022, India was home to 146,045 print publications comprise a bifurcated linguistic structure with 56,052 Hindi publications (39 %) and 19,929 published in English (14%) and 70,064 (48%) titles published in other languages (RNI, 2023). India’s print media boast a 392 million combined circulation. Hindi publications dominated with a circulation reach of 191 million (49 %), followed by English with 36 million (9%), Marathi with 36 million (9%), and Urdu with 24 million (6%). The remaining 33% circulation constitute publications in other languages such as Gujarati, Telugu, Odiya, Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Punjabi, Assamese and Kashmiri in that order (RNI, 2023). By comparison, India’s print media in March 2020 constituted 143,432 print publications comprising a bifurcated linguistic structure with Hindi (54,873 publications) and English (19,766 publications) dominating the top two positions (RNI, 2022). India’s largest circulated multi-edition newspapers similarly reflect a bifurcated linguistic structure. In 2021, the largest circulated English daily was *Eastern Sentinel* with 765,941 copies published from Itanagar, the capital city of Arunachal Pradesh, India. In 2020, the largest circulated English daily was *Hindustan Times* with 895,982 copies in Delhi, according to the India’s official reports, *Press in India* (RNI, 2022; RNI, 2021).

Figure 1



Sources: Data from Registrar of Newspapers for India of India's Ministry of Information & Broadcasting © Deb Aikat, 2022
Figure#1: India's registered print publications have consistently grown over 10 years, 2012 through 2022. India's print media constituted 146,045 publications, according to the latest available data from March 31, 2022 (RNI, 2023).

According to latest available data for 2022, the Hindi daily *Dainik Bhaskar* (meaning the “Daily Sun”) was the top multi-edition dailies with over 3.4 million copies across 44 editions, followed by the English daily *The Times of India* with over 2.4 million copies, across 33 editions. The English newspaper *Hindustan Times*, published from New Delhi, was largest circulated English daily with 513,521 copies per publishing day in 2022 (RNI, 2023). Trends in Internet penetration and literacy posit propitious signs of the print media’s growth potential and sustained proliferation. India’s print media are projected to grow until the nation’s Internet penetration and the digitally savvy segment increases to over 90 percent. In other words, India’s print media will remain influential until the technology tables are turned in a way that all people are comfortable using digital technologies. At present, much of the population do not have access to dependable technology. At the global level, Internet penetration rates are high at 86.6% in developed countries and 47% in developing countries and a low 63% worldwide (ITU, 2022). This disparity indicates that the Internet innovations may not disrupt India’s print media until all the parts of the nation are wired to the Internet. Even if that happens, India’s print media industry may bank on its rising literacy which highlights the relevance of India’s thirst for knowledge. Newspapers will thrive, for now. We will see what the future brings.

COVID-19 pandemic disrupts India’s print media

India’s COVID-19 pandemic severely affected paper copy sales and circulation of India’s major newspapers. In March 2020, before advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, India’s print media boasted a combined circulation of 439 million publications, dominated by Hindi publications with a circulation reach of 201.4 million (45.78 %), followed by English with 53.2 million (12.09 %) and Marathi with 34.8 million (7.9 %). Urdu with 26.2 million (5.96 %). The remaining 26.27 % circulation reach are publications in regional languages such as Gujarati, Telugu, Odiya, Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Punjabi, Assamese and Kashmiri in that order (RNI, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic affected India’s print media with an array of multifarious challenges: India’s print advertising marked a compounded annual growth of a mere 1% as pandemic lockdown restricted distribution of printed paper editions to homes; social media disinformation affected news credibility; government officials restricted access to information; public officials curtailed journalists’ press freedom privileges; and the government’s health communication lapses scuttled media functions to inform people about the virus. Above all, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on 24 March 2020, the world’s largest lockdown asking 1.3 billion Indians to stay home for 21 days to restrict the spread of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected journalists on the frontlines of reporting the impact of coronavirus. According to a study by the Delhi-based Institute of Perception Studies, over 300 journalists lost their lives due to the virus since the pandemic started. On average, three journalists died every day in April 2021 and over the next month, in May 2021, this average climbed to four per day. The second wave not only claimed the lives of several senior journalists but also killed many others working in districts, towns, and villages across the different Indian States. The Network of Women in Media, India, recorded more than 625 COVID-related deaths since the second wave engulfed India in April 2021 (NWMI, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic severely affected India's print media circulation, according to this study's analysis of latest available March 2022 data from India's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI, 2022). See Figure 2.

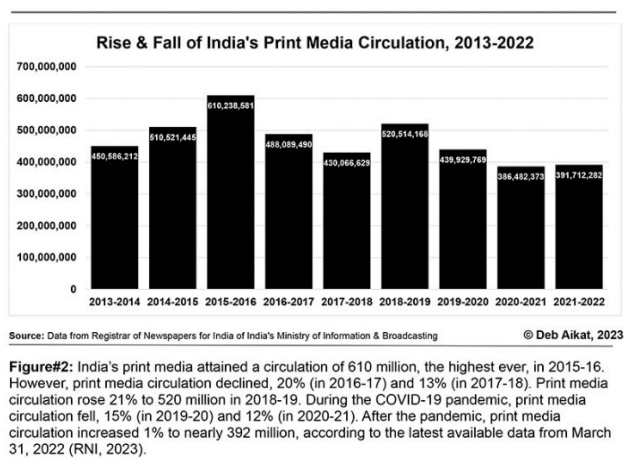


Figure 2

Compared to print media's unabated growth of 1.5% in 2019 and 19.5% in 2020, a downward spiral affected print media with a 0.8% decrease in 2021 over 2020, amid India's pandemic surges. India's print media attained a circulation of 610 million, the highest ever, in 2015-16. However, print media circulation declined, 20% (in 2016-17) and 13% (in 2017-18). Print media circulation rose 21% to 520 million in 2018-19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, print media circulation fell, 15% (in 2019-20) and 12% (in 2020-21). After the pandemic, print media circulation increased 1% to nearly 392 million, according to the latest available data from March 31, 2022 (RNI, 2023). Despite these challenges, India's media continued to thrive, exemplified by the spirit and success of India's journalists. India's media and journalists redefined democratic norms by acting as a bridge between the government and the governed. Amid widespread misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, India's media galvanized civil society to campaign more vigorously for institutional reforms and greater government accountability by melding multiple democratic roles as an inexorable watchdog of democracy.

India's news media: Critical moments and current challenges

After India's 15 August 1947 independence from British rule, the founding fathers of India's Constitution meticulously incorporated free speech provisions. Deriving freedoms from India's classical philosophy and Western liberalism, the Constitution of India empowered "the right to freedom of speech and expression," but stipulated that the government might restrict those rights under some circumstances, such as maintenance of public order, state security, and public morality.

The evolution of press freedom in India

With such a legal mandate, India's press has embodied the nation's indomitable quest for free speech. After India's independence in 1947, journalism in India has sustained its influential role on a bifurcated media structure comprising the English-language media and the vernacular press. A dominant legacy of the British Raj, the English-language media cater to the urban elite and India's growing English-speaking population, which is among the world's largest. India has emerged as the world's second largest (after the US) English-speaking country with 125 million people who speak English, according to the 2011 Census (Census Info India, 2017). The local language press, comprising publications in Hindi, Urdu and other local non-English languages, have served an influential segment of Indians who prefer to read news in their native languages. The British rulers gained control by bifurcating India's 19th century press system with a divide and rule strategy. They enacted in 1878 the "Vernacular Press Act" to curtail the freedom of the native Indian-language (i.e., non-English) press and excluded the English-language publications that were primarily owned by expatriate British citizens. The act, proposed by Lord Lytton, who governed 1876–80 as viceroy of India, was intended to prevent the vernacular press from criticizing British policies. The Act evoked widespread condemnation. India's populace protested such heavy-handed measures.

Following internecine turmoil and vociferous protests, Lytton's successor as viceroy, Lord Ripon, who governed India from 1880-84 repealed in 1881 the "Vernacular Press Act." The success of such protests intensified India's quest for independence from British rule. Such oppression propelled the native press to act as an unrelenting watchdog in the nation's historic freedom struggle. In later years, widespread press censorship during the 1975-1977. Emergency affronted an assault on civil rights and state-imposed press censorship severely restricted free

speech and disbanded democracy, as the next section delineates.

Media censorship during India's Emergency, 1975-1977

India's British rulers inflicted on journalists a range of repressive measures. History repeated itself in 1975-1977 when India's third Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi (1917-1984), promulgated in 1975 the nation's first-and-only 20th century "Emergency" press-censorship that disbanded democracy, suspended civil liberties and incarcerated opposition leaders in prison.

Reacting to opposition leaders' threat to incite a rebellion, Indira Gandhi asked the then obeisant President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to declare a state of emergency on 25 June 1975. In succeeding hours, authorities shut off electricity to stop the presses of major newspapers in New Delhi, India's capital city. In a surreptitious move, the police arrested opposition leaders, journalists critical of the ruling party, members of parliament, and political activists. The harsh action intimidated government officials. The sudden declaration of the Emergency surprised the Union Cabinet ministers who were not consulted about the Emergency. Like the common people, the Union Cabinet ministers learned about the Emergency through phone calls and media reports. The Emergency affected the common people with monumental restrictions on their free speech. Indira Gandhi abolished in July-August 1975 the Press Council, merged into one India's major news agencies, modified advertisement policy, withdrew housing facilities to journalists, and warned foreign correspondents of deportation if they failed to follow the rules of censorship (GoI CoP, 1977, p. appendix pages 1-6).

During the mid-1970s, the news media in India mainly comprised newspapers, magazines and government-owned broadcast media. As the world's largest democracy with over 1.42 billion people, India provides intriguing insights with which to research the role of social media in a democratic society. With their diverse audience, social media cater to India's complex combination of distinct doctrines, violent sectarianism, extreme views, gender and class inequality and a striking coexistence of the traditional and modern thought (Freedom Forum, 1999). India's free press and social media have helped sustain Indian democratic traditions, in sharp contrast to neighboring nations such as Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh, where military dictators have stifled the press and democratic values. The networked society is emerging as a reality in India. Social media are playing an important new role in transforming Indian democracy. With more than 881 million Internet users, India hosts the second largest Internet population in the world after China (at 1.08 trillion). In sharp contrast to Western decline in civic engagement, India's

media enjoy considerable influence in shaping the character of civic engagement. Social media enhance communication in India's multicultural society (Mohanty, 2012).

India's elected officials effectively use social media. Since his election victories in 2014 and 2019, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has featured in the group of global politicians active on social media. As of September 25, 2023, Modi was the most followed active politician on Twitter with 92 million followers. The U.S. President Joe Biden was second with 32.5 million followers. As of September 25, 2023, with more than 48 million Facebook fans, Modi ranked first on Facebook among world leaders followed by Biden, with 22 million followers of 11 million following @Joe Biden and 11 million following @Potus. Like world leaders in western democracies such as the US President Joe Biden, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, French President Emmanuel Macron and German chancellor Olaf Scholz, India's Prime Minister Modi used social media platforms as their political and governmental megaphones. Such developments are significant because not everyone in India is an Internet consumer, let alone a social media user. However, news coverage of social media messages from world leaders has perpetuated the megaphone effect of social media worldwide.

Dubbed as India's first "social media election," the 2014 Indian plebiscite involved significant online participation by citizens and politicians (Chao, 2014; Khursheed, 2014b; PTI, 2014). As Cadel observed, "the 814 million eligible voters" and "a record 66% turnout" showed that elections dominated the media agenda, while a significant segment of India's electorate used Facebook and Twitter to talk about politics. (Cadel, 2014). The 2019 elections furthered that trend. During the 2019 general elections in India, technology prompted India's political parties to rethink election campaigns. While most political parties have promised greater implementation of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Big Data and Block chain technologies to drive the growth of the economy, some have also assured punishment for those who misuse digital and social media. India is home to the mobile platform, WhatsApp's biggest market. Media analyst worldwide used the moniker of "WhatsApp election" to describe India's 2019 election campaign to describe the array of campaign messages, misinformation and rumors that were disseminated over WhatsApp.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (formerly twitter) have emerged as a primary source of news for a rising number of audiences in India, despite the low Internet penetration of 63%. With more than 881 million Internet users, India hosts the second largest Internet population in the world after China (at 1.08 trillion). With 881 million Internet subscribers and 1.52 billion mobile phone numbers, India is home to the world's second largest

mobile phone numbers after China with 1.61 billion Internet subscribers (TRAI, 2022; .CNNIC, 2022). Most of India's mainstream print media publish and maintain an active presence online, including social media. India's elite newspapers simultaneously publish color broadsheet editions in several cities and provide breaking news on their web sites for their domestic and international readers. In addition, India's diaspora of 16 million, cherish a deep interest in India.

Research methodology

The evolving media landscape, shaped by globalization, political economy, and populism, has dramatically altered the practice of journalism in India. This necessitates a fundamental reevaluation of journalism education to ensure future practitioners are adequately prepared.

Evolving roles and skills

The Indian media landscape has undergone significant changes in the past 15 years, with journalists' roles constantly expanding due to the proliferation of social media. Traditional gatekeeping models are being challenged as social media allows politicians to directly reach citizens. Journalists now increasingly rely on social media for story leads, news gathering, and networking, transforming their work routine. This shift demands new skills, particularly in filtering and authenticating online content to maintain credibility. Without adapting, mainstream media risks becoming irrelevant by merely repeating political statements from social media.

The challenge of misinformation and credibility

A critical challenge highlighted by research is the widespread dissemination of fake news and misinformation, especially in semi-urban and less literate populations. Journalists themselves observe a significant increase in misinformation and hate speech, particularly during election cycles. This underscores the urgent need for journalists to be trained to detect fake news and aggressively debunk false claims. Despite its foundational importance, the concept of "verification" is notably absent from some journalism curricula in India, and industry practices sometimes adopt a "gratuitous approach" to confirming information from sources. The broader consequence is a dwindling public trust in the media and a perception that Indian journalism suffers from a deep trust deficit. This makes it crucial for journalism education to address how to rebuild and maintain credibility.

Deficiencies in current journalism education

Research reveals significant shortcomings in current journalism education in India. A major issue is the lack of newsroom experience among many journalism academics, who are often appointed based on academic degrees rather than practical journalistic verification skills. This contributes to an outdated curriculum that fails to incorporate real-time changes in journalistic practice and praxis, often focusing on tips and techniques rather than a deeper theoretical understanding of reporting. Furthermore, the loss of credibility in the journalism profession and a perceived lack of role models in Indian journalism are cited as reasons for low admissions to journalism courses. These deficiencies mean that aspiring journalists may not be equipped with the critical skills and ethical frameworks necessary to navigate the complexities of the modern media landscape.

Findings & discussion

The findings underscore a critical juncture for journalism education in India. To remain relevant and effectively serve its democratic function, journalism schools must undertake a comprehensive transformation.

Reforming curriculum and pedagogy

Emphasize verification as a core principle: The curriculum must explicitly integrate and prioritize “verification” as the central core of journalistic practice, teaching students how to rigorously cross-check information, especially user-generated content (UGC). This involves moving beyond mere tips and techniques to a reflective news reporting curriculum.

Integrate advanced technology and fact-checking: Journalism schools should train aspiring journalists in the latest software and technologies for detecting and debunking fake news. This includes introducing courses exclusively on fact-checking and utilizing tools for data analytics and network analysis to uncover misinformation sources.

Promote collaborative and social journalism: Curricula should emphasize crowd-sourced, collaborative approaches to information gathering and verification, fostering an inclusive approach to news production. This means educating journalists to effectively engage with audiences as partners in news creation and consumption, moving towards a conversational/social

journalism model.

Fostering engagement and trust

Cultivate media literacy: Journalism educators should take an active role in promoting media literacy programs for the wider public, particularly in semi-urban and rural areas. This involves teaching citizens to critically evaluate information and identify misinformation, enhancing public resilience against propaganda.

Prioritize public interest over sensationalism: Journalism schools must instill a strong ethical foundation that prioritizes the public interest and diverse narratives over sensationalism and profit motives. This requires teaching students to counter the “breaking news syndrome” by valuing in-depth, accurate reporting over speed.

Rebuild trust and accountability: Encourage a culture of accountability among future journalists and within media organizations, advocating for clear editorial policies and consequences for misinformation. This includes fostering open dialogue between media professionals and the public, promoting transparency, and engaging in self-regulation.

Strengthening professional ethics and support

Equip educators with practical experience: An overhaul is needed not only in curricula but also in imparting necessary training to journalism educators, ensuring they possess practical newsroom and verification experience.

Address online harassment and self-censorship: Journalism education must prepare students for the realities of online harassment and hate speech, which can lead to self-censorship. This includes training on coping mechanisms and advocating for institutional support within news organizations for journalists facing digital abuse.

Reinforce watchdog role: Despite commercial pressures and political interference, journalism education must vigorously reinforce the traditional watchdog function of the media, encouraging fearless and honest reporting that holds power accountable.

Lessons learned: India's news media growth elevates journalism education

Adaptation is paramount: India's unique media growth demonstrates that traditional

media can persist, but only through continuous adaptation to technological shifts and evolving audience behaviors. Journalism education must therefore be dynamic and forward-looking, not static.

Ethics and verification are non-negotiable: The pervasive issue of misinformation and declining trust underscores that ethical practices, particularly rigorous verification, are foundational to credible journalism. These must be central to all journalistic training.

Beyond the newsroom: Modern journalism extends beyond traditional newsroom confines. Future journalists need skills in social media navigation, audience engagement, and understanding the political and economic forces shaping media narratives.

Holistic approach to education: Addressing challenges requires a holistic approach, encompassing not only curriculum reform but also the professional development of educators, fostering industry collaboration, and promoting broader media literacy within society.

Protecting practitioners: The rise of targeted online harassment highlights a critical need for journalism schools to prepare students for these threats and advocate for stronger institutional and societal support systems for journalists' safety and well-being.

Conclusion

Speaking truth to power in the world's largest democracy

Sparse competition from the fledgling Internet media and rising literacy have contributed to India flourishing print media. More people read a newspaper in India every day compared to people in the United States, Europe and other parts of the developed world, where newspaper circulation has declined. India is among a few nations in the world where newspapers still thrive and remain widely read and influential (Press Information Bureau, 2017). At the same time, India is on the cutting edge of media technology and is playing a major role in world politics. India provides the ideal media milieu to explore how citizens are making digital choices to connect the emerging new world with the traditions and history of an ancient civilization. India is a mixture of old media and digital news. Through print and digital platforms, India's media have served the world's largest democracy as an inexorable watchdog, as illustrated by India's journalism tradition, earlier in this study. Even as India seems to lack widespread Internet access for the under-privileged population, India's digitally savvy segment revels in the large-scale use of technology, connects to open-access Internet platforms, and engages in online interactions that generate ideas, mobilize opinion, and citizen action. And this is a nation of distinctly separated

social classes. The potential democratizing power of social media is immense.

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Journalism lessons of the AI age: Theorizing news agenda-setting and media agenda melding

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Abstract

Relevant to theoretical perspectives for the 7th World Journalism Education Congress theme, “Is it time to reboot journalism education?” this study examines the theoretical concepts of agenda setting and agenda melding in the context of the 21st-century age of Artificial Intelligence (AI), focusing specifically on their interplay within non-democratic regimes and their implications for journalism education. Historically, media have profoundly influenced public and policy agendas; however, the rise of digital and social media has introduced complex dynamics, challenging traditional unidirectional flows of information. In non-democratic contexts, regimes often control traditional media, yet social media platforms offer new avenues for information dissemination and audience agency, fostering alternative agendas and, at times, distrust in official narratives. This study explores how audiences actively “meld” information from diverse sources, including newspapers, television, and social media, to construct their personal worldviews. The findings highlight the evolving role of journalists as gatekeepers, the increased importance of media literacy, and the need for journalism education to adapt its curriculum to prepare future professionals for a fragmented, interactive, and often polarized media landscape. We conceptualize recommendations for adjusting teaching and practice to address these contemporary challenges and to encourage informed and engaged citizens.

Introduction

In a democratic society, the media serve a crucial function by transferring detailed information about issues to the audience, beyond just broad labels. This concept is central to agenda-setting theory, which posits that the mass media influence public opinion by determining which issues are considered important. Since its initial study in 1968, over 300 published studies worldwide have documented this influence, using various research designs including panel studies, time-series analyses, and controlled experiments. Agenda-

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setting operates on multiple levels: the first level involves transferring the salience of broad issue topics, while the second level focuses on the attributes or characteristics emphasized within those issues, influencing how people think about an issue. More recently, the third level of agenda-setting, known as the Network Agenda Setting (NAS) model, explores how media connect various issues and attributes, creating a holistic picture of reality in the audience's mind.

However, the advent of the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has profoundly reshaped this dynamic. The media ecosystem has undergone a “180-degree turn” with social media offering greater access to multimedia information in an interactive environment. This shift challenges the traditional, monolithic capacity of mass media to exclusively define public perception, given the proliferation of alternative sources that allow citizens to share information without relying solely on professional journalists. This new reality has given rise to the concept of agenda melding, which recognizes that audiences are not passive recipients but actively combine agendas from diverse sources, including traditional media, social media, and interpersonal interactions, to construct their individualized worldviews. Agenda melding emphasizes the audience's agency, shifting the focus from media *doing things to us* to *what audiences obtain from media use*.

Relevant to the 7th World Journalism Education Congress theme, “*Is it time to reboot journalism education?*”, this study examines the theoretical concepts of agenda-setting and agenda melding in the context of the 21st century age of AI, focusing specifically on their interplay within non-democratic regimes and their implications for journalism education.

Historically, media have profoundly influenced public and policy agendas; however, the rise of digital and social media has introduced complex dynamics, challenging traditional unidirectional flows of information. In non-democratic contexts, regimes often control traditional media, yet social media platforms offer new avenues for information dissemination and audience agency, fostering alternative agendas and, at times, distrust in official narratives.

This study explores how audiences actively “meld” information from diverse sources, including newspapers, television, and social media, to construct their personal

worldviews. The findings highlight the evolving role of journalists as gatekeepers, the increased importance of media literacy, and the need for journalism education to adapt its curriculum to prepare future professionals for a fragmented, interactive, and often polarized media landscape. We conceptualize recommendations for adjusting teaching and practice to address these contemporary challenges and to encourage informed and engaged citizens. This paper will explore these theoretical concepts within the unique context of non-democratic regimes. It will analyze how traditional media, often controlled by such regimes, interact with the burgeoning landscape of social media, and how these dynamics shape both news and audience agendas. Furthermore, it will highlight the critical implications of these evolving media dynamics for journalism education, proposing necessary adjustments to prepare future journalists for this complex environment.

Literature review

Media influence in non-democratic regimes

In non-democratic regimes, the relationship between media and audience agendas takes on distinct characteristics, often influenced by state control and censorship. Traditionally, mass media in such contexts are frequently under the direct control of the government, serving as instruments to promote state policies and values. This vertical, top-down communication strategy aims to “orchestrate” public opinion and establish institutional agendas. In China, for instance, mainstream news media functions as the government's mouthpiece, exhibiting a strong ideological bias and playing a role in guiding public opinion.

However, the rise of digital and social media has complicated this control. Social media platforms, characterized by their horizontal nature, enable individuals to bypass traditional gatekeepers and access a “profusion of other media as well as the opinions of other people.” This has led to an expanded concept of agenda-setting, where social media users can generate significant attention toward alternative themes traditionally ignored or downplayed by state-controlled media and institutions. The instantaneous access to

information and opinions through handheld devices has a significant impact on shaping attitudes and values, even in controlled environments.

This dynamic creates a tension: while non-democratic regimes strive to maintain a unified media front, the decentralized nature of social media provides platforms for dissenting voices and the emergence of “critical citizens.” For example, in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, studies observed that social media content from political leaders could bypass traditional media and directly influence public agendas. While not a non-democratic regime, this illustrates the direct line of communication that social media offers, which can be leveraged by political actors, including those in power in non-democratic settings.

A critical outcome of this environment is the potential for increased distrust in traditional, state controlled media and institutions. When citizens perceive that official pronouncements are merely recorded and reported without critical examination, or that traditional media are “rooted in novelty rather than precision,” they may seek alternative sources. This distrust can be further exacerbated by the proliferation of “fake news,” disinformation, and misinformation circulating in the public arena. Studies in European universities show that students, representing millennial media users, often treat social media as more credible and trustworthy news sources than traditional mass media, actively seeking out and participating in thematic social media discussions, especially around conspiratorial content. This indicates an agenda melding effect where individuals validate pre-existing beliefs within like-minded online communities. The “powerful West” narrative regarding international media influence also warrants reconsideration in the age of AI. Historically, media imperialism theory posited a unilateral influence of Western media on non-western cultures and media systems. However, recent research suggests that while intermedia agenda-setting does occur in the international sphere, there is often no single dominant agenda. Instead, intermedia convergence of issue agendas unfolds in a complexly intertwined network of international associations, challenging outdated narratives of Western dominance. For example, a study examining the influence among elite newspapers in Egypt, the UK, and the US found no consistently dominant agenda. This implies that while Western media may still be widely consumed, their agenda-setting power over non-

Western media is more nuanced and dependent on issue characteristics and local contexts. Furthermore, the rise of citizen journalism and peer production on platforms like Wikipedia and YouTube introduces a new layer of complexity. These platforms, where individuals actively contribute to news content, can create an “agenda loop” phenomenon. This loop suggests that effective agenda-setting can stimulate individuals' news production behaviors, which, in turn, influences the agendas of other media outlets, including mainstream media. This challenges the traditional elite-to-non-elite media flow, demonstrating that even within authoritarian systems like China, citizen journalism practices can subtly predict and influence mainstream media agendas, albeit often reinforcing official narratives or limited to specific types of events. However, the level of influence can vary, with mainstream media still holding significant predictive ability, especially in authoritarian contexts. The phenomenon of selective exposure and political polarization is also amplified in the age of AI, particularly in online environments. Individuals tend to seek out and engage with information that confirms their existing beliefs, leading to the creation of “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles.” This can result in fragmented and polarized agendas, where audiences become isolated in alternative perspectives, further diluting the singular influence of traditional media. This is a concern in democratic and non-democratic contexts, as it can hinder civic discourse and critical thinking.

This study focused on the changes in the media landscape since the original 1968 agenda-setting study and delineate the difference between the concepts of agenda setting and agenda melding, as delineated in the 2019 book, *Agenda melding: News, social media, audiences, and civic community*. This study addressed the implications of agenda setting and agenda melding for recent elections by reexamining the first and second levels of agenda setting and the contribution of need for orientation in our evolving media environment. This study analyzed how audiences “meld” agendas from various media sources with their own personal preferences to form a coherent picture of society. The results of this research support the agenda melding theory that predicts differences in the way various individuals mix media messages to form, or join, agenda communities.

From media agenda setting to agenda melding theory

Max McCombs and Don Shaw's seminal agenda setting study analyzed the 1968 presidential elections when traditional media, constituting newspapers and network television, dominated our attention. Agenda setting theory conceptualized that the news media have been enormously powerful at telling people what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) Since 1968, when the first agenda-setting study was conducted in Chapel Hill, NC, so many different sources of media content have emerged with a myriad of opportunities to select from these sources, making selective exposure more pertinent than ever before. During the 1968 presidential election, Shaw & McCombs collected survey data from a random group of Chapel Hill residents to demonstrate that audiences often judge the importance of a news item based on how frequently and prominently the media covers it, thus indicating the degree to which the media shape public opinion. McCombs & Shaw's seminal *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1972) article on the agenda-setting function of mass media is arguably the most-cited article in the field of mass communication research. Shaw extended the concept of agenda setting from its theoretical underpinnings to conceptualize that audiences not only mix media but also meld media agendas. In other words, audiences engage in agenda melding, a process that enables audiences to select and mix media objects and attributes to fit their personal visions of public and private perspectives. In the 50-year history of agenda-setting research, the agenda melding theory is more relevant today than ever, given the increased complexity of the media landscape and the ability of people to choose very different patterns of media consumption.

An innovative research method

The Agenda melding theoretical framework offers a comprehensive method and a step-by-step guide for media professionals and social scientists alike to precisely measure the effects of various types of media on audiences while also assessing the effect of audiences' biases, opinions and personal preferences on their receptiveness of media messages. Utilizing this method, journalists can identify agenda influence, broadly construed. For instance, the agenda melding method can be used to measure the impact of

false information dissemination efforts—one of the biggest, if not *the* biggest, threat to journalism today—on various audiences and identify the best avenues through which truth campaigns would have the biggest effect to neutralize the disinformation. The agenda melding model can be used to measure the effect that non-democratic regimes have on news and audience agendas. In the continuing evolution of agenda setting, agenda melding theory is a major and highly original contribution because it explicates the concept of the media agenda in civic life. The agenda melding perspective examines the merger of the perceived media agenda, which has been the traditional primary focus of agenda setting, with the agendas of the social media selected by individuals and the personal experiences and opinions of those individuals.

Scholarly contribution

The original agenda melding article published in the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* (Shaw, McCombs, Weaver, & Hamm, 1999) conceptualized how the concepts and creative framework underpinning the argument of “agenda melding” were important and forward-thinking in an early era of new technology. Emerging digital and social media platforms have given us the ability to link together in large and small groups. However, we become far more than just community members. We absorb and embrace communications within that community. We meld with the agenda(s) presented and valued by the community or organization. In addition to a comprehensive theoretical discussion of the concept, this theoretical study reports a rich variety of empirical data exploring this process from the 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 U.S. presidential elections. The timely publication of this data-rich work after the 2020 election uses the 2008, 2012 2016, and 2020 elections to illuminate how strangers in the global village meld their own beliefs with media messages. Moreover, research findings about media agenda setting and agenda melding in societies outside of the United States are also relevant.

This theoretical study’s practical applications and theoretical contributions make it a resource germane to both practitioners, especially those in public relations, and scholars familiar with agenda setting around the world. Taken together, this material provides

detailed guidance to scholars who wish to research this new frontier. This study explicates the relevance of the need for orientation theoretical concept and how its relevance to news media's agenda setting and agenda melding roles in the modern-day media environment. Dave Weaver argued that if we 1) have high interest in a topic along with 2) low information about that topic, then we have a high need for orientation. He has theorized how this need for orientation might work via both traditional/vertical media and social/horizontal media to account for agenda melding. This important concept drives audience use of media (Weaver, 1980). Weaver's research demonstrates that audiences are not passive users of media but actively engage in finding, and mixing, information into more personal pictures of public life (Weaver, 1980).

This research study examines the agenda-setting function of the news media – how news coverage influences the public's perceptions of issues and newsmakers. With research concepts in media effects related to political communication, this paper examines the agenda-setting function of the news media, including how the news media influence our perceptions of the issues of the day. Media coverage sets the issue agenda for the public. He effectively expanded agenda-setting research into the international news, including how news coverage affects perceptions of countries. Agenda melding theory draws upon the solid foundation of established theories such as agenda setting, cognitive dissonance, spiral of silence, and uses and gratifications. Since the inception of agenda-setting theory 50 years ago, a lot has changed in the media landscape. Thousands of news media outlets, varying by medium and ideology extremity, have emerged in the 21st century digital media ecosystem. With this diversity in news media comes diversity in news agendas, this paper argues that this media explosion has resulted in consumer choice. Consumers choose what media to consume according to their identities and communities they identify with. Current agenda-setting theory does not account for this type of consumer choice, and agenda melding theory is a useful continuation of the media agenda setting research stream. The field of mass communication research, particularly within the agenda-setting theory framework, has evolved significantly since its foundational studies in the late 1960s. This evolution reflects both conceptual refinements and the changing media landscape.

Research methodology

Core agenda-setting hypothesis and its robustness

The foundational premise of agenda setting is that the news media influence the salience of issues in the public mind. This effect has been extensively documented in over 300 published studies world-wide, employing diverse research designs including panel studies, time-series analyses, and controlled laboratory experiments, demonstrating its consistent influence. Early research, such as the Chapel Hill study during the 1968 U.S. presidential election, highlighted a strong correlation between the media's emphasis on issues and the public's perception of issue importance.

Levels of agenda-setting

First-Level Agenda-Setting (Issue Salience)

This traditional level focuses on how the media tell us “what to think about,” influencing the perceived importance of issues. For example, studies have shown that if crime is a prominent topic in the news, the public is more likely to identify crime as an important problem. However, the causal mechanisms for this effect are complex and involve psychological processes like the accessibility of cognitive constructs in memory.

Second-Level Agenda-Setting (Attribute Salience or Framing)

This advanced level examines how the media tell us “how to think about” issues, candidates, or objects by emphasizing certain attributes. This involves the media's selection and prominence of specific characteristics or frames. For instance, the framing of political events can be linked to the affective dimension of politics. Studies have explored attribute agenda-setting in various contexts, including public opinion on political candidates and complex issues like trade agreements.

Intermedia Agenda-Setting

This concept refers to the influence of one news medium on the agenda of another news medium. Research indicates a strong international intermedia link, where media agendas from some countries significantly influence, or are influenced by, media agendas in other countries. For example, several media studies have concluded that the mainstream media platforms influence news agenda, and vice-versa, demonstrating an “agenda loop.” This phenomenon has been observed between traditional media and newer platforms like blogs and social media, suggesting a “news source cycle” where content flows back and forth.

Agenda melding hypothesis

This theory extends agenda-setting by proposing that individuals seek out media and groups that reflect their existing beliefs or desired group affiliations, forming their personal agendas by melding with the agendas of these communities. It posits that people, rather than mass media, may be the dominant media of connection for joining groups. This is particularly relevant in the age of AI, where social media platforms function as “news” gatekeepers and information providers, and individuals may trust social media community’s more than traditional mass media. Studies suggest that participation in agenda melding, including discussing news in online and offline groups, is associated with increased news media literacy levels across various dimensions like mindfulness and knowledge of media effects.

Trust and credibility in media effects

Importance of trust: Social trust in the communicator is crucial for successful policy oriented risk communication. When public trust is low, it can lead to skepticism and a greater reliance on alternative information sources.

Defining credibility: News quality is often associated with credibility, built on professional quality. Source credibility is conceptualized as having components like

expertise and trustworthiness. However, empirically, it's been challenging to establish distinct sub-dimensions of media trust, leading some to suggest treating it as a single-factor measure.

Challenges to trust: The rise of misinformation and satire, particularly on social media, adds “noise” to the news environment and challenges the public's ability to discern information. Studies show a significant portion of students trust social media more or equally as much as mainstream media, treating social media as news sources. This suggests a need for increased news media literacy to critically assess information from diverse digital outlets.

Media effects on political attitudes and behavior

Beyond issue salience: Agenda-setting effects extend beyond merely affecting issue importance to influencing public perceptions of risk, policy expectations, political trust, and participation. For instance, media exposure can shape public perception of risk and policy makers' perception of public opinion.

Entertainment media effects: Research suggests that distinctions between entertainment and information sources may be less important than previously thought in shaping political attitudes. Television crime dramas, for example, can increase the political salience of crime by affecting the psychological accessibility of cognitive constructs, demonstrating agenda setting and priming effects like traditional news media. Political satire can also have a significant agenda-setting impact on public, media, and political agendas by increasing knowledge acquisition and perceived understanding of topics.

Behavioral outcomes: Agenda-setting theory's effectiveness extends to the behavioral level, influencing citizen journalism, political participation, and even protest behavior. Studies have demonstrated that increased media coverage of specific issues can predict user engagement in news production activities.

Methodological advancements and limitations: Agenda-setting research has moved beyond simple correlational techniques to advanced statistics like structural equation

modeling (SEM) and time-series analyses and incorporates qualitative methods. However, many studies still face limitations, such as the inability to definitively determine causal relationships with cross-sectional data or control for all confounding variables. The reliance on self-reported data versus direct behavioral evidence from social media also presents a methodological challenge. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal datasets, experimental designs, and big data analytics to further untangle causal influences and explore the complex interplay of agenda setters in the evolving media ecosystem.

This comprehensive view highlights the multifaceted nature of media influence on public opinion and behavior, extending beyond traditional notions to encompass a dynamic interplay across various media platforms and audience engagement levels.

Relevance to journalism education

The evolving media landscape presents significant challenges and opportunities for journalism education. The traditional role of journalists as primary gatekeepers is being reconfigured as news can break directly on social media and citizens can act as news producers. This necessitates a fundamental shift in pedagogical approaches.

Understanding a hybrid media environment: Journalism students must grasp that they operate within a complex “hybrid media environment” where news production is 24/7, citizen journalism is on the rise, and news breaks interchangeably across mainstream and social media. They need to understand the intricate interplay and influence dynamics between various media types—newspapers, television, wire services, online news sites, social media (Facebook, Twitter), and blogs.

Adapting sourcing strategies: Journalists increasingly use social media as a primary source of information, tips, quotes, data, and background information. Journalism programs must teach effective and ethical strategies for sourcing from social media, discerning credible information from “fake news” and misinformation, especially when public trust in traditional media is waning.

Fostering critical thinking and media literacy: In an environment saturated with unchecked and often inaccurate information, critical assessment skills are paramount. Journalism education must equip students to analyze media messages, understand media industries, effects, and content, and recognize the impact of framing and agenda-setting on public perception. This includes understanding how partisan media can influence agendas and contribute to polarization.

Embracing audience engagement and agenda melding: The rise of agenda melding means that audiences are actively constructing their own worldviews. Journalism education needs to foster an understanding of this active audience and teach strategies for engaging with diverse communities, building trust, and soliciting feedback, moving beyond one-way communication. This includes understanding how people form “agenda communities” based on shared values and interests.

Navigating political influence and disinformation: Students must learn how political actors, including those in non-democratic regimes, leverage social media to set agendas and bypass traditional media. They need to be aware of how news can be framed to support political agendas and how to critically evaluate such influences, especially when journalism itself is under attack.

Global and cross-cultural awareness: Given the interconnectedness of international news flows and intermedia agenda-setting, journalism education should incorporate a global perspective, understanding how different media systems and cultural contexts influence news production and consumption.

Six recommendations for journalism education

1. Integrate social media analytics and data literacy: Journalism curricula should incorporate robust training in social media analytics and big data analysis. This will enable future journalists to understand audience engagement, identify emerging issues, and track the spread of information and misinformation across diverse platforms.

2. *Emphasize critical media literacy and verification:* Beyond traditional fact-checking, students need to develop advanced critical thinking skills to evaluate sources across the digital spectrum, including user-generated content, blogs, and partisan news sites. This includes understanding the psychological processes of information processing and how biases (e.g., selective exposure) influence perception.

3. *Foster a “community-oriented” approach:* Teaching should emphasize the importance of community engagement and building trust with audiences. This involves understanding audience needs, responding interactively, and recognizing the role of peer networks in agenda melding.

4. *Promote ethical sourcing and reporting in a hybrid environment:* As journalists increasingly rely on social media for sourcing, ethical guidelines for verifying user-generated content, respecting privacy, and avoiding manipulation by political actors or disinformation campaigns are crucial.

5. *Develop skills in “agenda-building” and “agenda-loop” dynamics:* Students need to understand not only how media set public agendas but also how external sources (including political elites, NGOs, and citizen journalists) actively influence the media's agenda. This “agenda-building” process, especially the “agenda loop” where citizen content influences mainstream media, requires new analytical tools and strategies for engagement.

6. *Cultivate resilience and adaptability:* The media landscape is constantly evolving. Journalism education must instill a mindset of continuous learning, adaptability, and critical reflection on journalistic norms and practices in the face of technological and societal changes.

Findings & discussion

Curriculum shift

Move beyond a sole focus on traditional news production to include modules on digital storytelling, audience analytics, community engagement, and combating disinformation.

Interdisciplinary approaches

Encourage collaboration with departments such as computer science, political science, and sociology to provide a holistic understanding of media effects and digital ecosystems.

Practical training

Offer hands-on experience with social media management, content creation for diverse platforms, and real-time news verification in simulated or actual newsroom environments.

Ethical frameworks for the age of AI

Redefine journalistic ethics in the context of new media, addressing issues of transparency, objectivity, and accountability when dealing with fragmented and polarized audiences.

Lessons learned: Agenda-setting and news agenda melding in communities

The evolution from traditional media agenda-setting to the concept of news agenda melding offers profound insights into how individuals construct their understanding of the world and form “personal communities” in the age of AI.

From passive consumption to active construction: The core lesson is the shift from a passive audience, primarily influenced by a centralized media agenda, to an active, agentic audience. Individuals now consciously or subconsciously “meld” information from a myriad of sources—newspapers, television, social media feeds, blogs, and interpersonal discussions—to create a personalized “picture of the world.” This means that how we perceive important issues is no longer solely dictated by a few powerful media outlets, but is a composite, personally tailored view.

The power of “horizontal” connections: Agenda melding highlights the significant influence of “horizontal media” – social media and niche communities – where individuals with shared interests or beliefs connect. These online groups facilitate the sharing and

reinforcement of specific agendas, often leading to the formation of “agenda communities” based on common values and opinions. This contrasts with the “vertical” flow from traditional mass media and offers individuals a space to validate pre-existing views and explore alternative narratives.

Distrust fuels alternative agendas: A crucial insight, particularly relevant in non-democratic or polarized contexts, is that distrust in traditional, official sources can drive individuals towards these horizontal, personal communities. When people perceive mainstream media or government as untrustworthy or biased, they are more likely to seek “news” and validation from like-minded peers within their chosen online groups. This process can deepen adherence to specific, sometimes conspiratorial, perceptions, underscoring the powerful role of trust in information consumption.

Interconnectedness and feedback loops: While individuals create personal communities, these are not entirely isolated. Agenda melding acknowledges the continuous interaction between vertical and horizontal media, and even the “agenda loop” where content generated by citizen journalists within personal communities can influence mainstream media agendas. This signifies a dynamic, reciprocal influence where information flows in multiple directions, continuously shaping and reshaping our collective and personal understandings of reality.

Conclusion

News agenda-setting and media agenda melding in the AI age

The ongoing media developments and news events worldwide highlight the power of news agenda setting theory and related concepts such as *agenda melding*. Relevant to theoretical perspectives for the 7th World Journalism Education Congress theme, *Is it time to reboot journalism education?*, this theoretical study critically examined media agenda setting concepts and agenda melding theory to enhance our conceptual understanding of how media set agendas and audiences seek agendas by curating their own media networks to represent the places they live, work and play within networked personal communities.

This study theorized how audiences meld messages of newspapers, television, and social media in our 21st century digital age.

In essence, media agenda-setting and news agenda melding teach us that in the age of AI, our individual and communal understandings of the world are increasingly self-curated, influenced by a complex web of traditional and social media, and shaped by our inherent need to connect with others who share our perspectives. This active process of “melding” profoundly impacts what we deem important and how we interpret the vast amount of information available, giving rise to diverse and often fragmented personal communities.

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Ethical challenges in contemporary journalism pedagogy: Assessing the resonance of curriculum in training ethical journalists

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Abstract

An assumption that can be made is that ethical considerations and regulations typically chase after innovations. This catch-up between innovation and ethical frameworks for them to function in is also featured in the media; for instance, while the first mass media was introduced in the 1600s, it was not until the 1920s that the first ever set of media ethics codes was introduced. There are several implications of this, not just for media practice but also for the pedagogy that contributes towards the skilling and tooling of professionals in the practice. There is a gap between theory and practice in media. The dynamism of the media ecosystem and the technologies that have transformed the industry lends some credence to the assumption that there is a high likelihood that the gap in ethics does not just exist in the industry but also in town-and-gown conversations. It is the extent to which this gap exists (or not) in the media and journalism curriculum of Nigerian universities, the implications of this for professional practice, and recommendations for the present and future of media and journalism practice that this study intends to explore. Through the multiple-case study method, this study investigates the relationship between media and journalism schools in Nigeria's conceptualisation and implementation of ethics curricula and the perceived extent to which they are preparing to address pressing praxis problems in the media industry, especially given the prevailing digitalization of the operating environment and rise of technologies like artificial intelligence. It adopted a comprehensive data collection strategy, including document analysis of course materials from selected Nigerian media and journalism schools, and in-depth interviews with media ethics professors and senior to executive-level media professionals from newspapers and broadcasting organizations in Lagos, Nigeria. Data analysis revealed three key themes: ethics curricula inefficiencies exposed by contemporary operating environment, systemic maladaptiveness as obstacle to pedagogical adaptability, and collaboration approach to develop responsive pedagogy. In response to these identified themes, the study recommends a holistic and adaptive approach to media ethics teaching, informed by contributions by the industry, with a good example being the use of blended, case-based learning reflective of the moral uncertainty and the gravitas that contemporary journalists face rather than just standardized teaching.

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Keywords: *contemporary ethical challenges; curriculum adaptability; media and journalism, pedagogy*

Introduction

Although journalism has a long, rich history of professional practice in what is now modern-day Nigeria, its practice was initiated before the founding of the training institutions for professionals. The founding fathers of Nigerian journalism, including but not limited to Reverends Henry Townsend and Hope Waddell, Robert Campbell, Ernest Ikoli, Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Obafemi Awolowo, likely acquired the practice as a craft from individuals educated in foreign journalism institutions (Okunna & Omenugha 2012). The establishment of Jackson College of Journalism, now the Department of Mass Communication at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1961 clearly illustrates this point as it was the first journalism training institution in Nigeria, quickly followed by the Department of Mass Communication at the University of Lagos, a trend that Akinfeleye (2011) attributes to journalism not being considered to be a profession at the time. However, journalism in Nigeria can be traced back to 1859 when Reverend Townsend founded the inaugural newspaper *Iwe Irohin* (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012; Sunday, 2008). This development indicates that the practice of journalism in Nigeria preceded journalism training, with the general expectations at the time not involving having prescribed journalistic education beyond the ability to write well and report happenings around (Badiora & Sanusi, 2024). Patrick Campbell, as cited in Agbese (2008, p.16), captured the overall operating philosophy of journalism practice at that time, when he stated that journalism does not necessarily require “degrees, diplomas, or specialized knowledge of any kind”, a position that more contemporary arguments on the status of journalism as a profession still continues to suffer considerably from (see Ibietan, 2025) and Ojo (2025), for example). This prior devaluation of well-structured journalism pedagogy to journalism in Nigeria, fortunately, has lost its appeal and practicality, especially when one considers

the plethora of programs designed to provide professional training to prospective media and journalism professionals. This resonates with the opinion of Badiora and Sanusi (2024) who posits that education contributes significantly to engendering professionalism in journalism practice, and that achieving this at global best practice standards requires a high level of (media and journalism) literacy.

Since 1961, journalism in Nigeria has evolved as an academic field, with numerous universities now offering diverse programs in journalism, mass communication, media and communication studies, etc., all of which provide formal educational training in journalism within the broader field of mass communication (Ojomo, 2015; Odunlami, 2014). The imperative of this formalized training, as against what applied in the past, has been made even more pertinent with the rise of media technologies that have democratized access and capacity for producing and disseminating information content to the public (Ess, 2019). Chandler (2012) concurs, stating that the digital revolution has empowered almost anyone to be able to publish news, usually via the Internet or other digital platforms, which has contributed both net positives and negatives, with the negatives almost outweighing the positives, particularly with the mis/disinformation environment and the ethical conundrums that this trend has created, with ill-effects ranging from affective polarization, poor sociocultural and political socialization, negative stereotyping and discrimination, amongst others. In addition, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithm-driven content distribution makes the ethical landscape even more difficult. AI tools can make things run more smoothly, but they also make it harder to be open and accountable, and they may introduce biases into the production and distribution of news (Díaz Noci et al., 2024). Using algorithms can unintentionally create echo chambers, which means people do not see a wide range of viewpoints and the principle of balanced reporting is weakened. These puts the position of Ojomo (2015), who compared the journalist to the physician, in clearer perspective, where he points out that the journalist has a therapeutic function in society, which in turn creates a strong moral imperative for journalists to be equipped with training that is commensurate to the social burden their profession carries.

A general expectation of formalized media and journalism training is that the trained journalism professional is familiar with the mores and norms that behooves their profession. While the basic principles of journalistic mores remain the same: accuracy, independence, and impartiality, objectivity, etc., the environment in which these influence how information is gathered, processed and disseminated continues to evolve, rather rapidly, largely because of media technologies, necessitating the imperative for formal journalistic pedagogy to fully appreciate this dynamism and reflect it in the curriculum (Riordan, 2014). The argument, which partly informs the premise of this study, is that journalism education is very important for tooling the prospective journalist for responsible practice, in service to the profession, and the society in general. However, there is the justified concern that present constitution of journalism pedagogy, especially where technology penetration is still evolving, as is the case in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Nigeria, is one where the curricula and the overall learning experience is inadequate, and more specifically, journalism schools have not met acceptable standards in teaching students about digital media ethics, data privacy, and the moral issues that come up with new technologies (Zviyita & Mare, 2024). Moreover, journalism students often report feeling ill-prepared to handle real-world ethical dilemmas, indicating a disconnect between academic training and professional practice. It is in respect to these arguments that this study looks to investigate the state of journalism ethics curriculum to determine its adequacy in preparing journalists for contemporary ethical challenges.

Statement of the problem

An assumption that can be reached from the foregoing is that ethical considerations and regulations typically chase after innovations, which the literature tends to agree with. For instance, McCausland (2023) cites the case of smartphones and tablets and the fact that it has taken a long time since their introduction for practicable solutions to be proffered for the moral and ethical issues they have caused and are still causing. Wadhwa (2020) also concurs, stating that there are considerable regulatory (and implicitly, ethical) gaps because laws (which he describes as 'codified ethics') usually run after innovations that

have impacted society. This catch-up between innovation and moral frameworks for them to function is also featured in the media; for instance, while the first mass media was introduced in the 1600s (Abu, 2021), it was not until the 1920s that the first ever set of media ethics codes was introduced (Ward, 2009). This was also the case in Nigeria, where it took over a century from when *Iwe Irohin* was first published in 1859 to when the first-ever code of journalism ethics was adopted in 1998 (Olagoke et al., 2021; Akoje & Rahim, 2014).

There are several implications of this, not just for media practice but also for the pedagogy that contributes towards the skilling and tooling of professionals in the practice. Ogwezzy-Ndisika & Tommy (2024) imply a gap between theory and practice in media, a point that Dörr and Hollnbuchner (2016) agree with, stretching it to include ethical deliberations. According to the latter, the dynamism of the media ecosystem and the technologies that have transformed the industry lends some credence to the assumption that there is a high likelihood that the gap in ethics does not just exist in the industry but also town-and-gown conversations. Díaz-Campo & Segado-Boj (2015) reinforce this point, averring that one major challenge facing the journalism (and, by extension, the media) profession is that there is a lacuna in the pedagogy for training future media professionals that will prepare them adequately for ethical practice in a technology-driven industry. Hansen et al. (2017) and Trattner et al. (2021) raise the point of what is termed algorithmic journalism, the growing influence of AI, and the implications of this for ethical journalism practice and learning.

It is the extent to which this gap exists (or not) in the media and journalism curriculum of Nigerian universities, the implications of this for professional practice, and recommendations for the present and future of media and journalism practice that this study intends to explore, guided by the research question: How do Nigerian media and journalism schools manage the gap in contemporary ethical challenges and their curriculum design and implementation?

Literature review

Contemporary journalism

Modern journalism is going through a big change because of new technologies, changing audience habits, and creating ethical concerns (Agu, 2011; Amadi, 2011). One can argue that the evolution of the media landscape provides strong validation for the position of technological determinists, that not only has the digital age changed how people consume and engage with media, but it has also forced a reinvention of the way journalists work by bringing in new tools like automation and artificial intelligence (AI) in the processing and disseminating of information (Duru & Agbasimelo, 2024; Hauer, 2017). AI, for instance, presents a one-coin-two-faces problem: for instance, it is currently being widely used in journalism for a broad range of tasks, from writing articles to analyzing data. Although this makes things more efficient, but it also raises concerns about the "commoditization" of news and the possibility of losing the "human touch" in storytelling (Gutiérrez-Caneda et al., 2024). A systematic review shows that AI use in journalism has grown exponentially since 2015, especially for creating content and analyzing data, but not without consequence. Adding digital technologies to journalism has raised more ethical questions, like the need for openness and responsibility, as well as the possibility of bias in algorithmic decision-making (Abass & Khan, 2023). Diakopoulos (2019) stresses how important it is for AI to be open about its role in journalism. He says that AI should be open about its role in making content to keep the public's trust. Also, the possibility of AI reinforcing existing social biases means that it needs to be closely watched and have ethical oversight (Noble, 2018). However, even though this should mean that journalists need to review their rules to address the associated ethical issues (Sonni et al., 2024), there are arguably only a few media organizations that have developed a robust framework to ensure ethical use (Olanipekun, 2025; Voinea, 2023).

AI's disruption builds on the impact of social media; the latter being responsible for creating a new genre of journalists – citizen journalists (Benyamin, 2025; Simons, 2016). Citizen journalism; defined severally as the engagement in news reporting by average or untrained members of the general public, producing content that is usually on-the-spot,

user-generated, unfiltered, and uncensored (Desmond & Samuel, 2020; Apuke, 2016; Anorue et al., 2013); has served to satisfy the needs of an information market that wants news fresh and on-the-go. Anorue et al (2013) cited the prediction of Adelabu (2008) who believed that citizen journalism had the potential of becoming mainstream because in response to more people seeking information from the internet and other multimedia technologies rather than traditional media, more persons will undertake the production of their own news. The rising ubiquity of social networking sites (an extension of the Internet technologies) has significantly altered information consumption patterns, which have in turn, altered key considerations for quality control, e.g. the right kinds of people preparing information in as responsible a manner as possible. For example, the ‘first-to-break’ syndrome’s influence on information dissemination has worsened with social media, and when combined with the desire for virality of content – which is due to the affordances of social media and the often financial benefits that accrue from it – the outcome is the current scenario where traditional news values of accuracy, balance and fairness are constantly being sacrificed on the altar of speed (Igben & Acchugbue, 2024; Pelau et al., 2023). Unfortunately, this is with most citizen journalists who do not have the knowledge of ethics, or understand the imperative for them, especially for the credibility of the news and the broader implications for the society, and worse yet, increasingly, ‘trained’ journalists are fast falling into this category, even though they know the potential consequences (Craig, 2021).

Another factor that contemporary journalism has to deal with is the creation of fragmented audiences, where people get news from a variety of sources and choose what they want to read based on their interests. Selective exposure is a term for this, and it can lead to epistemic bubbles and/or echo chambers that silence or limit exposure to different points of view and make society more divided (Abdelzaher et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2018). The International Journalism Handbook says that audience fragmentation makes it harder for journalists and democratic institutions to do their jobs by creating ideological enclaves and making it harder to get people's attention (Zamith, 2021). In addition, the large number of media options has made competition between news outlets even stronger, forcing them to

focus on specific topics and target specific groups of people. This specialization may make it harder for people to get a wide range of news from generalist outlets, which could limit their access to a wide range of information (Lee, 2019).

In discussing about how technology has shifted paradigms in journalism practice, it will be remiss to overlook its impact on gatekeeping, which is a fundamental ethics quality control mechanism in the information production process (Wallace, 2018). Traditional newsrooms have almost totally disappeared, and the contemporary journalist within a structured news organization often find themselves being a generalist rather than a specialist, i.e. being able to produce different forms of media content, rather than when they were only responsible either just writing the news copy, or submitting photos, etc. But more importantly, it is that the role of the editor, beat, general or managing, has also evolved significantly, but has assumed even greater significance and criticality, if the value of verity of information to social development (Rusdi & Rusdi, 2020). Bro and Wallberg (2014) opine that with diverse information sources, and the increasing laxity in quality control in information gathering – which may not be unrelated to the rise in unqualified persons producing and propagating information content – the role of the gatekeeper is now more crucial to ensure that what people consume is accurate, balanced and delivered with a high sense of social responsibility.

There is the view that professionals at this level still deal with the traditional burdens of gatekeepers: determining which news value should take precedence per time, while also managing the overarching internal and external influences that look to decide which information is produced. For instance, Pérez-Latre (2014) talks about a new media ecosystem where there is a sense that technology has assumed some of these gatekeeping functions, with trends like algorithmic gatekeeping and AI being used to filter out news content. Ojo (2018) bring up the influence of political parallelism, especially within the context of Nigeria (and arguably other media and politics environments that mirror her), where government and business influences still hold considerable sway over editorial decisions. Navigating these, coupled with this necessity of reinventing the newsroom to suit the demands of a bidirectional, convergence-driven approach to news processing, means

that the expectations of gatekeeping in contemporary journalism differs significantly from conventional gatekeeping (Gutiérrez-Caneda et al., 2024). This informs Wallace's (2018) proposed digital gatekeeping model, which identifies that institutional gatekeepers, i.e. editors in media organizations, share their role with three other gatekeeping agents: individual amateurs (citizen journalists), journalists, and algorithms, in a decentralized process, which greatly reduces their heretofore powers to determine news content, while not absolving them of the moral burden to ensure news values are adhered to.

The changing media landscape thus calls for a new look at journalism education that ensures future journalists have the skills and moral frameworks they need in the digital age. There should involve increased attention in curriculum, not only on media literacy as going beyond knowing what the media is and how to use them to spread or consume information to counter misinformation and strengthen democracy, but also on the changing ecosystem and its implications for ethical practice (Cho et al., 2022). This might also require a redefinition of what ethics in journalism means, which would require a joint effort between the media industry and the academia in determining what news values are, and how prospective journalists can be best served by a responsive education that prepares them for the ecosystem they would be operating in.

Issues of relevance in contemporary journalism pedagogy:

Mugari (2010) asserts that the objective of education is to comprehend the contemporary world in which we exist and make decisions. Consequently, the demands of the 21st-century media industry necessitate journalism education that adequately prepares trainees for contemporary mass media and communication endeavors. This draw from the premise that an effective, organized learning approach in a professional domain requires a pedagogy that fosters comprehensive training, ensuring that trainees acquire the skills necessary for optimal performance amidst multifaceted changes. This is especially the case for journalism, given the evolving ecosystem it serves and the challenges this presents for adequate skilling of prospective journalists (Emmanuel, 2021). Mensing (2010) observed

that a challenge in journalism training institutions is that their programs were unprepared to address significant structural changes in the contemporary environment, which would require a transformation in the traditional journalism curriculum, i.e. a transition of journalism education from an industry-centered model to a community-centered approach, which has the potential to boost the extent to which journalism training is more effective in transforming journalism practice in line with modern expectations. This necessitates a fundamental redesign of traditional journalism curricula, establishing curriculum adaptability as an essential requirement for pedagogy which can be the basis for an optimal curriculum (Mensing, 2010).

UNESCO (2002, p. 2) asserts that curriculum encompasses more than the systematic selection and organization of subjects into "required" courses, "electives," and "practicals." The primary focus in curriculum development is to create a coherent connection between overarching goals and specific objectives that direct instruction, and the practical applicability of what is being taught. This perception that there might be a disconnect between these reflects Ojomo's observations on journalism education in Nigeria, where he highlights the lack of suitable and contemporary infrastructure and the extent to which it has hindered journalism and mass communication training in the country. Considering the pragmatic nature of the field, it is evident that in the absence of training facilities, the products of our institutions may become incompatible within the workplace. Frequently, numerous trainees lack opportunities to observe, let alone engage with fundamental equipment until their internships. This produces graduates with theory knowledge and near zero practical base (Ojomo, 2015). The submission above bears the pedagogical lacuna that probably was the reason Mensing (2010) observed that there was a need for overhauling journalism training in schools to match what is taking place in journalism beyond the university system.

Transformations in media technologies, especially since the turn of the 21st-century, appear to have accentuated the disconnect identified by Ojomo (2015). This is corroborated by Emma-Okoroafor's (2016, p.20) concern on the extent to which prevalent journalism curricula in schools were relevant towards preparing the students to meet new

challenges posed by the emergence of new media. Both observations on this pedagogy vs practice gap is validated by Chibita (2010) who found that numerous African journalism and mass communication institutions frequently receive complaints from the industry regarding the inadequate preparedness of contemporary graduates for employment in today's media. Thus, as an ameliorative approach, Emma-Okoroafor (2016, p.20) avers that "the pressures of communication revolution and the information revolution in the mid-nineties compelled the journalism educators to debate alternate models of curriculum". Chibita (2010) also advocates, in response to this gap, for curricula that highlight the conflict between programs that enhance graduates' employability in mainstream media and those that equip them to assist a substantial population of undereducated and socially marginalized individuals while also providing the adaptability to leverage the communication possibilities presented by new media.

An important perspective in the conversation about relevance of pedagogy to practice in journalism is the general view of the 'isolation' that characterizes the relationship between academia and industry. Yusof et al. (2018) mention this, stating that there appears to be little to no contribution of industry to journalism schools' curricula, which can have long-term (negative implications) on the extent to which journalism graduates have been trained in a way that aligns with industry skills' needs and requirements, the lack of which can mean that graduates have inadequate practical competence. There is also the divergence in objectives for training between the media industry and the academic community (Abuhasirah & Ismael, 2023). For example, Picard (2020) states that the focus of the academia often times is to familiarize and indoctrinate students with the theoretical aspects of the profession, while the industry is only interested in what can be applied in the day-to-day. Kruger (2022) concurs, stating that while the media industry has transitioned to becoming more "post-industrial, entrepreneurial and atypical" with more 'freelance-style' practitioners, journalism schools are still keen on producing graduates purposed to be full-time employees. In a way, it might even appear that in terms of practicum training in journalism, journalism schools are leaving a greater deal of responsibility for equipping prospective journalists to industry, often through

internship programmes (Ojomo, 2015). Although internships are typically employed to refine students' pertinent skills in the practical application of their academic training, media organizations' motivation for it is to facilitate a structured transition from academic talent to a ready-to-work professional (Ojomo, 2015). This might thus create friction in the pedagogy, especially where the theoretical aspects of the discipline the students have been learning do not feature in the real-world experiences that internships provide. This might not be unrelated to the fact that as much as media should see itself as a social service, in terms of its setup and structure in society, it is essentially a business, driven by commercial and even political economy interests. Picard (2020) raises some concerns about internship, especially as part of a broader 'teaching hospital' model of ensuring synchrony between academic training and contemporary journalism practice. He states that there is the likelihood that internships can be abused by media organizations who might view it as an opportunity to exploit students for cheap labor, without necessarily equipping them with the requisite experience that the program is supposed to.

This is however not to say there are no benefits to the internship system, especially within the framework of bridging the gap between theory and practice. For instance, Alemoh et al. (2018) found a positive perception of journalism practice amongst students who had undergone media internships as part of their academic program. This was also supported by Ojomo's (2015) findings, and he then went on to recommend that the internship period for students should be extended to one year (as against the three months as presently constituted in most Nigerian journalism training institutions), so as to give students a fuller and more immersed experience. Ogwezzy-Ndisika and Tommy (2024) go as far as advocating for journalism teachers to also undergo internships or use their sabbaticals as an opportunity to explore fellowships that will see them experience practical journalism, as this would go a long way towards enhancing their approach to teaching, even where the curricula is static.

Ethics and journalism

Ethics is a philosophical discipline that examines the majority of human actions and the standards governing human conduct. Some individuals believe that print media is entirely unregulated and that writers disregard the individuals they occasionally defame or the turmoil that fabricated narratives frequently generate. Although certain journalists have been convicted of fabricating information to generate more sensational narratives (e.g., Janet Cooke's Pulitzer Prize-winning piece, "Jimmy's World"), numerous writers continue to uphold journalistic integrity by exclusively presenting the truth. Journalists maintain their integrity by adhering to a code of ethics established by organizations to aid members in discerning 'right' from 'wrong' and applying that discernment to their decisions (Olagoke et al., 2021). The Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics delineates a set of guidelines concerning accountability, harm reduction, and independence. In print media, writing that encompasses biased comments and subjective remarks is called an opinion editorial. Bias is a specific tendency or inclination that obstructs the impartial evaluation of an issue. In summary, it is an assessment founded on subjective opinion. Unbiased writing, the antithesis of biased writing, is anticipated in journalistic endeavors (Ward, 2009).

Journalists are required to maintain objectivity and convey solely factual information, excluding personal opinions. Biased writing precludes readers from forming their inferences or judgements. When a writer incorporates personal views in an article, readers are expected to presume that the work is presented from an objective perspective. They fail to differentiate between truth and opinion (Ward, 2009). Consequently, the writer's work may lead readers to reach identical conclusions, potentially resulting in a predominantly biased publication if consistently produced by the same author or a limited group of authors. Ethical judgement in the media realm is ambiguous, as numerous ideas and concepts occupy diverse positions on the ethical spectrum for different individuals and organizations (Akoje & Rahim, 2014). Ethics are the established principles of behavior acknowledged concerning a specific category of human actions or a particular community or culture. Individuals entering the media realm must ensure they operate with a requisite level of integrity and ethics. The audience of a media professional presumes that the

individual addressed the issue by making an ethical decision that is both honest and equitable, thereby respecting the rights of all involved parties (Ward, 2009; Akoje & Rahim, 2014). Akinfeleye's (2003) treatise on the four types of journalism, where he offers the ideal archetype of 'journalism of conscience', captures the essence of pragmatic ethical practice of journalism, one that espouses social development and social responsibility as tenets of professionalism to guide their observance of the other elements of ethical decision-making. This is restated by Akinfeleye (2025), which aligns with Oso et al (2024) who argue that social responsibility is at the core of journalistic ethics, serving as an internal restraint mechanism to ensure that the vast powers of the 'pen' are wielded with as much altruism as possible.

Certain factors significantly influence ethical decision-making in the media. Impartiality and objectivity are two crucial factors (Senam, 2015). Numerous instances exist in which specific social systems are implemented, including conflict of interest, journalists as diplomats, endangerment of life, commodification of time and space, unnamed sources, criticism of competitors, cheque-book journalism, acceptance of gifts, pursuit of awards, collaboration with officials, censorship, and press codes (Amatu & Nwafor, 2021). The 1998 codes of ethics for Nigerian journalists encompass Credibility, Accuracy and Fairness, Privacy and Non-Disclosure, Privilege, Decency, Discrimination, Reward and Gratification, Violence, Children and Minors, Access to Information, Public Interest, Social Responsibility, Plagiarism, and Press Freedom and Responsibility. Nonetheless, being human, some journalists in Nigeria occasionally violate these professional codes of conduct. In this regard, Nasidi (2016) disclosed that journalists in Nigeria sometimes act contrary to their professional obligation to uphold the truth. He ascribed this phenomenon to the complexities inherent in Nigeria, characterized by its diverse ethnic groups, cultures, and religions. This led journalists from opposing factions to conflict in their practices, resulting in divergent journalistic values and ethical judgements. (Nasidi, 2016).

A common limitation identified in discussing journalism ethics in contemporary contexts is the seeming gap between expectations and realities within the context of the

practice of ethical journalism. Akinfeleye (2007) captured this concern succinctly, when he opined that at the heart of abuse of the media's power have been the professionals who have been entrusted with such capacities in deliberate or inadvertent violation of the social contract expected between the media and society. Sunday and Tommy (2011) echo this, providing some reasons to include low level of awareness, societal pressures, and low level of professionalism, a position validated by Onwunali et al. (2023) who also found that while there was an appreciable level of awareness amongst journalists in Lagos State, Nigeria on the importance of ethics in their practice, a significant number of respondents to their survey indicated low levels of knowledge of ethical code – the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) Code of Ethics – that their work was supposed to be guided by. This would speak more directly, not to the systemic issues that bedevil ethical practice, but to the low level of personal responsibility to the professional that most journalists have, which bears further investigation into.

Research methodology

This research study employed a qualitative approach. Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that the qualitative research focuses on obtaining and analyzing non-statistical data, paying more attention rather to the profound experiences of human participants. This implies primarily focusing on individuals' subjective experiences, opinions, and viewpoints. A qualitative research approach is essential for improving the interpreting and comprehension of inferences and implications related to social processes and human behavior (Taylor et al., 2015; Collis & Hussey, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This study adopted the case study qualitative approach, considered fitting for this study as it permits an extensive examination of the "how" and "why" queries within a bounded system (Yin, 2018), which in this case is the extent to which journalism ethics pedagogy in Nigerian journalism schools is adequate to produce industry-ready ethical journalists. The study site was determined to be South-Western Nigeria, which was considered to have significant 'town-and-gown' media and journalism presence to provide respondents that can ensure data saturation.

For data collection, a robust triangulation approach was adopted. This involved multiple data collection methods, including document analysis and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. For the document analysis, the researchers used an availability sampling approach to collect the syllabi for media/journalism/mass communication ethics courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level from ten (10) universities within the study site. Upon review of the documents, it selected course outlines from six (6) programmes, which were considered to represent theoretical saturation (this was because most of the curricula were largely similar in terms of the concepts they treated). Complementing the data from the document analysis, the study also used in-depth interviews to collect data. A purposive sampling was used to select participants, with the criteria being that one was either a university lecturer teaching (or at least, had taught) media/journalism/mass communication ethics courses, and the other being that one was a journalism professional, preferably one who was an editor, having worked as a beat reporter as well. Though Kumar (2018) and Bryman (2016) propose that interviews may involve 10 to 20 participants, Creswell (2015) posits that the number of interview participants in research should be a number that will provide answers to the research questions without reaching data saturation. Thus, a total of 10 respondents were recruited, with six (6) of them being university lecturers, and four (4) editors of media organizations. Semi-structured interviews were employed in collecting information from the recruited sample, allowing for a flexibility in data gathering while adhering to a laid-down interview protocol. Verbal informed consent was obtained from participants before they were interviewed, and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and cleaned to produce over 40 pages of data.

The transcripts from the interviews, as well as the document analysis of the course syllabi was inputted to NVivo 14 software for coding and analysis. A cross-case iterative thematic analysis was used to recognize the first-level codes and then organize them into second-level code to determine the themes. The goal was to return repeatedly to the data while analyzing to determine case-specific themes and look out for common patterns

across other cases until saturation is achieved in order to arrive at the final themes that will represent the findings.

All pertinent ethical considerations, including anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, and integrity, were fully adhered to in this study. For instance, the names of the participants were not stated, and pseudonyms were used to make reference to the participants. Also, to ensure reliability, two of the researchers initially coded the data independently, and then worked together to identify connecting categories, which informed the final themes. The data was represented to two participants to establish agreement of the conclusions of the analysis with the views they shared.

Findings and discussion

Curriculum document analysis summary

The first order of business with data analysis was to review selected curricula, in line with the main query of the study, that is, the extent to which curricula applied to contemporary ethical problems. Sensitized by existing literature, the selected curricula's analysis focused on executing a SWOT analysis of the syllabi content vis-à-vis the research question. A summary of the outcome of the analysis is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Curriculum document analysis summary

Name of Institutions	Title of Course	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
University of Lagos	Ethics of Mass Communication	Holistic approach to ethics, covering all forms of mediated mass communication. Also adopts a regional and global context to media ethics. Provides some inroads into actual realities of media practice, covering topics such as institutional pressures, advertorial, freebies, cartel	Does not indicate the extent to which practical realities will be taught in the framework of the course. Literature texts for the course appear dated.	Cross-country and cross-cultural learnings of media ethics which can give students insight into global ethical best practices, including from climes where digital media ethics are robust	Dated educational texts contributing to out-of-touch learnings. Organizational limitations to applying practical elements to classroom learnings

		journalism Second lecturer for the course is an accomplished media professional with over 3 decades of robust journalism/media experience	Does not indicate a strong focus on digital platforms' ethics	Opportunities to incorporate practical learnings with classroom teachings, including using internships as key grading metric	
Caleb University	Media Law and Ethics	Robust Coverage of Nigerian Media laws covering defamation, sedition, and copyright The inclusion of modern concerns like propaganda and privacy as well as ethical theories.	Little focus on case studies and practical application. Insufficient emphasis on digital media ethics and new technologies.	It is possible to include real-world situations and interactive modules to improve practical knowledge.	Possibility of obsolete material if the curriculum is not routinely updated to mirror present media trends.
National Open University of Nigeria	Media Law and Ethics	A thorough investigation of legal frameworks and ethical values guiding journalism. Including the Nigerian Press Organization's code of ethics and journalistic defenses in court.	Mostly theoretical with little practical involvement. Ignoring ethical quandaries and digital media issues.	Room to combine virtual simulations and multimedia tools to close the gap between theory and practice.	Possible unalignment between evolving media environment and curriculum.
Southwestern University	Media Law and Ethics	A broad overview of ethical theories and media regulations, including objectivity and press constraints.	Lack of detailed course objectives and learning outcomes. Lack of modern ethical concerns and practical elements.	Chance to create organized courses with interactive components and well-defined goals.	The curriculum might not sufficiently equip students for ethical issues in journalism in the real world.
Augustine University	Ethics of Mass Communication	In-depth analysis of legal issues affecting mass media, including defamation and privacy. Ethical obligations in message building and transmission are discussed.	Little interaction between global ethical standards and digital media ethics. Lack of case study	It is possible to include digital media issues and international ethical frameworks.	Without integration of present media practices, the curriculum runs the risk of becoming outdated.

			research and relevant practical application.		
Pan-Atlantic University	Professional Ethics in Media and Communication	Comprehensive curriculum encompassing ethical theories, professional standards, and emerging issues. Including discussions on digital media ethics, case studies, and hands-on activities.	Without sufficient instructional support, large material could be too much.	Model for integrating theoretical knowledge with practical application in ethics education.	Requires continuous curriculum updates to keep pace with technological advancements.

Data above indicates that the courses in the selected universities share similarities in their course titles, evidence ethics and media as the common terminologies. In particular, Pan-Atlantic University has the most robust curriculum, integrating more contemporary ethical challenges in training ethical journalists. A careful review of the observations presented in the table above reveals a difference in the breadth and depth of ethics education among the evaluated courses. Though some universities provide a solid theoretical foundation, especially for those arising from digital media, there is a general lack of practical application and engagement with present ethical issues. This issue in journalism pedagogy is attributed to a shortage of resources in educational institutions (Edogor et al., 2023; Msughter & Maradun, 2024). This disparity emphasizes the need for courses that combine theoretical education with practical experience to equip students with the tools they need to negotiate the complex ethical landscape of modern journalism (Senam, 2015; Amatu & Nwafor, 2021).

Presentation of themes

Triangulated data analyses, in response to the research question and sensitized by the theory and literature, produced three broad themes, including:

1. Inadequacies in ethics curricula exposed by contemporary operating environment
2. Pedagogical adaptability of journalism curricula impeded by systematic impediments
3. Academia and industry collaboration as approach to develop responsive pedagogy.

This study looks at the gap between journalism education syllabuses and actual ethical issues in professional practice using responses from journalism teachers and practitioners. Using thematic analysis, this paper unpacks recurring concepts across responses, frames them into logical themes, and assesses them critically using academic research.

Inadequacies in ethics curricula exposed by contemporary operating environment

A consensus amongst participants was that there is a lag between curricula of media ethics in journalism schools and actual real-world practice. This gap reflects the failure of extant journalism teaching to match the expectations of contemporary practice, as the current operating environment, with the significant evolution it has experienced due to innovations and widespread penetration of media technologies and digital platforms, has created ethical practice lacunas that journalism schools have struggled to fill. There is a general consensus that conventional media ethics remain fundamental and sacrosanct to the profession, but they have not kept pace with operating environment evolution and the complications presented by the internet, misinformation, disinformation, deepfakes, hate speech, and Artificial Intelligence (AI). One participant, for instance, stated that:

Media ethics has always pointed to the set of practices or guidelines that journalists in particular should necessarily be aware of the conscious and should imbibe in what they do. So how they report, how they meet sources, the guidelines, basically, that they should abide by in terms of, you know, confidentiality, objectivity and how all of these things link together and their

need to be impartial and not succumb to corrupt practices and to be fair in how they treat, you know, their sources, their audiences generally, and how they present the news, trying to be as fair, trying to be as objective as accurate as possible. And I think in our practice of journalism today, these are guidelines or ethical principles that journalists will still need to abide by the only problems that have in a contemporary world, the Internet, with misinformation, disinformation, deep fake, hate speech, AI. These issues are now compounded, and the ways in which they manifest are slightly different because the technologies are different or they are always improving. So, it means that journalists also have to adapt and upgrade their ethical standards."

What this indicates, in addition to the point earlier made, is that ethical issues (and the ethical standards that cater to them) are essentially the same as used to be. For example, concerns like misinformation and fake news are not new phenomena, however, with Internet-enabled technologies, their occurrence and impact have been amplified, which, unfortunately, media ethics training curricula and pedagogy have not adequately responded to. One participant's view, from the industry perspective, on this was that:

One major gap is the slow pace of curriculum adaptation to digital realities. Ethics education often assumes ideal scenarios, while in practice, journalists are navigating grey areas, commercial pressures, and sometimes institutional resistance. While ethics provide a moral compass, but many are outdated and struggle to address digital-era challenges like AI, influencer journalism, and online abuse. Also, digital transformation has amplified issues like clickbait, privacy breaches, and unverified virality. It's also made it harder to separate fact from fiction in user-generated content.

Another participant puts it thus:

I know in some universities like maybe UNILAG mass communication department, they are trying to bring in a new curriculum. But that new curriculum, I'm not sure if it has AI embedded in it. So, broadly speaking, AI integration is largely lacking. That is, media ethics being taught in schools like Unilag, and I'm guessing other universities in Nigeria might not necessarily might not necessarily as active in considering how AI might affect journalism practice. Overall, AI isn't very present in curricula.

The above introduces the fact that there is a significant focus on AI's role in contemporary journalism and the lack of attention being paid to it by journalism curricula

in most universities. The overall opinion is that the ethical conundrum that AI presents is as pressing in the newsroom as it should be in the classroom, with the terms of engagement for using the technology for journalistic work still being determined. The same participant posed some rhetorical questions around this:

AI, for instance, presents a whole lot of challenges, lots of challenges for journalists. And how, for instance, should they even use AI in the first place in their work? Should they use AI to produce content? Should they use AI to get their work?

Another participant presents his concern similarly, making the point that:

I don't know how many media organizations in Nigeria have an AI policy. You know, I've attended one or two trainings where it's been advocated for. But the typical response from the legacy media was around the need to be able to use AI to produce stories. As you can imagine AI can do a lot of interpretation, for instance, you can do generic content for news stories. What you want is the content. So those are the challenges, the know-how and ability to use it ethically. I don't have a problem with using AI, but when it is wholesale, just copy and paste, it's a major challenge.

Respondents, as we see above, are clear on the benefits of technological innovations on journalism practice; however, the apprehension lies in the extent to which these technologies are used ethically, and the extent to which journalists are being trained to do so. From developing and writing stories, to fact-checking, etc., the use of AI is acknowledged as a welcome development for journalism, which can be enhanced if the proper regulatory framework is built around it, and this framework forms part of ethics training. For instance, one respondent who is an industry participant, gives an example of this problem

There's the temptation to over-rely on AI for content generation or moderation without adequate editorial oversight. AI may reflect bias or omit context which is a serious problem. There's also the challenge of detecting deepfakes, which can mislead even highly experienced journalists.

The perspective from the industry on the curricula's inadequacy is similar; that is, ethics training is good, albeit limited and dated in its applicability. One respondent acknowledged that though his training in journalism was a decade ago, his experience of

the difference between classroom and newsroom experience of media ethics remains markedly similar to the experience of people around him, particularly in the areas of managing trauma and navigating prevalent socioeconomic power structures.

My formal education gave me a strong foundation in media ethics, particularly in understanding the principles of truth, fairness, and accountability. However, the real test came on the field where ethics often intersect with pressure, power, and profit. The ethical implications of using AI tools, handling deepfakes, or managing the mental health of reporters covering trauma weren't deeply explored.

This presents the considerations of factors beyond technology in the contemporary operating environment that journalism training does not cover. The point of mental health and trauma is particularly interesting, especially given the context of Nigeria, where issues of mental health awareness and protection are still largely under-explored. This presents the perspective of the role that the general value system of the operating environment plays in creating a gap between theory and practice, which is not often factored into the curricula. A good example of this is the allegation made by two participants that a good number of media professionals are unaware of, or have a lax view of enforcing, ethical codes. One alludes this to the undesired working conditions most media professionals have to cope with, which exposes them significantly to the risk of compromising on ethical standards due to financial inducement, which is often not covered in the syllabi. He noted that:

"You know, the life of the average media practitioner in Nigeria and Africa generally exposes them to deviant behaviors that infringe on the ethics of the profession. Some of them come there because there aren't many other options, and so they get into it. But the remuneration is insufficient to sustain a reasonable level of existence for them. Some factors can induce them to do certain things that are not ethical, that are not acceptable, maybe because of social or economic pressures. They can be enticed or induced to change the slant of stories, to change a story, or to look the other way instead of striking a balance. Instead of balanced reporting, they can run away with one side of the story. And of course, these things have consequences".

The other layers on this, suggesting that another reason for this gap would be lethargy on the part of journalists to familiarize themselves with, and apply ethical codes in their practice, even though they have been taught. According to him:

I teach ethics in some schools. And when I break it down, people wonder, this is a lot...and unfortunately, for many people one of the problems with complying with ethics is that many journalists who practice today have never even read the code of ethics. I can say that each time I do training for journalists and I asked them how many people have seen the code; in a room of 30, you'd be lucky to find five. NUJ (sic: Nigerian Union of Journalists) has a code of ethics. But like I mentioned, even if you ask some NUJ members and said they probably have not even read the code, even some officials. They are the ones that are supposed to be enforcing the code like NIPR will do, but that's not what we have. I can't remember the last time I heard of anybody being accused of violating the code and being maybe subjected to question like it has happened long, long time ago. So that is a big deal.

In summary, the gaps in media and journalism ethics curricula when compared to contemporary practice exist, not as a deficiency of knowledge, especially as it is widely accepted that the theoretical aspects of media ethics are largely universal and timeless; but rather as a matter of applicability, that is, the extent to which they resonate, in real-time, with performance expectations, especially when one considers the influence of media technologies. Perhaps another positive about this is the acknowledgement, especially among media/journalism ethics faculty, that there is a variance in what they are teaching as against what their students are experiencing in the field.

Pedagogical adaptability of journalism curricula impeded by systemic impediments

The last point under the first theme brings up the second theme. This speaks to the fact that the slow speed at which training matches practice expectations might be a systemic issue and must be looked at contextually. From analysis, there is an agreement that schools are not generally flexible in adapting media/journalism ethics curricula to operating environment realities, due to the bureaucracy usually involved in the process of curriculum review. There is also a consensus on the frustration expressed by respondents

on the fact that the speed at which technology is innovating is not matched by the adaptiveness of the learning environment to keep pace. For instance, one respondent's view was that:

One of the major challenges is that the technological landscape is fast-changing. Now we're talking about AI, but in the next few years, we may be talking about artificial general intelligence (AGI) and superintelligence, as well as the metaverse and the Internet of Things. Technology keeps evolving at a fast pace, while media ethics training is slow to adapt.

Given the situational context pointed above in considering this theme, it fits that one respondent compares the situation in Nigeria to that of the United Kingdom (UK) where he also has teaching experience, and he points out that:

There are moves now to upgrade the curriculum to account for AI and how journalists might navigate its use. The boom in AI is significant, and curriculum takes a while to adapt to technological changes. I'm trying to think, because I have a Nigerian and a UK mindset. Looking at my Nigerian experience, I know some universities, like the University of Nigeria Nsukka's mass communication department, are trying to bring in a new curriculum. I'm not sure if this new curriculum has AI embedded in it; I think it's an ongoing conversation. The UK is more advanced in incorporating AI into journalist training and in raising awareness of the ethical issues.

Even some of the responses that apply to the first theme bear some relevance here. They speak to the slow pace of ethics curriculum matching up with the demands of the current environment, with one respondent even hinting that what most current practicing journalists know about media/journalism ethics cover what he was taught over a decade ago. Another respondent, who had graduated from a mass communication program over three (3) decades ago also affirms this, albeit in defense of the continued relevance of fundamental journalism ethics, but this, more significantly, buttresses the point about maladaptiveness of ethics curricula to dynamism that is required for continued practical relevance. The point is also made about the fact that even students are aware of this gap, and can identify that the content of ethics curricula still largely bear semblance to the ones used decades prior. They point out that:

Generally, student journalists are well-versed in technology and sometimes ahead of their teachers. You can't teach students about media ethics from the 1960s when they're concerned about AI. So, teachers will feel the need to upgrade their teaching, even if the curriculum hasn't caught up, to ensure they embed AI into their teaching of media ethics.

Another strong indicator of structural inertia impeding pedagogical adaptiveness in media ethics training is the quality of ethics faculty. One respondent, a faculty member with extensive media practice, hints on the bureaucracy that stood in his way of having a fully-immersed teaching experience, in this case, the unwillingness to compromise on the academic qualifications required for industry personnel interested in joining faculty to teach media ethics. He revealed that:

The one that I know that is difficult some of what I've been advocating for is this issue of what do you call it now? Professor of practice. You know, where so someone like me interested in teaching, for example, they will say, go and get a PhD. If I'm not interested, I'm not interested. But if I have knowledge to share, that must be a standard way of integrating me into the school and being paid commensurately.

Another perspective to the faculty element within the structural inertia theme is the how most media/journalism programs are designed and implemented, which often sees people without media training being responsible for training journalists on ethics. Also, there is the issue of faculty fatigue, which is the product of bloated admissions and the poor lecturer-student distribution within the programmes that stand in the way of quality dispensing of knowledge. A view of this is that:

"...one problem I've also noticed if you're talking of ethics, which is under media law, if in terms of some of the schools are some of the people teaching media laws are lawyers. Some of them just teaching from just like the basis of law. They don't relate it. They don't have case studies, enough current ones, you know, that they can use to sample what they are teaching. So it's not enough to just have a lawyer to teach media law. You need somebody who understands because when you say law and ethics, there are two different things".

Analogous to this is the point made about media/journalism programmes may be suffering from success, as seen in the proliferation of mass communication programmes around the country and more people enrolling in those programmes, which has created a situation where lecturers are overwhelmed with the amount of work they have to do.

I think the gap that we are talking about now has to do with number one, the number of students that we are talking about. There has been a population explosion in terms of number. How do you teach a writing class of 100? You know, those are the major things that can also make it difficult for lecturers to do the kind of thing that we need them to provide, which is to close that gap.

A dissimilar but related point-of-view to this perspective is the reluctance of media/journalism ethics' teachers to evolve themselves and their approach to pedagogy in tune with the times.

We need to give more training to lecturers, but they must also be willing, you know, because some lecturers think they don't have to; some of them are a bit arrogant about it. They need themselves to sit down and like I said, the new definition of education is to learn or learn and relearn. At a program I did recently...They were talking about this gap, and somebody says, they did a training/internship for a set of lecturers, and it was a disaster. Apparently, the lecturers are not ready for the grilling that the new learning was going to give them.

This perspective above is vital, as respondents expressed belief that it would require concerted initiative-taking from current faculty in media/journalism training programs to create and sustain an agenda that could result in institutional flexibility with respect to curricula review in line with industry expectations. While this is a likely outcome in the long-term, it will also help to address the more immediate concern of ensuring that students are familiarized with industry expectations of their ethical obligations within the context of the operating milieu. One response to this point was that:

...teachers will have to, on their own, invest in their own lesson plans and ensure that they are in tune with the changes in the ecosystem. And in the

long term, then we can then start to look at the changes in the curriculum and how that can be, you know, really affected, you know, coming up with new courses if necessary. It's about adapting the current and ensuring that teachers on their own, even without necessary changes, you know, take the initiative. That's what the future holds, generally, teachers taking the initiative to ensure that they're updated in their own offerings, even if their schools have not gone along with them.

The institutional and systemic barriers to adaptability in media/journalism ethics curriculum, including the 'catch-up' game between media technologies and ethics training and the likely contribution of Nigeria's situational context (especially in terms of technological development) to this; the fact that Nigerian journalism schools have structural issues – bureaucratic bottlenecks impeding curriculum review, overpopulated departments, and ill-fit of some faculty to actually teach ethics because they have no experience or training to do so – that restricts dynamism in curricula change (which has resulted in very dated content in most ethics curricula, as evidenced by the document analysis findings); and the importance of individual initiative-taking by lecturers to provide ad hoc, immediate upgrade to the curriculum represents some of the challenges facing adaptability of the curriculum for media/journalism ethics, but yet presents some opportunities for strategies to address them. These are explored in the final theme.

Academia and industry collaboration as approach to develop responsive pedagogy

A common string in the responses indicated that addressing the gap between training curriculum and practice realities is only possible through a strategic convergence of both, in a structured system that identifies the lacuna, appreciates the situational and environmental obstacles impeding dynamism, and drives solutions that are contextually-relevant and resonant. The buzzword adopted by all the respondents was collaboration, which would suggest an alignment of objectives from both parties that ensures the actualization of mutual benefits, which is important, given that one of the reasons for the gap was the fact that media industries' goals as a business are markedly different from academic institutions'. One view on this theme was that the current relationship between

‘town’ and ‘gown’ is one where either is working in silos, which results in industry being ahead of pedagogy, as innovations usually first arise from identified market needs.

Academics are sometimes stuck in their ivory towers. So they don't even know they might not necessarily know what obtains in newsrooms or the specific issues that are currently existing that journalists are facing in terms of AI and the ethics of AI. That's why the industry should come in to support, sometimes by simply providing that insider knowledge to say, you know what, these are the issues we are facing. Just, you know, collaborate and come and share ideas. And I think also the academic can actually take that initiative also go out and engage with the industry by organizing workshops, etc. So that it becomes a two-way street, with the academia and the industry coming together; the industry learning from academia as to what are the things that you found out as to how we can navigate this current landscape. And then industry feeding back and saying, these are the issues we are facing, you know, these are the things that we are facing.

Another point made about this is that this can ensure an alignment of approaches to address needs peculiar to industry and academia, e.g. improved talent for industry, and research for academia, which can inform curriculum review and development.

The industry can bring the issues that they are facing and then the academia can take that off and then turn them into research projects and then teaching plan, training. Whatever they find, they can go back to the industry and see these are the things that we found out now and how you can better deal with the issues. It goes back and forth and becomes like a virtuous cycle going around and around from academia to industry and impact to academia and then they are feeding one another just to strengthen that relationship on the bond so that the collaboration is there

One immediate benefit that can emanate from this collaboration is a reviewed curriculum that is abreast of innovations and dynamisms in the operating environment. One respondent expressed belief that ethics curriculum must be designed after robust conversations between industry and academia to ensure resonance and relevance. Another respondent corroborates this, sharing the opinion that one critical area for this collaboration that will have immense benefits for curriculum review is in the area of media

technologies. According to him, the collaboration between industry and academia can ensure that the ethics curriculum will feature:

“...greater integration of newsroom case studies, newsroom internships, and scenario-based learning to help bridge the gap. With current journalism trends, I think digital verification, trauma-informed reporting, whistleblower protection, and ethical use of AI tools would be emphasized more”.

Another respondent concurs, adding that a productive partnership between industry and academia should typically feature joint programs that ensure cross-involvement and a fertilization of ideas across both aisles. This would imply the adoption of a media ecosystem where ongoing coworking is the norm and not a novelty, which is not limited to students, but also to practicing journalists and academia as well.

We need regular exchange programmes, co-designed curricula, and joint research projects that tackle real-world issues. Through immersive internships, newsroom simulations, and involvement in actual editorial decision-making processes, these can make the courses practical, current, and cross-disciplinary. Ethics should be integrated into every course, not treated as a standalone.

Equally, one current practice that is mentioned but can be optimized, is internships, which another respondent talks about more broadly beyond its current remit of only engaging students thus:

It's not only about taking (only student) interns. It's why people have also advocated for lecturers to be able to go on sabbatical in media organizations. For example, when the new Provost of NIJ resumed, he asked lecturers to go on internship. When some of them went for internship, the feedback was very disturbing. And he was like, how can these people be teaching what they themselves don't even know? So it has to be structured, for example, if you're teaching news writing or even ethics, at least once in a session, even if it's just

one week, you must spend it in a newsroom, even if it is once in a week, to catch up.

Internship should also be reciprocal, with industry professionals also serving as adjunct faculty or professors of practice, so as to bring up-to-date, relevant industry knowledge to the classroom to enhance practical learning, not just of media ethics, but of the journalism profession in general. This is an easy-to-accomplish first step, but it should optimally progress into a well-designed program that provides funding for research, teaching opportunities for experienced professionals, internships for students, and a co-designing of a curriculum that reflects contemporary realities, including, but not limited to the state of technology, mental health and trauma concerns, and managing financial inducements. This is seen in the responses below:

The classroom must be up to date. We should bring in practitioners to discuss topics and provide industry perspectives. This way, you train journalists who are current with the issues. So when they enter the job market, they are not lost. It's about investment in the classrooms. We must bring in technology and teachers who have worked in newsrooms, analyzed and reported on issues, so they can transfer their experiences to the students. It's not only a textbook matter. There must be an interface between knowledge, practice, and technology. That's how we produce the (ethical) journalists of the future.

This is backed by another respondent, whose position was that investing in educational infrastructure and resources was equally as important as the 'soft' support that the industry can provide as part of its joint venture to improve journalism ethic education. According to him, collaboration would include:

Investing in new textbooks, workshops, technology devices for schools and students. Guest lectures from journalists, case studies and simulations in classrooms to mirror real-life examples. More industry collaborations and partnerships with media outlets, with feedback incorporated into practice manuals and course curriculum.

For another industry professional, collaboration must focus on:

...investing in tech-savvy journalists, fostering newsroom innovation units, and strengthening fact-checking alliances. Industry professionals should co-teach and provide mentorship, using immersive internships, covering topics like digital misinformation, source protection, trauma reporting, AI ethics, and media law. This should incorporate newsroom simulations, role-playing ethical dilemmas, and ensuring students' involvement in actual editorial decision-making processes.

Discussion

Findings indicate that there is a gap between journalism education and the expectations of professional practice. Many teachers have grown in the classroom and lost touch with the professional world, which results in teaching that lacks present relevance. This is not unrelated to the trend where in newsrooms, environmental and financial pressures encourage unprofessional conduct, even though most journalists who have training in media and journalism have undertaken some form of media ethics education. Journalism pedagogy literature has long recognized this gap. According to Reese and Cohen (2000), journalism education usually reflects normative values but does not mimic the pressures of actual practice. Furthermore, Deuze (2006) underlined that journalism education should include academic and professional paradigms to close this theory-practice divide.

Particularly, participants underlined a clear disparity between ethical complexity in professional journalism and classroom teaching. They blame this disconnect on socioeconomic constraints in Nigerian newsrooms, claiming that the average media practitioner is exposed to deviant behaviors. This shows systematic problems, such as low pay and political meddling, that usually override ethical training once reporters start working.

There is also an agreement on the point that although students are exposed to conventional ethical values, problems like "brown envelopes" (a euphemism for corruption) compromise their pragmatic relevance. Though students might start the job ethically conscious, industry practices molded by political and commercial pressure can

compromise their education. Journalism education literature well documents this problem. Deuze (2006) claims that an overreliance on normative ethics and inadequate interaction with structural constraints causes journalism education to be often out of step with newsroom reality. Reese and Cohen (2000) equally contend that if ethical journalism education does not address political context and market pressures, it runs the risk of becoming irrelevant. To better equip students for outside pressures, journalism programs have to include courses on professional resistance, newsroom economics, and media ownership and simulate ethical quandaries in the real world. Including ethical role-playing and newsroom simulations, as Christians et al. (2015) recommend, will help to close this gap.

Findings also show a worry: media ethics education is lagging behind technological developments, including artificial intelligence, algorithmic journalism, and deepfakes. There is evidence from the data that indicates that, in contrast to more prepared UK universities, Nigerian universities have little integration of artificial intelligence in their ethics curriculum in particular, and the journalism curriculum in general, as indicated in the document analysis findings. While there is the call for adding ethical frameworks for new technologies, including algorithmic bias and digital surveillance, there is an underlined need to arm students to handle AI-generated false information. This fits with recent studies stressing the critical need to include digital ethics in journalism education (Tambini, 2019). As Marconi and Siegman (2021) contend, the arrival of artificial intelligence changes journalistic labor, raising fresh ethical questions about truth, authorship, and responsibility. Ignoring these problems leaves graduates unprepared.

Findings align with extant literature in acknowledging that digital disruption, particularly with the rise artificial intelligence, mis/dis information, and synthetic media, has changed ethical journalism expectations and practice. Deepfakes, AI, and the internet now confront journalists, challenging their long-held, conventional ideals such as objectivity and fairness, especially with respect to how they apply currently. These problems require an evolved ethical framework that can keep pace with technology. The data emphasize the ethical concerns ingrained in algorithmic journalism, including

prejudice and lack of openness, which bears some congruence with the studies that advocate strongly for considering the effects of artificial intelligence and automation in journalism education. According to Marconi and Siegman (2021), artificial intelligence raises ethical questions about authorship, verification, and responsibility, even if it may improve output. Tambini (2019) also warns about the dangers of automated reporting and algorithmic curation, which could compromise ethical accountability.

Findings also underlined the glacial speed of curriculum changes as an obstacle to incorporating modern ethical concerns. It identifies systemic obstacles, including, but not limited to the bureaucracy preventing nimbleness in curriculum changes, which results in antiquated ethics teaching ‘from the 1960s’. This criticism echoes the more general academic agreement that journalism programs usually trail behind business breakthroughs (Kruger, 2022; Mensing, 2010; Macdonald, 2006). According to McDevitt and Sindorf (2012), ethical pedagogy must change from a fixed, rules-based approach to one that supports critical thinking, flexibility, and scenario-based analysis.

There is some regret expressed over how slowly Nigerian journalism courses react to the quick technological changes. Under the second theme, findings indicate that although institutions like Pan Atlantic University have tried to include more recent technologies and the ethical issues they present in the pedagogy, the curriculum still largely contains conventional content, and it is requiring often, teachers taking the initiative to teach these new influences in their ethics classes. Mensing (2010) backs up this criticism by pointing out how often rigid academic structures hinder the capacity of journalism schools to create new ideas. The fast-changing media sector makes the need for curricular agility more pressing than ever. This is underlined by the recognition that teachers occasionally update lesson plans on their own to cover subjects including artificial intelligence and false information; this approach might be successful in the near term but lacks institutional backing and consistency.

A clear point from the findings is that ethical mores remain the same, but the issues they tackle, especially in real world, continue to evolve, with contemporary concerns now including fake news, mis/dis information, ethical use of artificial intelligence – and the age-

old matter of financial constraints or inducements – that undermine ethical reporting. It can be observed from the data that external pressures and low pay represent some causes for journalists to compromise ethical values, and that the ethical landscape is made more difficult by new dangers such as deepfakes and hate speech, which calls into question the future of journalism under AI control. Hanitzsch et al. (2019) support these worries by showing that journalists' ethical behavior worldwide is greatly affected by economic and political limitations. Furthermore, Tandoc and Maitra (2018) point out that the spread of false information calls for journalists to acquire sophisticated verification techniques, which are rarely covered in conventional courses. One key ethical tool for the present and future that was suggested is fact-checking, especially given the rise of fake news, mis/dis information, etc. as the most urgent ethical issues facing journalists. There is also the point made about nefarious agendas that may not necessarily be bothered about ethical considerations, which emphasizes the need for fact-checking as a core ethical competence going forward.

This point bears some significance. Political operatives or non-journalists using social media often drive misinformation, as Tandoc et al. (2018) point out. Therefore, journalism education must broaden its ethical training outside the newsroom to cover digital citizenship and platform control. Furthermore, reflecting Kovach and Rosenstiel's (2014) focus on journalism as a discipline of verification, the ethical practice of fact-checking should be regarded not only as a verification tool but also as a moral position against distortion and manipulation.

Collaboration was touted by all the respondents as a possible solution to the gap between industry and academia, with respect to preparing prospective ethical journalists, albeit with different suggested approaches. Central to these suggested approaches is a systematic blending of both worlds in a way that ensures the achievement of mutual benefits and shared objectives. This requires significant changes to current teaching strategies work, with scaffolding and practical-based learning, flipped classrooms and lecture-based instruction, and real-life case studies and scenario-based learnings as some suggested approaches. This corresponds with studies by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014),

who contend that ethical education should be participatory and dialogue-driven to promote reflective thinking. Students' ethical sensitivity has been proven to rise through practical involvement techniques such as peer evaluation and role-playing (Christians et al., 2015).

Findings also suggest a stronger "town and gown" connection between media companies and journalism schools. Curriculum design, experiential learning, and professional relevance all depend on this partnership. Under this arrangement, while academics provide analytical frameworks and pedagogical rigor, the industry can provide insider knowledge, and even financial and human resources to enrich students' classroom experience. There is also the age-old internship approach, which has been taken further to incorporate academics also going on practical newsroom internships to re-acquaint themselves with real-world experiences, which can enhance their teaching. Macdonald (2006) and Ward (2009) echo this mutual reinforcement by supporting "dual immersion", whereby academics interact with practice and vice versa. Such partnerships guarantee ongoing curriculum development and help to match ethics education with on-the-ground reality. Picard (2020) and Ogwezzy-Ndisika and Tommy (2024) also emphasize this when they talk about the teaching hospital model where industry and academia are merged in common cause and shared objectives. It is also underlined that journalism schools need to be supported by regulatory authorities, associations, and publishers. They mentioned continuous projects in Nigeria to hold regional training courses encouraging media responsibility and ethical journalism.

Conclusion and recommendation

The answers from participants show a significant disparity between journalism courses and the ethical reality of modern practice. The main difficulties are obsolete courses, insufficient technological integration, theory-practice disconnection, and constrained pedagogical creativity. Journalism education has to change if it is to create ethically resilient reporters: flexible curricula, cross-disciplinary training, digital ethics inclusion, and academic-industry collaboration enhancement.

The thematic insights from participants highlight a common awareness that although traditional media ethics are still fundamental, they are growing insufficient in addressing the digital-age complexity confronting today's journalists. Problems like false information, artificial intelligence, and newsroom socioeconomic pressures call for a rethought ethics pedagogy that is responsive, multidisciplinary, and based on theory and lived experience. Bridging the gap between curriculum and reality will call for more than gradual changes; it calls for systematic reform, closer cooperation with business, and the inclusion of new technologies into ethical investigation. Only then can journalism education create professionals able to negotiate the changing moral landscape of modern media.

A blended pedagogy combining interactive learning flipped classrooms, and reflective practices should be institutionalized to promote critical ethical thinking. Curricula should also assist career counselling by involving students with unclear professional interests. Universities should create modular courses that let new ethical concerns be quickly updated and integrated. Periodic reviews driven by industry input and technological developments should be required every two to three years. This would allow teachers to include current industry trends, especially those relating to technology developments. Increase the use of problem-solving workshops, ethical simulations, and scenario-based training. Promote reflective journaling and peer-led debate to strengthen ethical thinking.

Ethics education has to include case-based learning that reflects the moral ambiguity and real-world pressures journalists face rather than just normative teaching. Students might gain a more grounded ethical literacy from workshops, simulations, and problem-solving labs. Institutions should include digital ethics courses concentrating on artificial intelligence, false information, and algorithmic bias in fundamental courses. As the findings suggest, cross-disciplinary cooperation with areas including computer science and law can improve student awareness of the ethical consequences of digital tools.

Including industry-led seminars and internships in experiential learning strategies could help to close this gap. A1's suggestion to include industry veterans and combine their

knowledge fits Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which holds that active experimentation and reflective observation enhance professional competence.

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On objectivity and transparency: Examining ideological North Stars for local reporters in Canada

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Abstract

Journalistic objectivity has historically been a theoretical lynchpin for understanding and teaching the profession. In recent years, the concept has faced increasing criticism from journalism educators and some frontline reporters as both an unattainable goal and a framework reinforcing unequal power dynamics. Some scholars have argued that suggested transparency is moving to replace objectivity as an ethical North Star guiding journalism practice. These debates have been widely studied, but less research has focused on how evolving theoretical conceptions impact the ethics of community journalism practice. Based on interviews with 22 reporters working for local outlets in Canada, this study finds slightly more respondents (40.9%) prioritize transparency over objectivity (36.4%) as the key value guiding their journalism. The study found no clear correlation between years of newsroom experience and journalists' perspectives on objectivity and transparency. As journalism educators discuss which values should underpin the profession in an era of declining trust and newsroom closures, there is value in understanding how local journalists conceptualize different ethical ideals when reporting in local communities.

Keywords: *Journalistic values, local news, journalism education, objectivity, transparency, Canada*

Introduction

With declining audience trust in journalism across most of the Western world (Brin & Charlton, 2024), and profound business challenges facing the industry (Phillips, Greenspon & Uncles, 2025; Sjøvaag, 2022), media scholars and frontline reporters are revisiting long-running debates about the core values guiding the profession (Arsenault, 2024; Callison & Young, 2019; Pickard, 2020). These discussions come with a new sense of urgency: how can reporters regain audiences and broader social credibility? Are North American newspaper journalists now mostly catering to the educated, liberal leaning professional class, who will still pay for subscriptions, or what Usher (2021) calls “news for

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the rich white and blue” at the expense of other audience members? And if the goal of news organizations is to regain credibility and increase subscriptions among the broader public, what values should underpin coverage at the local level?

The stakes of debates on core journalistic values are high. In Canada, at least one third of journalism jobs have simply disappeared since 2010 (Canadian Heritage, 2024), a broader collapse of the local news ecosystem underway across much of the Western world (Pickard, 2020). An estimated 450 news Canadian outlets closed between 2008 and 2021, hitting smaller communities especially hard (Canadian Heritage, 2024). More than 340 Canadian communities have lost local news outlets since 2008 (Local News Research Project, 2024; Phillips, Greenspon & Uncles, 2025). These business declines coincide with reduced trust in journalism. In Canada, trust in the media fell by 20 percentage points between 2018 and 2024, dropping from 58% to 39% (Brin & Charlton, 2024). Like in the U.S., falling trust has a partisan political dimension, which could be linked to debates over objectivity in news and the broader values guiding professional coverage. Nearly half of Canadian Conservatives, (49%) say Canadian news is mostly biased, compared to 18% of Liberals (Green, 2024). Better understandings of the values guiding journalists alone will not address these interlinked problems of declining trust and local news outlet closures. But as journalists grapple with these challenges, there is value in developing a clearer understanding on the evolving values guiding local news reporting.

The article begins by attempting to define the terms “objectivity” and “transparency” as possible North Stars or guiding principles for local journalism practice, while outlining some of the scholarly debates and contentions around the concepts. It then presents the research methodology based on semi-structured interviews with 22 local journalists working in Canada. Coverage of local government, business and the court system from these reporters is foundational for the broader information ecosystem (Usher, 2023; Pickard, 2020). The findings section analyzes the perspectives of these local journalists on the values guiding their daily work and how this impacts their reporting. The discussion and conclusion explain broader takeaways on what this information means in terms of how

journalists' perceptions of objectivity and transparency impact coverage, and where future research is needed.

Literature review

Defining objectivity

As a fundamental value guiding journalism in North America, objectivity became an ideological mainstay in the late 19th and the early 20th century (Kaplan, 2009). While there is near universal acceptance that accuracy, fairness and accountability are key professional values for journalists, as evidenced by internal codes of conduct from journalism organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists (Brown & Peterson, 2020) and the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ, 2023), objectivity is a more contested idea among practitioners and media scholars (Carson, 2025; Maras, 2013; Wallace, 2019). There is no debate, however, that it is an idea worthy of broader discussion and definition. For instance, Kaplan (2009, p. 26) calls the concept “something akin to the lifeblood of the U.S. press” defining it by a “refusal of interpretation, its critical distance from all authorities, and its elevation of ‘balance.’”

There are two general interpretations of the value of journalistic objectivity as a guiding professional value, as articulated by practitioners. The late *Rolling Stone* correspondent Hunter S. Thompson famously quipped: “The only thing I ever saw that came close to Objective Journalism was a closed-circuit TV setup that watched shoplifters in the General Store at Woody Creek, Colorado” (Quoted in Steinbrink, 1983 p. 221). In contrast, veteran American anchor Walter Cronkite, argued “Objectivity is the reporting of reality, of facts, as nearly as they can be obtained without the injection of prejudice and personal opinion” (quoted in Maras, 2013, p. 11). This guiding doctrine, equating objectivity with fundamental journalistic ethics and fair reporting, dominated mainstream journalism until roughly the 1960s (Esser & Umbricht, 2014), with scrutiny increasing again in the 1990s (Schudson, 2001). Scholarly and journalistic critiques of objectivity contend it is an ineffective framework for covering the world, privileging establishment

voices over marginalized populations and maintaining the status quo (Vos & Craft, 2017; Hearn-Branaman, 2016; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2021). As Peterson-Salahuddin notes, despite claims of objectivity or the “view from nowhere”, journalism cannot be “divorced from the subjective values in which news is constructed” (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2021, p. 392). Critics of objectivity as a guiding journalistic principle reject “bothsidesism” (Ben-Shai, 2023, p. 8) for issues such as covering the science behind climate change or the medical value of vaccines. In a defence of objectivity as a key value, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, arguably the biggest global survey of industry trends and audience perspectives, notes: “While impartial or objective journalism is increasingly questioned by some, overall people strongly support the ideal of impartial news” (Robertson, Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi & Nielsen, 2021). Audiences, in other words, expect objective, unbiased news, a perspective frequently cited by study participants who favor the concept as an ethical North Star (Author interview 5, 2024; Author interview 8, 2024; Author interview 17, 2025)

As core values guiding journalism education and practice in the wake of professional soul searching in the past two decades, some scholars consider transparency, the “new objectivity” for the 21st century (Koliska & Chadha, 2016). Transparency, as an epistemological tool for producing content, explaining newsroom decisions, fostering trust with audiences, has gained new prominence in journalism studies (Arsenault, 2024; Maras, 2013). In practice, this means journalists should be “open about relationships and goals”; “open to criticism”; and allow audiences “inside the news gathering, production and decision-making process” (Vos & Craft, 2017, p. 1511). This privileging of transparency over objectivity places the former alongside core journalistic values such as honesty and fairness (Plaisance & Deppa, 2009).

Defining transparency

There is widespread consensus among journalists and journalism educators that transparency is positive, desirable and an idea worthy of support (Black, 1997; Birkinshaw, 2006; Kurambayev & Freedman, 2020; Rodríguez-Martínez et. al, 2017; Meijer, 2009;

Moene & Søreide, 2019). In the typical characterization shared by many reporters, the anti-corruption group Transparency International describes the concept as “the characteristic of governments, companies, organizations and individuals of being open in the clear disclosure of information, rules, plans, processes and actions” (Transparency International, 2024). Birkinshaw echoes Transparency International’s approach, defining the concept as “the conduct of public affairs in the open or otherwise subject to public scrutiny” (Birkinshaw, 2006, p. 189- 191). This stands in contrast to what Black calls “opaque policy measures” where it is difficult to determine who is making decisions and why, and who benefits (Black, 1997, p. 476). As a concept, transparency is often defined as greater openness and accountability in terms of an institution’s goals and relationships (Vos & Craft, 2017). These are notions with which “journalism has been viewed as having a special relationship” (Chadha & Koliska, 2015, p. 216). Some definitions are normative, constructing transparency as a principle; others are descriptive, viewing transparency as a characteristic of institutional relationships (Meijer, 2009).

The Society for Professional Journalists’ code of ethics extrapolates Transparency International’s base definition to the practice of reporting, calling transparency a key “ethical principle” for journalists and how they relate to their audiences (SPJ, 2014). The SPJ’s guidance urges journalists to conduct themselves with openness, explaining processes, source-gathering methods and editorial decisions (SPJ, 2014). This interpretation of transparency, as it relates to the work journalists produce, is part of a broader scholarly debate involving best practices for communicating with audiences: how much (or whether) increased communication about editorial choices leads to improved trust in the press, and how journalists can most effectively strive for transparency in their relationships (Chadha & Koliska, 2015; Karlsson, 2021; Kurambayev & Freedman, 2020; Manninen, 2020; Vos & Craft, 2017). There is also a more assertive idea of transparency, particularly for investigative or adversarial journalism, reframing the concept into an active praxis of engaged reporting to wring new information from powerful institutions, rather than a steady state or just a desirable characteristic (Arsenault, 2024).

Research methodology

Debates over the relative merits of journalistic objectivity and transparency have been underway in editorial pages (Baron, 2023), podcasts (NPR, 2020) and academic journals and conferences (Konieczna & Santa Maria, 2023; Schudson, 2023) in recent years. The concepts are discussed and debated frequently in journalism schools (Peuchaud, 2021; Solkin, 2022). Less attention, however, has been paid to how local reporters at small, often rural newsrooms understand and view ideas such as objectivity and transparency in the context of their work covering small town councils, zoning boards, agriculture or community events. Measuring the relative value of objectivity and transparency as core values guiding local journalists in Canada is the first aim of this study. The second is to try and determine how local reporters conceptualize the idea of transparency as it impacts their daily work. The final aim is to determine if there is a link between years of newsroom experience and reporters' perceptions of these guiding principles.

This study is based on 22 semi-structured phone/Zoom interviews with journalists and editors working at local publications in Canada. Interviews were conducted between October 2024 and April 2025. Most respondents worked at local newspapers in small communities with fewer less than 10 staff members. Participants were selected based on the inclusion of their outlet in a publicly available database of established local news outlets hosted by News Media Canada, an industry association. Study participants had the option of being quoted anonymously or having their comments included on the record for attribution, following standard journalistic interview practices, while adhering to academic research ethics guidelines. The majority chose to have their responses quoted on-the-record, for attribution. Participants received an interview guide with standardized questions ahead of interviews, and the principal investigator asked specific follow-up questions in some cases. Interviews typically lasted 30-40 minutes.

RQ1) as a core value guiding journalism practice, do local reporters in Canada prioritize objectivity or transparency? Why?

RQ2) how do local reporters conceptualize the idea of transparency as a value guiding their coverage?

RQ3) is there a relationship between years of newsroom experience and journalists' views on the relative importance of objectivity and transparency as guiding values?

Journalists were asked directly whether they prioritized objectivity or transparency as a value guiding their work, with the option of only choosing one option. A specific question aimed at measuring a reporter's approach to transparency was conceptualized based on analyzing the broader academic literature on transparency in journalism to tease out four interpretations of the concept (Arsenault, 2024; Black, 1997; Transparency International, 2024; Vos & Craft, 2017). Those four options were put directly to study participants as an attempt to quantify their view of the concept. Participants were also given the chance to expand upon their understandings of both concepts to provide more nuance and detail. Responses were categorized and collated into spreadsheets and interviews were transcribed in an attempt to offer both qualitative and quantitative understandings of the issues. Reporters were also asked about the number of years they have worked in the industry and their responses were cross checked with publicly available data sources, such as LinkedIn and company websites.

Methodological critiques

Attempting to quantify views on complex, nuanced and contested subjects such as journalists' perceptions of objectivity and transparency is inherently challenging. Many respondents gave answers such as "both are important" (Author interview 20, 2025) or "it depends how you define the terms" (Author interview 11, 2025). Extrapolating measurable data on terms with evolving and contested meanings is challenging. The sample, while reasonable in size, is narrow in scope focused only on local reporters in Canada, making it harder to draw broader conclusions about how evolving interpretations on these ideas influence daily coverage. Similarly, trying to streamline the meaning of transparency in journalism into four measurable definitions is fraught; entire books have been dedicated to examining the concept (Maras, 2013; Wallace, 2019; Craft & Heim, 2008) meaning narrowing the definition to four possibilities is imprecise. Finally, many local reporters said they had not thought about these broader ideas guiding journalism practice and theory. In

an era of declining budgets for original coverage and expanding workloads, local reporters responsible for producing 12-15 original stories each week said they barely had time to eat, let alone moments for reflection on broader theoretical concepts (Author interview 14, 2025; Author interview 17, 2025). These critiques aside, there is value in understanding how changing ideas in journalism education and theory impact the foundation of the news ecosystem via the work of local reporters. And while specific quantitative elements of the study design could be questioned, the mix of qualitative data and reporter insights on their own terms adds new information to ongoing debates about how evolving journalistic values impact reporters' approaches to their work in observable ways.

Transparency versus objectivity

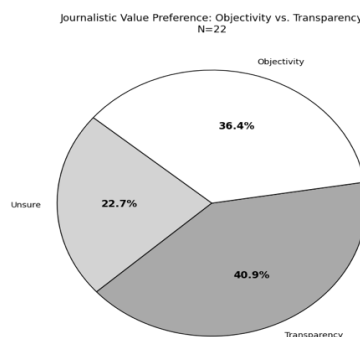
There was clear agreement among study participants that both objectivity and transparency are key values underpinning local news reporting (Author interview 16, 2025; Author interview 12, 2025; Author interview 6, 2024). Slightly more participants 40.9% cited transparency as the most important value when they could choose only one, versus 36.6% who cited objectivity. More than 22% of respondents said they were unsure which one was more important or otherwise declined to answer. "Transparency is more important to me than objectivity," said a reporter with the Lakeside Leader newspaper in northern Alberta (Author interview 7, 2024). "Transparency is where you build your trust; if we make a mistake we admit it. I think that transparency is more important as it gives that involvement." A reporter with Canada's National Observer, an online outlet, backed that general position, stating:

"We are in this age where there is a debate over objectivity; I would be on the side of the argument that objectivity is an outdated concept and the only way to combat that is with transparency. I think that's the direction journalism should be moving ... [For] the new generation of journalists; objectivity can't be the North Star anymore and transparency can give people more information to base their beliefs" (Author interview 2, 2024).

Others ranked objectivity slightly higher as a value guiding their reporting. "You can't approach a story if you have your mind made up already," said one Ontario-based

newspaper reporter, citing the value of objectivity (Author interview 14, 2025). “You have to be open to all possibilities, whether they align with your beliefs or not.” That perspective linking objectivity and professionalism aligned with the view of a 40-year industry veteran who covers civic affairs for the Claresholm Local Press/Fort Macleod Gazette in Alberta. He said: “Objectivity is more important than transparency. If you are being objective, transparency should be obvious. You aren’t putting in your opinion or you’re bent. When you are being objective, you are being a professional” (Author interview 5, 2024).

A substantial portion of respondents, more than one in five, declined to answer definitively on whether objectivity or transparency played a larger role in guiding their work. “They are probably both important,” said a Saskatchewan-based reporter with less than five years of newsroom experience (Author interview 16, 2025). “I wouldn’t say one is more important than the other.” Others who declined to answer directly presented a unified conception of the two ideas. “There is a very strong argument that objectivity is transparency,” said a Manitoba-based reporter (Author interview 10, 2024). “Some people think objectivity means you are a robot and you don’t have opinions; the other is that objectivity is a consistent message transparently communicated with people.”



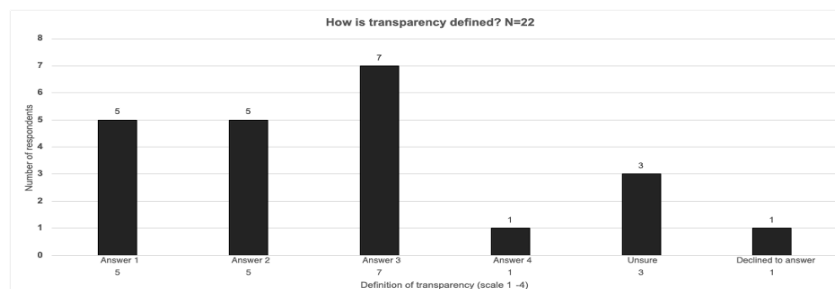
As a value guiding your journalism, what's more important: objectivity or transparency? (you can pick only one)
Source: Author interviews

Understandings of transparency

When asked to describe their understanding of transparency as it impacts their work, there was a broad consensus among local reporters but plenty of divergence on specifics

(Author interview 13, 2025; Author interview 18, 2025; Author interview 21, 2025). To one long time journalist now working for ECA Review newspaper the concept means “honesty and truth” and “being as accurate as possible” (Author interview 6, 2024). When given four options for defining transparency as it applies to their work, the most popular interpretation (n=7) was, “An ethical principle for journalists guiding how they relate to their audiences, sources, editors and the general community.” The second most popular response (n=5) was a tie between “The characteristic of governments, companies, organizations and individuals of being open in the clear disclosure of information, rules, plans, processes and actions” and “The conduct of public affairs in the open or otherwise subject to public scrutiny.” Many respondents who choose one of the three most popular options added notes of caution when given the chance to frame the concepts in their own words, such as a Burnaby Beacon reporter who said, “Transparency means different things for different actors” (Author interview 1, 2024). A veteran reporter based in Alberta said:

Transparency has to be the top of the list of concerns in everything you do in journalism. Once you miss that, your integrity is eroded. Once your integrity is eroded the trust is eroded and what are you? (Author interview 5, 2024).



As a follow-up question on transparency;

a. You can choose only one of the following. As a journalist transparency to me means:

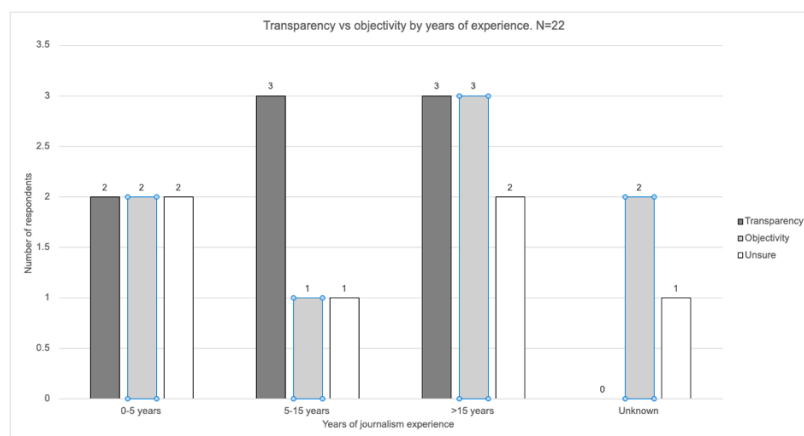
- i. The characteristic of governments, companies, organizations and individuals of being open in the clear disclosure of information, rules, plans, processes and actions;
- ii. The conduct of public affairs in the open or otherwise subject to public scrutiny.
- iii. An ethical principle for journalists guiding how they relate to their audiences, sources, editors and the general community.
- iv. a praxis of engaged journalism and research focused on the means of reporting – how information is wrenched from powerful actors rather than an elusive end goal or final steady state where openness has been attained

Source: Author interviews

The notion that transparency should be viewed as an active praxis to break stories and obtain new information from powerful actors received minimal support (n=1), potentially because it is a newer interpretation of the concept (Arsenault, 2024) and few of the local reporters interviewed said they had time to devote to investigative or adversarial journalism (Author interview 4, 2024; Author interview 10, 2024). The approaches of transparency most popular with respondents fit largely within standard interpretations of the concept, as exemplified by the definition offered by Transparency International (Transparency International, 2024).

Does newsroom experience influence perspectives on objectivity and transparency?

As objectivity has been questioned by journalism educators (Muñoz-Torres, 2012) one hypothesis prior to conducting this study was that newer reporters would be more likely to prioritize transparency as a guiding value for their work, while reporters with more newsroom experience could be more likely to favor objectivity. The data did not support that hypothesis. There was a slight increase in journalists with between 5 and 15 years of experience who favored transparency over objectivity but support for each of the ideas was equal among reporters with more than 15 years of experience and those with less than five years of experience. In-depth participant responses on why journalists prioritized one of the two values made few mentions of journalism education or links to shifts in academic scholarship around the subjects. Instead most participants, regardless of newsroom experience, referenced longstanding ideas about objectivity and transparency. “I don’t think many of my older colleagues would disagree with my definition of objectivity in terms of being truthful, doing due diligence and fact checking,” said a Manitoba-based reporter with less than 15 years of newsroom experience (Author interview 11, 2025). “I think that term objectivity has taken on a new meaning for younger journalists who are more comfortable interrogating our biases versus older colleagues who may believe they can be more robotic.”



Discussion and conclusion

The paper has shown a slight prioritization of transparency over objectivity for local reporters in Canada as a core value for guiding their journalism. However, when compared to the broader consensus in the academic journalism literature critiquing objectivity, the dissemination of those shifts in theoretical conceptions among scholars seems to be having a marginal or slow impact on local practitioners in the field, presenting a disconnect from theory into practice. Definitions of the terms “objectivity” and “transparency” among local reporters remain fluid. One journalist based in northern Canada working in her first newsroom, for instance, prioritized objectivity over transparency “in the sense that you are thinking about the voices you include in your reporting and who hasn’t been included yet, and being able to gauge which sources should be there and which shouldn’t be. For instance, a climate denier who doesn’t respect science or facts maybe shouldn’t have a voice in a story about science or climate change” (Author interview 21, 2025). Some scholars, in contrast, would not associate that position with a defence of journalistic objectivity (Callison, 2021; Van Eck, Mulder & Dewulf, 2019), likely deeming her approach as a rejection of “bothesidesism” which is often linked to the idea of objectivity (Ben-Shai, 2023).

The findings add depth and frontline newsroom texture to long-running debates in journalism studies and journalism education. While a small number of respondents offered structural critiques of objectivity as a guiding value for news, the majority said it remains

an important ideal underpinning their reporting. “Objectivity can be important too,” said a reporter in Alberta who prioritized transparency out of the two options (Author interview 9, 2024). “You just really want to show that truth; to report on it. Tell me what happened, give me what happened and why. Make it as accurate as possible.” An editor based in suburban Ontario made a related point. “I try to be self-aware enough to know about my internal biases,” said the editor who completed a doctorate in anthropology prior to getting into journalism and reported having some knowledge of scholarly debates around the issues (Author interview 18, 2025). “As much as we strive to be objective, transparency I think is the more important.”

The study did not find a conclusive link between the number of years a reporter has worked in the industry and whether they prioritize objectivity or transparency in their approach to journalism. For defining transparency as it impacts their work, participants offered responses broadly in sync with the standard interpretation of the concept, as offered by organizations such as Transparency International (Transparency International 2024). It remains unclear how a slight preference for transparency over objectivity as a guiding value influences coverage priorities for local reporters, especially given the fluid approaches participants used in defining the two terms.

More targeted research is needed at the local level on what audience members believe should guide reporters in their communities as an ethical North Star for coverage. Likewise, while this paper is the first to examine how local journalists in Canada view the relative importance of objectivity and transparency in guiding their reporting, more research into how these ideals are conceptualized by national and international reporters would be valuable. This additional research could help scholars better understand how ideals in journalism studies impact reporting practice in different segments of the industry, along with possible points of divergence and convergence between local and national journalists. Better understandings of ethical ideals and how reporters conceptualize them will not, of course, address the industry’s interrelated challenges of declining trust and revenues. But as profound strains hit small newsrooms across North America, there is value in understanding the shifting ethical poles influencing community coverage.

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Appendix

Interview #	News outlet	Coverage area or beat	How is transparency defined?
1	Burnaby Beacon	Municipal reporter	"Transparency for me means being honest about different sources of funding or whatever is affecting your reporting."
2	Canada's National Observer	Federal policy, focus on energy/climate	"We are in this age where there is a debate over objectivity; I would be on the side of the argument that objectivity is an outdated concept and the only way to combat that is with transparency."
3	IndigiNews	Human rights and the environment	"Transparency to me as a reporter is understanding the intent of a story, the ethics of journalism, reporting on a story, I'm always telling sources what I am writing about."
4	Energeticcity.ca, Moose Media	Indigenous voices reporter	"Holding yourself accountable, other people holding themselves accountable for the stories you tell, the facts or situations you uncover and taking responsibility for the reaction and said story."
5	Claresholm Local Press/ Fort Macleod Gazette	Civic news reporter	"Transparency has to be the top of the list of concerns in everything you do in journalism. Once you miss that, your integrity is eroded. Once your integrity is eroded the trust is eroded and what are you?"
6	ECA Review	Multimedia journalist	"Transparency also means honesty and truth to me. If you are being as accurate as possible."
7	Lakeside Leader	Community reporter in Wabasca, Alberta	"I try hard to be objective but there was an article idea I was too passionate about and told the editor. It was really newsy and needed to be dealt with right now. Transparency is where you build your trust; if we make a mistake we admit it. I think that transparency is more important as it gives that involvement. "
8	Editor, Drayton Valley and District Free Press	Politics	"I think people are going to see transparency whether they want it or not; in a small town there are conversations happening in the Legion or coffee shop. I need to be convinced our reporting is objective and will argue with anyone about transparency who wants that. "
9	Lakeland Today	Civic/multimedia reporter	"I would have to say transparency. Objectivity can be important too. You just really want to show that truth; to report on it. Tell me what happened, give me what happened and why. Make it as accurate as possible."
10	Brandon Sun	General assignment reporter	"I think transparency actually means objectivity. If you inform the public on how you did your job, that's essentially objectivity. If you say, 'I only interviewed people on this side of the argument and only.'"
11	Winnipeg Free Press	Education reporter	"I think transparency for sure. My guiding principles as a journalist are wanting to be as close to the ground as possible for reporting."

12	Bay Today	Civic and diversity issues	"It's objectivity, right? It's accountability. And it is telling both sides of things, when you can, right? There's always more work to be done because, you know, obviously still, newsrooms are understaffed, but for my part, I strive to always tell the story."
13	Barrie Today	Civic news reporter	"It's the single most important thing, with integrity. Transparency and integrity are the only 2 things we have as journalists; it's your reputation. My job is to report 100% accurately what happened and why it's important to the community. Beyond that, not my concern."
14	Local Ontario newspaper	N/A	"Objectivity and transparency should be the same; I wouldn't separate those."
15	Bay Today.ca	Regional issues across Northwestern Ontario	"I actually consider transparency more important. I never actually use the word 'objectivity' -- as Walter Cronkite said, 'if I were objective, I would be a vegetable' when you walk into a room you immediately make judgements on the people in the room. Balance is what you go for."
16	Anonymous, Saskatchewan	Municipal, First Nations and education	"I think they are probably both important. I wouldn't say one is more important than the other. "
17	Local Ontario newspaper	Civic news reporter	"You have to be able to be transparent. I think we are in such an age of disinformation that being transparent is a novelty. Everyone is hiding behind their webpages or sub stacks. "
18	Editor in Chief of Local-news.ca	Editor-in- Chief	"I think as an anthropologist, I try to be self-aware enough to know about my internal biases. I think transparency. As much as we strive to be objective, transparency I think is the more important."
19	Anonymous 4, Northern Canada	N/A	"I definitely think, specifically in the north, transparency as a reporter means explaining to people what you are doing 'I am recording, here's when you can expect it to be out, here's my cellphone.'"
20	Olivia Bradbury, The Shoreline	N/A	"Me talking about the core value of objectivity, I do also value and try to prioritize transparency. I think my background as a creative writer tries to make me pay close attention to the objectivity of my work."
21	Cabin Radio	Northwest Territories, housing and Indigenous affairs	"In terms of more trauma informed work and what that looks like I have put together a document I have sent to people that spells out exactly what they can expect from the interview process and not to catch anyone off guard so they can say they can shut it down or take a break. I don't do that for daily stories, just stories that might be difficult."
22	The Guysborough Journal	Editor	"They're the key touchstones. I think the best thing to do in a straight news reporting environment is objectivity. The whole thing about transparency is you have to be transparent anyway ... Both are primary I would think."

Time to reboot journalism education: A critical analysis of India's journalism and mass communication landscape

Bharthur, S.*

Abstract

Journalism and Mass Communication (J&MC) education in India has a century-long legacy, with over 1,300 public and private institutions. Yet, skepticism about its value persists, rooted in the belief that journalists are “born, not made.” Compounded by structural, ethical, and professional challenges—such as issues of ownership, corporatization, regulation, and media freedom—India’s media sector faces critical scrutiny. These challenges raise fundamental questions about the readiness of J&MC education to equip professionals for a rapidly evolving landscape.

Introduction

Journalism and Mass Communication (J&MC) education has traversed a long path in South Asia with a cumulative history of more than 100 years if we take the theosophical society of India's attempts to start a programme in 1918-1920 (Nadig, 1966). In the University system it has completed more than 80 years (K.E. Eapen, 1995). The colonial context of the entire South Asian Region needs to be recalled for the nature of the influence.

Anglo-Saxon academic traditions and broader ideological shifts, including the post-Cold War tilt towards a unipolar global order have shaped J&MC education in India (Eapen et al., 2001). These historical trajectories raise important questions about how media professionals are trained within diverse and unequal contexts. The colonial roots of university education (Macaulay & Babington, 1935) and its expansion after Independence remain significant, particularly given the limited access to such opportunities for large sections of the population. A major point of contention is the medium of instruction—English—which continues to dominate, despite being inaccessible to many (Pioneer, 2018). This creates a disconnect, especially given the growing prominence of Indian language media, which offers considerable employment potential (Jeffrey, 2009). Paradoxically, institutions often persist with English-medium programmes, citing its commercial value and the privileges associated with English-language media—albeit in a smaller, more elite segment of the job market. This tension between linguistic accessibility and market-driven imperatives remains a critical curricular and policy challenge. This has been addressed in Hindi journalism training efforts (Neyazi, 2011).

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While formal degrees in journalism were once met with skepticism, the emergence of dedicated media institutions and university-backed J&MC schools has helped reduce resistance within the industry. However, standalone programs—particularly those in public and private universities not linked to media organizations continue to face pressure to prove their relevance and alignment with employment opportunities.

Statement of problem

J&MC schools are critically responsible for incorporating AI qualitatively and judiciously into their pedagogy and training. This integration must go beyond technical literacy—it should sharpen students' critical and analytical capacities, enabling them to assess and ethically apply AI in journalistic and communication contexts. Crucially, such training must also engage with the socio-linguistic realities of India. With emerging policy frameworks now focusing on inclusivity through the promotion of Indian languages in digital and AI-driven domains, there is a timely opportunity for institutions to align their curricula with this vision. Doing so can help bridge the language divide in media access and participation, ensuring that AI technologies are not limited to elite, English-dominant spaces but are meaningfully integrated into diverse linguistic and cultural contexts across the country (Mohan, 2021).

An essential component of J&MC education, particularly at the master's level and in emerging doctoral programs, is research. Increasingly, international, regional, and national discourses have questioned the limitations of dominant media theories and models (Halloran, 1981; Nordenstreng, 2004), prompting a call for grounded research in postcolonial and geopolitical contexts. For a country like India—asserting greater visibility on the global stage—developing context-sensitive research traditions is not only timely but necessary (Liu et al., 2017). While this paper does not delve deeply into research frameworks, it affirms the importance of cultivating practices that respond to India's specific social, cultural, and political realities as a vital extension of curricular development.

Literature review

Many J&MC programmes that emerged between the 1950s and 1980s were shaped by both British and American models, influenced significantly by the academic backgrounds and orientations of the faculty who led them. Journalism and Mass Communication was formally included as a recognized subject within the University Grants Commission (UGC) framework in the late 1970s. This recognition was crucial, as it enabled the regulatory body to allocate funds to higher education institutions offering these programmes. Alongside this, the UGC also undertook assessments of the scope and

structure of the programmes, including recommendations on minimum equipment and infrastructure required for their effective delivery.

Curricular debates consistently focus on the persistent mismatch between industry demands and academic outputs. This disconnect has polarized opinion: should education prioritize vocational training, or should it also foster broader social awareness? Many J&MC institutions find themselves caught in this tension, often facing criticism for emphasizing theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical relevance.

Nomenclature aside (Sundeeep, 2008), efforts have been sustained to develop a model curriculum for J&MC education. The University Grants Commission (UGC) undertook initiatives to propose a uniform syllabus across institutions. However, these moves raised concerns within India's federal academic structure, where universities strongly value their autonomy—especially in curriculum design. On the international front, UNESCO played a key role in designing model curriculum and convening consultations that included South Asian participants (Banda Ed, 2013). These discussions led to a broad framework and emphasized contextual adaptability. The consensus underscored that while standardisation has merits, curricula must remain sensitive to regional, cultural, and institutional specificities.

Experience with curricular development at the master's and postgraduate diploma levels reveals a set of core components that have consistently shaped J&MC programs (Bharthur, 2017). These include editorial and reporting practices, media ethics, communication theories and models, and broader thematic concerns such as culture, globalisation, advertising, public relations, and the increasingly sophisticated domain of corporate communication. Institutions often differentiate themselves through specialized tracks that reflect their capacity to add value and respond to industry trends (Raman, 2015).

Underlying these curricular structures are enduring pedagogical concerns—most notably, the centrality of language proficiency, writing, and communication skills. The need to cultivate a deeper understanding of India's complex socio-demographic landscape is equally critical. This includes its linguistic and religious diversity and the persistent structural issues of inequity, limited access, and uneven participation, particularly within emerging digital media ecosystems (Srinivas, 2016). Any robust curriculum must grapple with these realities to remain relevant and socially responsive. While there is increasing sensitivity to these challenges, the ability to meaningfully translate them into classroom practice remains limited and uneven, often constrained by institutional capacity, faculty preparedness, and entrenched pedagogical models.

India actively engages with global trends, challenges, and ethical concerns surrounding the use of artificial intelligence (Jain & Sriram, 2023), especially in the media sector. The country adopts emerging technologies, navigates regulatory complexities, and addresses ethical dilemmas such as misinformation, data privacy, and algorithmic bias. Indian media organizations increasingly integrate AI for content creation, curation, and audience targeting, while policymakers and civil society push for responsible and transparent AI use (Ashfaq, 2022). Industry developments indicate a growing integration of AI across various functions, initially raising concerns about job displacement, especially in entry-level roles. However, there is a gradual shift towards recognising the irreplaceable value of human insight, creativity, and contextual judgment. Increasingly, the focus is turning to how the next generation of media professionals—emerging from J&MC schools—can be equipped to work alongside AI, not in competition with it, leveraging its tools while retaining the core human dimensions of journalism and communication.

Findings & discussions

Understanding the structure and evolution of the media system (Thakurta, 2012) is crucial to contextualizing the challenges and expectations placed on J&MC education. The dynamics of ownership, language diversity, technological disruption, and regulatory shifts all shape the professional environment into which graduates enter (RSF, 2023). These systemic factors not only influence curriculum design but also demand a rethinking of pedagogical priorities and institutional strategies.

The vast and diverse landscape of the Indian media system (Kaarle, 2020) while not elaborated in detail here, must be foregrounded and recognised for its influence on both the accessibility of media and the spectrum of emerging employment opportunities. The continued relevance of legacy media (Athique, & Adrian et al., 2007), with their established journalistic practices, sustains the rationale for students to pursue formal degrees in journalism and mass communication. At the same time, the rapid expansion of the digital ecosystem (Aneez & Neyazi, 2019) has significantly intensified aspirations for careers in media and related fields.

However, the widespread proliferation of J&MC schools across India—once driven by high demand—is now facing visible strain (Bharthur, 2017). The slowdown is linked not only to a saturated and hyper-competitive job market but also to concerns over return on investment. Many students and families are increasingly questioning the value of high-fee programmes when compensation in entry-level media jobs remains modest. This mismatch between educational costs, industry remuneration, and employment stability poses a serious challenge for institutions trying to sustain enrolment and credibility in the long term.

This raises a deeper dilemma for institutions: is the core challenge one of curriculum design, or does it lie more fundamentally in the economics of education and employment? Balancing academic rigour, professional relevance, and financial sustainability remains an ongoing tension. Institutions are under growing pressure to offer meaningful, future-ready training while justifying high programme costs in the face of a shrinking and highly stratified job market. Addressing this dilemma demands both structural reforms and pedagogical innovation.

Conclusions & recommendations

While this paper does not offer a full structural analysis of the Indian media system, it recognizes that its key features—such as the coexistence of legacy and digital platforms, language fragmentation, and economic pressures—shape not just employment and curriculum, but also the epistemic and ethical terrain of journalism itself. The rise of platform-driven content ecosystems, where unverified social media posts often masquerade as journalism (Alisha, 2018 & Al-Zaman, 2021), and the increasing use of AI in content production, further complicate the boundaries of what is considered credible or professional media. These shifts call for urgent pedagogical responses that prepare students to critically engage with the media landscape—not just as future practitioners, but as responsible communicators in the post-truth era.

Students must be prepared to navigate an information environment saturated with personalized, echo chamber-like articulations and cluttered content. At the same time, the broader political and economic structures that shape media discourse have facilitated the manufacture of consent—often through patterns of consumption and uncritical alignment with dominant narratives.(Chomsky, 1985 & Haliso, 2011) Dissent, though more visible in the digital age, frequently struggles to translate into sustained or systemic change, as illustrated by movements such as the Arab Spring. In such a context, journalism education must not only foster critical literacy but also equip students to interrogate the deeper power structures that shape both speech and silence.

Ethics have surfaced as a larger dimension in media education particularly after many aberrations in media practices such as the paid news at the industry and professional levels (Council, 2010 & Thakurta, 2013). Media trials (Amit, 2021)and media captures (Schiffrin, 2021) challenge the approach to training and teaching of media ethics. Questions about morality at the individual level as well the desire and inclination to institutionally embed ethics and ethical frameworks are challenging. Rebooting Indian journalism must prioritize a national ethics architecture that is real-time, enforceable, and technologically aware.

Amidst these challenges, there is also a growing—if nebulous—impulse to integrate the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) into journalism education (Veer, 2008). While some initiatives have emerged, their relevance and application in a field grounded in critical inquiry, professional norms, and contemporary global practices remain to be meaningfully articulated and examined. A high-level committee is examining the framework, its strengths, and limitations as well.

In this light, the conference theme— **“Rebooting Journalism Education”**—is both timely and reflective. It signals a growing sensitivity to such complex and comparable challenges faced across institutions, not just in India but globally. The call to “reboot” is not merely about updating content, but about rethinking the structures, expectations, and purposes of journalism education itself, especially in contexts where socio-economic disparities and digital disruptions are deeply entangled.

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Preparing students for freelance work: An analysis of journalism curricula

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Abstract

This study examines business course offerings in ACEJMC-accredited journalism programs. Analysis showed that most accredited programs offer at least one course in business, entrepreneurship, or freelance work. These include entry-level and upper-level courses, as well as required and elective courses. Class descriptions indicated emphases in business reporting; financial and economic aspects of media industries; the media business environment; and freelance business skills. Implications for journalism programs are discussed.

Introduction

Preparing students for freelance work: An analysis of journalism curricula

The journalism industry has drastically reduced staffing in newsrooms globally for decades (UNESCO, 2022). Although journalists' work proves essential to societies, journalists "are poorly remunerated for their work" (Roses, 2011, p. 203), and low salaries have contributed to low retention and/or high turnover rates within industry jobs (e.g., Reinardy, 2009; Setiawati & Thomas, 2024), especially in rural communities (Carey, 2017). The low salaries do not account for the increased workload journalists experience (Hayes & O'Sullivan, 2023) — and in recent decades the increased harassment and dangers journalists face (Miller, 2021).

One significant outcome from the industry's economic woes is an increase in freelance journalists. The Editorial Freelancers Association reported its membership increased about 100% between 2011 and 2021 (Drohan, 2021, para. 6) as the "gig worker" labor market has become a necessity for thousands of journalists globally. Additionally, the opportunity for journalists to work as freelancers or contractors has allowed for more

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flexible ways of managing work and life, particularly during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2022). Full-time freelance careers appear to be appealing to a growing number of recent journalism graduates — and current students — as well (Marino, 2022).

How are university journalism programs addressing these industry changes? Are programs teaching students about the business of journalism? Are they teaching students how to be successful freelance journalists? This study explores whether accredited programs devote space in their curricula to educating students on these elements of the labor market. In particular, this study thematically analyzes course titles and descriptions of business-related classes in journalism programs accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. The goal was to evaluate the curricula to see whether standalone freelance courses are taught and whether any of the other classes explicitly mention freelance skills. The analysis illuminates how journalism programs view freelance labor and what they deem to be essential skills for these careers. The findings should spark discussion on the potential need of better aligning the curricula to meet the growing needs of freelance and entrepreneurial journalists in the gig economy.

This project focuses on training offered within university programs. As noted globally (Weaver & Willnat, 2012) and in the United States (Willnat et al., 2017), most journalists have college degrees, even if many do not specifically have degrees in journalism or mass communication. The fact that most journalists attend universities suggests that the courses offered by these programs would have the potential to influence future journalists' perspectives on the industry, especially if those courses were open to non-journalism majors.

Similarly to the news industry, higher education institutions around the world find themselves struggling, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Dennis, 2021; Owens et al., 2022). Additionally, myriad governments now push for colleges and universities to provide students with more so-called applied-skills programs rather than more theory-based liberal arts degrees (e.g., Dekker, 2020). Journalism resides in the same position as employers continually seek journalists with increasingly robust skill sets (e.g., Bernhard & Russmann, 2024; Guo & Volz, 2021), which places strain on an academy that vacillates

between being considered a trade school or a place that teaches a wide range of knowledge and perspectives (Lugo-Ortiz, 2016). Overall, “journalism skill-sets are recognized and valued by a wide range of employers outside the industry” (O’Donnell et al., 2016, p. 48), and so having a knowledge of applying these skills in a more entrepreneurial context could be beneficial.

Literature review

Since the emergence of the internet, journalism has been struggling to redefine its business model (e.g., Broussard et al., 2019; Jin, 2012; Vukanovic, 2011), which has worsened with the infiltration of artificial intelligence into the legacy media industries (Dandurand et al., 2023). Generally, when there are upheavals in the journalism industry, leaders turn to academia for research solutions (e.g., Kim et al., 2024). For example, journalism curricula underwent wholesale changes to account for the “modern” journalists, aka the do-it-all journalist (Mulrennan, 2018). In this case, despite the shift toward more skills ... and increased productivity, the industry continues to struggle sustaining full-time jobs and providing adequate wages (e.g., Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2021).

In recent years, journalism programs have added an increased focus on entrepreneurship in their course offerings (López Linares, 2025). A report from Sembra Media (2023) and UNESCO found Latin American and Spanish journalism programs had a 15% increase in entrepreneurial classes from 2017 to 2022, with most of these entrepreneurial courses being required classes. The report also explored the nature of the courses: “The primary topics covered by these courses are business models (51.5%), the status of the industry (45.5%), and funding sources and monetization (39.6%)” (p. 6).

Several studies have found that current practitioners desire mass communication educators to provide more instruction on business acumen. Solomon (2016), for example, interviewed freelance journalists from multiple countries, finding: “Marketing is a challenge to many of these young journalists, many of whom wish they had learned basic business skills in college. Most of the journalists did not feel prepared to run a small business, which is essentially what a freelancer does” (p. 245). Appelman and Hettinga

(2024) surveyed copy editors, proofreaders, and fact-checkers about the skills they think are important for new hires, and many freelancers mentioned entrepreneurial skills. The researchers further concluded that mass communication programs could consider “replacing some multimedia skills with business skills and adding information on freelance careers” (Appelman & Hettinga, 2024, p. 451). While higher education has increasingly focused on the skills and ethics needed to acquire journalism jobs (Mulrennan, 2018), freelance work arguably requires additional skills.

Marín-Sanchiz et al. (2023) created a freelance “toolkit comprising three content strategies (diversification, differentiation, and optimization) and six self-management strategies (negotiation, rejection, social networks, branding, education, and association) to improve working conditions and job satisfaction” (p. 451). Having knowledge of journalism or expertise in business management was not enough, according to the freelancers interviewed in their study. Freelancers need a holistic range of skills and abilities to be successful economically and for a long period of time. Additionally, freelance journalists told Hayes and Silke (2018) that receiving payment for labor can be a significant issue. Both studies report that marketing and branding, though not necessarily part of a traditional journalism curriculum, remain essential to freelancing even though those behaviors are not necessarily considered labor that earns income.

Within this media industry landscape, this study explores whether relevant skills are being taught in undergraduate journalism programs. The analysis focuses on three research questions:

RQ1: Do most ACEJMC-accredited journalism programs offer classes in business, entrepreneurship, or freelance work?

RQ2: What types of business and entrepreneurship classes are accredited journalism programs offering?

RQ3: What types of freelance classes are accredited journalism programs offering?

Research methodology

This project examines the journalism curricula from Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications schools, which includes 105 programs within the United States (“Accredited Programs,” n.d.). The researchers selected ACEJMC because these programs tend to have a more industry-facing curricula — As the ACEJMC mission statement says, the organization “encourages educational innovation” and seeks “to prepare students for careers in journalism and mass communication around the world” (“Mission Statement,” n.d., para. 5). Because these programs are encouraged to prepare students to work in the journalism industry, we were interested in whether the programs were incorporating freelance topics and skills into their curricula.

The researchers went to the ACEJMC website to identify the current list of accredited schools. One of the researchers then went to the schools’ websites to locate their list of offered classes. The researcher then downloaded the list of classes for the research team to code. First, the researchers examined the curricula to look for general themes. Then, they searched for the keywords “business,” “entrepreneur,” “entrepreneurship,” and “freelance” in course titles. The descriptions for these business- or freelance-focused classes were then examined to address the research questions.

The researchers employed thematic analysis to analyze the sample. Thus, they read the sample individually, separately deriving codes and themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Then, the authors worked together to agree as to the unique definitions and examples needed to answer the research questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017).

Findings

General themes

Across universities, the curricula had several similarities. They all generally emphasized career skills, often through hands-on production and writing classes. They also integrated digital technologies, with a focus on digital literacy, social media, and multimedia storytelling. The evolving media landscape was addressed throughout the programs, through courses such as data analytics, media entrepreneurship, and specialized

reporting on genres such as entertainment or sports. Ethics and media law were also a foundation across programs. These patterns were in line with ACEJMC accreditation standards for curriculum and instruction (“Accrediting Standards,” n.d).

RQ1: Course offerings in business, entrepreneurship, freelance

Across the 105 programs examined, 44 (41.90%) had at least one course that mentioned the word “business” in the title, 31 (29.52%) had a course that mentioned “entrepreneur” or “entrepreneurship,” and 11 (10.48%) had a course that included the word “freelance.” Almost two-thirds of the programs ($n = 63$, 60%) had at least one course with these terms: 42 programs (40%) had one of these types of courses, 19 programs had two (18.10%), and two programs (1.90%) had all three. Notably, 42 programs (40%) did not have any courses with these keywords in the title. Regarding *RQ1*, then, most ACEJMC-accredited journalism programs currently offer at least one course in business, entrepreneurship, or freelance work. Additionally, the courses ranged from entry-level to upper-level courses, and generally contained prerequisites.

RQ2: Types of business and entrepreneurship classes

As noted above, 44 courses (41.90%) mentioned “business” in the title. Within these courses, two themes emerged. The first theme was schools offering a skills-based business reporting class. These types of courses contained descriptions such as: “Examines how the U.S. economy works and how to find news in business, market and government data sources. Focuses on the role of corporations, financial markets and regulators, and benefiting students interested in sports, entertainment, political and investigative journalism” (“Business Journalism” course, Arkansas, 2025) and “This course focuses on news reporting and writing about business and finance. Topics of coverage may include reporting on personal finance issues, banking, government economic and regulatory policies, and corporations and other forms of business” (“Business Writing” course, Temple, 2025).

Temple University also highlights the other theme within “business,” which included courses studying the financial and economic aspects of media industries, with the courses often focusing on the volatile and uncertain nature of the various business models. For example, Temple offers “The business of journalism” course that:

... examines the evolution of business models to support journalism, exploring not only how those models work but also why they have emerged and how new models are being envisioned and created for the future. By exploring how business models affect journalistic content, practice and audience, this course prepares students to be more informed citizens as well as more innovative news producers.

The University of Missouri (n.d.) offers a class titled “Changing media business models” whose description is “Analysis of the economic changes in news media industry. Explore concepts and theories of monetizing media. Hands-on experience in creating innovations in media business models.”

As noted above, 31 courses (29.52%) mentioned “entrepreneur” or “entrepreneurship” in the title. These courses focused on teaching students about the business environment, but often from a hands-on approach. The University of Florida’s (n.d.) “Media entrepreneurship” course “Introduces media entrepreneurship with a focus on how digital technologies are transforming industries. Work in teams to develop new digital media businesses. Develop and pitch ideas, explore market analysis, develop business and financial plans, and study social media strategies.” Similarly, Florida International University uses its “Digital media entrepreneurship” class as a capstone in which “students will create digital media business proposals demonstrating their understanding of the needs of advertisers and end users in digital media.” Auburn University (2024) has an “Entrepreneurial journalism” course that focuses “on content, advertising, audience, and marketing in news organizations and applying entrepreneurial principles to journalism start-ups.” The excerpts from the course descriptions indicate an academic push toward teaching students how to develop a business model or run some sort of enterprise.

RQ3: Types of freelance classes

Overall, few programs explicitly mentioned freelancing in course titles. As noted above, 11 (10.48%) course titles included the word “freelance.” The courses followed two themes. The first theme was viewing freelance as a full-time business. For example, the University of North Carolina (n.d.) offers a “Freelance fundamentals” course in which “Students gain an understanding of the fundamentals of freelancing in the media and journalism industry. The course will utilize online learning tools to offer an introduction to skills and concepts necessary to manage a creative communication production business.” Ball State University (2024) offers a “Career readiness and freelance” course with the following description:

An introduction to the basics of career readiness, personal branding and the business models of independent contractors and organizations that hire media and/or strategic communications professionals. Identification of and preparation for professional freelancing and entrepreneurial opportunities within media and strategic communication.

The other theme for freelance courses was an emphasis on specific skills, often tailored to specific subfields of journalism. For instance, the University of Montana (2024) describes its “Freelance photography” class as follows:

This workshop-style class centers on editorial, commercial and retail photography. Students work on-location and in the photo studio. Students produce adventure portraiture, astrophotography, music/concert photography, product and food illustrations, fashion projects and travel stories. The course covers copyright, contracts, branding/promotion, pricing, stock and assignment photography, licensing, negotiation and the cost of doing business as a freelance photographer.

Similarly, Drake University (2024) offers a “Magazine freelance writing” class that develops print journalism skills:

Article writing for specifically targeted media outlets, from print magazines to consumer websites. Includes intensive editing of student work in and outside of class; critiques and analyses of professional work; and strategies on targeting and pitching of potential outlets. Students research, write and rewrite multiple pieces, from profiles to features, essays to reviews.

Also of note is that just because freelance was not mentioned in a course title does not mean those schools ignored freelance careers. In addition to the freelance photography class, the University of Montana (2024) also teaches “Marketing your work,” which has the following description:

Learn how to freelance and get paid for it. Develop your big idea. Create the next media success story. This class teaches the business of freelancing including pitching stories, negotiating contracts, filing invoices and understanding taxes. It also requires students to think like an entrepreneur and create a media project.

Thus, the freelance courses that emphasize skills do not eschew the “business” of freelance, but strongly emphasize how students leverage their specialty talents and go through more of the micro-processes related to freelance labor.

Discussion

Summary of results

Based on this analysis, most ACEJMC-accredited journalism programs currently offer at least one course in business, entrepreneurship, or freelance work. In analyzing these course descriptions, several themes emerged. The courses with “business” in the title included skills-based business reporting classes, as well as courses focused on the financial and economic aspects of media industries. Courses with “entrepreneurship” in the title

appeared to focus on understanding the business environment, often from a hands-on approach. The programs that included freelance-specific courses included those that looked at freelance work as a full-time business, as well as those that focused on more specific skills and subfields. Additionally, the upper-class courses tended to focus more on applying business skills or journalism skills, and the freelance courses tended to integrate both.

Implications

As more journalists find opportunities in freelance and contract work (Carpenter et al., 2022; Drohan, 2021), ACEJMC-accredited programs seem to be offering several types of classes to teach related skills. These findings extend work on entrepreneurship offerings in Latin American and Spanish journalism programs (López Linares, 2025; SembraMedia, 2023) and suggest that similar trends are occurring in the United States. While several studies have found that practitioners would like to see more business training (e.g., Appelman & Hettinga, 2024; Solomon, 2016), this study's findings suggest that journalism programs are working to address that concern.

Although most schools included some type of business class, only 10 percent included a course that specifically mentioned freelance careers. As noted in Marín-Sanchiz et al. (2023), freelance work involves a variety of skills, including those related to content (diversification, differentiation, and optimization) and self-management (negotiation, rejection, social networks, branding, education, and association p. 451). Based on this study's analyses, most accredited journalism schools are not offering standalone courses that teach these skill sets.

Some higher education journalism programs might not offer freelancing classes, and so journalists can supplement the skills they learned in school through professional associations, such as ACES: The Society for Editing (n.d.), the Poynter Institute (n.d.), Editorial Freelancers Association (n.d.), and the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education (n.d.). These programs offer a variety of workshops, classes, and certificates for practitioners to develop new skills. Notably, the career development opportunities

provided through professional associations are available without enduring the prerequisites found in many of the courses in the sample. These programs are also often more accessible to practitioners because participation can occur online and often asynchronously. Thus, journalism programs might explore offering and/or marketing similar types of career and skills development courses to practitioners while also removing prerequisites that might discourage practitioners from enrolling in the courses.

Conclusions & recommendations

The sample is not necessarily reflective of all classes offered by the ACEJMC programs as the researchers examined the course information readily accessible online. Programs likely have courses or course descriptions that were not listed online. While the researchers tried to review the most recent course catalogs when available, it is unclear how often some websites and courses were updated. Similarly, some courses that are listed in the online catalogs might not be regularly offered, and this analysis didn't account for that possibility. Also, this study examined only ACEJMC-accredited programs, and ACEJMC does not have a business requirement in its standards ("Accrediting Standards," n.d). Other journalism programs could be offering varying types and amounts of business-related courses that were not included in this sample.

Additionally, the researchers analyzed the course titles and descriptions for this study; future work could interview alumni, professors, or internship coordinators to better understand the courses and potential curriculum gaps. Future studies could also analyze syllabi or interview faculty to get a better sense of whether these skills are being taught and where in the curriculum that training is occurring. It's likely that some business-related skills are taught in journalism classes without these keywords in their titles, and it's also likely that these skills are being taught to students outside of classes, such as through career services and internship offices. A follow-up study could explore these alternate sources of related training. Also, while there is evidence indicating the proliferation of these courses is related to the instability in media economics/business (López Linares,

2025; Sembra Media, 2023), the study did not examine when the courses in the sample were first offered, so it's unclear whether they were a response to current trends.

Additionally, the researchers only looked at courses within journalism and mass communication programs; other academic units on campus likely teach these entrepreneurial skills, as well, so students interested in freelancing could be taking related classes in business schools. This could particularly be the case for smaller mass communication programs that don't have the capacity to offer related classes. Additionally, just because courses are offered, that does not mean students must — or would want to — take those courses. Recall that many entrepreneurial classes in Latin American and Spanish programs were required (Sembra Media, 2023). Thus, there are difficulties in making meaningful changes to curricula, especially balancing the multiple needs in journalism education, given a limited number of course credits.

This study focused on current undergraduate student curricula, and previous research looked at laid off or experienced journalists' experiences with freelancing (Hayes & Silke, 2018; Marín-Sanchiz et al., 2023). A future study could explore the graduating students' job expectations, in terms of whether they see themselves wanting a full-time job through an industry employer, or whether they strive to be self-employed as a freelancer. This seems highly salient given journalism students' recent embrace of freelance journalism (Marino, 2022).

Though this study did not explicitly examine artificial intelligence, a cursory analysis of the course offerings indicated that some schools are explicitly adding AI to their courses, with those classes focused on tool use. Future studies could explore whether journalism programs are teaching AI's effects on the journalism business model, considering that AI has significantly impacted the journalism industry (Dandurand et al., 2023), and subsequently global journalism education (e.g., Babacan et al., 2025; Demmar & Neff, 2023; Wenger et al., 2025).

Overall, the courses show journalism programs are focused on teaching some classes related to the business of media. They are going beyond preparing students as

content creators by helping to develop an understanding of economic realities and entrepreneurial opportunities within the media landscape.

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An exploratory study of key factors influencing media framing on tribal rights

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Abstract

Tribal rights are instrumental in safeguarding dignity and autonomy of the indigenous people. It guarantees prevention of tribal cultural genocide. This study explores the underlying dimensions of media framing concerning tribal rights using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and item analysis applied to survey data collected from 432 respondents. Media framing of stories using priming and agenda setting theories shed light in understanding how various factors impact how media reports on tribal communities and how such information is created and packaged. Studying the survey results, it showed that nine-factor framework aligns with the literature review. CFA demonstrated a good model fit of the correlation of nine factors identified. Political and economic pressures are strongly linked to the way indigenous voices are presented in the media. The study points out that government policies and who owns the media often ensure that media stories support the interests of the state or corporations, rather than those of indigenous people. The findings point out that gaps in journalism education help perpetuate biased reporting. This study seeks to explain the factors influencing media coverage of tribal rights and suggests ways to improve its fairness. The analysis shows that each of the nine factors reflect the connections between government control, colonial history, media ownership, political goodwill, economic development ideas and framing strategies. This analysis gives a clear picture of how media bias affects the way indigenous rights are perceived by the public.

Keywords: Media framing, tribal rights, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Introduction

Media plays an essential role in championing and fostering human rights. The role of media in protecting the tribal people human rights is a complex, dynamic and multifaceted issue compounded by both achievements and trials (Sanz & Alencar, 2020). Media institutions have been at the forefront in drawing international attention to the plight of tribal communities around the world (Gupta, 2022; Dreher et al., 2016 ; Schudson, 2002). Although their unwavering commitment to this fundamental cause is proof to the instrumental role they play in social justice advocacy, their allegiance seems to be conspicuously differentiated when it comes to human rights of the dominant society and that of the indigenous communities (Kazansky & Milan, 2021).

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Deliberations on tribal rights has become more important now due to the need for environmental justice, land management and preservation of culture (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010) (Dawson et al., 2023) (Nachet et al., 2022) (Grabowski et al., 2022) (Johnson & Sigona, 2022) (R. Gordon & Zelikoff, 2024). There are numerous evidences of a proliferation of social media networks that challenge mainstream narratives and highlight Indigenous perspectives on issues like self-determination, autonomy, sovereignty, climate change, land rights, and cultural preservation (Sonza, 2018) (Karsgaard & MacDonald, 2020). Although institutions such as UNESCO champion for the media to ensure fair representation and access to public discourse regarding indigenous issues, there are still instances of stereotypes affecting indigenous identity.

Literature review

The media packages information in a way to set tone and elicit certain sentiments and reactions from its audience. As it communicates to the audience, it relays a distinct interpretation of the event while safeguarding the focus of its interest usually vicarious to the state (Warren, 2014). The interpretation of an event and the focus of media interests lies in priming and the manner in which stories are reported (Hoewe, 2020). The media has had a tendency of amplifying indigenous protests, while implicitly labelling tribal culture inferior and trivializing pursuit of indigeneity (Lupien et al., 2024) (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019). The inextricable link between nature and the tribals has been explored so has the struggle for land. Tribal confrontation with the government is reported frequently by the media, what has scantily been aired and is often conveniently ignored is the recognition of indigenous people sovereignty which demands respect for the self-sufficient economy as their chosen path. Conversations around indigenous environmental stewardship and the value of their subtle and distinct culture grounded on self-sufficient economy are rarely held by the media (Grote & Johnson, 2021). The admittance of a distinct people inseparable with their land creates antagonism in the political realm because of the unwavering pursuit of economic growth in an era of diminishing nature (Albalade et al., 2022). The media seems to aid state institutions in shaping indigenous narratives and condensing them to specific events that fit in the political economic agenda probably because majority of those who own the media stations control state power (Warren, 2014).

Media treatment of human rights injustice involving the dominant society differs a great deal from uprisings and demonstrations coverage involving indigenous people (Glasson, 2010). The melee is often framed violent confrontations. While dominant society protests are framed human rights justice, those of the indigenous people are termed riots and subsequently does not receive same national or even international attention (Morris, 2005) (Austin-Broos, 2015). Most newspapers front page headlines and debates often reports information about indigenous autonomy and polity as a confrontation rather than consensus, protest rather than solidarity for universal human rights quest (Mang-Benza et al., 2021). The once bold and vibrant media whose ideologies were independent and neutral seems to have shifted gears and emerged as a powerful counterforce that provides platforms for indigenous voices and perspectives. Indigenous communities continue to struggle to have their rights recognized due to media misrepresentation (Fredericks et al., 2022). Tribal people marginalization stems from being side-lined and viewed through the lens of political, economic and cultural biases (H. S. J. Gordon, 2022). Indigenous movements serve as fundamental moments that are not merely isolated acts of civil disturbance, instead they are breakpoints upon which competing socio political economic forces contest tribal subtle culture and indigenous autonomy (Morris, 2005). Media coverage of human-rights related demonstrations strengthens dominant narratives at the detriment of indigenous voices (Viaene & González-Serrano, 2024). Such coverage influences the way the public views media interpretations.

Media can impact the way people think about tribal rights and how Indigenous communities are portrayed since news can either keep stereotypes alive or help people understand them better (Fredericks & Bargallie, 2020). How these issues are presented has a big impact on policy choices, public opinion and the progress of indigenous rights worldwide. The approach that the media frames Indigenous issues greatly affect the way people and policymakers liaise about tribal rights (Fredericks et al., 2022). Many tribal communities are often misrepresented and overlooked by mainstream media which tends to shape public perception influencing the portrayal of indigenous people socio-political narratives that govern their autonomy and sovereignty. Research on media framing has shown that the way issues are presented to the public influences how they are perceived and understood (Austin-Broos, 2015). Media outlets framing of indigenous protests, state interactions and cultural identity reinforce and reflect

existing power structures while simultaneously shaping the possibilities for Indigenous agency and political mobilization.

The complex interplay of cultural stereotypes, political agendas, and legal discourses that shape the portrayal and reception of Indigenous rights claims is manifested in the framing of indigenous movements by the media (Morris, 2005) (Grote & Johnson, 2021). Indigenous protests seem to be contested symbols that reflect paradigm shifts in state governance and indigenous policies (Warren, 2014). These demonstrations have not just been about an instant conflict between tribal people and government but about the long-term struggle over how indigenous distinctiveness and identity are understood, controlled, and politically mobilized within the state machinery (Fredericks et al., 2022). Priming and framing of the aborigines in the video footage during Brewarrina protest and the media binaries hitherto elicits debates focused on a reportage that is confined to the monopoly of state power and a by-product of colonial contempt (Gordon, 2022). This kind of an essentialist approach has overtime created a scenario whereby the media reports disproportionately. This is a reflection of selective reporting of indigenous stories by other media agencies around the world. Brewarrina protest was portrayed by the media as a riot rather than a people who have long sought for self-determination, autonomy and legal recognition. In their reportage, the media emphasized a social hierarchy that positions the aborigines' culture as inferior to that of the dominant society (Morris, 2005). Media representations recurrently equivocate between depicting Indigenous communities as militant or lawless and framing their struggles within broader civil rights or treaty rights discourses, which complicates public understanding of Indigenous claims (Bonner & Dammert, 2022).

The disproportionate media coverage given to protests organized by the tribal's compared to other similar disturbances involving dominant communities and police in many countries has been conspicuous since the 1980s when the Brewarrina incident was brought to the attention of the public (Morris, 2005). The "riot" brought out media selective reporting to the spotlight. There is huge information to unpack in how events and incidences associated with tribal rights are reported and interpreted which requires an urgent deeper analysis of how media framing influences public perception of tribal resistance. Several events involving indigenous people have happened globally whereby Indigenous communities have clashed with governments usually in protest

against land grabbing, systemic oppression and police brutality (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019). They have characterized a moment of change instigating a debate between the leftists and right-wing forces over indigenous people rights to their self-sufficient chosen lifestyle (Survival International, 2025). The analysis of events captured by media taps into a broader discourse pertaining relationship between state power and the role of media (Gupta, 2022). From the onset of Brewarrina coverage in 1987 to the latest media representation on the Shompen depicts a lens through which tensions between indigenous autonomy and state power are contested in public discourse however the media seemingly inclined towards representing state ideologies than indigenous worldview (Schudson, 2002).

The media's portrayal of the Red Power Movement, Oka crisis, Ipperwash crisis, Mapuche resistance, Dakota Access Pipeline demonstration and Juarez indigenous protests have played a pivotal role in redefining tribal autonomy (Hauptman, 2019) (Hutchinson, 2022) (Paterson, 2023) (Marshall, 1998) (Leone, 2022) (Grote & Johnson, 2021). The snapshots taken during these events provide fertile ground for political forces to reinforce stereotypes of indigenous people disorder and justify a stringent governance. The purported strict governance system is only established by conservative polity as a machinery to suit their vested interests (Schudson, 2002). Simultaneously, liberal voices frame the incidences as evidence of ongoing racial discrimination and police brutality, advocating for Indigenous rights (Viaene & González-Serrano, 2024). The events have been a hallmark of an indigenous sovereignty that is not exercised by the owners rather the state whose scope of mandate is ideally supposed to be dictated by the owners of sovereign power. The events are strikingly relevant today because it is a hallmark in the trajectory of indigenous people journey to liberation and a symbol of onset of an assertive indigenous political mobilization.

Media produces particular account details pertaining to the indigenous protests for public consumption. Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline were extensively covered, however mainstream media often focused on confrontation with law enforcement rather than the environmental issues raised by the Sioux tribe (Grote & Johnson, 2021). The media showcased Brewarrina demonstrations in a manner to side line sovereignty concerns raised over a long period of time and instead labelled it an unprecedented eruption of violence (Morris, 2005). In a similar scenario, the Oka

Crisis in Canada was framed as matters to do with law-and-order issue rather than a land rights dispute, reinforcing stereotypes of Indigenous people as troublesome rather than defenders of their ancestral lands.

Similarly, the plural policing response to Indigenous-led public health interventions in Aotearoa New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the tensions between state authority and Indigenous sovereignty, a dynamic mediated through competing narratives in both mainstream and Indigenous-controlled media (Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022). Media frames thus serve as critical sites where cultural meanings and political power intersect, influencing public opinion and policy outcomes concerning tribal rights (Nachet et al., 2022). Persuasive imagery used by media to uphold government-initiated projects in forest lands relegate tribal rights (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010) (Gupta, 2022). Indigenous self-sufficient economy within the forest is often downplayed while framing government-led economic development projects as universally beneficial. Territorial sovereignty is apparently the price paid for the quest of economic growth. Packaging indigenous people rights in a state-approved approach not only compromises cultural integrity and environmental justice but also interferes with their intergenerational identity thus trivializing indigenous presence and epistemologies (Dreher et al., 2016).

These indigenous-led events have stood out because the documentaries aired to that effect implicitly frame the incidents as a dramatic and unprecedented eruption of violence. Why other protests are in full-blown demand for human rights not branded or labelled dramatic violence by the media? Media portrayal amplified the significance of indigenous protests beyond its actual scale, reinforcing narratives of tribal unrest and lawlessness while side lining broader systemic issues of cultural discrimination, land grabbing, government forced eviction ostensibly to conserve the environment and police brutality (Kazansky & Milan, 2021) (Austin-Broos, 2015). While other sorts of picketing cause extensive damage, the struggle for indigenous self-determination and autonomy does not receive the same level of attention (Morris, 2005). The state in its engagement with the tribal communities hold the cultural essentialism view that indigenous worldviews are culturally deficient and emboldening them to embrace dominant society culture thus necessitating alteration of their environment (Paterson, 2023). A claim promoted by the state to change indigenous environment in essence

implies assimilation hence giving up on their indigenous land for government development projects (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). While media is not explicitly controlled by state power, it's framing of indigenous issues exhibits a machinery of government proxies especially in crisis moments.

Reporting on indigenous issues or tribal rights is allegedly confined within an ecosystem and framing narratives whose scrutiny manifests ideological frameworks grounded in state interests (Schudson, 2002). The layout of the footage is blatant manifestation of selective reporting while side lining tribal rights and trivializing indigenous grievances. Coverage is predominantly rooted on social hierarchy and media binaries; the ruled vs the ruling; the dominant vs the marginalized, the civilized vs the primitive thus deviating and deflecting from systemic issues such as land grabbing, unlawful evictions and police brutality (Nachet et al., 2022). Such coverage reflects the manner in which media personalities and journalists are trained thus imbibing knowledge, information, values and attitudes pertaining indigenous people.

The rights of Indigenous peoples are still a main topic in political discussions. Media can either lift up Indigenous peoples by telling their stories or spread stereotypes that hold them back. If Indigenous protests are mainly seen as violent, it can distract from the real issues of treaty rights and land ownership. Conversely, framing these issues as a matter of environmental justice, cultural heritage, and human rights can generate greater public empathy and support for Indigenous communities (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010) (Dawson et al., 2023) (Nachet et al., 2022). While Indigenous rights are being recognized more, most of the research on media framing looks at environmental matters instead of the unique problems faced by Indigenous communities. Dearth of research is noticeable both in occidental and oriental countries, where there is an increasing desire to know how media portrayals affect public views on tribal rights while trivializing authentic issues affecting the tribes. Often, media reports on Indigenous issues in the West are usually shallow and do not reflect the full story of these struggles.

In addition, most of the current literature uses qualitative content analysis whereby news stories often highlight conflict, economic issues or political topics and that colonial narratives are used to challenge Indigenous independence and identity (Sonza, 2018). Yet, these theories rarely provide a way to measure the main reasons

behind these framing decisions. This study addresses this gap by using a survey with Likert scale questions to measure how people view the main factors that affect media coverage of tribal rights. The factors chosen are government preference, who owns the media, political goodwill, interests in economic development, journalism education and broader societal biases. These variables are based on well-known theories in media framing, agenda-setting and priming which describe how media outlets choose, highlight or leave out parts of Indigenous stories to influence how people think and feel.

This research uses statistical analysis of survey answers from media professionals and informed stakeholders to find out how much each factor affects media narratives on tribal rights. The research provides new evidence on the factors behind media portrayals of Indigenous communities which suggests that changes in journalism education and media policies are needed to ensure fairer and more respectful coverage. As a result, this research helps scholars understand how media affects minority rights advocacy and gives a solid basis for encouraging ethical journalism and informed discussions about tribal matters.

Research methodology

The study gathered data through an online survey administered between October and November 2024, aiming to systematically quantify public viewpoints and interpretations of media coverage related to tribal rights. The survey employed a series of Likert Scale items, meticulously developed to measure respondents' attitudes, awareness, and beliefs regarding key factors influencing media framing, including government influence, media ownership, political agendas, economic development priorities, journalism education, and dominant societal narratives. These constructs were informed by extant literature on media framing and Indigenous representation, ensuring conceptual rigor.

The survey was disseminated across various online platforms, including social media sites like Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn, as well as academic networks to secure a demographically diverse sample reflecting various age groups, geographic locations, and media consumption habits. A snowball sampling technique further expanded participant reach, particularly among Indigenous communities and

stakeholders engaged with media discourse on tribal rights. Inclusion criteria required participants to be 18 years or older and to have some engagement with media content concerning Indigenous issues. Out of 450 initial responses, 432 complete and consistent datasets were retained for analysis.

Prior to the main deployment, a pilot study involving 60 participants tested item clarity and survey structure, resulting in minor revisions that enhanced question comprehension and response reliability. The final instrument thus ensured methodological rigor and robustness in capturing multifaceted public perceptions of media framing related to tribal rights. The survey instrument was developed through a rigorous review of contemporary literature on media framing and public perceptions of Indigenous rights (Viaene & González-Serrano, 2024) (Lupien et al., 2024) (Hoewe, 2020). Grounded in foundational framing theory (Lupien et al., 2024), the questionnaire was designed to systematically capture the complex cognitive and cultural dimensions that influence individual interpretations of media narratives regarding tribal rights.

The questionnaire was structured to evaluate respondents' individual attitudes and values regarding Indigenous matters, along with their patterns of media consumption. Drawing on Entman's (1993) framework, this section aimed to elucidate underlying cognitive biases and value orientations shaping perceptions of Indigenous media narratives (Venger, 2016). To achieve nuanced measurement, respondents rated their agreement with statements concerning government influence, political agendas, colonial legacies, economic development priorities, journalism education, and dominant societal narratives. This granularity enhanced statistical reliability and allowed for more precise differentiation of attitudes, consistent with measurement practices in media studies (McCallum & Waller, 2017) (McCallum et al., 2023). Media consumption habits were also queried, focusing on frequency and source diversity spanning traditional media, content in journalism curriculum (Bargallie, 2020), digital platforms, and Indigenous or academic publications to assess their role in shaping framing perceptions.

The questionnaire also focused on respondents' perceptions of media framing effects, probing views on bias, accuracy, and representativeness of mainstream media coverage of Indigenous rights. Inspired by Robertson (2013) and Moore & Lanthorn (2017), this segment explored the perceived salience of framing devices such as conflict,

victimization, and cultural preservation in media reports (Gupta, 2022). Scenarios depicting media portrayals of Indigenous protests invited participants to evaluate emphasis on violence, sovereignty, or environmental concerns. Additionally, items assessed were perceptions of media influence on public policy and governmental responsiveness, informed by Dreher's (2016) findings on media's role in policy outcomes. The survey gathered socio-demographic details such as gender, age, educational background, geographic location, cultural background, occupation and proximity to Indigenous communities. These variables allowed for subgroup analyses of framing perceptions, reflecting the importance of demographic diversity in media effects research (Bednar et al., 2022)

To validate the survey instrument, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure (0.862) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($\chi^2 = 9194.583$, $p < 0.001$) verified sample adequacy and appropriateness for conducting factor analysis. Varimax rotation identified nine distinct factors corresponding closely to theoretically derived constructs such as Government Preference, Colonial-Based Temporal Ideas, Political Goodwill, Economic Development, Journalism Curriculum, Media Ownership, Dominant Society Narratives, Framing Theory elements, and Priming and Agenda Setting. All items loading strongly (>0.6) onto their respective factors. Reliability analysis demonstrated acceptable internal coherence (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.72 to 0.90 across factors). Confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated good model fit (CFI = 0.942; TLI = 0.933; RMSEA = 0.042), indicating that the observed variables accurately represented the latent constructs with minimal cross-factor correlation (Chong et al., 2014). This process ensured a firm psychometric validation of the questionnaire thus supporting construct validity and the distinctiveness of the latent variables.

Factor analysis

Using orthogonal rotation varimax, a factor analysis was conducted to condense and simplify data into a more concise set of key summary variables. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity precisely confirmed the adequacy of the sampling and correlations correspondingly (Shrestha, 2021 ; Yong & Pearce, 2013). Notably, the KMO value of 0.862 demonstrated a strong level of sampling adequacy and

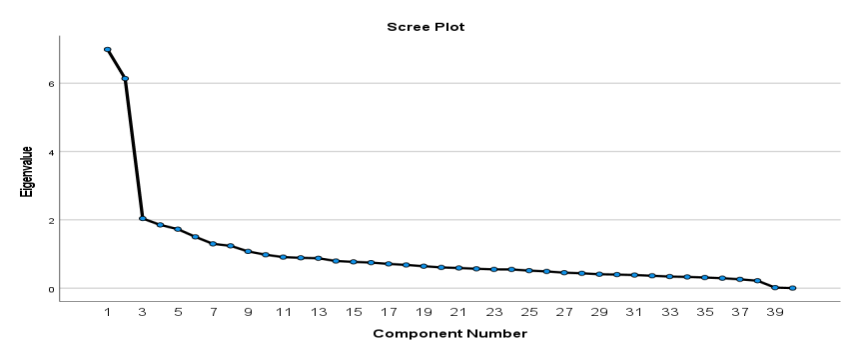
Bartlett’s test yielded a chi-square value of 9194.583 (df = 780, $p < 0.001$), confirming the appropriateness of the factor analysis by indicating significant correlations among variables.

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett’s Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.862
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	9194.583
	df	780
	Sig.	0.00

To identify the appropriate number of factors to include in the analysis the Scree Plot was examined. This plot displays the eigenvalues associated with each factor extracted during the factor analysis (Williams et al., 2010) (Watkins, 2018). The Scree Plot showed a clear break after the ninth factor, suggesting that retaining nine factors provides the best balance between explaining variance and parsimony. Further supporting this selection, the rotated factor loadings revealed distinct clusters of variables loading strongly on each of the nine factors, with most loadings above 0.6.justifying retention of nine factors for analysis thus ensuring a robust and interpretable factor structure.

Figure 1: Scree Plot showing Eigen Values above 1



The factor analysis using Varimax rotation extracted nine distinct factors as shown in Table 1. Each represents clusters of related variables with strong loadings, mostly above 0.6, indicating clear item-factor associations. This orthogonal rotation method maximized the variance of loadings within each factor, improving interpretability by producing factors that are more distinct and easier to label. The

results showed well-defined groupings of questionnaire items on each factor, supported by good internal consistency as depicted by the Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.720 to 0.897 shown in Table 2 below hence confirming the reliability and clarity of the factor structure identified.

Table 2: Reliability statistics

Factors	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Factor 1-Government Preference	0.814	6
Factor 2-Economic Development	0.820	5
Factor 3-Colonial-Based framing	0.897	4
Factor 4-Political Goodwill	0.807	5
Factor 5-Journalism Curriculum	0.720	5
Factor 6-Media Ownership	0.782	4
Factor 7-Dominant Society	0.780	5
Factor 8-Framing Theory	0.722	3
Factor 9-Priming & Agenda setting	0.725	3

Table 2 shows nine factors included in the analysis with the first four factors showing higher Cronbach values. Specifically, the first factor, labelled Government Preference, has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.814; the second factor, Economic Development Narratives, shows a Cronbach's value of 0.820; and the third factor, Colonial-Based Temporal framing, has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.897. After excluding three items with factor loadings below 0.60, the fourth factor, named Political Goodwill and Agenda, demonstrates a Cronbach's alpha of 0.807. In addition, the fifth and sixth factors are Journalism Curriculum Ethics with a Cronbach of 0.720 and Media Ownership with Cronbach values of 0.782. The last three factors are Dominant Society Narratives, Framing Theory Constructs and Priming and Agenda setting effects with Cronbach values of 0.780, 0.722 and 0.725 respectively. The factor analysis having attained a well-defined structure resulted in items aligning correctly across each of the nine factors appropriately.

Table 3: The factor analysis with Varimax Rotation

[illegible]

Furthermore, the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) were computed to evaluate the goodness-of-fit of the nine-factor analysis. Moreover, to examine the constructs convergent and discriminant validity, correlations between factors and survey questions were analysed to precision.

Findings

The nine-factor analysis demonstrated a strong fit, with CFI at 0.942, TLI at 0.933, and RMSEA at 0.042. Generally, CFI and TLI values of 0.90 or higher indicate a good fit while RMSEA values between 0.06 and 0.08 are considered acceptable. Likewise, the construct's convergent and discriminant validity was confirmed, as items within the same factor showed high correlations with that factor, whereas items from different factors exhibited low correlations (see Table 2)

Table 4: The convergent and discriminate validity of the construct (Correlation between variables of the factors and the questionnaire)

Items group	Factor1	Factor2	Factor3	Factor4	Factor5	Factor6	Factor7	Factor8	Factor9
Government Preference									
q08	.788**	0.043	.108*	.154**	-0.037	0.005	-.127**	0.014	0.038
q14	.739**	0.027	.124*	.259**	-0.004	0.034	-0.035	-0.091	-0.029
q10	.736**	0.023	.142**	.187**	0.024	-0.013	.140**	0.02	0.021
q01	.630**	0.034	.113*	.102*	0.044	-0.076	.139**	-0.001	-.139**
q04	.608**	-0.042	.167**	.151**	-0.057	0.033	.149**	.106*	-0.024
q05	.564**	-0.05	0.07	.171**	-0.047	0.053	.228**	.148**	0.019
Economic Development Narratives									
q27	0.023	.749**	-0.031	0.068	.200**	.288**	-0.031	0.007	-0.07
q26	0.042	.742**	0.093	0.07	-0.013	.151**	-0.048	0.048	.252**
q32	-0.043	.692**	-0.068	0.003	.204**	.317**	0.011	0.067	-0.019
q31	-0.014	.664**	0.018	-0.093	0.059	0.081	-0.045	.246**	.191**
q35	0.035	.660**	0.056	-0.035	.208**	-0.066	0.014	.387**	.103*
Colonial-Based Temporal Framing									
q18	.248**	0.013	.904**	.263**	-0.05	0.073	0.067	0.007	0.056
q13	.250**	0.016	.901**	.251**	-0.049	0.069	0.061	0.01	0.051

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q20	.249**	0.013	.900**	.268**	-0.057	0.066	0.066	0.006	0.045
q17	.128**	0.03	.531**	-0.06	0.069	-.160**	.292**	0.044	-.101*
Political Goodwill & Agenda									
q06	.147**	-0.015	-0.036	.749**	0.038	0.018	.129**	.096*	0.044
q11	.294**	0.059	.171**	.669**	-0.056	-0.062	.117*	-0.006	-0.035
q07	.345**	-0.014	.266**	.651**	-0.04	0.035	0.04	0.015	0.031
q15	.238**	-0.07	.236**	.642**	0.022	-0.046	.162**	.127**	-0.001
q12	.326**	0.043	.220**	.590**	0.043	0.012	.114*	-.146**	-0.042
Journalism Curriculum Ethics									
q37	-.119*	.196**	0.009	0.071	.670**	.135**	-0.016	-0.002	-.122*
q23	-0.025	.202**	-0.057	0.064	.622**	.287**	0.029	.113*	.187**
q38	0.035	.392**	0.048	-0.053	.621**	0.089	0.005	.210**	-.181**
q36	0.029	.118*	-0.011	-0.035	.610**	.229**	0.019	0.079	.188**
q22	0.024	-0.09	-0.092	-0.061	.577**	0.012	-0.032	0.007	.390**
Media Ownership & Control									
q28	0.023	.125**	0.083	0.015	.118*	.754**	-0.014	.238**	-.152**
q30	-0.011	.194**	-0.003	0.056	.256**	.676**	0.004	.257**	0.048
q34	0.048	.397**	0.08	-.117*	.225**	.614**	0.058	.265**	-.139**
q33	-0.01	.335**	-0.07	-0.068	.211**	.584**	-0.034	-0.078	.168**
Dominant Society Narratives									
q09	0.084	-0.087	-0.018	0.057	0.025	0.043	.742**	0.053	0.002
q02	.192**	-0.055	.128**	-0.034	-.151**	.137**	.640**	-.106*	0.059
q19	0.047	-0.026	-0.006	.223**	-0.007	-0.068	.594**	0.036	0.059
q16	-0.021	.147**	.203**	.127**	.108*	-.168**	.558**	-0.051	0.013
q03	.384**	-0.062	.258**	.221**	0.021	.117*	.536**	-.165**	-0.032
Framing Theory Constructs									
q21	0.037	.170**	0.061	0.042	.120*	.111*	-0.023	.787**	-0.001
q25	0.05	.164**	-0.083	.107*	-0.034	.240**	-0.014	.575**	.200**
q24	0.063	.216**	0.054	-0.022	.269**	.241**	-0.073	.558**	-0.052
Priming & Agenda Setting Effects									
q40	-0.007	.147**	0.09	-0.048	0.009	-0.081	.112*	-0.057	.665**
q39	-.127**	.266**	-0.071	0.088	0.088	.097*	-0.004	.124**	.632**
q29	0.003	-0.082	0.043	0.007	.467**	-0.081	-0.005	.144**	.595**

Notes. $N = 432$, $p < .05$; $p < .01$.

Sampling

The sample for this study, as presented in Table 5 below, comprised 432 participants, with a mean age approximating 38 years, reflecting a relatively young adult demographic. Females constituted a slight majority, representing 55.1% of respondents. Educational attainment varied across the sample, with 58% holding a university degree or higher, while 42% reported having completed secondary education or lower levels. This distribution illustrates a diverse but not fully representative cross-section of the broader population, a limitation commonly associated with convenience and snowball sampling methods (Valerio et al., 2016). Regarding media consumption patterns pertinent to Indigenous issues, 83% of respondents indicated frequent exposure to media content addressing tribal rights. Social media platforms and news outlets focusing on Indigenous topics were regularly followed by 61% of participants.

Awareness of Indigenous struggles was widespread; 72% acknowledged familiarity with Indigenous rights movements, and they demonstrated a general understanding of media framing effects related to these issues and environmental justice concerns. Nevertheless, a majority perceived media representations as biased or incomplete, signalling significant scepticism about mainstream coverage.

Attitudinally, the sample exhibited a favourable disposition toward Indigenous causes. 79% expressed principled support for tribal rights, and 68% endorsed participation in media campaigns advocating improved Indigenous representation. However, only 56% showed willingness to financially support products or services directly linked to Indigenous rights initiatives, highlighting a common gap between ideological support and practical engagement. Quantitative analysis of perceived issue importance revealed moderate to high interest, receiving an average score of 6.5 on the scale. Respondents identified 'representation of cultural heritage' and 'environmental justice' as the most influential media framing elements affecting their views (mean score: 6.72). Despite this, only 58% agreed that media coverage sufficiently portrayed the legal and moral arguments of Indigenous communities, pointing to perceived deficiencies in media depth and fairness.

Socio-demographic variables significantly influenced framing perceptions. Higher education levels, particularly among those with advanced degrees, correlated positively with nuanced understandings of colonial history's role in shaping media

narratives. Urban respondents reported greater exposure to Indigenous rights issues but were also more critical of the sufficiency and impartiality of coverage compared to their rural counterparts. Additionally, awareness of environmental justice and cultural preservation themes was strongly mediated by respondents' media exposure and socio-cultural backgrounds. The sample provided a broad spectrum of perspectives on media framing and Indigenous rights, characterized by generally supportive attitudes tempered by critical assessments of media practices. These findings underscore the prominence of tribal rights within public discourse while revealing persistent gaps in the public's comprehension of media framing's influence on policy and opinion formation.

Table 5: Sociodemographic details of the sample (N=432)

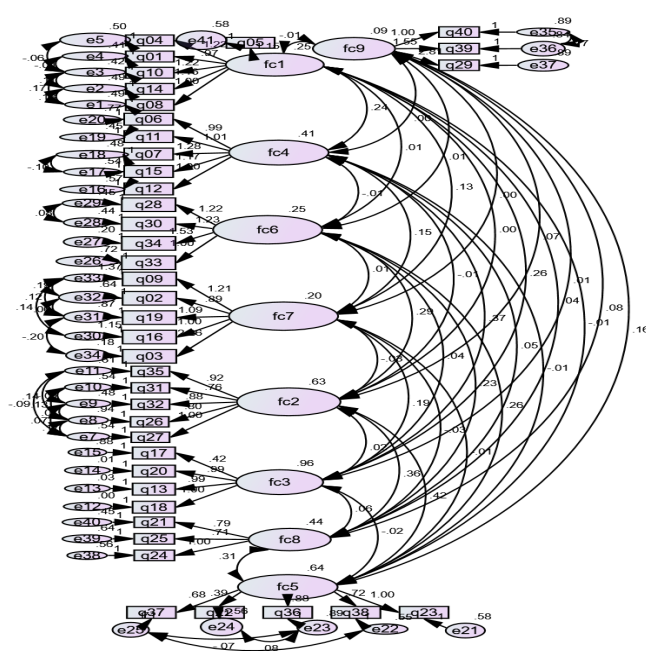
Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	238	55.1
Male	194	44.9
Level of Education		
secondary education	181	41.9
University level	251	58.1
Location		
Rural residents	203	47
Urban residents	229	53
Age		
<= 18.00	14	3.2
19.00 - 28.00	93	21.5
29.00 - 38.00	109	25.2
39.00 - 48.00	110	25.5
49.00+	106	24.5
Awareness of Indigenous struggles		
No	123	28.5
Yes	309	71.5
News outlets focusing		
No	169	39.1
Yes	263	60.9
Familiarity		

No	72	16.7
Yes	360	83.3

Confirmatory factor analysis

The confirmatory analysis is done just to provide the justification that whether the observed variables adequately reflect the latent constructs they are intended (Hox, 2021). The results of Figure 1 below show that all the loading factors of each item for factor1 up to factor 9 were at least 0.4 and above. This suggests that each item measures its latent factor well, and the correlation between the latent variable was very weak since there is no correlation between latent factors above 0.5, which suggests the latent factors are distinct. These findings implies that the model suggests good construct validity for the measurement. The fit indices indicate a good model fit overall. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.942) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = 0.933) exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.90, suggesting that the specified model fits the data reasonably well compared to a null model. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.042) is well below the 0.05 cutoff, indicating a close fit of the model to the data. Collectively, these values support the conclusion that the hypothesized factor structure is a valid representation of the underlying data.

Figure 2: Confirmatory factor analysis diagram



Discussion

This study offers valuable revelation and wisdom into how media framing shapes public perceptions and attitudes toward tribal rights. While the exploratory nature and the use of a non-representative sample limit the generalizability of the findings, the research contributes meaningfully to the existing literature by unpacking the nuanced interplay between media narratives and public opinion on Indigenous issues. The sample's demographic composition and media engagement patterns, although reflective of a specific cross-section of the population, reveal important patterns and trends consistent with prior peer reviewed literature on media influence and Indigenous advocacy.

An important finding is the glaring effect of preceding media exposure on respondents' attitudes toward Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination and environmental justice. Respondents familiar with media coverage on tribal rights expressed stronger support for Indigenous causes, underscoring media's role in shaping awareness and engagement. This aligns with research indicating that media exposure not only informs but can also mobilize public support for marginalized groups (Gupta, 2022). The factor analysis further corroborates this, highlighting 'Media Trust' and 'Framing Theory' as central constructs influencing attitudes, suggesting that both the credibility of media sources and media framing strategies often grounded on state and political ideologies critically affect public reception.

The perception of media bias emerged as a momentous moderating factor. Respondents perceiving media portrayals as biased, indecisive or incomplete were less inclined to support Indigenous issues actively, illustrating the detrimental impact of negative framing on public engagement. Conversely, media frames emphasize cultural heritage and environmental justice rarely the long struggle of securing indigenous land and its rationale. These two factors scored highly in the factor analysis and were associated with more positive public attitudes and constructive media criticisms by the public. These findings resonate with earlier work by McCallum & Waller (2017) and Walter & Baltra-Ulloa (2020), which emphasized the empowering potential of constructive media framing that is centred on moral and legal dimensions of tribal governance and indigenous rights (Kazansky & Milan, 2021).

Socio-demographic variables also played an influential role. Higher educational attainment and urban residency correlated with greater awareness and critical evaluation of indigenous media narratives. Specifically, education appeared to enhance recognition of the colonial historical contexts that continue to influence media representations, as reflected in the 'Colonial-Based Temporal Ideas' factor. Urban respondents' broader media exposure may explain their heightened sensitivity to framing biases, reinforcing literature that links access to diverse information sources with critical media literacy while exhibiting bias on opposing viewpoints within the tribal realm (Rodrigo-Ginés et al., 2024).

The emphasis on environmental and ethical concerns in media framing emerged as another pivotal influence on public support. Respondents who prioritized environmental justice and cultural preservation showed stronger alignment with media narratives that connected Indigenous rights to broader sustainability and social equity issues. This intersection, captured by factors related to 'Economic Development' and 'Dominant Society Narratives,' illustrates how media can construct compelling narratives that resonate with contemporary public values, thereby fostering greater support for Indigenous struggles. Although this is a positive gesture, the tendency of media to continue side lining indigenous sovereignty and self-determination under the pretext of broad issues involving the dominant society would be high. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of direct and mediated exposure to Indigenous issues in shaping public attitudes. Engagement through community events, educational programs, and media consumption was positively associated with support for Indigenous rights, consistent with findings by Fredericks & Bargallie, (2020) on cultural competency training and the role of exposure in cultivating empathy. For media practitioners and policymakers, these insights underscore the value of creating accessible and informative platforms that facilitate meaningful engagement with Indigenous narratives that not only conveys authentic information but also respects their chosen cultural lifestyle. Media institutions of learning should in turn use the insights to align indigenous perceptions in journalism curriculum

Despite these contributions, the study's limitations warrant consideration. The sample's non-representativeness constrains the extrapolation of results to the broader population. Additionally, the study focused primarily on media framing perceptions

without fully accounting for the broader socio-political and ideological contexts that shape attitudes toward indigenous rights and tribal governance. Future research would benefit from incorporating variables such as political ideology, cultural identity, and regional differences, alongside larger and more representative samples, to deepen comprehension of the multifactorial influences on public opinion.

This study upholds the critical aspects of media framing in influencing the formation of public opinion regarding tribal rights. Positive framing that highlights legal, ethical, culture-sensitive narratives and environmental dimensions can significantly enhance public support for indigenous causes (McCallum et al., 2023) (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). Additionally, socio-demographic factors and media exposure patterns modulate these perceptions, suggesting that interventions aimed at improving media literacy and diversifying media narratives are essential. By strategically framing tribal rights within contexts of cultural preservation and environmental justice, media can serve as a potent catalyst for advancing tribal sovereignty and fostering equitable public discourse.

Conclusion

This study puts forward the scholarly comprehension of media framing and its influence on public perceptions of tribal rights by identifying and empirically validating the nine key factors that shape how Indigenous issues are portrayed and perceived. Despite the fact that the findings are limited by a non-representative sample, the discoveries elucidate critical dimensions through which media narratives impact public awareness, attitudes, and support for indigenous communities. The results underscore the influential impact of media framing on shaping public perception, particularly when narratives accentuate environmental justice, cultural preservation, and the legal dimensions of Indigenous sovereignty. These framing elements, which emerged prominently in the factor analysis, demonstrate the potential to foster greater public empathy and support by connecting Indigenous struggles to broader socio-environmental and ethical concerns. Conversely, factors such as government influence and economic development agendas reveal the structural and political pressures that may marginalize Indigenous perspectives, highlighting the contested nature of media representation.

Moreover, the study reveals that exposure to diverse and credible media portrayals of tribal rights correlates positively with public support, reinforcing the importance of trustworthy media and balanced coverage. The validated constructs, including Government preference, Journalism curriculum, and Media ownership, point to systemic challenges within media ecosystems that affect the quality and inclusivity of indigenous narratives. Addressing these challenges through media reform and educational initiatives through media curriculum amendment could enhance the accuracy and fairness of reporting on indigenous issues. Given the increasing public interest in ethical and environmental matters, strategic media framing that aligns indigenous rights with these themes holds significant promise for raising awareness and mobilizing support. However, the findings from this study also caution that merely raising awareness is insufficient without providing comprehensive and nuanced portrayals that bridge the gap between media representations and public understanding.

Future studies should expand on the underlying insights through employing higher representative sample populations and incorporating broader socio-political variables, including political ideology and cultural background, to deepen constructive criticisms and analysis of how media framing intersects with identity and power dynamics. Moreover, longitudinal studies could explore the extent shifts in media narratives influence public opinion and policy outcomes over time. Ultimately, this study supports the idea that media framing is not entirely a neutral process but a powerful force and agent in shaping and influencing public discourse and policy regarding tribal rights and governance issues. By nurturing more inclusive, accurate, and ethically grounded media narratives, stakeholders can contribute to advancing indigenous sovereignty and ensuring indigenous communities receive the recognition and support they deserve within the public sphere.

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The potential of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Virtual Exchanges (VE) in media education

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Introduction

For decades, journalism and mass communication educators have been concerned about the international aspects of their degree programs (Carty, 1969; Kruglak, 1973; Riley, 1975). But within the last five years, an increasing number of studies in the journalism and mass communication field have focused on new models of international education (Bhayroo, 2024; Chadha & Relly, 2024; Coche, 2021). For example, 30 students at a university in the Southwestern U.S. and 40 students in Yemen used Slack, a messaging and collaboration application, as they produced online magazines, videos with translated captions and scripts and audio for podcast episodes related to students' shared experiences (Chadha & Relly, 2024). Results from in-depth semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and participant observation offered new insights on cultural responsiveness, cultural awareness and cultural humility. Elsewhere, Bhayroo (2024) studied five cohorts of a journalism study abroad program in South Africa. He found strong evidence that students acquired varying levels of critical consciousness about South Africa and about themselves (p.163).

The COVID-19 Pandemic accentuated the importance of being able to deliver instruction using virtual platforms such as video conferencing on Zoom or Microsoft Teams (Brennan, 2021). While such platforms permitted real-time (AKA synchronous) instruction, faculty also delivered remote instruction in asynchronous or on-demand environments. At least one author has even developed a volume around the "New Normal" of remote teaching or a combination of remote and classroom education (Lemov, 2020). The technologies that faculty also have the potential to augment global education connecting students in one

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country with their counterparts overseas. But, in fact, using technology to deliver education involving students in one country with those in another country is not new. Long before the once-in-a-century COVID-19 Pandemic, scholars like Robert O'Dowd (2007) were writing about telecollaboration or online intercultural exchange. Along with establishing a background on the development of telecollaboration or online intercultural exchange, this paper spotlights differences and advantages of two models of international education that don't require students to physically travel to another country. More recent books have given specificity to the term Collaborative online international learning (COIL) as a bilateral exchange and corresponding pedagogy. The man who coined the term, Jon Rubin (2022) recently released *The Guide to COIL Virtual Exchange*. The definitional distinctions between COIL and virtual exchanges (VE). Are necessary in order to unpack their advantages and disadvantages in delivering instruction for students in media and communications. As the winner of a Global Challenge Teaching Award in 2022, the author was introduced to COIL and implemented it in a fall 2022 course on Race, Gender and Media. This paper compares the fall 2022 COIL model to other semesters where students have participated in virtual exchanges that did not involve extended work with students in other countries. Finally, experiences in the development of a new COIL experience with a different institutions are discussed.

Literature review

The term virtual exchange was adopted by the Stevens Institute. Virtual exchanges are technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs to build mutually affirming relationships and foster constructive and meaningful dialogue among youth (Virtual Exchange Coalition, 2015, para). Soliya is one of many organizations that are part of the Virtual Exchange Coalition, which formed in 2011. It's been noted that Soliya began as an attempt to promote dialogue between the Western and Arab worlds after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the U.S. (Alves et. al., 2024). Now based in New York, the non-profit launched in 2003 with a focus on using digital technology facilitated high-impact inter and cross-cultural education to students around the world. It lists seven elements or components to its virtual exchanges: 1) synchronous, 2) small, diverse, balanced groups, 3) embedded in existing educational programs, 4) multilateral & multidisciplinary, 5)

facilitated, 6) sustained and with a 7) process-oriented curriculum (Soliya, n.d.) At least one writer, a modern language student, has produced a thesis based on the implementation of Soliya's eight week Connect Program at The University of Padua, which is located in Padua, Italy (Laurea, 2021-22). Students attended the program for two months with one meeting per week. This particular group engaged in dialogue on the topics of gender equality, human rights, environmental crisis and coronavirus. She wrote:

After the whole semester of participating in the Soliya Connect Program, you step out of your comfort zone, because you try things you never tried before, and you learn things you never learned before. What happens to students when they come back from their exchange experience abroad is the same as what happens to students after the virtual experience: the experiences impact on their identity and professional and personal lives (p. 12).

In 2024, the American Association of Colleges & Universities Institute for Virtual Exchange became one of nine recipients of funding to run virtual exchange programs that connect young people in the U.S. with those in Middle East and North Africa (AAC&U, 2024). The "Why" of Virtual exchange involves global challenges that require multi-lateral and cross-cultural cooperation, study abroad and education exchanges? Additionally, less than one percent of young people participate in international exchange programs. Several studies have examined virtual exchanges in international learning. In one study, Coche (2021) featured a six-week VE project between a sports communication course in the U.S. and a journalism capstone course in England where students met in groups over Zoom. They discussed cultural differences between the U.S. and English soccer industries via the idiosyncrasies of the respective sports, focusing on issues as minorities' representation (p. 416). Another example involved 106 participants from universities in Mexico, Poland, Spain and the USA who met one another for six weeks as a required part of students' course. Data collected from pre and post-exchange surveys showed the VE made a significant impact on participants' identification with global citizenship (Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszylk, 2022).

In Australia, (Bowen et. al. 2019) developed and studied a virtual student exchange in journalism that implemented technology to connect students from RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia with a similar composed group of students from the University of

Peshawar in Peshawar, Pakistan. The program ran for four consecutive weeks with the two classes meeting over videoconference in joint session for three hours each week. Then, the students were required to meet in small groups via web conference outside of class to work on collaborative assignments. The Australian students' reports on Pakistan included articles about the changing role of women in journalism, the changing role of women in sports, the anti-vaccination movement, political turmoil, and changing tastes in cinema in Pakistan. For the Pakistani students, they wrote reports on similar topics plus the high cost of living in Melbourne. The stories contained local data that students could not look up on the Internet and included interviews arranged by their "fixers" at the other school. As described in the study "Pakistani students worked as fixers for their Australian counterparts while Australia students worked as fixers for their Pakistani counterparts in the exchange's main reporting assignment" (p. 58) Open-ended surveys and semi-structured interviews conducted after the experience showed generally the virtual student exchange was capable of providing key benefits in terms of helping students build professional trust and form productive working relationships.

Another journalism international virtual collaboration focused on online journalism training. Five universities Brazil, Spain and Portugal (Ureta et. al., 2021). Students completed assignments on teams. Each of the five teams assembled had five members-- two in Portugal, two in Brazil and one located in the Basque country, Spain. The students communicated in English. Based on student opinions gathered after the experience and a content analysis of the peer interactions, the provided revealed that students needed more real-time contact and interaction with their counterparts on the other side of the Atlantic. The use of the English as the vehicular language was difficult for those used to speaking Spanish and Portuguese (Ureta et. al. p. 11).

A fifth example of a study of virtual exchange explored the use of cross-national dialogue among German and American undergraduate students who were seeking to better understand how media messages are interpreted and how they inform and guide the civic action of citizens (Hobbs et. al., 2018). They found the diverse interaction enabled the undergraduate education and communication students from Germany and the United States to express and share diverse opinions across two continents. Not to be confused with virtual exchanges, collaborative online international learning (COIL) is a term coined by Jon

Rubin “a bilateral exchange and corresponding pedagogy, embedded into existing courses across two institutions.” (Rubin, 2022, p. 6) The four essential elements in a COIL experience are: it is a collaborative exercise of teachers and students; it makes use of online technology and interaction; it has potential international dimensions; and it is integrated into the learning process. The term COIL was used by Pouromid (2019) in his study of the nature of intercultural interactions between 16 Japanese and 16 Taiwanese students in a program developing oral English skills between a Japanese university and a university in Taiwan. A conversation analysis of video recorded interactions during five joint sessions included six hours of video data. The Japanese learners spoke Japanese and English while the Taiwanese learners spoke Mandarin and English. Results from these English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes showed students employed translingual practices or go beyond the language they are expected to use in the form of a different language or multimodal practices such as the use of gesture to resolve emerging communication difficulties. “The COIL-based curriculum can offer valuable opportunities for learners to experience intercultural interaction without having to bear the burden of traveling overseas” (Pouromid, 2019, p. 634).

Beyond these studies on virtual exchanges and COIL experiences, Lewis and O’Dowd (2006) in the introduction to their edited volume on online intercultural exchange (OIE), noted that in the past two decades OIE had begun to receive a great deal of attention in the academic literature. Elsewhere, (Alves et. al. 2024) focused on the commonalities between active methodologies and virtual exchange using primarily bibliographic research to uncover the points of convergence between the two. So-called active methodologies (AM) aim to create learning where students take an active role in knowledge construction, solving challenges, performing operations, reflecting and developing their critical thinking (p. 5). Four common active methodologies are peer instruction, problem-based learning, project-based learning and the flipped classroom. The research on the different methodologies revealed that the active methodologies used in virtual exchange is intended to “promote student initiative, the development of student independence as learners, teamwork, communication skills, the ability to think and analyze critically and the comprehension and appropriation of concepts (p. 19).

With this backdrop on virtual exchanges, COIL and other international virtual exchanges in mind, we turn now to the details of the virtual exchanges in media classes in which the author has been involved. From teaching award to sustainable teaching strategy the author of this paper was one of six faculty in the United States and United Kingdom to receive Global Challenges Teaching Awards in 2022 from the U.S./U.K. Fulbright Commission, which partnered with the American Council on Education (ACE). There were three awards categories: racial justice, Pandemics, and climate change. Each of the U.S. faculty members was paired with a faculty member in the U.K. to develop a COIL experience to be executed in an existing course in the fall 2022 semester. As the creator and instructor of race, gender and media, the author's award was in the category of racial justice. The collaboration was made between the author at The University of Alabama and a partner at The University of Liverpool, who taught in the Department of Politics. The COIL experience would involve two components: weekly co-lectures presented live via Microsoft Teams and student collaboration on a project that would engage students from the University of Alabama and University of Liverpool in meeting outside of class time to research and develop a project that would include some type of video component with content from both the Tuscaloosa, Alabama and Liverpool, England communities. The collaboration ran eight weeks from the last week of September until the last week of November 2022.

Starting in the Spring 2023 semester, the author engaged a different class, which was entitled Mass Communication, Service and Diversity in a virtual exchange that coincided with the theme of the course that semester—global hunger and food insecurity. Soliya through its Global Circles program offered a four-week exchange that required students respond to some online questions and participated in two two-hour live dialogue sessions with students in other countries. As a part of the class assignment, students wrote two-page essays about the Global Circles experience. These essays linked the overall theme of global hunger and food insecurity to the experience of talking about it with other students in other countries. Additionally, during end-of-semester presentations on the overall theme of the semester, multiple students gave oral reports on their experience in the Soliya Global Circles. The virtual exchange was repeated in spring 2024 with the same class, but a different theme: *Freedom of Speech: Meanings and Limits*. This topic was chosen following the pro-Palestinian protests on many college campuses in 2024 following the

Gaza War that started in October 7, 2023. Soliya's dialogue sessions were focused on tackling questions such as how is freedom of speech perceived in your country? What limits, if any, should there be to free speech? Are those limits evolving? When does speech become intolerable or harmful? Just as in Spring 2023, those participating in the Spring 2024 virtual exchange after attending the two live sessions and completing some online assignments submitted two-page paper summarizing what they learned in their global learning experience. Unlike in the spring 2024, there was no end-of-semester presentation about the experience. Most recently, in the spring 2025 semester, rather than participate in the Soliya Global Circles program, students in the Mass Communication, Service and Diversity Class engaged in a full-blown COIL experience, which was designed to be a smaller-scale project lasting just three weeks. A new partner in the School of Arts and Humanities at Nottingham Trent University in Nottingham, England was engaged for this experience that involved advertising, public relations, marketing and news media students at University of Alabama in making promotional items for short films produced by teams of students from Nottingham Trent University. Prior to the start of the COIL experience, University of Alabama students wrote two-page essays about Nottingham, England, using data about racial/ethnic diversity of the area and Nottingham Trent University. Once the COIL experience began, University of Alabama students were expected to meet at least three times using a video conference platform of choice (Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Facetime, etc.) to learn about the films produced by the NTU team. The U.S. team was expected to deliver at least three promotional items (i.e. poster, director bio, film summary and social media brand items) that utilized the information gained from interacting with the student film team in the U.K. Each Alabama team was expected to make a live presentation over Microsoft Teams to a joint session of students from both schools. Based on these experiences from 2022 to 2025, the remainder of this paper centers on answering the following three research questions were explored:

RQ1: How do pedagogical strategies in a Virtual Exchange compare to those of Collaborative Online International Learning?

RQ2: Based on the two semesters of experiences, to what topics of media diversity do COIL projects appear to most easily align?

Research methodology

This study focuses on four semesters of coursework—two using the COIL model and two with virtual exchanges in a mass communication course in media diversity. The first COIL experience connected students in the U.S. in the 400-level course in fall 2022 and spring 2025 with two different universities. The fall 2022 course involved an introduction to politics class at The University of Liverpool in Liverpool, England while the spring 2025 class involved students in a beginning filmmaking class at Nottingham Trent University in Nottingham, England. For the virtual exchanges in spring 2023 and spring 2024, students in the mass communication course were involved in virtual conversation on diversity-related topics with students around the world through an organization known as Soliya.

Findings & discussion

In response to Research question 1, given the relative close proximity between the U.S. and U.K. (six-hour time difference), the idea of having synchronous class meetings seemed very attractive. This made the choice of a co-lecture as a pedagogical strategy a no-brainer. Once the co-instructors determined the common topics to be covered in their respective classes, units were built around those topics. The pedagogy began with the two discussing the topic in a video podcast that was recorded in the studio at the University of Alabama. The podcast series was designed to help students in both classes prepare for the assigned readings and the material to be further developed in the co-lectures. What could not be anticipated was the challenging part of co-teaching a 50-minute class when the two instructors have very different teaching styles and strategies and the students were different levels of maturity and operated in different cultures when it came to in-class interaction and engagement. While the two instructors came up with a common set of presentation slides, the actual in-class presentation exposed the diverse teaching styles and at times there was noticeable tension that even students pointed out. The second part of the pedagogy involved students working in small groups on a team project. Because there

were four times as many students in the University of Liverpool class as in the University of Alabama class, the University of Alabama class had a greater burden to meet twice a week with different small groups to prepare team project. The expectations of media students in terms of product outcome also had to be adjusted since the University of Alabama were upper-level students studying media and the University of Liverpool students were only in their second year of college and less-informed about how to make media. In retrospect, the pedagogical strategy for this initial COIL experience was overly ambitious given the logistics of the class. More forethought about the conceptualization of the COIL Project would have improved the experience for students in collaborating with the counterparts at the other university.

The Virtual Exchange with Soliya that was executed in spring 2023 required no preparation on the part of the instructor, who was largely excluded from the exchange. Purely as a means of understanding how the virtual exchange Global Circles operated, the instructor completed an 8-week basic training for Global Circles Facilitators. This offered some insights on the core principles of dialogue and enabled the instructor to share with students what they could expect to occur in the virtual exchange live sessions. At the end of the spring 2023 semester, all but two students met the requirements for the virtual exchange. The same was not the case for spring 2024. While the topic was timely and appropriate for students studying media, a large number of the students were unable to attend the live sessions due to conflicts with work schedules or other classes. An alternative assignment option had to be developed for these students. To make matters worse, unlike spring 2023, no report on students' engagement was ever provided by Soliya. Thus, this presented a problem for the instructor in evaluating or validating the level of participation on the part of the students. In the end, the Soliya virtual exchange fell short of pedagogical expectations in the spring 2024 semester.

While the terms "virtual exchange" and COIL have been considered synonymous in some circles, the two experiences in fall 2022 compared the spring 2023 and spring 2024 could not have been more different. Eager to see what would happen with another COIL, the author was able to be paired with an international education coordinator who had COIL as a part of his duties as a senior lecturer. This meant developing international learning experiences was a part of his work as a faculty member. This facilitated a much easier

conceptualization process for what would become the COIL experience between the University of Alabama and Nottingham Trent University. A schedule developed by the Nottingham Trent University faculty member showing precise expectations and timelines for both classes allowed the instructor at University of Alabama to concentrate the other class assignments that would be associated with the exchange. For the spring 2025 COIL Experience, the one barrier was the short window for students to meet outside of class and prepare their tools before the Nottingham Trent students were to be on spring holidays. As a result, an additional presentation day at the end of the semester and during final exam week for University of Alabama had to be added.

The second research question centered on the diversity topics most suited for COIL experiences. In the first COIL experience in fall 2022, the semester activities were designed to focus students' attention on diversity of race. This was simply because the US/UK Fulbright Commission's Global Challenge was racial justice. It was an easy topic to attack because there were issues in both media and politics related to race. Students had little problem finding material for their projects related to race. At the same time, the Virtual Exchange on world hunger and food insecurity was most closely aligned with the diversity of class. This virtual exchange subject matter was easily linked to course objectives in a diversity class. Less obvious were ways to build exchange activities around diversity of ability/disability or diversity of geography. The spring 2024 topic on First Amendment also brought in diversity of religion. But, that was not directly addressed in the Global Circles dialogue.

Conclusion

Lewis and O'Dowd (2006) in the introduction to their edited volume on online intercultural exchange (OIE) lay a number of definitions that are worth further exploring as one looks to do more COIL experiences. While (COIL) is a term coined by Jon Rubin "a bilateral exchange and corresponding pedagogy, embedded into existing courses across two institutions." While Rubin (2022) is credited with coining the term Collaborative Online International Learning based on his work in the U.S., it remains to be seen whether one can

truly sustain these types of experiences without some intentional work in maintaining and further development relationships between faculty members in different countries.

Unlike (Bowen et. al. 2019) or Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszyk (2022), who developed an intentional strategy for assessing their virtual student exchanges for research purposes, the author of this paper has not yet moved to that level of assessment. Given what (Alves et. al. 2024) found in their study of commonalities between active methodologies and virtual exchange, that insight would seem to be the starting point for an assessment strategy based on what these active methodologies used in COIL or Virtual Exchange are designed to accomplish. In each of the COIL experiences in fall 2022 and spring 2025, short questionnaires were administered at the end of the course with data the University of Alabama instructor could have for internal use only. Such an assessment is the starting point for a conversation with the instructor at the partner institution for data that could be used to compare the different ways students perceive their experiences with COIL. In other words, an intentional assessment strategy is still needed with these experiences. Developing such a strategy is certainly a big next step in offering COIL further experiences to students.

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Journalism defined

Fisher, S.*

Abstract

This qualitative study applies audience expectations to the question of “what is journalism” to provide a potential definition of journalism for the modern digital era by combining interview data results with journalism ethical codes, journalism history and the “Madden Test” (Madden v. Titan Sports, Inc., 1998) often used in the courts to define “who is a journalist?” The existing definition and expectations were applied to the research data to result in a potential definition of “journalism” for the modern digital realm and journalism education.

Introduction

Journalism schools worldwide teach the science and skill of journalism in higher educational institutions. Yet, a commonly understood definition is lacking for the basic question, “What is journalism?” The courts often look to the “Madden Test” (Madden v. Titan Sports, Inc., 1998) to decide “who is a journalist” and thus protected by the Constitutional First Amendment’s press clause. But since there is not yet a clearly understood definition of what “journalism” entails and how to train journalists for the future role of the press, this can cause some ambiguity among journalism students and in journalism schools. There has often been a disconnect between the journalism industry and education, yet with intellectual processes and ideology often shared by journalists (Deuze, 2005). But can there be a clear and shared understanding of the occupation of journalism?

In response to declining enrollment in journalism schools, some have taken creative approaches to recruiting through offering journalism courses or entire degrees on such topics as “fashion journalism” or “video game journalism” even though these consist of opinion-writing and not the unbiased reporting requiring fact-finding skills that journalism students would traditionally acquire in a journalism program. However, fashion columns and product reviews have long been part of traditional journalism, but not as the main focus of the program or a primary recruitment tactic. Are journalism programs still training

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journalism to find the facts and report unbiased truth or are the programs becoming increasingly focused on recruitment courses? From conversations I've had with journalism students, many want to "be part of that" online realm, but do not always know what their role will be or what options exist. Even when they begin journalism train with the desire to write, they usually do not plan to be a part of writing traditional news stories (which they don't typically read, so why would they?). But they likely read fashion articles or reviews of some type, so that type of writing may connect with them more closely than writing news stories. But who will write the "breaking news" or unbiased stories for future society?

The larger question, of course, is what will be considered journalism for the Constitutional press clause? If writing a fashion column is protected journalism, is an opinion-based article written by a company's own public relations representative also to be considered "journalism"? What about a lifestyle magazine, such as a fishing publication, or written propaganda, or advertisements? Where does it end, is any type of published or written work considered journalism? What about the individual writing a product review or complaint, or someone writing on their social media page or blog? Is it all journalism? There must be a line drawn somewhere to determine who is "the press" to receive special protection against libel lawsuits, otherwise, if everyone who writes is considered to be the press, then really no one is. There is already a clause in the First Amendment for Freedom of Speech for everyone, thus the press must be a separate group in order to have a dedicated clause. The courts wrestle with the definition of "who is a journalist?" and rely on such things as the "Madden Test" (Madden v. Titan Sports, Inc., 1998) to determine if someone should be considered a journalist and thus protected from libel lawsuits and exempt from revealing their sources (see *Branzburg v. Hayes*, 1972, in which reporters cannot claim First Amendment protection to avoid revealing their sources to a grand jury).

With the court's "Madden test" of a journalist as the basis, I combined it with traditional journalism through U.S. history and current journalism ethical codes to address what journalism looks like from current industry professionals, then listened to audience expectations to the question of "what is journalism" through qualitative in depth interviews, to reveal a suggested potential definition of journalism for the modern digital era and for use in journalism education.

Literature review

The business of journalism

In recent decades, the most commonplace form of journalism in many areas of the world has been a dedicated organization researching and writing topical stories. But can this traditional form be sustained or are other forms becoming more useful for the gathering and disseminating of truthful information? Economic decisions versus social decisions are nothing new, Lippmann (1922) examined whether journalism should be about what is important to society or what sells. Many news organizations are still trying to discover a “magic bullet” of how to have the greatest influence over the audience, others are searching for a financially sustainable business model. Since Generation Z grew up with a device in their hands as ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001) and are now of the age to purchase products, they are the current focus of advertising sales. “All are trying to figure out what changes in the news and its presentation will attract the most profitable audience, particularly the 18- to 34-year-olds, for whom advertisers will pay the most” (Gans, 2004, p. xiii). Audience opinion and purchasing is the determination of much decision-making in the media industry, thus the changing media landscape will be determined largely by what the audience wants (Hill et al., 2016), or in other words, by what news is determined by the audience to be useful and/or most gratifying (Katz et al., 1973). But business models aside, what does the term “journalism” encompass? This question has been raised in the U.S. courts for centuries and in academic research for decades, without a definitive answer.

What is journalism?

To determine what journalism is for educating future journalists, it is imperative to know that there is a common understanding of what journalism is and what expectations, responsibilities and liabilities are involved. The responsibilities of the press have been varied throughout history and place. In much of the world, the press is the voice of the government rather than the voice of the people. But even historically in the U.S., the press was primarily partisan until the early 1900’s. The difference in expectation was that the partisan press was the voice of the people, not the government, although promoting or

advocating for a partisan viewpoint. It wasn't until early in the Twentieth Century that the U.S. audience began to believe and expect that the press should present viewpoints from both political sides, and the expectation of the "unbiased mainstream media" was thus created. Part of the reason that the meaning of the term "journalism" is vague is because journalists allow it to be, since "journalists themselves often don't want to be licensed, certified or classified by any official authority or by anyone outside journalism, and in part because there is no specific body of knowledge that journalists must master to practice their craft" (Weaver, 2005, p. 44). Similarly, the organized institution of journalism does not need to remain the same in order for journalism to survive (Deuze, 2019). Yet, the expectation of objectivity in journalism "emerged first and most fully in the United States" (Schudson, 2001, p. 149). This objectivity in journalism is part of what makes journalism exceptional and unique, and should not be easily overlooked (Schudson & Anderson, 2009).

Advocacy

Although "unbiased" reporting is expected by much of modern society, it has not always been that way. Prior to the 1890s, most newspapers were clearly partisan, whether directly or indirectly affiliated with a political party. During the 1920s, the societal view of news began to shift away from partisan news, with the expectation of unbiased news rising in the U.S. due to the desire to eliminate corrupt and dishonest practices often labeled as "yellow journalism." An influence on the formation of modern journalism, Edwin Shuman, editor of the Chicago Tribune and journalism textbook author, believed that partisan goals in news production were honorable, but financial conflicts of interest were questionable and to be avoided (Shuman, 1894; 1912). Another influential writer during the transition to unbiased reporting wrestled with the reporting of facts and political bias: "For newspapers, despite their beginning as partisan organs, have come to believe they have a covenant with their readers to provide them with impartial facts. The newspaper's covenant to publish facts does not necessarily imply, however, that the newspaper abandon its leadership in politics" (Bush, 1929, p. 327).

Should advocacy be considered as journalism or remain separate? The ideal of neutrality is unnecessary, some have argued, but as others argue the importance of objectivity, it can become more of a focus than the greater goal of journalism which must be reporting the truth (Muñoz-Torres, 2012). Perhaps striving for traditional journalistic neutrality by reporting "just the facts" is not necessarily more ethical than advocacy journalism (Ward, 2018). Before answering the question of "what a journalist should do" the ethics of journalism must be determined and systematic (Ward, 2010).

The social responsibility of the press

The traditional audience view in the U.S. has long been that the press has a social responsibility as "A Free and Responsible Press" of fair reporting to represent all groups of society (Hutchins, 1947). This view expects that journalists will distribute information to inform the public of multiple viewpoints about issues and political parties while avoiding unfair influence of a dominating political party or viewpoint: "No democracy will indefinitely tolerate concentration of private power, irresponsible and strong enough to thwart the democratic aspirations of the people. If these giant agencies of communication are irresponsible, not even the First Amendment will protect their freedom from government control. The Amendment will be amended" (Hutchins, 1947). The Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press was formed by Henry R. Luce, owner of Time, Inc., with the goal of finding a way to preserve the failing press and restore the peoples' confidence in journalism after the corrupt practices of "yellow journalism" had diminished trust in news organizations. The University of Chicago president at the time, Robert M. Hutchins, was appointed to the committee along with a dozen other scholars, to investigate what would be necessary for the freedom of the press during the present and future (Lyons, 1947). After three years of work, the group released several articles, one entitled "A Free and Responsible Press" became a changing force in journalism, after a slow adoption of the concepts presented within, that journalists are privileged and this privilege is accompanied by the responsibility to report with fair coverage topics that are important to all groups in society. The work became also known as the Social Responsibility theory. In

the early Twentieth Century, when the journalism profession was struggling with diminished trust, newspaper owner Joseph Pulitzer viewed university degrees as a method of building trust and respect for journalism through training journalists in ethical ideals, commented on his perceived role of a journalist:

A journalist is the lookout on the bridge of the ship of state. He notes the passing sail, the little things of interest that dot the horizon in fine weather. He reports the drifting castaway whom the ship can save. He peers through fog and storm to give warning of dangers ahead. He is not thinking of his wages, or of the profits of his owners. He is there to watch over the safety and the welfare of the people who trust him. (Pulitzer, 1904, p. 656)

Journalism ethical codes

The first code of ethics, the Canons of Journalism, was formed in 1922 with the goal of increasing integrity and respect for the journalism profession. Since that time, the journalism profession has continued to implement self-guidance on ethical standards to hold the industry accountable, as well as to inform the public of the ethical standards. The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics was most recently revised in 2014, and is looked to as the national standard for journalism ethics. The code presents the role of the journalist, describing “*SEEK TRUTH AND REPORT IT*” as the first goal of journalism, further detailing: “Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.” The code then lists many specific expectations of journalism professionalism and behavior while reporting, the following are a few select excerpts from the list, demonstrating the expectations of unbiased reporting, disclosures and honesty in working for the people not for another agenda. “Journalists should:

- Identify sources clearly. The public is entitled to as much information as possible to judge the reliability and motivations of sources.

- Consider sources' motives before promising anonymity. Reserve anonymity for sources who may face danger, retribution or other harm, and have information that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Explain why anonymity was granted.
- Diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information unless traditional, open methods will not yield information vital to the public.
- Support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that public records are open to all label advocacy and commentary.
- Never deliberately distort facts or context, including visual information." The Code of Ethics continues by explaining the need to avoid conflicts of interest in reporting, focusing on serving the public: "*ACT INDEPENDENTLY*"
- "The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public. Journalists should: Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived. Disclose unavoidable conflicts. Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities that may compromise integrity or impartiality, or may damage credibility.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressure to influence coverage.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Prominently label sponsored content." (Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, 2014)

The above demonstrate the expectation that journalism should not involve factors such as other influences, but to act independently to gather truthful information. There are many more points in the code, but the above excerpts reveal that journalists are still expected to be avoiding conflicts of interest while reporting news to serve the people.

The First Amendment protection for the press

The First Amendment provides freedom for the press (journalists) by protecting them from libel (defamation) lawsuits, as long as they are acting responsibly to find and report the truth. Journalists are not protected from lawsuits if they are intentionally (or neglectfully) writing false or misleading news. The First Amendment was added to the Constitution of the United States as part of the Bill of Rights in 1791, four years after the Constitution was written in 1787:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. (First Amendment, Bill of Rights, 1791)

The journalist is protected when they are reporting the truth, but not falsities or slander. Writing can be protect as journalism only as long as it consists of factual information only, and "The Truth" is considered an absolute defense against charges of libel (Crown v. John Peter Zenger, 1735). Zenger printed "The New York Weekly Journal" which voiced criticisms of the then-governor of NY, William Cosby, but the jury acquitted Zenger in the libel case. This case was the groundwork of freedom of the press, and in 1805 a law was passed to recognize "truth" as a definite defense against charges of libel. However, false words were protected in *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* (1964) since a libel claim had to prove that the press knew that the information they published about a public figure was false or that they recklessly published without making a reasonable attempt to check the facts. But opinions that are published as "expressions of opinion rather than fact" are protected as such: In *Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc.* (1974) the Supreme Court determined that ideas were protected, saying that "under the First Amendment, there is no such thing as a false idea." This was a landmark decision of First Amendment protection for the press against defamation claims from private individuals.

The recent Supreme Court, Roberts Court, frequently references the First Amendment's expressive freedom of speech, yet has been found to have far fewer mentions of the freedom of the press, "The institutional press itself is changing—and may even be

disappearing—but the press and the press function of course continue to exist, and a stable democracy requires continued recognition of the overarching principle of press freedom” (Jones & West, 2022, p. 1461). However, attempts to define the press have often been overbroad, resulting in fewer protections for the press, rather than greater. To avoid this consequence and provide protection as the Constitutional text intended, requires a narrow definition of the press that will “embrace press exceptionalism” (West, 2010, p. 1025).

The Madden Test

Who is a journalist? The courts often refer to the “Madden test” (1998) to determine who is considered a journalist or “the press” and thus covered by the First Amendment of the Constitution with a measure of protection from defamation (libel) lawsuits and from revealing their sources in court. Libel cases in which a person believes they were written about in a way that presented them in a bad light or gave an unjustly unfavorable impression, are only immune to libel lawsuits if the press made a reasonable attempt to find and present truthful information in an honest manner.

Mark Madden was employed by the World Championship Wrestling, with Turner Broadcasting Systems, Inc. as the parent company, to use information from confidential sources to produce promotional commentaries that were recorded on tape and replayed to callers of WCW’s 900 number. Titan Sports, Inc. was the parent company of World Wrestling Entertainment (then World Wrestling Federation) and wanted to find out the names of the anonymous sources used by Madden, but he refused to reveal this information in court, stating his journalistic privilege. But the courts decided that he was not a journalist and thus must reveal his sources: “It is clear from the record that Mr. Madden was not investigating “news,” even were we to apply a generous definition of the word. Madden admits in his deposition that his work for the WCW amounts to a mix of entertainment with reporting... Even if Madden's efforts could be considered as “newsgathering,” his claim of privilege would still fail because, as an author of entertaining fiction, he lacked the intent at the beginning of the research process to disseminate information to the public. He, like other creators of fictional works, intends at the beginning

of the process to create a piece of art or entertainment. Fiction or entertainment writers are permitted to view facts selectively, change the emphasis or chronology of events or even fill in factual gaps with fictitious events-license a journalist does not have. Because Madden is not a journalist, it follows that he cannot conceal his information within the shadow of the journalist's privilege." The court's decision, which became a precedent for many other court decisions after that time, was based on their determination that in order to claim journalist privilege an individual must demonstrate that they meet three requirements:

To summarize, we hold that individuals claiming the protections of the journalist's privilege must demonstrate the concurrence of three elements: that they:

- *are engaged in investigative reporting;*
- *are gathering news; and*
- *Possess the intent at the inception of the newsgathering process to disseminate this news to the public.*

Madden, having failed to sustain his burden, cannot protect his sources or his information by invoking the journalist's privilege. We will reverse the order and remand the cause to the district court. (Madden v. Titan Sports, Inc., 1998)

Thus, the protection of sources is not guaranteed and this test of whether someone is considered to be a journalist has been utilized in the courts many times since. The courts have to grapple with the question even more since the internet has allowed many citizen journalists to become "publishers" of a blog or other type of website that produces information, such as the question of: should anyone who publishes information be covered by the First Amendment press protection? (Papandrea, 2006).

Further, to what extent would a journalist at a news organization still be considered a journalist if they had to define the word "news" as contained in the three requirements? Would advocacy or political or corporate communication be considered news? Would the

requirements of press privilege still be the same if objective journalism was no longer the norm?

Research methods

RQ1: What is “journalism” and how can it be defined clearly and concisely?

For this qualitative study, twenty (N=20) semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted. The qualitative method was ideal for the topic of this study to gain a greater understanding of how the audience perceives journalism. Interviews were chosen as the ideal method for this study to gain a greater understanding of audience perception of journalism. Open-ended questions on the topic of news were asked during the interview, with consistent prompts to gain an understanding of the participant’s thoughts and viewpoint.

The interview data was then transcribed for analysis using the constant comparative method of thematic analysis. The process of inductive thematic analysis with the constant comparative method requires frequent comparison of incidents in the data during coding, while consistently returning to the data to compare the forming themes during this procedure. The process results in consistent themes that emerge inductively through the process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The results have been analyzed using the constant comparative method of thematic analysis, partially leading to the formation of the proposed definition of journalism.

Interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling method (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) to gain a variety of participants with varied demographics.

Findings

Prior to defining the word “news” during the interview, participants were asked to define “news” in their own words: “When you hear the word ‘news’ what comes to mind?” participant’s answers were varied, with many focusing on either timely and urgent information or truthfulness and/or bias.

Table 1. News Definitions

Participant	Question: <i>"When you hear the word 'News' what comes to mind?"</i>
P1	Current. Temporarily relevant, ongoing issues, factors, just things that are happening anywhere. Information being disseminated broadly. Ideally, I would think of that as information without bias.
P2	Division. There's a lot of stuff out there that's purported to be news that really isn't, and there's a lot of other stuff that actually is news.
P3	Agenda. Every news outlet today has an agenda or a slant or something that they are trying to push. It is so rare to find something that is truly objective anymore.
P4	Factual. Current and factual. It definitely has to be factual and there should be accountability that it is factual and that has been checked.
P5	Breaking information regarding government politics or events. Something new, different, or changing, not a continuation of something that has always been.
P6	Facts. Real events that are happening. Based on facts and not opinion or trying to persuade the public to think a certain way.
P7	Information. It depends on the source... certain ones I go to more often because I think that they're more accurate in their reporting. I do try to get both sides of an issue.
P8	Information. Current events, political details.
P9	Biased. Local, national, or across the world, it's very biased based on the actual work. I feel like each network has their own agenda, whether it's a conservative or liberal mindset.
P10	Sensationalize everything. It seems like on the news they show the worst possible scenarios.
P11	The latest events that are taking place.
P12	Recent and maybe unexpected.
P13	Information about public events usually done by a factual organization. And I would say something that is timely, something that is new.
P14	Problems. Issues that, as an individual, I'm about to hear. Something that I can't control, that I have no say in, I just watch and form an opinion.
P15	Biased. News today is more opinion related than facts and data. Journalism has changed. It's not the same as it used to be.
P16	Current events. And that can be anything from culture to politics, actual events happening locally, nationally, or internationally.
P17	Usually bad. They seem to focus on bad news or fear or controversy.
P18	Journalism. A daily journal put together by unbiased people in order to exhibit and declare the day's events without favor or rank of those events.
P19	Lying. My first thought was 'Something having to do with lying.'
P20	Sports or local. Typically, I think of sports, or I try to think of more of like local news and things that are happening around my house.

Throughout the interview questions, participants continued to their views on what journalism is, as well as what they wished journalism was. Consistent themes emerged from the data analysis, with many expressions of expecting trustworthy and timely information, many others focusing on their perception of political bias or financial influence on the news. The desire for fairness from reporters and news agencies was dominant as well. The themes began to form inductively during the analysis, and the following five themes emerged as consistently expressed perceptions of what news/journalism is or should be.

Thematic analysis

The five consistent themes that emerged during the analysis that related to the perceived or expected role of journalism were the following themes:

Fairness:

If a journalism story unfairly promotes or demotes one side, it is unfair to the other group(s). Whether through words or an angle that would lead the reader to choose one side rather than another, by giving the perception that one side is more desirable or valued than another, or through influential attempts such as political propaganda or public relations one-sided, agenda-filled stories. If the words are intended to influence towards one side of an issue or character through distortion or hiding, it is perceived as unfair to the other side or person(s). Each person and side of an issue deserves to be treated fairly and given the opportunity to be presented fairly and have a fair chance to respond equally in the news. All sides of the story and/or each person or party should be covered fairly.

Facts:

Journalism requires facts (not false facts). Stories that are opinion-based were appreciated by readers as long as it was clearly labeled as an “op-ed” or similar. If the story was presented as “news” there was the expectation that it would include undistorted facts, without miss-interpreted or exaggerated results or context of the facts. When participants noticed falsities in a news story, the reported decreased trust in that news organization as a

result. If the story was unsupported by facts and not labeled as an opinion piece, or if it was not clearly labeled as a sponsored story, the participants reported decreased trust resulting as well.

Partisan press:

While many participants reported that their ideal desire was to read unbiased news, many shared the perception that it may not be possible since each writer has their own bias, as do the publishers. But many also expressed that they would not object to reading partisan news, with some expressing that they would rather read partisan news that is labeled as such, than news from an organization that hides its bias.

Disinterested:

Most participants expressed their view that journalism must be either disinterested communication or reveal their interests in order to build audience trust. Similar to the bias that was mainly expressed as political, the disinterested journalism involved primarily financial or business interests, as well as political. Participants would rather read news written by a neutral party on most topics, but several expressed perceived challenges of neutrality.

Disclosures:

Participants were especially wary of reading stories with hidden financial agendas. Many expressed that they would want clear labeling or easy-to-find disclosures of any funding or political leanings of the journalist or organization. Similar to the decrease in trust for a hidden bias, participants expressed an appreciation for transparency of an organization's interest, especially financial and political, and clearly labeled agendas in stories.

Journalism definition

The following suggested definition was formed from the research study results, compiled with the frequently utilized legal determination of "a journalist" and with considerations of current journalism ethical codes. Journalism is planned information containing only true facts, presented honestly and accurately, compiled by a person with

the predetermined intention to communicate that information to the public. It is of note that I did not include the word “disinterested” or “objective” in the definition. I considered including it in the first sentence as “*Journalism is planned (disinterested) information*” but decided not to include it because although it is a historical and cultural expectancy for journalism to be unbiased, the fact remains that partisan journalism survived for thousands of years worldwide with bias included. Indeed, the expectation of journalism without bias has roots in the past century of the idealism that presumably saved journalism in part through the expectation that reporters serve all groups of society (Hutchins, 1947), avoid financial influence (Shuman, 1912) and should set aside their own interests to report on a topic (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). It can be argued that without the “disinterested” aspect of journalism, advocacy journalism does not differ much from propaganda. As well as the view that “objectivity” in reporting is one of the unique and meaningful aspects of journalism in the U.S. (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). So, perhaps the word “disinterested” (or similar) should be included in a definition of journalism, but I will leave that to the reader to decide.

Conclusion & recommendations

Journalist privilege, or the freedom of the press, is an important aspect of the First Amendment, but who is the press? A definition often used in the courts is the “Madden Test” (Madden v. Titan Sports, Inc., 1998), in which the court proposed that a journalist must meet a set of defined requirements to be provided protection allowed to the press. Can a common definition of “journalism” assist in avoiding ambiguity in modern society and the digital realm? It is recommended for journalistic education to have a clear definition of “journalism” for consistent training of future journalists across the nation and the world.

This study was conducted specifically about journalism in the United States: through examining the historical media and current ethical guidelines and court practices of application of the U.S. Constitutional First Amendment protections for the press, thus the participant base interviewed about their outlook of journalism matched the location of the

former. There are many studies about journalism worldwide, including viewpoints of the readers as well as governmental and historical application of such. What makes this study unique to the U.S. is the application of the court protection of journalists against the backdrop of a lack of common definition of the parameters of the term “journalism.” However, it is recommended to consider if this — or another — definition of “journalism” could be received internationally as a common and connecting understanding of the important role of the press worldwide.

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Extraordinary threats impact traditional journalism education

Gainey, B.*

Abstract

Today's newsrooms and communities are confronted by daunting crisis events, both in the number of crises and the differing expertise required to respond and cover these events effectively. Accordingly, journalism education must adapt to prepare university students for these wide-ranging crises, the trauma that follows in the wake of these crises, and the critical need to develop more resilient journalists and communities. This paper will address these changes to journalism education to ensure that students have the skills to assess expected and unexpected crisis dilemmas; education that prepares students for the trauma that impacts residents as well as working journalists in a crisis event; and education that recognizes the role that journalism and journalists have to play to support resiliency in news organizations and communities often stymied by a lack of local news in growing news deserts.

Introduction

In addition to traditional news beats of politics and government, education, and health, we must add content about increasing crises that are impacting citizens globally, nationally and locally. Today's newsrooms and communities are confronted by daunting crisis events, both in the number of crises and the differing expertise required to respond and cover these events effectively. According to Taleb, Goldstein & Spitznagel, "Because of the Internet and globalization, the world has become a complex system, made up of a tangled web of relationships complexity not only increased the incidence of Black Swan events but also makes forecasting even ordinary events impossible" (2009, p. 79). The complexity of national and global crises has only increased since the financial crisis of 2008-2009. Journalism education must reboot and adapt to prepare university students for these wide-ranging crises, the trauma that follows in the wake of these crises, and the critical need to develop more resilient journalists and communities. This paper will address these changes to journalism education to ensure that students have the skills to assess expected and unexpected crisis dilemmas; education that prepares students for the trauma that impacts residents as well as working journalists in a crisis event; and education that

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recognizes the role that journalism and journalists have to play to support resiliency in news organizations and communities often stymied by a lack of local news in growing news deserts.

Communities often face more devastating and far-reaching crises that are shared via global and social media. The historical record of product recalls or sabotage, corporate malfeasance, and inclement weather have been compounded by increased incidents of terrorism, gun violence or societal conflict, natural disasters of increasing magnitude, cybersecurity threats, pandemics and other global health challenges, and crises that are cataclysmic and seem to challenge currently accepted best practices. In addition, society must deal with the “creeping crisis” that is “a threat to widely shared societal values of life-sustaining systems that evolves over time and space, is foreshadowed by precursor events, subject to varying degrees of political and/or societal attention, and impartially or insufficiently addressed by authorities” (Boin, Ekengren & Rhinard, 2021), such as climate change. It is vital that journalism programs expand content to include strategies that students can use to better understand and knowledgeably cover these crises. Coverage must also support accuracy and trust, in addition to addressing underserved communities.

The trauma of a natural disaster or school shooting leaves behind families and friends who have experienced dreadful loss and reporters, videographers and photographers who are often ill-prepared to interview grief-stricken family members or be exposed themselves to devastation and suffering. Journalism programs can do more to prepare students how to cover traumatic events and, at the same time, protect themselves from physical or psychological harm. Trauma-informed education may run the gamut from covering a local protest or election to being assigned to a multi-state natural disaster or global pandemic that results in many local deaths. As one New York Times author noted, “Now, having lived through the experience of the global Covid-19 pandemic, we are all disaster survivors, one way or another we were all affected by the stress and uncertainty we have learned lessons that can save lives and reduce suffering the next time disaster strikes. But there is a lot of work to be done. We have to reckon with our losses and turn all of our hard-earned wisdom into new institutions and traditions” (Ripley, 2024, pp. xi-xiv).

Journalism education must also recognize the importance of its role in supporting resilience in our students when facing destructive events. Resiliency reflects a number of factors, which include the belief in the ability to protect one's self (Zhang & Shay, 2019), the ability to find reliable information and a trusted local support system to aid survival (Almedon, 2005), and the ability to contribute to a sense of community and "everyone is in this together" approach (Zhang & Shay, 2019; Almedon, 2005; & Adger, 2000). Crises present journalists with the dilemma of the "pressure cooker in which pre-existing but hitherto 'normalized' social problems are aggravated, dramatized, and – not invariably but often enough – politicized. So, it is not just that they have long shadows, crises [are] also harbingers of societal conflict, choice and change" (Hart, 2023. p. 78). News deserts, neighborhoods with limited or no access to local journalism, are also threatening a disturbing influence on crisis response and community resiliency. We are just starting to see results as universities, news organizations and nonprofit news sites collaborate to address the threats that news deserts pose to a democracy. This research will also compare the ramifications of news deserts to resilience. As we consider adaptations needed to journalism education, a focus on resiliency among those in the new-journalist pipeline will impact what we do in our classrooms.

Statement of problem

Threats require curriculum adjustments

Journalism education has undergone numerous changes in recent years as the skill sets needed by students in the evolving journalism landscape expand. Skills in writing and telling an important story to keep the attention of a time-strapped and fickle audience—whether straight news reporting, features, longform reporting, podcasting or multimedia storytelling—are still essential components of journalism education. Other aspects of journalism education continue to be interviewing, critical thinking, deadlines, journalism history, law and ethics, and research or data analysis (Finneman, Heckman & Wolgast, 2024). Students also need competence in the latest digital technology, social media, and artificial intelligence. Acknowledging the importance of this list of curriculum topics, we

still must find a way to incorporate the following societal threats into our curriculum if we hope to grow and strengthen journalism education for future journalists. This paper will examine the crucial role of educating students on crisis coverage, the impacts of trauma-informed practices, the value of resilience to journalists and communities, and the implications of news deserts on the role of journalism in a democracy and in the global stage.

Literature review

Communities in crisis

From the 1980s, crises such as the Johnson & Johnson Extra-Strength Tylenol poisonings and the Exxon Valdez oil spill, “traditional crises” were analyzed, documented, and response checklists proposed. These crises are often viewed as more narrowly focused and more linear in time with recognized start and end dates. The crises tend to fit in neat categories, such as product sabotage/recall and product failure (Buckle, 2003; Lagadec, 2006; Jaques, 2012). Other traditional crises pose short-term trials, whether they are a severe local snowstorm or the unexpected death of a corporate leader.

However, the crises that shake and challenge today’s communities are more complicated. These crises are often multistate or multiregional, violent, environmental, or global events that affect the health, economy or financial stability, or safety of local citizens. Researchers have noted the increasing “uncertainty, complexity, and rapid change” of crisis threats (Kents, 2006, p. 44) and the need to “be more imaginative and more resourceful in looking at the hazards we face” as well as creative in looking at generational and global consequences (Buckle, 2003, p. 121; Topper & Lagadec, 2013). Crises are more often transboundary and hypercomplex in nature, damaging infrastructural or functional systems; crossing geographical boundaries or political affiliations; and impacting traditional time boundaries (Boin & Lagadec, 2000; Lagadec, 2007; Boin, 2009; Lagadec, 2009; & Ansell, Boin & Keller, 2010). Scientist and crisis responder Tom Hunter said “I think many of our systems do not operate as if things could go wrong. They operate as if everything will go right” (Achenbach, *The Washington Post*, 2011). Such an attitude leaves

systems and organizations woefully unprepared for crises, particularly those that have no predecessor (Taleb, 2011).

Researchers in 2013 postulated that “A quarter of a century after the blossoming of crisis studies, the need for a decisive breakthrough appears crucial in the present world, where crisis is no longer the marginal exception but the core engine” (Topper & Lagadec, 2013). Changes needed include:

- Moving from large-scale to off-scale as major crises threaten greater numbers.
- Adjusting from complex problems to crises that grow and unfold in interdependent systems.
- Shifting from “high speed to instantaneity” as information travels globally in real time through media coverage or social media (p. 6).
- Moving from a focus on ground zero to multiple fronts, indicative of global interdependence and cascading effects from one field to another.

Journalism educators need to introduce students to “black swan” crises that have a low probability of occurring but will have a high impact and far-reaching consequences when they do occur (Taleb, 2011; Gainey, 2020). Crisis events that spill over into multiple areas of society as well as inflict longer-lasting damage are more frequent and more costly. According to the Homeland Security Report *Crisis Response and Disaster Resilience 2030: Forging Strategic Action in an Age of Uncertainty* (2012), the country needs to “empower individuals to assume more responsibility” as high-impact black-swan crisis events strain traditional hierarchical structures and require more innovative “boots on the ground” approaches to human and societal crisis and risk. The Homeland Security report predicts that the future will be “characterized by more frequent emergency events, many of which will be simultaneous...and have more far-reaching impacts...We will need to employ, and in some cases develop, new and improved models and tools to successfully meet our critical missions.” As one example, by May 2024, the U.S. was already on track to set new records, with 11 billion-dollar disasters to date, to be followed by hurricanes, wildfires, heat waves, and storms that could upend communities and economies (Cappucci, 2024).

In 2025, communities and states in the U.S. are likely to face new response challenges as federal budget and programmatic cuts place more expectations and strain on localities and individuals impacted by natural disasters and other crises. According to the Associated Press, “Experts are alarmed over the large-scale staff reductions, travel and training restrictions and grant cut-offs since President Donald Trump took office at both the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which prepares for and responds to hurricanes, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which tracks and forecasts them” (Borenstein & Angueira, 2025). “FEMA canceled various emergency management trainings this spring, moved others online and restricted travel to events such as the National Hurricane Conference. Some trainings have resumed. ‘Given the reduction in staffing, being unable to do trainings, participate in conferences, there’s potential that the federal government’s ability is diminished,’ said former Florida Emergency Management chief Bryan Koon, now president of the disaster preparedness firm IEM.” The federal government is empowering “state actors to provide relief for their citizens,” Associate FEMA Administrator Geoff Harbaugh said in an email,” as quoted in the AP story. How this new crisis response procedure will impact communities remains to be seen during tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, severe heat and drought, and wildfires occurring throughout 2025.

It is imperative that journalism curriculum be modified to include an introduction to potential crisis topics. Because crisis management and crisis communication are interdisciplinary research areas, there may be numerous professors available to supplement traditional journalism education. Academic crisis scholars can sometimes be found in departments of communication, public relations, psychology, business and political science, in addition to calling on working journalists who cover natural disasters and other crises. These experts ease the pressure on journalism faculty to become versed in yet another discipline. Development of content modules can ensure that today’s students are better prepared to research, cover and tell the story of crises that inflict human and societal suffering.

Trauma-informed education

Godlasky, a 2020 Fellow, asks an important question: “Can people remain informed citizens without feeling vicariously traumatized or experiencing compassion fatigue” by consuming the news” (2020, p. 56). According to Godlasky, the Pew Research Center has noted that almost seven in 10 Americans confessed to being worn out by the news. In addition, a 2019 Reuters Institute report found that 41 percent of Americans sometimes or often avoid the news. May 2025 analysis by the Pew Research Center found that respondents felt more negative than positive about the quantity or content of the news they received (Eddy et. al, 2025). One Pew respondent said, “I can become overwhelmed ... and need to step away for a while.” If this negativity leads to more news avoidance, citizens are less likely to be engaged, may vote less and be less informed (Godlasky, 2020). The impact of news on receivers, not necessarily only those personally impacted by crises or the journalists covering these events, is another critical factor that should be addressed by journalism educators--and professional journalists—as solutions to crisis fatigue are sought.

Trauma-informed education should lead students to consider all of these audiences and prepare themselves for the repeated acts of covering disaster events, interviewing victims, and implementing strategies to mitigate the distress of the coverage on receivers of this crisis news. Also, unlike war correspondents, stateside reporters may not always recognize that trauma reporting is part of their job and brings with it risks for their personal physical and emotional health (Seeley, 2020).

Resources to develop class lessons to address gaps of student understanding could include documents from the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, the Poynter Institute, the Committee to Protect Journalists, American Press Institute and the Global Investigative Journalism Network, among others. The Dart Center “advocates ethical and accurate reporting of trauma; compassionate, professional treatment of victims and survivors by journalists; and greater awareness by media organizations of the impact of trauma coverage on both news professionals and news consumers” (Ogunyemi & Price, 2023, p. 218; Dart Center). Ogunyemi and Price note that journalism education doesn’t regard journalists as first responders as yet, even though they are often working alongside emergency workers as a disaster unfolds (2023). There are also few published curriculum

guidelines on trauma-informed literacy other than a 2009 guide produced by the Dart Center (2023). Only slightly more than 10 percent of journalism education programs in the U.S. offer trauma-informed journalism training, while 37% of programs in an Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication survey reported committing some portion of the curriculum to trauma journalism (Newman, Madrigal & Hight, 2023).

Trauma-informed journalism topics should include impacts on victims, the community and the journalists; accuracy; sensitivity; respect for survivors; privacy rights; safety; trustworthiness and transparency; sense of serving the public interest; and best practice approaches to communication before and during disasters (Newman, Madrigal & Hight, 2023; Wake, Smith & Ricketson, 2023; Raptis, 2023; Ewart & McLean, 2019). Students need to be aware of ethical challenges when disasters are covered as pack journalism, spectacle or sensationalism, or as a form of entertainment (Ewart & McLean, 2019). Journalists “have an important educational role during disasters” that includes providing warnings and timely, accurate, and easy to understand information (p. 1576). Incorporating trauma-informed communication into existing journalism classes or establishing a semester-long course are options to be weighed by journalism programs.

Findings and discussions

Need for resiliency

According to Duckers, “When a crisis occurs, it is tackled by networks of organizations, which cut across disciplinary, jurisdictional, and public-private sections boundaries ... The resilience of a society is to a considerable extent determined by the breadth and depth of interprofessional or interorganizational relationships within its crisis management systems,” which include local and national media (2017, p. 184). While journalists may see themselves as separate from the formal community structure, ideally local media are a crucial part of the community’s information-gathering and -dissemination system and a contributing factor to the resilience of local residents and communities.

In exploring the topic of engaging community audiences through local journalism, Jennifer Choi of the McCormick Foundation, notes, “While it is incumbent upon the public

sector, individuals, business and civic organizations to contribute to a healthy democracy, journalism institutions clearly have a significant role to play” (2016, p. 9). This could be expanded to recognize local journalism as essential both to a democracy and to a more resilient society, able to move forward after experiencing a traumatic event.

Norris and colleagues define resilience as “a process linking a set of adaptive capabilities to a positive trajectory of function and adaptation after a disturbance” (2008). Capacities at different levels of society (individual, community, national, or global) are often linked to a sense of well-being, health and safety, connections between individuals and community organizations, an alignment in sense of purpose, a measure of social trust, recognition of shared interests, and collaboration between individuals, various levels of government, business, and society.

Resilient individuals demonstrate an adaptive capability of self-efficacy or the belief in one’s ability to protect oneself and one’s family. The resilient individual exhibits personality traits such as optimism and trust, has secure and stable relationships, is flexible in the face of crisis, and exhibits problem-solving skills and the trait of hardiness (Almedom, 2005). Hardiness has been defined as the belief that one can influence the outcome of events and learn and grow from a traumatic or crisis experience Bonanno, 2004). Promoting a sense of togetherness, sharing narratives and stories of individual crisis experience, and recognizing common community values support resilience (Zhang & Shay, 2019; & Ulmer, 2007). Having attachments to place and trusted sources of information to turn to in a crisis are contributing factors to community resilience.

Ogunyemi and Price said, “Journalism schools can no longer ignore the need to prepare students to deal with traumatic events...As journalism educators, we argue that we have an urgent duty to strengthen resilience in both the reporter and the reported by equipping journalists with the skills and knowledge they need to live up to their vital public service obligations. Resilient democratic societies require resilient journalism to adopt to current and future challenges” (2023, p. 110). According to Raptis, “Developing resilience...means we can learn to develop the capacity to adapt more effectively to the multitude of stressors we encounter. Engaging in trauma-informed practices can help educators build resilience in themselves and their students” (2023, p. 303).

Local journalism gaps

While expertise, location, resources, and community expectations may dictate their differences, local media often tend to view themselves as an integral part—rather than strictly an observer—of the community. However, increasingly we have lost local news media voices that were important to the resilience of local communities—acting as watchdogs of local politicians and government agencies, especially during a crisis; reporting the local impacts of regional, national and international news; disseminating important and timely news; and capturing for posterity the news of major community events and milestones. Now “new deserts” are a common part of the lexicon as we have seen the takeover of locally owned news outlets by media conglomerates, often to be stripped of their resources and shuttered, reduced in size and editorial impact, or minimized to the point of irrelevance in their localities. These news deserts create challenges for providing news on local governments, perspective on the local impact of major national and global news, and a “community’s life story” (Garfrerick, 2010, p. 152).

The Washington Post media columnist Margaret Sullivan has devoted many column-inches to the loss of local news coverage. In the fall 2021 magazine coverage, Sullivan wrote, “The demise of local news poses the kind of danger to our democracy that should have alarm sirens screeching across the land.” In her 2020 book *Ghosting the News, Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy*, Sullivan writes that the loss of trusted local news “takes a toll on civic engagement—even on citizens’ ability to have a common sense of reality and facts, the very basis of self-governance” (page 15). Harvard Business School’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy author Forman wrote that the loss of local papers was “an emerging challenge for America’s democracy” (2021, page 1). “Research shows that the disappearance of credible local news and information contributes to...suboptimal community outcomes” (2021, pp. 1 & 2).

Other scholars and news organizations have also researched and reported on the loss of local news. “*New Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?*,” a 2021 report by Abernathy, Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, found that the United States has lost almost 1,800 papers since 2004, including more than 60 dailies and 1,700 weeklies. There are hundreds — if not

thousands — of communities at risk of becoming isolated news deserts. According to a 2022 report, “More than a fifth of the nation’s citizens live in news deserts—with very limited access to local news—or in communities at risk of becoming news deserts” (Abernathy & Franklin, 2022, p. 6). University students and nonprofits are helping to fill this gap, but the challenge remains as the need for timely crisis response and community resilience grows.

Journalism majors need to understand this shift in the journalism landscape and the impact of this shift on the role they will play as they cover traumatic events and help their communities build resilience for challenges that may be ahead.

Conclusion

Traumatic crises—as extraordinary events—threaten traditional journalism education that may leave students unprepared for the challenges that await. These extraordinary threats require that we take a critical and honest look at the education needs of students facing an evolving field and changing society. Course requirements need to expand to include necessary strategies for reporting and staying safe while covering natural disasters, shootings, violent protests, and other realities of the 21st century.

Updated journalism education must include topics on covering major crises; best practices on reporting on traumatic events as they impact victims, the community and journalists themselves; the role that journalists play in supporting community resilience in responding to future traumatic events; and the challenge that news deserts pose. Better equipping our students for their vital role in informing their communities is a necessary investment for the future of journalism education.

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Mental health for journalists: Are newsrooms and classrooms doing enough?

Ghani, F.*

Abstract

Journalism is a profession of choice. Typically, it offers limited financial returns and almost always puts peace of mind at risk. Long hours, hostile environments, and the potential for more adversaries than allies have long been hallmarks of a journalist's life. The increased competition among peers, for speed and exclusivity, also puts extra pressure on individuals to perhaps work beyond their capacity in return for what they consider success and achievements. Working on conflict zones as well as covering wars and natural disasters has a negative effect on a journalist's life. However, in addition to that, workload, office stress, anxiety, bullying at work, long working hours and increasing work demands can negatively affect a journalist's mental health. But do journalists have coping mechanisms? Is mental health being discussed in newsrooms? Away from the newsrooms, is any of that being discussed in classrooms? Are journalism institutes preparing the journalists and content creators of tomorrow incorporating mental health into their curriculum as an essential part? Is the focus more on telling other people's story instead of focusing on their own self too while at it? In addition to learning data journalism, reporting, interviewing techniques and adapting to various social media platforms, is enough being done to instill survival skills, identify red flags, and the importance of stepping back without fear of repercussion or embarrassment?

Introduction

For newsrooms across the globe – from print to broadcast to digital – the stress of deadlines, workload and increase in gruesome content to sift through is taking a toll on journalists and content creators. With falling budgets and rise in competitiveness for share of advertising revenues and clicks, a lot of newsrooms are facing redundancies which often result in overworked staff. With an increase in demand of consumption due to additional publishing avenues (print, digital, social media, audio), journalists are expected to adapt a single piece of content across platforms, resulting in extra work. That may help with polishing of skills and an increase in the skillset, but with an understaffed newsroom, the pressure of meeting expectations as well as the deadlines can take a toll.

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Now, with an increasing number of conflicts globally, the emotional side of things take a hit as well. Gory content, news and visuals of death and destruction, demands of an under-staffed shift and overload of news lines will affect reporters, sub-editors, editors and even interns who want to have a taste of the real working life in the newsroom. This leads to loss in quality, increase in stress levels, inferior meaningful discussions in the newsroom and a possible effect on professional relationships among staff. Journalists play a vital role in shaping the audience's opinion. Often, what the audience consumes is what forms their opinion. With an effect on journalists' mental health, and the subsequent fall in output quality, a domino effect may happen on the audiences, with struggles when it comes to impartiality and keeping their bias away. Away from the newsrooms, is any of that being discussed in classrooms? Are journalism education institutions preparing the journalists and content creators of tomorrow incorporate mental health into their curriculum as an essential part? Is the focus more on telling other people's story instead of focusing on their own self too while at it? In addition to data journalism, reporting, interviewing techniques and adapting to various social media platforms, is enough being done to instill survival skills, identify red flags, and the importance of stepping back without fear of repercussion or embarrassment?

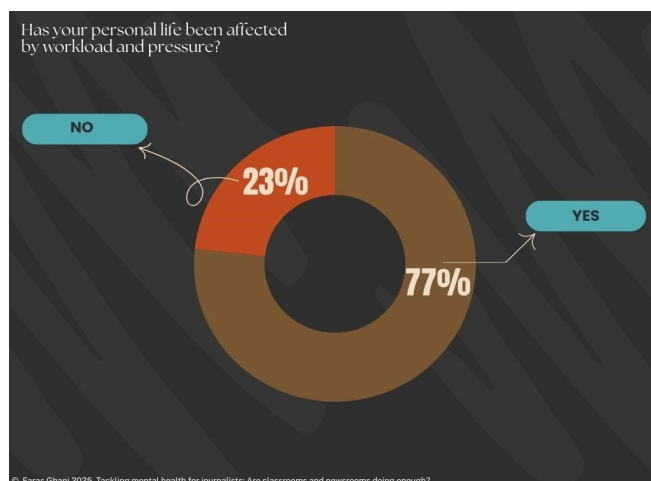
This paper will look to examine where classrooms and newsrooms stand on the very important matter that is a journalist's mental health in these demanding times. We speak to academia and students to see how far classrooms and trainers are going to prepare the students for the real world, physically and psychologically. And we will also look at newsrooms where mental health is an integral part of the day as well as organizations that send the regular "look after your mental health" emails purely for optics and without any credible efforts to undertake that. In addition, do newsrooms have help on hand? Do universities provide professional psychologists to impart knowledge and deliver the course? Also, do journalists really care about mental health or they want to look "macho"? The importance of mental health is not only for an individual, but also the newsroom as well as the subjects the newsroom and the journalist tackle. It is also important for the future of the industry and the world of journalism. Therefore, the paper will also look at how mental health was being looked at in the past, comparing it to today and look into the myths that reporting on these types of content for long hours on end "is part of your job".

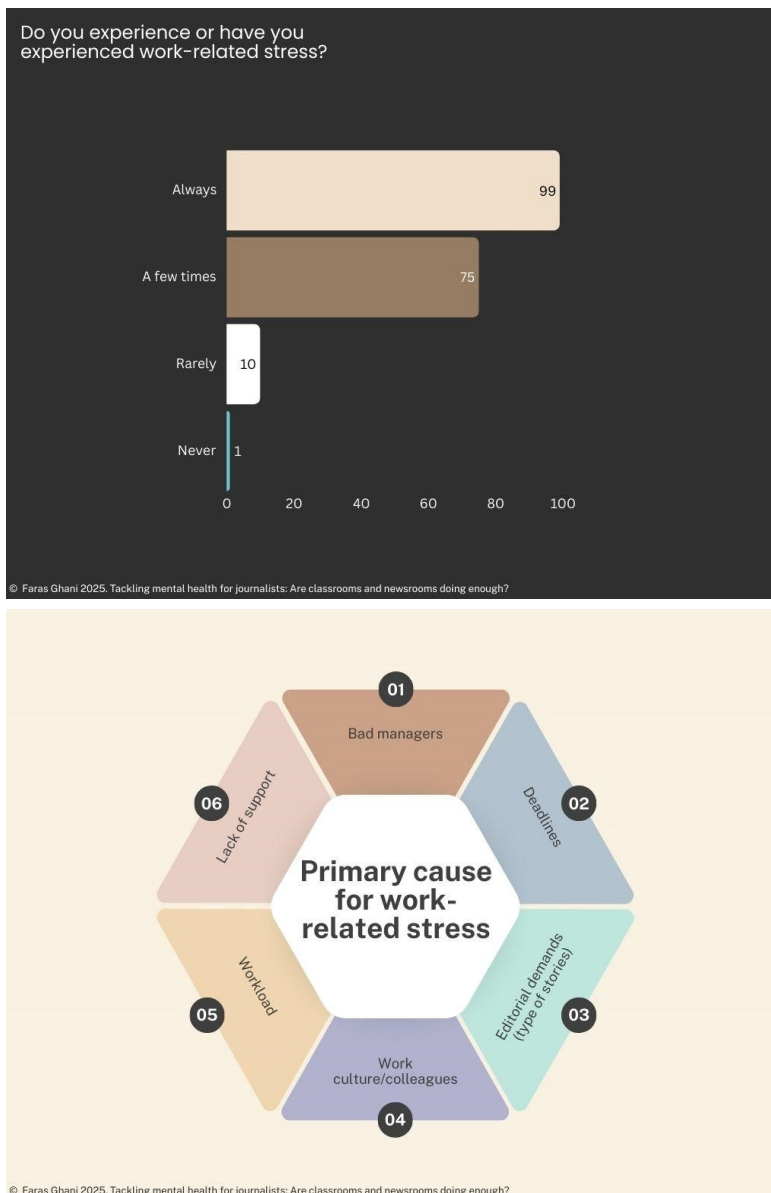
Literature review

When breaking news breaks the journalist

A staggering 93% of journalists surveyed for this research said they've faced mental health challenges on the job – a stark reminder of the emotional toll this profession can have on people. Journalism is a profession of choice. Typically, it offers limited financial returns and almost always puts peace of mind at risk. Long hours, hostile environments, and the potential for more adversaries than allies have long been hallmarks of a journalist's life, the increased competition among peers, for speed and exclusivity, also puts extra pressure on individuals to perhaps work beyond their capacity in return for what they consider success and achievements. (WATCH: Video testimony by Aigul Zhamalova, Dean of the International School of Journalism, Maqsut Narikbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan.)

For some, the reward is almost instant – reporting on an exclusive story, seeing a published byline or the efforts bringing about a change. However, with rewards come risks and danger – physical and mental – as illustrated in the glaring statistics throughout this paper. Just over 54 percent of respondents of the survey mentioned above said they are always working under stress, with 66 percent citing workload as one of the many reasons why they have experienced some sort of stress at work or while working.





Inside the pressure cooker: The realities of newsroom life

Journalism is inherently demanding, requiring journalists to be constantly “switched on”, on-call, and aware of all major news and events, whether at work or on a day off. This “on-call” expectation can be an employer’s demand, requiring journalists to stay abreast of news and events outside office hours, possess detailed knowledge, and be ready to jump on instantly. In most cases, based on the survey and interviews, there has not been a formal request by the employer to do this but rather an expectation. Additionally, there is an unseen pressure to “get the work done” and also not seen leaving the office before managers or colleagues. Additionally, the need to deliver news and create content around the clock has increased due to the rapid

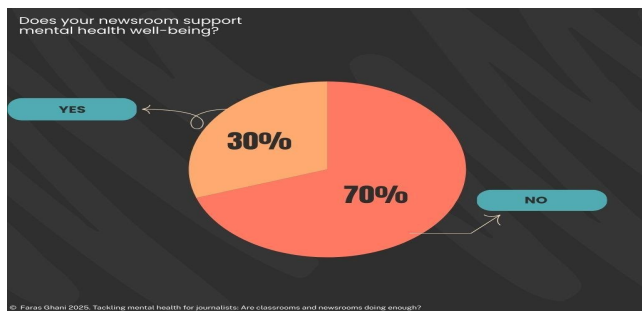
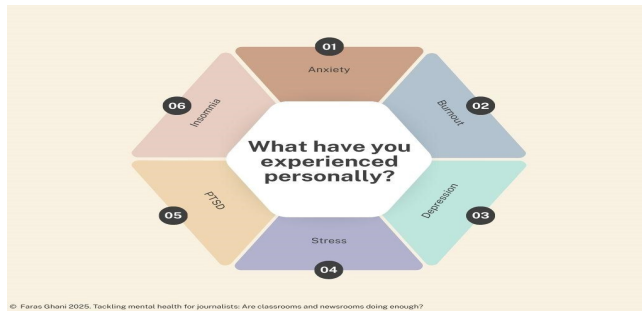
advancement in the digital world and increase in social media use. Financial constraints at some media outlets have resulted in overworked staff – in the newsrooms and on the field – which then requires the journalists to put in significantly higher number of hours than what they are contractually obliged to. This extra workload and time commitment profoundly affect journalists' physical and mental well-being, with almost 48% reporting they work more than they should. Journalists are also exposed to situations that enhance stress and tension, ranging from road accidents, political and social demonstrations, burglaries and murders, situations involving the abuse of children to greater critical events such as natural and human disasters and war.

Stories from the edge: When newsrooms become toxic and too demanding

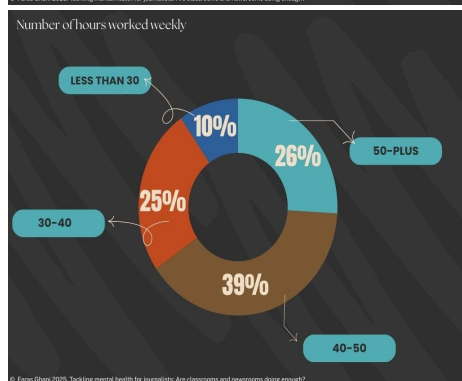
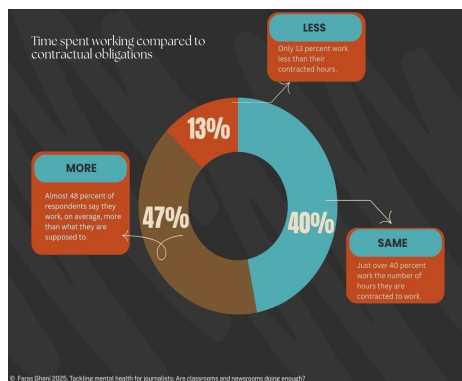
"I was just there 24/7. You're just not letting me go home," recalls a young entertainment journalist in India, describing a toxic newsroom where expectations spiraled beyond reason. A* (name changed to protect identity), started off as an entertainment journalist in India at the age of 22. Soon after joining a well-known organization, they quickly discovered the harsh realities of that newsroom. Contractually, they were supposed to work nine hours a day for six days a week, finishing by 10pm. "What really happened was that I, together with my team, would stay in the office till early morning. All of us had the suffering of sitting in that newsroom. This was because of this particular manager who set daily targets (number of stories) which were impossible to achieve.

In Albania, journalist Alice Taylor also experienced workplace challenges that continue to affect her deeply. She said she resigned from her job "due to bullying, toxicity and a really terrible, terrible work environment. ([WATCH: Video testimony from Alice Taylor, a journalist in Albania.](#))

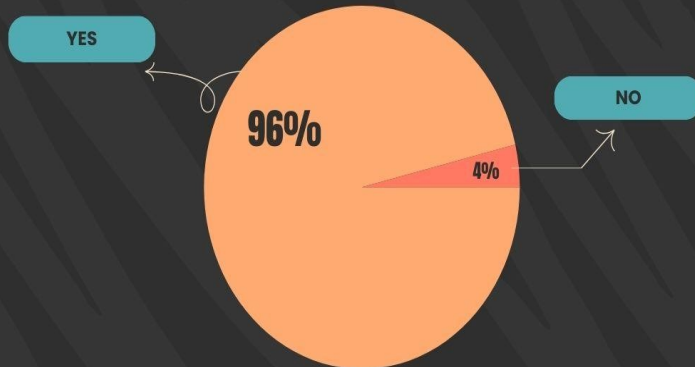
She was not the only one, though. Taylor said that in the span of three months, 11 people either left or were fired, while "there are a number of staff who are on long-term mental health leave because of the environment there". "I've taken a couple of months off to put myself back together again after the stress of being there. I find myself struggling with a writer's block, which was caused directly by the situation that was going on in the



previous workplace. “All this was caused by anxiety, stress, and some kind of post-traumatic stress, caused by long-term bullying and toxicity in that workplace.”

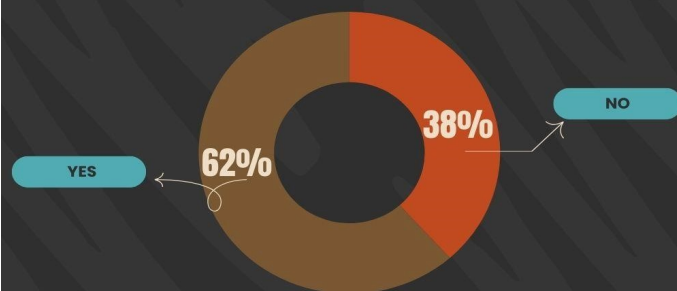


Should newsroom leadership take a more active role in promoting mental well-being?

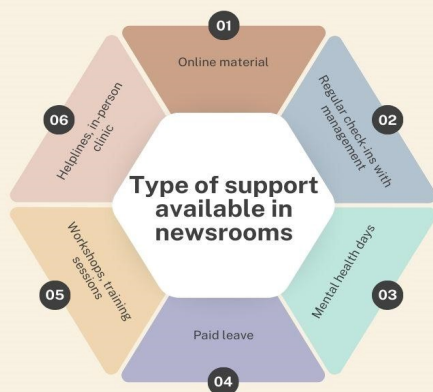


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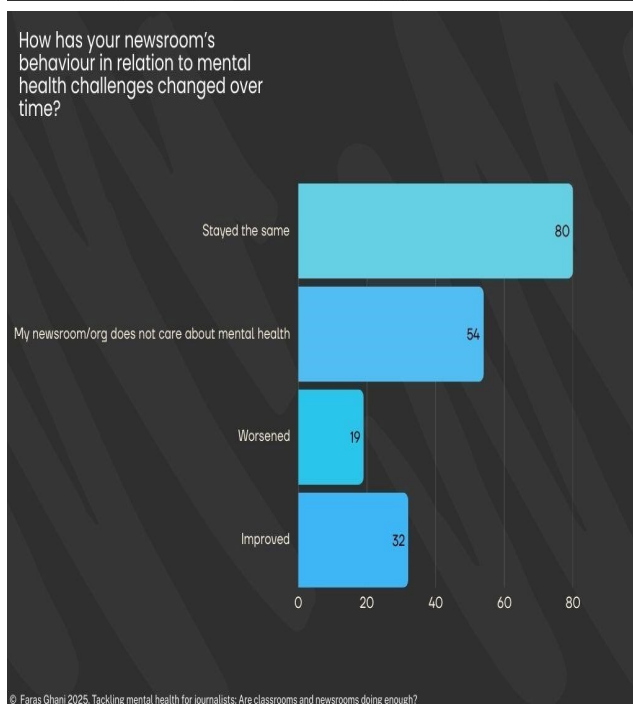
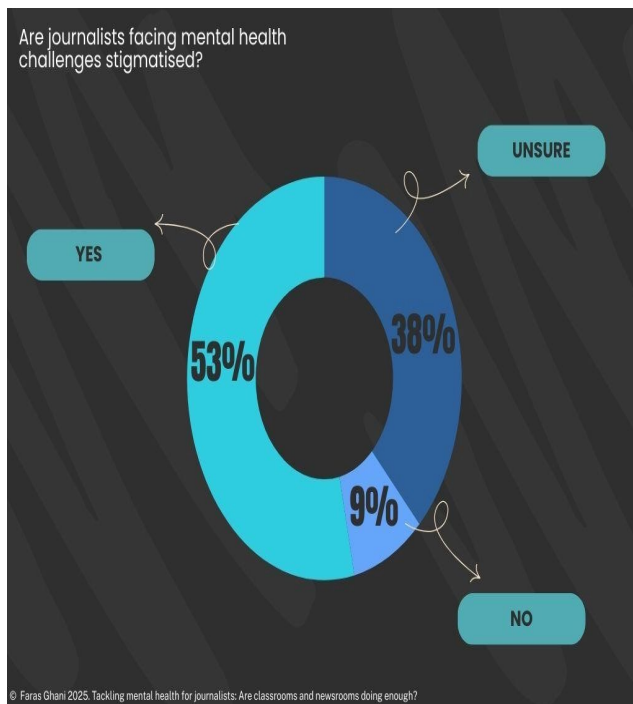
Do you feel your workload is manageable?



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In an article for women in news, Bokani King wrote: “As journalists, we dedicate time to covering other people’s mental health struggles but seldom focus on our well-being. The demands of the job often overshadow our mental health needs, raising the question: are we so focused on others’ stories that we ignore our own?”

In 2025, a study published by Muck Rack the state of art in journalism revealed that “stress levels for journalists remain high” with half of the more than 430

respondents considering leaving their job this year and more than one-third unsure of how long they'll stay in the industry. The same survey found that 38% of journalists said their mental health has declined over the last year. These findings clearly indicate that mental health largely remains a taboo topic in newsrooms and for journalists themselves. Additionally, newsrooms generally lack workflows or systems for addressing some of these challenges that staff face. ([WATCH: Second video testimony from Aigul Zhamalova - Dean of the International School of Journalism, Maqsut Narikbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan.](#))

In a survey, the self-investigation, a nonprofit dedicated to promoting well-being and mental health at work, reported high levels of anxiety (60%) among journalists, with one in five respondents reporting signs of depression. It added that levels of post-traumatic stress disorder and burnout are on the rise, and ended with saying that “tackling mental health in the media is an urgent issue”.

“I think what happens in newsrooms when it comes to the freedom to talk about mental health is a reflection of what’s happening in society in general,” said Aldara Martitegui, co-founder of The Self-Investigation. Martitegui, who is also a journalist, psychologist and coach specialized in emotional intelligence and mindfulness, said that while the taboo was lessening, “There’s still a long way to go to destigmatize mental health in newsrooms as well as in society in general”. She stressed that “taking this issue seriously in a newsroom and giving it the same importance as writing, editing, and reporting and audience interaction would be a huge change in journalistic culture”.

“Historically what has been rewarded is being able to tackle all kinds of topics, working 24/7 without flinching, and being permanently connected to current events, which, as you can see, are very toxic dynamics that are deeply rooted and do not help our mental health. “We can’t easily eliminate them.”

When passion turns into pain

Research published in the international journal of communication confirmed that “there is a mental health crisis across all media industries worldwide”.

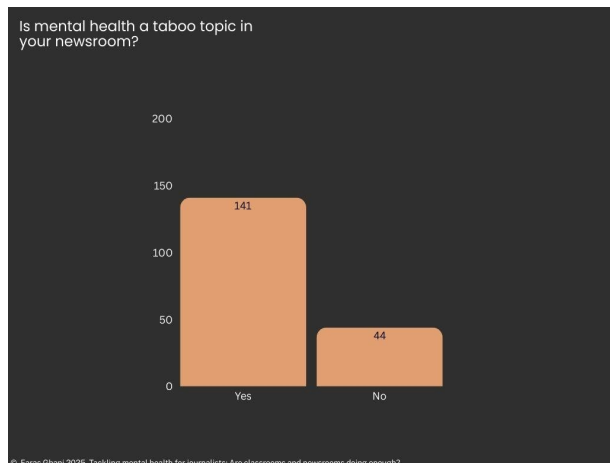
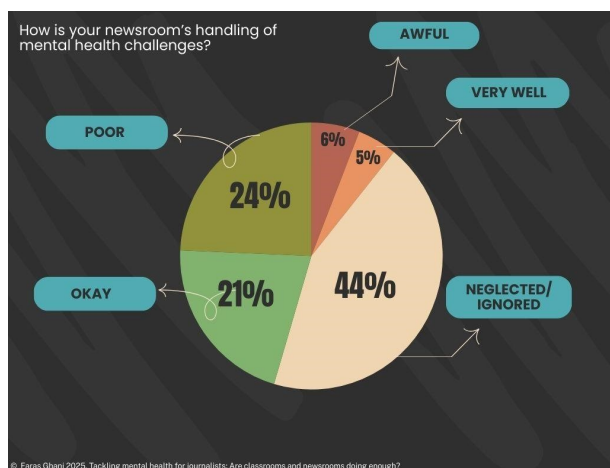
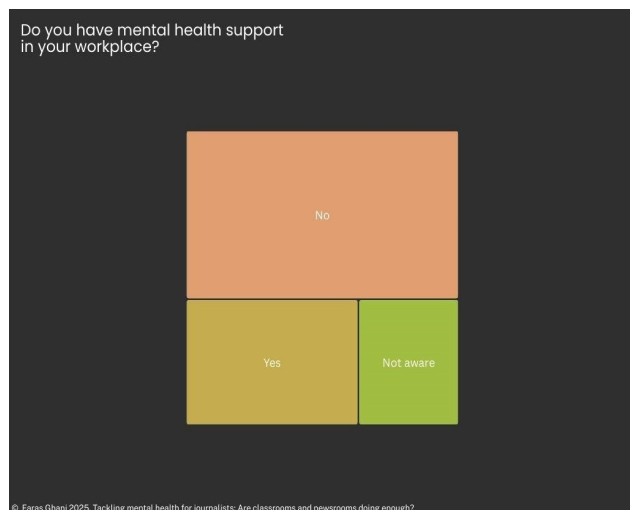
Depression, as well as stress and burnout, tend to “score high” on industry reports and scholarly research on the mental health and well-being of media

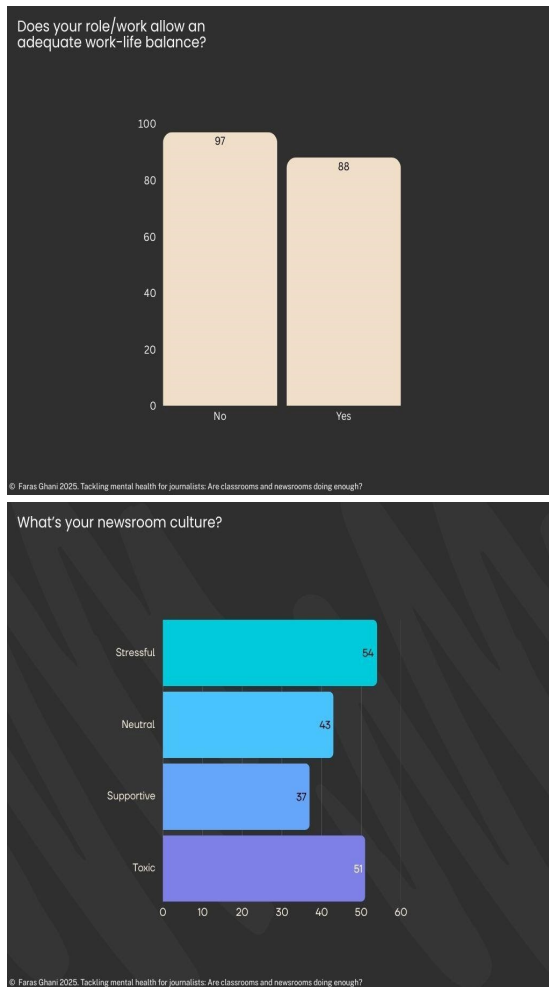
professionals. Overall working conditions across the media industry are frequently touted as the main contributing factor to these challenges. Key findings from the published research include:

- A global mental health crisis across all media industries.
- Media professionals report higher-than-average rates of depression, anxiety, burnout, substance abuse, and suicidality compared to the general population.
- The very passion and meaning that draw people to media work are also the elements that make it emotionally and mentally harmful.
- The biggest risk factors across sectors are: effort-reward imbalance, low organizational justice, and high job demands, which account for up to 90% of the risk for stress-related disorders at work.
- Journalists often experience trauma from witnessing human suffering and operating in dangerous or emotionally intense environments, yet objectivity norms push them to suppress emotions.
- Freelancers, women, LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by poor mental health outcomes in media.

Mariam Amini describes the life of a freelance journalist when it comes to finances, flexibility and mental health. Working as a freelance journalist is a constant juggling act. I love the flexibility to work from anywhere and the freedom to cover stories I am interested in but it can be a very isolating experience. It is especially difficult when working on sensitive stories or with vulnerable communities which you have personal associations with. For instance, at times it can be quite triggering for me to report on Afghan issues. Often, you only have your editor to talk to, but it may not feel appropriate to bring up mental health or they might not know how best to support your situation. During such instances, professional mental health support would go a long way, but once again it is down to you to source this since media outlets do not hold the same level of responsibility for freelance staff. When you're already in a negative headspace, it is even harder to muster the energy to start seeking support from scratch. Moreover, there is no compensation if you were to take any time off. Over the years, I've also been reluctant to

take on private counselling due to the costs. Since your income varies month by month, it's hard to justify an ongoing therapy commitment.





Catalina Coates, Interim Chief Emergencies Officer at Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), says mental health should be thought of as part of the safety of journalists.

“It’s difficult to have these conversations internally. Journalists feel that if they open up and if they have honest conversations about their mental health, there could be some repercussions. It means they will feel that they may be perceived as weak, not ready to continue working. So they prefer not to be open and transparent about talking about it. I think this is also about our society, talking about mental health will never be as easy as talking about an injury or going to the doctor.”

Surveys underscore these concerns. A 2020 survey found that 70% of international journalists reported psychological distress, and 11% showed symptoms of PTSD. A global pandemic-era survey by the International Center for Journalists revealed that 67% of journalists reported anxiety, burnout, or a sense of helplessness. What’s more is that journalists frequently bear witness to human suffering, whether covering

mass disasters or individual atrocities, and are sometimes the direct targets of violence. This type of work can affect their health and well-being. Dr Erum Irshad, head of Peshawar University's psychology department in Pakistan, conducted a pilot study a decade ago with 20 Pakistani journalists, finding that 14 suffered from severe stress.

"The journalists that came to us were facing mainly stress disorder and depression," said Dr Irshad. "They were covering areas where there were bomb blasts and disasters and they were under a high level of stress. This continued stress leads to a negative impact on interpersonal relationships, including with their family members. The pressure [accumulated due to work and the environment] was too much and they used to displace this on family members."

Financial pressure also adversely affected the journalists' mental health, "resulting in problems in personal and professional lives", she added.

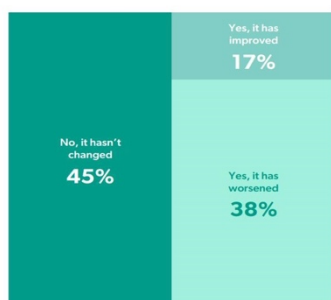
A perfect storm: Burnout, anxiety and the passion trap

The Muck Rack study mentioned earlier also revealed high stress levels for journalists, with "50% of the respondents having thought about leaving their job this year and over a third are unsure how long they'll stay in the industry. The study, which surveyed over 400 journalists about stress, burnout and support, revealed that:

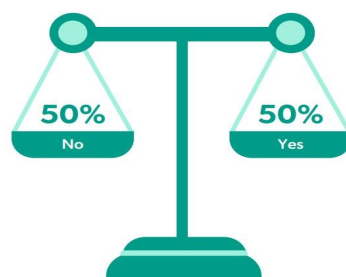
- 38% of journalists reported their mental health had declined over the last year.
- 58% of journalists report getting six hours or less of sleep each night, with 85% citing the inability to "switch off" as a contributing factor.
- Half of them considered quitting because of burnout
- 48% had left their previous job due to exhaustion or burnout

Conversely, 17% reported improved mental health due to therapy, access to remote or hybrid work, and stronger support networks. Below are some of snapshots from the Muck Ruck study:

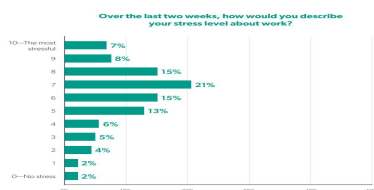
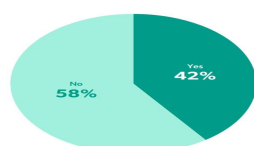
Have you noticed changes in your mental health over the last 12 months?



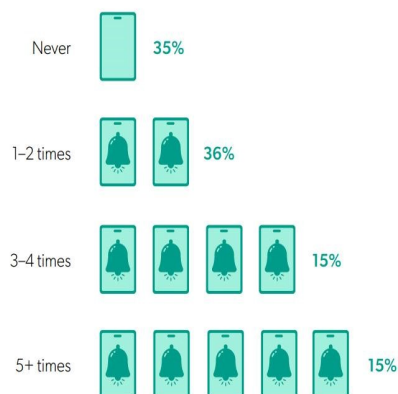
In the last year, have you thought about quitting your job because of exhaustion or burnout?



Have you previously left a job due to exhaustion or burnout?



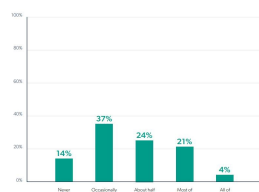
How many times over the last year has a vacation day been interrupted by work?



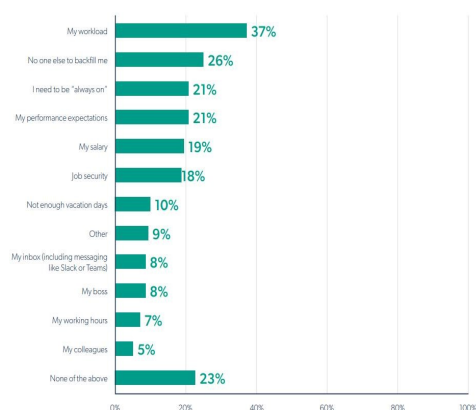
Does your difficulty "switching off" after work affect your sleep?



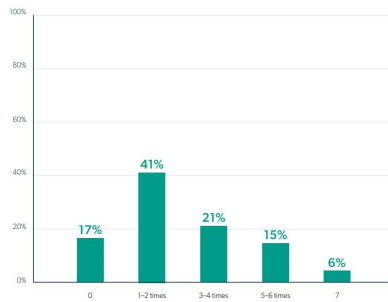
How often do you feel that you can "switch off" after work?



What are the main barriers to you using your vacation days? Select all that apply



Over the last week, how many times have you had to work after hours, like late nights, early mornings or on weekends?



Financial stress

As part of the survey, the 38% saying their mental health had worsened in the last year, the common reasons cited included “uncertainty about the future, general work stress, and financial issues including poor pay”. Makhosi Sibanda, a Zimbabwean journalist and mental health podcaster, noted a decline in funding and support for newsrooms and journalists. “You notice that funding for the newsrooms or for the media, or the support for journalists, is declining,” said Sibanda. “As a result, a lot of journalists are now in distress. While they are expected to deliver, the operating economy is putting them in distress. “There are no safety nets for them. They’re facing a lot of challenges with balancing their work, their personal lives and their mental health. So, there is a big gap there that is affecting journalists in terms of their well-being, their livelihoods, especially their mental health.

“Hannah Storm, founder and director of Headlines Network, wrote a book titled *Mental Health and Wellbeing for Journalists* which highlighted that while mental health in journalism is slowly becoming less taboo, newsrooms must continue to normalize these conversations. By the age of 30, I would endure a lot of trauma and toxic behavior, but I kept going back into these environments, believing I was not quite good enough,” she was quoted as saying during an interview with journalism.co.uk.” It was as if my career was becoming something of an abusive relationship. It took me completely breaking down to realize that journalism was important to me, but it could not be everything.

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma reports that “despite repeated exposure to work-related traumatic events, most journalist’s exhibit resilience”. It

clarifies that strong reactions to harrowing events, including war, disasters and human suffering “is not necessarily a problem, but simply a signal of the emotional challenges of news gathering, and a signal to practice self-care”.

Complementing the research already shared on the state of affairs in newsrooms, Elana Newman, Research Director at the Dart Center, reinforced that “lack of respect and feeling unsupported by management” are also driving factors behind issues cropping up in newsrooms.

“From research that we are doing, it turns out that the kinds of pressures in the past, like deadlines, rushing around, and working in spurts, working evenings, and those things journalists can handle pretty well. It seems like the toxic combination is doing trauma-related work plus being in an organization that you somehow perceive as not supportive, messed up or problematic,” said Newman.

Studies cited by the Dart Center confirm journalists’ risk of exposure to work-related traumatic events. They recommend increased organizational support for journalists, which “may result in a reduction of mental health harm, as well as a reduction in occupational dysfunction and an increase in job performance (and likely work satisfaction)”. “Aiding connectedness to social networks within and outside of an organization may also be of benefit.”

Work stress leaks out at home

Dr. Jason Wang, a psychotherapist, noted that in the toxic workplaces prevalent among journalists and media workers, psychological safety is scarce. Journalists battle not only stressful content but also internal organizational conflicts and environmental pressures, he said.

“You’re fighting a stress battle on multiple fronts,” he explained. “It’s not only the content you’re working on but also trying to maintain your position. You’re fighting colleagues who are ambitious and trying to do things to you that might be detrimental to your career. You’re just fighting on all fronts and that’s just not good for you in the long run”.

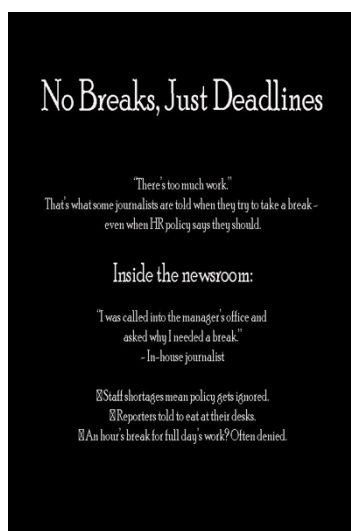
He added that while not taking work stress home and keeping work-life boundaries intact only works to a certain extent, it acts as a coping and defense

mechanism. “But when the stress and the anxiety and everything else is too much, it’s impossible to compartmentalize in a healthy way. And so things start leaking out. Stress leaks out at home, even though you’re trying not to let it leak out. “All that stress becomes activated every time you have to deal with it in your home life. So people have this idea that they can leave work at work but even in the most successful cases, if there’s just too much going on at work, it leaks out whether or not you want it to when you’re at home.”

The AWIM reported that one in journalists has considered taking their life. Additionally, two-thirds are negatively affected by the graphic and disturbing stories, and 80% are worn-out from trauma coverage. Aisha Wakaso, a Nigerian journalist-turned-mental health campaigner, was quoted as saying by AWIM that “the majority of journalists are not even aware of their mental health, and unfortunately the majority of us in Nigeria don’t care about our mental health”. “We don’t understand what it is. We take it as a joke. It doesn’t know race or gender.”

For journalists working in Africa’s conflict zones, security concerns, harassment, and surveillance are some of the initiators of mental health problems for journalists, according to an article on Al Jazeera Journalism. Garaobe Salomon, a Cameroonian psychologist and blogger, was quoted as saying in the article: “Operating without adequate mental health support, Cameroonian journalists routinely expose themselves to traumatic events, particularly in conflict-affected regions”. “They document violence, human rights violations, and civilian suffering while struggling to maintain professional objectivity. This constant exposure to trauma, combined with job insecurity and low wages, creates a perfect storm for psychological distress.”

Journalists participating in this research’s survey also shared common issues impacting their mental well-being at work:



No Breaks, Just Deadlines

Journalists at a major news outlet reported being denied breaks due to staff shortages.

Despite clear HR policies for an hour's break, in-house journalists were questioned by managers for requesting breaks when no one was available to cover them.

Some were even told to eat at their desks because 'there's too much work'.

Retaliation for questioning management

A few journalists reported being singled out for identifying issues and flaws in workflow or daily tasks.

One seasoned journalist (over 20 years of experience) explained: "When my manager joined the organisation, they had very limited experience so in order to help out for the greater good, I often suggested alternatives to their decisions. While in meetings, it was taken amicably but I noticed that I was sidelined from future meetings and major decision making due to this.

It ended up impacting my mental health as I was being singled out".

Mental health helpline

A journalist at a news outlet that offered independent mental health support for its staff said that when they shared stress and workload levels with the management, the response was that staff should call up the helpline.

"When I told them that the culture and habits in the newsroom need to change as well to complement any therapy and advice they get, I got told I was being cynical and was told to focus on my job," said one journalist from that organisation.

Unfair shift patterns

While fully functional digital newsrooms operate round the clock, and major outlets typically hire staff across time zones for shared responsibility and fair weekend rotation, journalists reported unfair treatment with irregular weekly and monthly patterns, negatively affecting their personal and family lives, sleep, and creativity.

Work-related training

Some media outlets offer in-house training for career development. However, staff from one news outlet were asked to take training only on their days off. Any training falling on working days was denied, even if contractual.

Some journalists' training requests were also deliberately ignored until registration deadlines passed.

“Burnout is on the rise, anxiety levels are on the rise, so is depression within the journalism community,” said Kim Brice of The Self-Investigation. “It has to do with workplace culture, which is distressing, pushing people into distress. She identified workload, lack of communication from managers, unclear roles, and job insecurity as key factors. “But when it comes to addressing those challenges or even acknowledging that these challenges exist, it doesn’t seem to be a priority or the coping mechanism is not there in newsrooms. There are not many people to talk to.”

Research methodology

Research was done in the form of three different surveys that were carried out:

- Journalists (working in newsrooms, field or freelance) – 185 respondents
- Journalism (or related curriculum) students – 100 respondents
- Faculty (journalism or related subjects) – 15 respondents

The survey link was shared online across various social media platforms (Linkedin, X, Instagram) as well as WhatsApp. The results were then used to make selective graphs (shared in the paper). Respondents were then selected from all three surveys for detailed interviews elaborating on what they had answered in the surveys. Further respondents were selected for audio and video interviews to be shared in the paper. In addition to the above, analysts and experts relevant to the study (including academia, mental health experts as well as journalists who quit the profession) were shortlisted for detailed interviews about their experience and suggestions.

Findings & discussions

AI and the future of journalism: Relief or replacement?

The rise of AI, particularly since the introduction of ChatGPT and other Large Language Models (LLMs), has become a significant topic in journalism. AI applications and technologies, ranging from transcribing, translation, and report summarization to SEO headline creation, idea generation, and video editing, have been widely adopted in numerous newsrooms globally. While AI has automated processes, sped up tasks, and streamlined workflows, its use in large-scale content generation has sparked fears among journalists and writers about job displacement. A study on the Impact of AI Integration on Journalists' Mental Health found "significant correlations between the perceived threat of AI replacing jobs and higher levels of depression among journalists". The study observed "mixed effects regarding the impact of AI integration on job roles, with associations found between AI integration and both increased depression and reduced stress levels". It concluded that "AI integration in journalism presents both opportunities and challenges for journalists' mental health", emphasizing that "strategies to address job

security concerns, enhance comfort with AI tools through training and establish mental health support systems are crucial for fostering a supportive environment in AI-driven newsrooms”.

The study attributed increased apprehension to “rapid technological changes” and suggested that shifts in workflows, roles, and potential pressure could “impact journalists’ mental health”. K* (name changed to protect identity) left their job in a newsroom because of the “detrimental” effect of “how much AI we had to use”. They felt “it was really stifling me in terms of creativity and using my skills which made me feel quite low some days”. K described a new cost-cutting initiative where they were assigned to a social media team: “this role involved using AI to rewrite my work, and then I’d edit it”. “I’d go from writing eight unique stories myself a day to writing four stories myself and then having AI rewrite it for tons of different websites. So, the vast majority of the role was just rewriting what AI’s done, because it spits out a load of rubbish all the time. “So I felt like I could have done a better job. It felt like it was replacing us in a way. It felt like they were trying to make it so that they didn’t need as many reporters as what they have, and it didn’t make the work I was doing valuable anymore.”

Trauma by proximity: Fieldwork in war and conflict zones

War and conflict reporting profoundly impacts a journalist’s physical and mental well-being. Research showed journalists exposed to extreme danger during a decade-long career in war zones have lifetime prevalence rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and major depression of 28 and 22%, respectively. This research also revealed significantly higher weekly alcohol consumption among both male and female war journalists, who were less likely to receive treatment for these disorders and experienced significantly more psychiatric difficulties than those not reporting on war.

Israel’s silencing of journalists in Gaza

Since October 2023, at least 232 journalists and media workers have been killed by Israeli attacks on Gaza (targeting infrastructure and individuals). This human cost an average of 13 journalists killed per month – has made this war the deadliest conflict for media workers ever recorded, according to a report by the Watson Institute for

International and Public Affairs' Costs of War project. The report indicated that more journalists were killed in Gaza than in both world wars, the Vietnam War, the wars in Yugoslavia and the United States war in Afghanistan combined. "Across the globe, the economics of the industry, the violence of war, and coordinated censorship campaigns are turning more conflict zones into news graveyards, with Gaza being the most extreme example," the report said. While the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) put the figure slightly lower due to differing identification criteria, it still classified Israel's war on Gaza as "the deadliest period for journalists since CPJ began gathering data in 1992".

Since the war in Gaza started, journalists have been paying the highest price – their lives – for their reporting. Without protection, equipment, international presence, communications, or food and water, they are still doing their crucial jobs to tell the world the truth," said CPJ Program Director Carlos Martinez de la Serna. "Every time a journalist is killed, injured, arrested, or forced to go to exile, we lose fragments of the truth." Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) is an organization dedicated to supporting investigative journalists, editors and fact checkers in the Arab world. In November 2024, it released a report concluding that "mental health is not a priority for Media employing journalists in Gaza". "This investigation documents, through testimony and statements by journalists in Gaza, the severe mental impact that covering the war has, given the absence of the necessary psychological support that should be provided to them by media institutions," the report said. ARIJ's data, collected from 125 journalists in Gaza, revealed that:

- 105 "urgently needed to talk about what they had witnessed during the current war on Gaza"
- 69 journalists thought their social relationships were impacted by covering the war
- 77 reported having severe mood swings
- 75% of journalists cannot free themselves from what they have witnessed and experienced, even after they stop working"

Rawan Damen, Director General of ARIJ, noted that requests coming in from Gaza for help were unprecedented. "But the genocide is continuing and the war is continuing so there's nobody available for mental support. "Even the fact checkers and the

journalists who are covering Gaza from outside started being very traumatized. One of my colleagues at the office started crying watching the news and another told me she felt like she started having nightmares that her kids died and so she would go to the room and check on them repeatedly.”

Plight of journalists in Indian-administered Kashmir

Indian-administered Kashmir is another location where journalists are being continuously targeted for reporting on atrocities. Since the revocation of article 370 in 2019 by the Indian government taking away the autonomy of the region, press freedom has sharply declined. Local journalists face harassment, surveillance, and charges under anti-terror laws, while foreign correspondents are denied access or deported for critical reporting. The above mentioned report by Al Jazeera Journalism Review highlighted that those measures “aimed at controlling the region’s narrative and projecting normalcy” have drawn widespread criticism from international watchdogs, “who warn of increasing suppression of both domestic and foreign media”. Journalists in Kashmir have been detained, questioned and harassed by authorities. Some have been threatened while others have had their passports confiscated. Independent media outlets have been targeted and closed. A freelance journalist based in Indian-administered Kashmir describes the immense difficulty of not only reporting from the region but also the struggle to survive and lead a healthy and sane life.

“Reporting in Kashmir is extremely difficult. You are under surveillance all the time. I have been called and interrogated countless times. Monthly calls by security agencies are a norm, where they summon you and ask questions about political ideology or even the use of words like ‘Indian-administered’,” the journalist said. “We have nothing to do with the style-sheet of news organizations but we pay the price. It brings great trauma when you get a call suddenly and are hit with a barrage of questions. “One time I got so much anxiety that I could not sleep or eat for a week and was put on medicines. I felt I was being choked. My heart was beating so fast.” Mirroring the ARIJ report findings, freelance or independent journalists in Kashmir felt let down and unsupported by the media outlets they contributed to. “Being an independent journalist, the media outlets do not support us. I am at my own mercy and have never got any support from the outlet I reported for. To report from Kashmir, I have taken a great

personal risk and have suffered in ways that I cannot even explain. When a story gets published, I cannot sleep for nights, anticipating a call from authorities. “A random beep on my phone scares me. This is how things are.”

Substance abuse and use of antidepressants has also become common among journalists in Kashmir, according to some journalists based in the region. In addition to personal safety, the fear of harm coming to one’s family is also a worry that stays with journalists in Kashmir, affecting the physical as well as mental well-being. “This is a very helpless situation. All this adds up to be a very traumatizing experience.”

Workplace behavior: The other battle

Pakistan is a country which Reporters without Borders (RSF) classifies as one of the most dangerous in the world for journalists due to multiple murders each year that are often linked to cases of corruption or illegal trafficking and which go completely unpunished. But beyond field dangers, newsroom environments can also be detrimental to healthy reporting. Kamal Siddiqi, former editor-in-chief and bureau chief at various media outlets in Pakistan, said bullying and harassment are endemic to newsroom culture there. Workplace bullying is defined by the union as “offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behavior, an abuse or misuse of power through means intended to undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient”, according to the National Union of Journalists in the UK.

“It’s a sort of a culture in Pakistani newsrooms that a senior person can scream and shout,” said Siddiqi, who is also former director at Centre for Excellence in Journalism in Pakistan. “I called out a few people at one of my previous workplaces and told them they cannot do that. They would think I’m joking. “There were also people who would use the kind of language they would [which is unacceptable] in newsrooms. Generally, people think that in a newsroom, this is the culture. That is where much of the problem lies. Most people think this is part of a newsroom. A lot of people just took it as part of the newsroom culture because it used to be male dominated, and they could use that kind of language.”

Shekufe Ranjbar, an Iranian journalist now living in Germany, said she also experienced male-dominated newsrooms in Iran. She found that being a woman added

an extra layer of pressure, on top of the emotionally taxing work she did in a TV newsroom. “There was the advancement of Daesh [ISIS, ISIL]. With it, we had Syria’s civil war. We had the refugee crisis. And of course, there was the Israel-Palestine conflict on and off,” she recalled. “I worked in the newsroom at a time that we had so many stories taking an emotional toll on me. It was very difficult for me because that was also my first experience in journalism. I had jumped into the deepest end of the pool. Broadcast journalism is also about working under time pressure, apart from the content that you cover. “And if you work in a male-dominated environment, like I did, you’re under another layer of pressure. It’s all about power and fighting over authority. And men there put extra pressure on women, trying to portray them as less qualified.

“This is related to that emotional part of the story. So, imagine if I felt like this story is too much for me. I just can’t cope with it. I can’t write it because I cannot even watch the footage. They wouldn’t consider it as something that has to be dealt with. They considered it as a weak point for me.”

What, then, should journalists do?

Given the state of affairs, the world of journalism – in newsrooms and on the field – looks unlikely to change. Demands will likely increase, and despite evolving consumption habits, journalists, driven by passion, need and pressure, will continue to strive for more. But ultimately, how much is too much? And how can journalists care for themselves amidst demanding conditions that are breaking them down? What should they do if they exhibit symptoms of mental distress? “Detox yourself regularly and mentally declutter your environment,” said Dr Asma Naheed, an educational psychologist based in the UAE. “Keep your work area and work life clean and safe so you can feel calm. Increase water intake, sleep, keep boundaries, and attend regular therapies. If you start seeing any symptoms, or any emotional burden or confusion in your thoughts, start seeking therapy.”

“You need to have a circle outside of work. Work extra hard on your relationships. Journalists work in a toxic and scary environment. You need to have your quality time with family, and playful activities. Go running, swimming, hiking, and take part in playful activities. “Normalcy is a luxury. Be normal. Don’t be exceptional.”

Dr. Wang, the US-based psychotherapist, highlights that the pervasive stress, anxiety, workload, and toxicity within the journalistic “environment” create unsustainable pressure, making it impossible for a journalist to perform their entire job without burning out. “It’s not sustainable to be in an environment like that,” said Dr. Wang. “And so something has to give. Usually that’s your mental health or you just have very little personal life. There’s just no way to do everything that the environment requires of you and a negative effect happens somewhere.” While work-life boundaries and compartmentalization are often discussed, Dr. Wang explains that when stress and anxiety become overwhelming, healthy compartmentalization is impossible, leading to “leakage” into home life, regardless of intent. It emphasized that “there is no shame in this”, asserting that the condition is manageable “if journalists remain aware of their mental health”. This awareness would include monitoring themselves for stress, including “revisiting memories repeatedly, feeling low or depressed, or experiencing anxiety, panic, irritability, or numbness”.

RSF added that when stress “starts to disrupt day-to-day activities, journalists should take a step back from their duties and consider taking a leave of absence”. They should then:

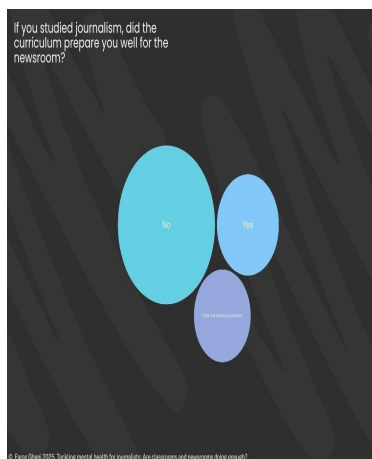
- Rest and engage in relaxing activities
- Assess and address trauma with professional support
- Rebuild connections and establish healthy routines
- Build mental resilience

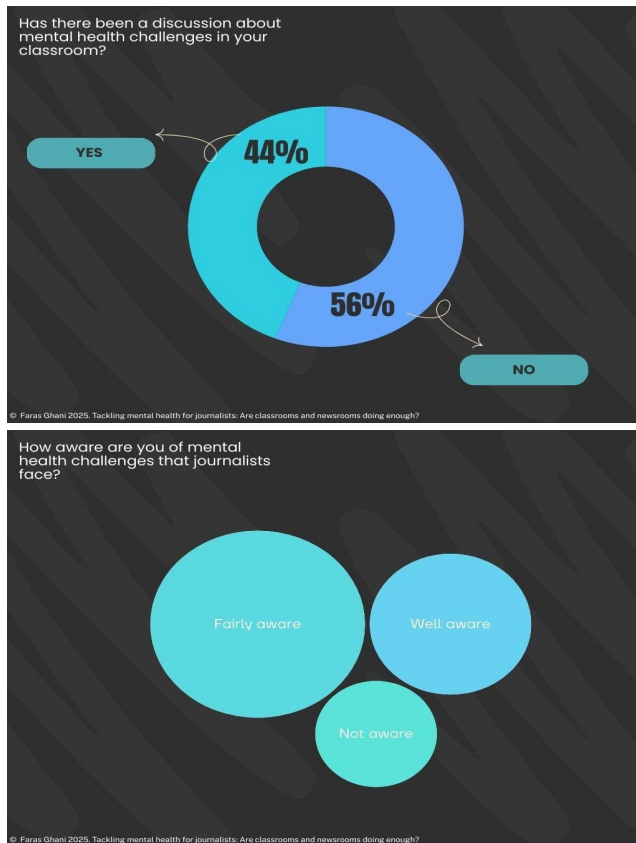
However, experts contend that improving the situation should not fall solely on individual journalists. The contributing factors are multiple and often out of their control – newsroom environment, management behavior, flawed workflows and workload management. Therefore, remedial measures need to be taken across the board and not just on an individual basis. Storm, an expert in journalism safety and mental health, suggests that part of those measures should be “training for managers, buy-in from senior leaders, spaces for cross-generational meetings, sharing of stories, and greater access to therapists”. “I am constantly surprised by the number of conversations I host or facilitate where colleagues say to me this is the first time in 10, 20, 30 years anyone has asked them how they are and they felt like they really meant it.”

Preparing for the pressures: The role of journalism education

With so much at stake when it comes to well-being in the newsroom, are students and recent graduates entering the demanding world of journalism well informed and well prepared? Are universities and institutions offering journalism, media or related curricula doing enough to make students not only aware of the challenges but also equip them with coping mechanisms? A survey conducted for this research found that just over 55% of journalism or related curriculum students reported no classroom discussions on mental health challenges. Only 1% had a separate course on mental health as part of their curriculum, and only 33% had ever received a visit from a working journalist to discuss mental health challenges in the field or newsroom.

In 2018, Noah Richardson, a journalism student at Carleton University in Ottawa, wrote that “a foundation for resiliency needs to be built up before journalists are in the field”. “While journalism school has helped me prepare to cover breaking news events, press conferences and politics, it barely addressed the ways in which I may be physically, emotionally and mentally impacted by my chosen career,” Richardson wrote. He noted that he only had one full lecture discussing journalism and mental health up until nearing the end of his four-year course.

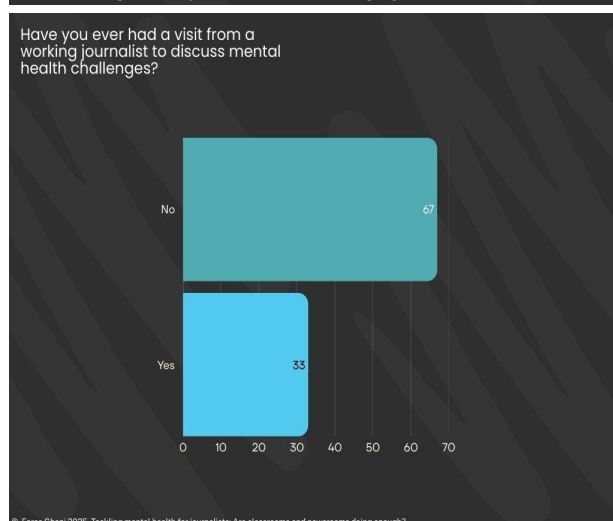
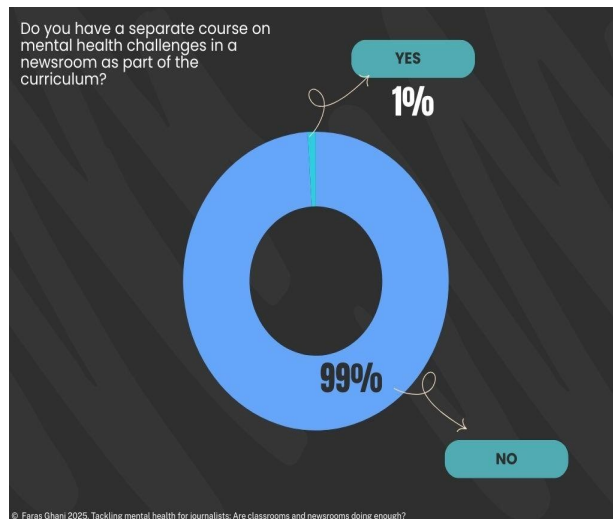


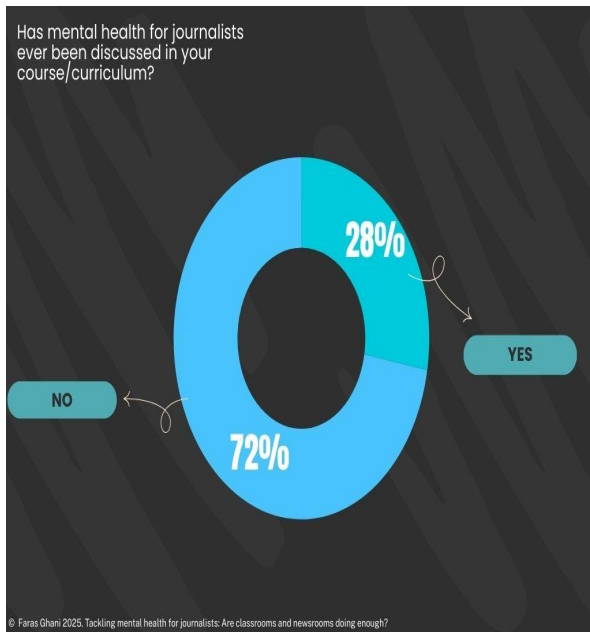


Hamna Shakeel, an undergrad Liberal Arts student in Pakistan, believes topics like mental health and ethics are life skills and “should be taught regardless of the program”. “I think it should be included as part of the curriculum,” said Shakeel. “I’m 100 percent aware of what’s to come but honestly, I don’t know how I will navigate. Because when you enter the newsroom, the kind of pressure you will have, you don’t know what the next step you can take is. “So, maybe I’m equipped, I’m well aware and I’m fortunate enough to call mental health concern as a mental health concern. But I don’t know if I will be able to handle the situation.” Almost 92 percent of respondents said mental health needs to be a more important topic in journalism schools. Why then is it not taken as seriously as writing, editing, reporting, ethics, or photography?

Dr Samia Manzoor, Assistant Professor at Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan, attributes this to a lack of awareness among educators. “It’s because we don’t know about it, we don’t know the severity of the situation or its impact,” said Dr Manzoor. “This is why we’re unable to educate the students. We cannot teach them something that we ourselves are unaware of. We don’t have a course, we don’t talk about it.” ([WATCH: Video testimony by Dr Samia Manzoor](#))

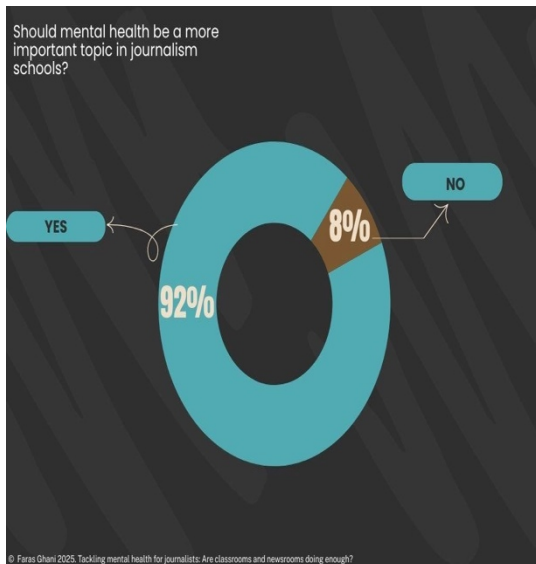
She argued that courses developed by academics “will definitely have major deficiencies” because “being an academic, I can only have a remote idea of the kind of stress that a journalist is enduring when they are in the field”. “I don’t know the extent of it, I don’t know how lethal it can be, its intensity and how many journalists are affected. “Sitting in my air-conditioned office, I won’t know these things like a working journalist would. So to devise these courses and curriculum, there needs to be a team which includes working journalists and academics.” Dr. Manzoor likened the role of classrooms to a military training academy, where a soldier is trained and prepared for all likely scenarios in order for them to deal with any situation in an appropriate manner. “Journalists are also soldiers, fighting their own battles. The way of war is different but its war. We’re not equipping them in the same way. The work in the newsroom is difficult. You are under stress, deadlines, in situations that leave an impact.”





Pheladi Sethusa, a lecturer at Wits Centre for Journalism in South Africa, echoes these sentiments. She noted that mental health topics are not prioritized in journalism schools because educators themselves were “molded in environments that were not open to conversations about mental health illnesses, about how to look after your mental health, about giving people the time and space to treat any diagnoses that they might be under”. “So I think it’s not something that is common in their experience so it naturally wouldn’t be something that trickles down into curriculum, especially because it’s seen as such a personal issue,” added Sethusa. ([*Hear more from Sethusa on why mental health is not a priority in journalism schools.*](#))

Mental Health in College Journalists: Recognizing Causes of Trauma and Recommendations was a study undertaken in 2024. What it revealed was that “many journalism schools rely heavily on teaching methods such as lectures, readings, videos, and discussions, but they are not teaching methods such as role-play exercises”. The authors interviewed a licensed therapist for their study who observed that trauma among their journalism patients “did not start in the professional field but at the college level”. “They suggest that because of the lack of coping techniques taught at the college level for basic signs of mental health that these are crucial skills that journalists at the college level need to be taught in order to not succumb to their trauma in the professional field.”

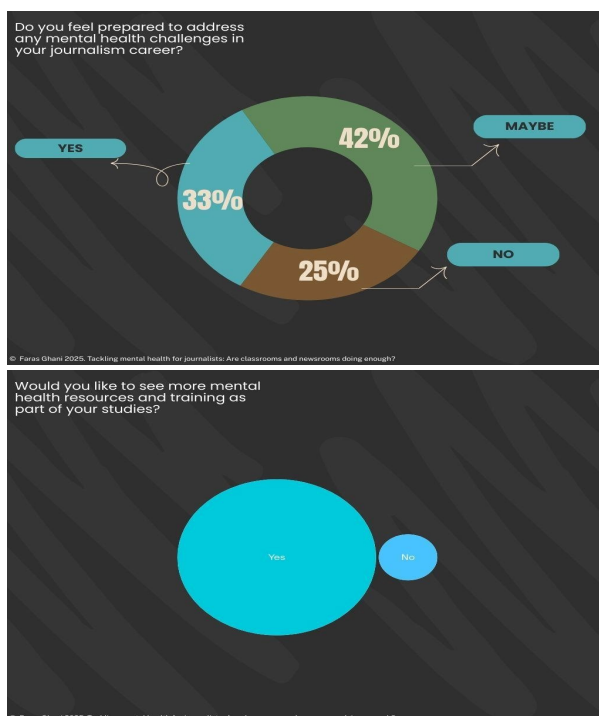


informed decisions. I'm not saying that doing this will eliminate it. But it will minimize the risk," she explained.



CPJ's Coates advocated for journalism schools to initiate and hold "open and transparent conversation about the impact that this can have physically and mentally" on journalists". "It's a work that demands a lot from you in terms of time, energy, emotionally, and there will be an impact. How you start understanding how all this is linked to your safety and how you have to prepare to make the right and more

"The more you understand your profession, the more you understand the risk you are facing when you are a journalist. The more you understand the risk when you are doing a story or covering something specifically, the more prepared you will be to make decisions when you are in the field."



A significant majority said they would like to see more mental health resources and training as part of their studies. "This is something that journalism schools don't talk a lot about: the risk of this profession, the risk in terms of what risk you are facing when you are out there, physical, digital and absolutely psychological," Coates added. While most faculty interviewed and surveyed for this research heavily

supported a broader, more inclusive curriculum incorporating mental health related topics, Chris Arsenault, Chair, Master of Media in Journalism and Communication Program at Western University in Canada, argued that “it’s not valuable” to the course he is heading. “I don’t suggest having it as a standalone course as I don’t think it’s valuable. Adding it would mean taking away something else that is fundamental to their technical education and that would mean less time on learning how to make a podcast, less time on video editing, etc,” he said. “Discussions about mental health end up being woven through some of those courses we do anyway.”

Arsenault added that emphasis on mental health challenges that only those who actually go on and take up jobs in the newsrooms will be affected by will lead to more students opting to not take up newsroom roles. “I do think there’s, this almost sounds cynical, a genuine concern that a lot more and more students are just opting to go right into communications and not journalism. So I think there’s a worry that if you spend a whole course on that, you’d lose half of your students. “It’s hard to teach students how to deal with a problem they haven’t fully encountered yet without just potentially creating more fear and anxiety and mental health challenges in the process. I’m not convinced having this like a separate course on mental health is a way to address this.” Sethusa, from Wits Centre for Journalism in South Africa, argues that despite some opinions against it, the research on how journalists are affected by trauma shows “there is an obvious need arising for there to be some kind of teaching about how journalists’ mental health can be affected by the profession as well as how to cope with it”.

Conclusion

A staggering 93% of journalists surveyed for this research said they’ve faced mental health challenges on the job. More than 50% have experienced work-related stress. Just under half have taken time off due to mental health challenges. Around 77% said their personal life has been affected by workload and work-related pressure. Another survey done found that 38% of journalists said their mental health has declined over the last year. Research by The Self-Investigation, a nonprofit dedicated to promoting well-being and mental health at work, reported high levels of anxiety (60%) among journalists. A 2020 Reuters Institute survey found that 70% of international journalists reported psychological distress, and 11% showed symptoms of PTSD.

These surveys, research and interviews point to a grim situation in newsrooms, where journalists are facing uphill battles to produce content round the clock while neglecting their mental health or having it not featured on the priority list for the management. The surveys and respondents have also pointed to lack of help in newsrooms where journalists are also wary of bringing up the topic for fear of repercussion. There also seems to be a lack of importance given to this topic in journalism schools, where the emphasis seems to be on equipping students with skills such as writing, editing, filming, photography and the likes but neglecting, overlooking or totally ignoring the mental health challenges that exist in the newsroom and field and also failing to equip them with coping mechanisms.

Fixing the broken system: What needs to change?

But while most of the education is delivered in classrooms, nearly all working journalists confirm that the real training starts when the individual enters a newsroom. Most of the skills learnt in classrooms – including writing, editing, reporting, interviewing, filming – will be recalled in practice. The inverted pyramids, the smooth transition, catchy headlines, SEO keywords and audience-first methods, all the classroom memories will come back. ([WATCH: Part three of the video testimony by Aigul Zhamalova - Dean of the International School of Journalism, Maqsut Narikbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan.](#))

However, what happens while that work happens is what starts molding young journalists in that testing and demanding environment – the interpersonal skills, handling difficult colleagues, learning to cope and also preventing overwork and burnout. “No one’s prepared you for a clash of personalities, of egos, and how to navigate these kind of things,” said Robin Adams, a journalist who has worked in South Africa, Turkey and Qatar for major news outlets. “No one teaches you this. It’s all trial and error. It’s all learning on the job and learning fast. Whatever you learn in school won’t take into account how lonely it becomes, how overwhelming it becomes. “How are we nurturing these young graduates and trainees? How are we molding them, shaping them to get into this world of journalism which is a scary, dark place for us? “We’ve been doing it for 25 years. But the young ones coming through, how are we helping them navigate the personalities, the egos, the shouting, and the swearing? Because we can shout and swear

but you and I know because we've been here for 20 years that we're friends again in the next five minutes. "We know that. But a new graduate might not. And they might take it to heart thinking why that person shouted and swore at me? Why is this one so rude? And how can I approach this person again? "We really need this psychology part of it. But also, we need to teach graduates so that there's a softer landing for them when they enter this very scary world of journalism. Your colleagues can even turn on you in minutes. "It's such a difficult and tricky place. I really think more needs to be done at the universities and colleges, and certainly by the managers as well to make sure that we usher in a more welcoming space.

Media helping media reports that journalism schools and training programs must prepare aspiring journalists for the psychological realities of the profession, including:

- Teaching coping mechanisms and self-care strategies.
- Raising awareness of the signs and symptoms of PTSD.
- Providing ethical frameworks for reporting on trauma.
- Creating a culture of open dialogue about mental health

"What they want is for someone to tell them that this space can be a very dark space but I don't want you ever to feel that it's a dark space. I want you to feel welcome," said Adams.

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Exploring the potential for AI editorial assistance in student newsrooms

Hettinga, K. & Pagliassotti, D.*

Abstract

This study compared student-edited and AI-edited articles. Forty student-produced articles were collected. The unedited articles were processed through Claude 3, an AI tool, for editing focused on spelling, grammar, Associated Press (AP) style, and story structure. These were compared to the published, student-edited versions. In a faculty evaluation, AI outperformed students in nearly all assessed categories. These findings suggest that AI can enhance editorial quality in student journalism, particularly in technical areas.

Keywords: *AI editing, student journalism, Associated Press style, writing assessment, accuracy*

Introduction

Journalism's use of artificial intelligence has included data mining, recommendation systems, algorithmic curation, intelligent dissemination and archiving, and fake news detection, among others (Fernandes et al., 2023; Zhang & Tornero, 2023). However, journalism's use of generative AI has been a burgeoning topic of research (Jen & Salam, 2024) since the release of ChatGPT in November 2022. AI's adoption in journalism has raised concerns over commercial viability and legal complexities effect on audience perceptions of news credibility and quality, and potential to take jobs (e.g., Moran & Shaikh, 2022). Pavlik (2023) found ChatGPT useful for spelling, grammar and the ability to process, distill, and present information, but significantly limited in other areas.

Research has addressed the use of AI in journalism and education (Hossain & Wenger, 2024; Sparrow, 2022), but not its use in student newsrooms. Generative AI tools are potentially effective in improving the quality of student-produced media, which have increasingly played an important role in covering local communities (Finneman et al., 2023). As generative AI's integration becomes ubiquitous, examining its efficacy will be

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critical in helping journalism educators recommend to students when and how to use, or not use, such tools. This research explores the potential for student newsrooms to use generative AI to edit student-produced articles and compares the quality of generative AI's editing to student editors' work.

Literature review

Doroudi (2022) argued that the histories of AI and education research in the United States have been intertwined since the 1950s, pointing out that early AI researchers were cognitive scientists often directly involved in education research, as well. Studies addressing the use of artificial intelligence in the classroom have existed since at least the early 1980s, when computers were first being introduced into schools (Balajthy, 1985; Schank & Slade, 1985).

"Artificial intelligence" is often used rather indiscriminately today as a marketing buzzword, and a number of technologies now labeled AI had been referred to in the past as "automated, algorithmic, or intelligent" systems (Sirén-Heikel et al., 2023, p. 356). Discussing the role of AI in journalism, therefore, often requires some clarification of the term. Fernandes et al.'s (2023) review of 514 articles about the role of data science in digital journalism published between 2010 and 2021 identified six major topic clusters: exploratory research and detached ML (machine learning) approaches, text mining, recommendation systems, event extraction, opinion mining, and automated journalism. Similarly, Zhang & Tornero (2023) included within *AI journalism* the areas of "data mining, machine learning, natural language processing/generation, automatic news event detection, algorithmic curation, intelligent dissemination, intelligent archiving, intelligent news presentation, fake news detection, news quality control, etc." (p. 344).

The artificial intelligence systems of interest to this study are LLMs (Large Language Models). An LLM, such as ChatGPT, ClaudeAI, and Google Bard, is a computational model—an artificial neural network—that has been "trained" on extraordinarily large data sets to recognize linguistic patterns, such as rules of grammar, and predict statistically likely, contextually sensitive relationships between various words and concepts. Today's LLMs

are capable of natural language understanding and processing; in response to a user's input in the form of natural-language prompts, LLMs can perform such tasks as generating natural-sounding text about a variety of topics, summarizing or rewriting text, translating text from one language to another, and “conversing” with a human in coherent and reasonably believable fashion.

However, the old “garbage in, garbage out” rule of programming remains relevant to LLMs, which reflect any biases, factual errors, gaps, and ethical shortcomings within the vast amount of material upon which they have been trained, as well as any biases or misperceptions that reside within any humans who may provide feedback to the LLM to reinforce its learning (e.g., Gallegos et al., 2024). Such biases, as well as other factors such as misinterpreting patterns and being unable to evaluate or verify truth, may result in LLM output that includes “hallucinations”—inaccurate or invented material presented as fact (e.g., Greengard, 2025; OpenAI, 2025). Of note, different LLMs have been trained in different ways on different datasets and use different algorithms, meaning that the type and quality of output generated will vary according to the platform used.

OpenAI's GPT (generative pre-trained transformer) series has been available to the public, at various times and in various stages, since GPT-1's release in 2018, although the audience for these early LLMs was relatively specialized. It was November 2022's launch of GPT-3, which the public could interact directly with using ChatGPT, that made AI—more specifically, generative AI—a household word. ChatGPT was quickly followed by ClaudeAI and Google Bard, both released in March 2023 with similar user-friendly interfaces. These popular, easy-to-use generative AI models, which were quickly embedded into a variety of search engines, social media platforms, and other applications, had an immediate effect on those industries based around writing (and, later, art). In a review of 80 academic journal articles and conference proceedings published in English between 2013 to 2023, Jen and Salam (2024) found that the number of articles about the use of AI for writing tasks more than tripled in 2023, after the release of ChatGPT in November 2022 and—rising from 13 articles in 2022 to 49 in 2023. The most common writing tools mentioned were ChatGPT (20 articles), followed by Google Bard (3 articles), Grammarly (3 articles), and Perplexity (2 articles).

The use of Artificial Intelligence in journalism

Concerns over AI's use in journalism have existed for a number of years. Moran and Shaikh's (2022) study of UK and U.S. media coverage of AI and journalism from 2016 to 2020 identified three broad categories of concern expressed within the articles, with several themes emerging in each—how AI will affect journalism as an industry and profession (inevitability and economic justifications for adoption and its economic justifications, the difference between anthropomorphized AI and humans, whether journalism is simply quantifiable “content”); how AI will affect journalists' roles and job security (is it a threat to jobs or a liberating tool, the quality of output); and concerns over how AI will change media-audience relationships (whether AI-written articles can be distinguished from human-written articles, concerns over algorithm driven sensationalism). These media themes are reflected in the concerns and hopes of journalism educators, students, and practitioners.

Gómez-Diago's (2022) review of literature, meta-narratives, and AI-related journalism projects and events found that AI training for journalists fell broadly into two perspectives: a social perspective examining the ethics of AI usage and its consequences for journalists and the media industry, and an applied perspective focused on analyzing, developing, and using AI, with an emphasis on data collection and processing, automated content creation and content verification. With regard to practical applications of AI, Hossain and Wenger's (2024) survey of 41 journalism educators revealed that AI had been adopted “in the last 3 to 5 years” by only 20% of their journalism programs, well behind the programs' rates of adoption for video streaming, data analysis, data visualization, drone journalism, virtual reality, animation, and augmented reality (p. 137). However, AI was rated, by 51% of respondents, as the technology most likely to be adopted in the future (p. 158). The most important challenge facing journalism educators was “more funding,” chosen by 67.57% of respondents.

Al Sawi and Alaa (2024) interviewed 17 professional editors and proofreaders in Egypt about their use of and attitudes toward AI tools such as Grammarly, ChatGPT and PerfectIt, among others. Those respondents found such tools to save time, enhance

productivity, and improve quality in their work (Table 1, n.p.). Among the disadvantages they listed were accuracy and reliability issues, concerns that the tools would create dependency among users, concerns about ethical issues, and concerns about tool cost and access (Table 2, n.p.). Opinions were split over whether AI would replace human editors. These concerns reflect those described in an analysis of 223 articles about AI and journalism in Spanish and English by Peña-Fernández et al. (2023): the industrial dimension of news production (e.g., commercial viability, legal concerns); impact on professionals (e.g., concerns over job loss, rethinking job roles and training); and human-centered media AI (e.g., audience perception of credibility and quality of information).

By contrast, Sirén-Heikel, Kjellman and Lindén's (2023) interviews with nine technology professionals working at companies that provide natural language generation services for journalism shared a narrative that the field of journalism is in crisis. Characterizing themselves as outsiders—engineers—not journalists, they argued that automation would be more cost effective, opens new revenue streams by better personalizing content to audiences, and frees journalists from menial, non-creative aspects of their job. The technology professionals' narrative included "a shared understanding of journalists as headstrong and reluctant to give up professional authority, and viewing newsrooms as misunderstanding the technology" (p. 361), leading them to dismiss journalists' concerns over losing their jobs to AI.

Student journalism & Artificial Intelligence

A 2024 report (Hopelab et al.) found that about half of people aged 14–22 had reported using generative AI, but few used it frequently. Only 4% reported using it daily, while more than 40% reported having never used it. The majority reported using it for finding information and idea generation. However, the rapidly evolving nature of AI and its incorporation in both education and journalism is an area of concern for practitioners and scholars. Research suggests that faculty and journalism education administrators are deeply aware of the future effects of artificial intelligence in newsrooms and see a need to prepare students for this reality. Wenger et al. (2024) discussed how administrators widely

agreed on the need to incorporate ethical training related to AI in journalism education, but noted that “No program had yet developed a comprehensive plan around AI instruction for journalism students, instead they have largely left the decision on what to teach or whether to with or about AI to the individual faculty member” (p. 109). Meanwhile Hossain & Wenger (2024) reported that 51% of journalism deans, program directors, etc. reported planning to add artificial intelligence to their curriculum in the next three to five years. The authors noted that such plans indicated that “journalism program leaders believe this technology is not a passing fad and will become foundational to journalistic practice” (p. 141).

In terms of student newsroom use, Kim and Desiare (2024) sought to identify the use of ChatGPT in student newspapers. They determined that following the release of ChatGPT, there was limited evidence of the use of artificial intelligence: “a reasonable conclusion can be made that student journalists were not using ChatGPT in the editing stages to generate university news articles in 2023” (p. 7). Student journalists may be using AI in other ways, however, beyond editing or writing. For example, Dalan and Enciso (2024) reported that student journalists may be using artificial intelligence to assist with data journalism, to summarize reports, and to tailor content for audiences. The authors did highlight the escalating ethical concerns related to the incorporation of AI in student newsrooms, which were echoed by the administrators in Wenger et al. (2024). For student newsrooms that wish to use AI tools, selecting the most appropriate option is also ripe for consideration.

Selecting an appropriate Large Language Model (LLM) for a student newsroom

The market is currently flooded with large language models (LLMs), public and proprietary. Many LLMs offer a limited free usage plan and, for a month-to-month fee, a faster and more effective professional usage plan. However, many of these LLMs are relatively obscure—an individual with an interest in the field might find them listed in a technology article or recommended on a technology-related discussion board, but those who do not actively seek out such recommendations are unlikely to know about them.

By far the best-known LLMs are OpenAI's GPT tools: GPT 3.5 and GPT 4. At the time of writing, consumers can use a free ChatGPT account, giving them access to GPT-3.5 and limited access to GPT-4o, or several tiers of paid accounts, the most common being Plus at \$20/month.

OpenAI's major competitor at the time of writing was Anthropic, with its proprietary Claude LLM. At the time of writing, Claude 3 offered three tiers: Opus, Sonnet, and Haiku. The free version grants access to Claude Sonnet, and the Claude Pro plan, at \$20/month, offers access to Opus. Performance results and comparisons between Claude, GPT and Gemini tend to be published by the LLM firms themselves, and therefore must be regarded with caution (e.g., <https://www.anthropic.com/news/claude-3-family> and <https://openai.com/index/gpt-4-research/>). In addition, the quality of an LLM's output is also significantly affected by the nature of the input prompt it has been given.

LLM usage is not unlimited; all LLMs set rate limits, with stricter limits on free accounts and more generous limits on paid accounts. Rate limits restrict the number of requests that a client account can make over a designated period of time to help manage server loads and resource distribution among users. These limits, which typically vary depending on the account type, are usually defined as the number of requests or tokens (units of text) that may be processed within a specific time window, usually a minute or a day. Rate limits tend to change as technology changes and may also shift during high-demand or low-demand usage periods.

An LLM's token limit will be an important consideration for student editors. The number of units of text per token can vary depending on the LLM, but for ChatGPT at the time of writing, a unit is currently considered approximately 4 characters, or 0.75 of an English word. Thus, an LLM with a limit of 4,096 (Chat GPT-3.5's limit at the time the research was conducted) would equal about 5,461 words (number of words = number of tokens/0.75; Open AI, n.d.) This token allowance typically includes both the input text (which would include an uploaded article and the editor's prompts), and the generated output text from the LLM (the edited article and any other comments or suggestions the LLM might make in response to the editor's prompts). In journalism, standard-length news

articles may seldom exceed the token limit on an individual basis—in 2014, the Associated Press suggested articles run from 300 to 500 words long (Farhi, 2014)—but an editor will only be able to process a limited number of articles through the LLM before rate limits are reached.

In an ideal world, a student newsroom would choose to use an LLM that offers generous token allowance and the most advanced linguistic ratings. However, it is more practical to assume that (1) student media do not have disposable income to spend on a monthly subscription to a pro-level LLM, and (2) student editors are likely to choose an LLM with which they are already familiar. For this research, and using these assumptions, the authors chose to use the free version of ClaudeAI for this research because it has slightly better ratings on textual performance tests in various consumer media ratings (e.g., Drapkin, 2024; Nuñez, 2024).

Research methodology

For this research, 40 articles were randomly selected from those published by a student news organization at a small private liberal arts university in the United States. The news organization is a co-curricular model in which there is an associated production class, but the student staff is editorially independent. All articles published in fall 2023 and spring 2024 were collected and sorted by section. A random number generator was used to select five articles from each section (news, sports, features, opinion) from each semester for a total of 40 articles representing 18 different student authors. Most had worked on the student newspaper for just one semester. Two of the authors had worked on the student newspaper for at least two semesters and one author wrote an article as part of the prerequisite course and was not directly working for the student newspaper. Posts that were written in Spanish and those that were videos or primarily photo stories were not considered for inclusion.

Unedited articles were collected by using the “Version History” function in Google Docs and selecting the version of the article last modified by the student author (i.e., before being edited by the student editorial staff). The final edited version of the article was

collected from the student newspaper website. Prior to publication, the articles were typically reviewed by at least three editors (the section editor, a copy editor, and the editor in chief). Some articles may have received additional editing from other section editors or by fellow student journalists. None of the articles were reviewed or edited by the faculty adviser/instructor.

AI prompt development

After discussion of the criteria a journalism instructor is likely to look for in evaluating a student article, researchers developed a preliminary prompt.

Please edit this article for grammar, spelling, and Associated Press style. The article should be organized in an inverted pyramid structure or reflect the prioritization of information. Convey information in an impartial manner with a focus on clarity and factual accuracy. Draw the editor's attention to potentially erroneous information and internal inconsistencies.

(Although the inclusion of “please” in an AI prompt isn’t required and adds to the overall token count, its use arguably reinforces polite communication behaviors in both humans and LLMs.)

This preliminary prompt was input into the free OpenAI version of ChatGPT with a request to “please improve this AI prompt for editing student newspaper articles.” ChatGPT suggested the following:

Please edit this article for grammar, spelling, and adherence to Associated Press (AP) style. Ensure the content is organized using the inverted pyramid structure or reflects a logical prioritization of information. Maintain an impartial tone, emphasizing clarity and factual accuracy. Highlight any potentially erroneous information and internal inconsistencies for further review.

ChatGPT added, “This version is more concise and clear while retaining all the necessary details” (OpenAI, July 2024). Interestingly, the unnecessary word “please” was retained in the prompt revision. The prompt was used to edit three test articles not included in the final research set—one news, one sports, and one feature. The researchers noted that a request to check punctuation had been omitted from the prompt—although ClaudeAI seemed to be fixing that, as well—and added it:

Please edit this article for grammar, spelling, punctuation, and adherence to Associated Press (AP) style. Ensure the content is organized using the inverted pyramid structure or reflects a logical prioritization of information. Maintain an impartial tone, emphasizing clarity and factual accuracy. Highlight any potentially erroneous information and internal inconsistencies for further review.

A first run of ClaudeAI revealed an unanticipated result—the algorithmic nature of an LLM’s output led to inconsistencies in each batch’s results. On the first batch of articles, ClaudeAI provided headlines without prompting, but on the second batch, it did not. Because writing effective headlines can be a challenging part of a student editor’s job, the researchers revised the prompt to require them:

Please edit this article for grammar, spelling, punctuation, and adherence to Associated Press (AP) style. Ensure the content is organized using the inverted pyramid structure or reflects a logical prioritization of information. Maintain an impartial tone, emphasizing clarity and factual accuracy. Write a headline appropriate for an online newspaper. Highlight any potentially erroneous information and internal inconsistencies for further review.

All previously AI-edited articles were discarded to start fresh with this new prompt. After the initial prompt was fed into Anthropic’s ClaudeAI and the first article in the chat session

edited, for each new article in the same chat session, the prompt was simply, “Please do the same for this article.”

LLM output

Rate limits required that articles be edited in limited batches. Approximately seven to nine articles could be processed by ClaudeAI in each free session before receiving a notice that no more messages could be accepted until a later time in the day, typically around four hours later. As per the prompt’s instructions, ClaudeAI provided comments for the editor. In one article-processing batch (7/26) these comments appeared inserted within the article, in brackets, and also summarized at the end of the article. However, in the following batches, LLM comments on the article were only summarized at the end of the article.

The LLM’s comments to the editor, inserted at the end of the article in brackets, included technical observations and corrections, notes about inconsistencies, reminders to verify information (including dates, titles, and, in some cases, personal pronouns), and suggestions for reorganization. The most common suggestion, especially across Features, Opinion, and Sports articles, was for the author to include additional information to provide background, context, details, or different perspectives for balance. The LLM also noted its removal of sentences that appeared to be notes to the writer or the editor. All bracketed editorial comments were removed from the version given to coders, in order to keep the LLM-edited articles in “final draft form” to match the student-edited articles.

Also as prompted, the LLM provided headlines for each article, again inconsistently formatted, with some headlines put into quotation marks and some not (e.g., “DACA's Future Uncertain as Legal Battles Continue, Impacting California Students”). Quotation marks were removed, when present, from the versions given to coders. The LLM consistently removed the article identification code at the top of the article. Article codes were re-inserted on the versions given to coders.

Coding

To assess the quality of the articles, eight faculty members were recruited from the College Media Association listserv. All participants taught media writing classes or reporting classes and several taught editing classes. Four of the participants had been faculty members or advisers for 1–5 years, one had 6–10 years of experience, one had 11–15 years, and two had 16–20 years of experience as an instructor/adviser. Six of the coders identified as women, and two as men. The majority of the coders were white ($n=6$), one was Hispanic/Latino/a, and one did not indicate. The coders ranged in age from 27–52, with an average age of about 40. Three of the participants worked at community colleges, while the other five worked at public, 4-year institutions. The majority were from the Midwest. The participants were each given 20 articles, which were a mix of AI-edited and student edited work. Each article was given a unique identifier, and the coders were not told that any of the articles were edited using AI. The coders were asked to evaluate each article on seven different criteria on a scale of 1–5 (see Appendix). They were also asked to provide comments for each category and to provide overall feedback. Each article was evaluated by two different coders. The numerical scores of the two coders were averaged for a single composite score for each AI-edited version and each student-edited version. Given the small data set, advanced statistical analysis was not feasible and only general comparisons of the scores were made.

Findings

In general, the coders ranked the AI-edited articles more highly than the student-edited articles in nearly every category. An average of the composite scores revealed that the AI-articles scored 27.6/35 or 78.8%, whereas the student-edited versions scored 25/35 or 71.4%. In comparing the overall scores for different types of articles, the AI-edited articles outperformed the student-edited articles. For news articles, there was a 1.2 point difference, with AI-edited news articles averaging 26.9/35 (76.8%) compared to student-edited news articles 25.7/35 (73.4%). The difference was greater for sports articles, with AI-edited sports articles averaging 29.1/35 (83.1%) compared to student-edited sports

articles (26.5/35, 73.1%). The greatest disparity was seen in the opinion articles. AI-edited opinion articles averaged 26.9/35 for 76.8%, whereas student-edited opinion articles averaged 20.5/35 for 58.6%. However, there was no difference between student and AI-edited work in features, with both earning an average scores of 27.6/35 or 78.9%.

Each evaluation category was also assessed (see Table 1). In general, the AI-edited articles ranked more highly for each criteria (grammar, spelling, punctuation; use of Associated Press style; organization; impartiality; clarity; accuracy; headline quality). The greatest scoring difference was seen in headline quality, with the AI-produced headlines scoring an average of 3.8/5 vs. 3.15/5 for student-produced headlines. Notably, there was no difference between student-edited and AI-edited articles in their rating for accuracy, with both scoring a possible 3.8/5.

Table 1

	AI-edited Articles	Student-edited Articles
Average of all composite scores (out of 35)	27.6	25
News (out of 35)	26.9	25.7
Sports (out of 35)	29.1	25.6
Opinion (out of 35)	26.9	20.5
Features (out of 35)	27.6	27.6
Grammar, Spelling, Punctuation (out of 5)	4.45	3.6
AP Style (out of 5)	3.86	3.5
Organization (out of 5)	3.78	3.46
Impartial Tone (out of 5)	3.93	3.7
Clear (out of 5)	3.9	3.6
Accuracy (out of 5)	3.8	3.8
Headline (out of 5)	3.8	3.15

Additional observations

The LLM reduced the total word lengths of the original, unedited articles in all cases and did so to a greater extent than student editors. Notably, the prompt did not ask AI to reduce the word count or to do any streamlining. The average word length of an LLM-edited article was 48.65% less than the original, unedited article and 46.78% less than the student-edited version of the article. By comparison, the average word length of student-edited articles was only 3.51% less than the original, unedited articles. Student editors cut less than ClaudeAI overall, and, in fact, added to the word count of 15 of the 40 original articles, often by adding additional quotes or information to flesh out an article. The LLM's deep cuts contrast with its request, in notes to the editor appended to the end of its edited articles, for further information to provide context, background, details, different perspectives, and so forth.

The AI-edited sports articles lost anywhere from 29% to 70% of their words, whereas news articles lost a minimum of 32% of their words. For one long-form investigative article, Claude AI cut the article from 1,895 words to 375 words—it cut more than 80% of the total article. Seven out of 10 feature articles lost 40% or more of their words.

In addition to these significant cuts, the authors observed other AI edits that raised concerns. In at least one article, AI took a paraphrase from a source and turned it into a direct quote by adding quotation marks. In several other articles, AI took all the original direct quotes and turned them into paraphrases. Also, in an opinion article where the author used first person, it took narrative material from the source and changed it into a direct quote from an unnamed source. The authors also noted that AI varied attribution words more frequently—in several instances it changed the most common attribution word of “said” to “noted” or “concluded.” In some instances, it was observed that the AI-edited article failed to include end-of-sentence punctuation, and not all Associated Press style errors were addressed, specifically basic number formatting.

Conclusion & discussion

The prompt used for this study included the lines “The article should be organized in an inverted pyramid structure or reflect the prioritization of information. Convey information in an impartial manner with a focus on clarity and factual accuracy.” As a result, ClaudeAI’s edits tended to revise features and opinion section articles to structure them more like news articles, for example, by preferring summary ledes. In one opinion article, HS2401, ClaudeAI turned an authorial “I” lede into an unattributed direct quote. In another opinion article, HS2405, the authorial “I” anecdotal lede was dropped entirely and replaced with a summary lede. Although coders rated ClaudeAI’s opinion articles substantially higher than student-edited opinion articles (by 6.4 percentage points), given that the coders’ evaluation criteria prioritized the inverted pyramid and impartiality, it may be that they did not observe that the articles were opinion pieces. In addition, the extreme word-cut reductions made by ClaudeAI are likely to be problematic for features and opinion articles, which often run longer than news and sports. In practice, student editors should craft a set of prompts that could be applied to specific newspaper sections to retain or allow for different types of article ledes, structures, and lengths.

The algorithmic irregularity of output and the possibility that editing prompts may be poorly worded for a particular section indicates that LLM-edited articles should not be published without human proofreading, including checking LLM-generated copy against the original. For example, operating under a prompt biased toward news editing, as was the one used in this research, ClaudeAI took several approaches to first-person perspectives in opinion articles. In one opinion article, the LLM transformed first-person narrative by the writer into direct quotes attributed to unnamed sources.

Original text:

I hate when I'm driving in my car, the windows are tinted and all of a sudden I hear that "Hey boss, nice car!" Then I lower my car window a tad and I hear "oh, it's a girl" and they drive off in their trumpet sounding cars, at least my car sounds like it could breathe.

ClaudeAI edit

"I hate when I'm driving in my car, the windows are tinted and all of a sudden I hear, "Hey boss, nice car!" said one female enthusiast. "Then I lower my car window a tad and I hear 'Oh, it's a girl,' and they drive off in their trumpet-sounding cars."

In three other opinion articles, the LLM simply deleted all first-person text from the article. In a fifth opinion article, it took a paraphrase and turned it into a direct quote.

Original text:

Daniels says that his biggest priority as a harm reduction volunteer is safety. He says that he wants to make sure that people understand that they can ask for help, that it is ok to say someone is not okay, and that they can get aid with resources they may need.

ClaudeAI edit:

Daniels, who volunteers in harm reduction at events, emphasizes safety. "I want to make sure that people understand that they can ask for help, that it's ok to say someone is not okay, and that they can get aid with resources they may need," he said.

These alterations to features and opinion articles in particular suggest that careful prompt engineering is important when using AI to edit student journalism; prompts should be individually tailored to each section, as structural and stylistic differences between news, features, sports, and opinion differ significantly. If a newsroom imposes specific limits on its articles, such as word counts, that information should be included in the prompt.

Regardless of the prompt provided, at this time an LLM cannot reliably fact-check names, addresses, dates, statistics, or mathematical calculations, nor can it reliably evaluate whether an article is fair and balanced or whether sources are credible. The coders did rate

the AI-edited and student-edited articles equally in terms of accuracy, giving both a 3.8/5. Feedback from the coders suggested that their ability to assess accuracy beyond noting inconsistency within the articles was limited. Furthermore, student editors had the capacity to add context and quotes and did so in several articles, but the LLM could not.

Limitations

About seven to nine articles a day could be processed by the free ClaudeAI plan in July 2024. This seems sufficient for many student newsroom editing jobs, although sections with longer articles (e.g., Features) may be more constrained by these limits, as the longer articles use more tokens. Rate limits could be mitigated by assigning each editor an individual LLM account and/or rotating usage across multiple accounts whenever limits are reached. In addition, best practices for an editor could include keeping prompts as short as possible and specifying a limit on the number of words of output text the LLM can generate, especially if it is only being asked to generate suggestions or recommendations. Newsrooms that can afford to subscribe to a higher-tier plan will be able to process more articles or carry out other tasks with the LLM.

Notably, this research explored articles from one student newsroom, generated in a limited period of time; the findings of this research are not intended to be generalizable to student-produced media at large. Also, generative AI is rapidly developing, and as such it would be critical to repeat similar research with journalism produced by different institutions, using different LLMs (including institutionally specific retrieval-augmented generation systems) at different times.

Security and ethical considerations

Although not addressed by this experiment, other considerations must be made if choosing to use an LLM in a student newspaper. Journalists should read an LLM's terms of service and privacy policy carefully to understand how the LLM will use any information input and output in a session. For example, depending on the platform, uploaded material

(such as prompts and articles intended for editing) could be stored and used to train later models. In addition, journalists could, by uploading material, possibly be granting the LLM other rights over that content. Finally, the inclusion of LLM-generated text into an article could potentially raise questions concerning authorship and copyright. At the time of writing, U.S. copyright only protects the human-authored parts of a work (U.S. Copyright Office, 2023). At this point, the use of an LLM to conduct simple editing tasks such as correcting spelling, punctuation, grammar, and style falls within the U.S. Copyright office's acceptable parameters, but more extensive rewriting tasks, or inclusion of LLM-generated content into an article, could trigger copyright concerns.

Student newsrooms may also want to consider the larger ethical questions associated with the use of LLMs. Such concerns might include the poor pay and exploitive circumstances of the microlabor force, largely from the global South, that has been used to train LLMs (e.g., Regilmey, 2024; Stahl, 2024); LLMs' unauthorized use of images and texts that are potentially protected by copyright (e.g., Gesmer, 2024; Rogowski & Nagle, 2025; U.S. Copyright Office, 2025; Vana, 2025); and environmental effects such as the immense amount of water needed to cool LLM server farms and the extra demands AI places on local and national electrical grids (e.g., Dauner & Socher, 2025; Zewe, 2025).

Ultimately, the decision to incorporate AI into student newsrooms is one that should be made by student editorial teams, in collaboration with appropriate faculty and administrators. At this time, the current findings suggest that the use of AI in the student editorial process is most effective for technical editing—though it is not perfect. These findings support the work of Pavlik (2023) who found ChatGPT to be potentially useful to journalists with regard to its spelling and grammar (p. 92). Certainly, there are other applications that warrant further examination. For example, the data in this study suggested that AI-generated headlines were ranked more highly by journalism educators than those written by students. As such, just as AI's development continues to accelerate, so do its applications in student newsrooms.

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Learning from the best: Lessons from corrections of Pulitzer-winning journalism

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Abstract

In a review of Pulitzer Prize-winning articles from 2005–2024, 87 corrections were identified. Through thematic analysis, the authors determined that many corrections were lengthy, confusing, and occasionally did not provide the correct information. A few corrections in the dataset were clear and concise without repeating the error. Further, editor's notes demonstrated news organizations' commitment to transparency. Suggestions for journalism professors and student media advisors are discussed.

Introduction

For many journalists, some of the discomfort around corrections can be found in whether the inaccuracies that are addressed change a reader's perception of whether that reporter or that news organization is trustworthy. This concern is growing since adults in the United States are reporting a continuous decline of trust in news content. In fact, there has been a steady decline among the American public in news content for the past 40 years (Brenan, 2020). This decade's long decline long precedes more recent concerns regarding misinformation or accusations of fake news (Fisher, 2018). Concerns around misinformation should not be dismissed. In September 2020 the World Health Organization issued a call for governments to develop policies to curb the spread of false or misleading information (Managing the COVID-19 Infodemic, 2020). A recent measure of public trust in the news found that only 27% of Americans reported that they trust the news, and 56% of Americans reported they believe journalists try to mislead their audiences (Salmon, 2021). But factual accuracy may have less to do with trust than political polarization. Media scholar Michael Schudson (2019) argued that the news has never been

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more accurate. So, trust has more to do with polarization than accuracy or, even, transparency.

Yet, news organizations continue to seek ways to cultivate transparency and trust with readers. Though corrections have been upheld as a key element of transparency in news media, their effectiveness is somewhat debated (Karlsson et al., 2017), and newspapers, in particular, continue to rely on corrections as means to address inaccuracy. To support a deeper understanding regarding the effectiveness of corrections, this research seeks to explore the use of corrections on articles that have been recognized for their quality, namely, those that have won Pulitzer Prizes. By examining corrections that have run with Pulitzer Prize-winning articles, this study contributes to professional and academic understanding of transparency and accuracy. It also highlights common areas of error and lessons in correction writing for student journalists.

Literature review

Publisher Joseph Pulitzer laid the groundwork for the creation of the Pulitzer Prizes in his will and specifically identified four journalism categories to recognize “the most disinterested and meritorious public service rendered by any American newspaper during the preceding year” (Pulitzer.org). The awards have been given out since 1917 and today recognize 23 categories including 15 journalism awards, 12 of which recognize writing-focused content. The other four journalism prizes recognize illustrated reporting and commentary (formerly editorial cartooning), breaking news photography, features photography, and audio reporting, which was added in 2020. The remaining eight prizes are awarded to “books, drama, and music.” While some have critiqued the amount of attention given these prizes (Shafer, 2015), LaForme (2020) wrote “The Pulitzers are generally regarded as the highest honor that U.S.-based journalists and organizations can receive” (para. 3).

Despite this recognition however, there has been relatively limited research on Pulitzer Prize winners. Most notable is the work of Volz & Lee (2013), which found that only 13.9% of winners from 1917 to 2010 identified as women. Further, women were

more likely to win in the categories of Local Reporting and In-depth Reporting, as compared to men who were more likely to win awards for National Reporting and International Reporting (Volz & Lee, 2013). Ultimately, Volz and Lee suggested that gender disparity was greatest in the early years of the prize, but a gender gap among winners persists. In a second study, Volz and Lee (2012) found that International Reporting prize winners were more likely to be born in major cities or foreign born, more likely to be Ivy League graduates and were more likely to work for national or international news organizations and suggested “that the playing field of journalism is not completely level” (Volz & Lee, 2012, p. 601).

In looking at the articles rather than the reporters, Moore and Lamb (2005) found that winning features stories were more likely to come from publications in the Northeastern United States, covered local stories, reported on men more than women, often addressed “hardship” and commonly included references to Christianity. Further, in an examination of six of the main journalism categories, Wahl-Jorgensen (2013a) indicated that Pulitzer Prize-winning articles drew “heavily on emotional story-telling, deploying what has been referred to as the strategic ritual of emotionality” (p. 141). In a second study, Wahl-Jorgensen (2013b) used content analysis to study subjectivity in Pulitzer Prize-winning articles in the categories of “explanatory, international, national, investigative, feature, and public service” (p. 310). She found that many winning articles used subjective language, but that did not necessarily detract from the “ideal of objectivity” (p. 316).

Pulitzer quality

Interestingly, there is little to no empirical research regarding the *accuracy* of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism. A Pulitzer for Feature Writing was returned in 1981 after author Janet Cooke was found to have fabricated her article about a child heroin addict (Eason, 2009). In discussing the Cooke scandal and the firing of *The New York Times* journalist Jayson Blair for plagiarism, Jones Patterson & Urbanski (2006) discussed the implications of these larger journalistic failures and suggested that a desire for notoriety on

the part of both the individual journalists and their respective organizations rather than an emphasis on “reporting and presenting news in a way that earns the public’s trust” (p. 846) facilitated the publication of these big, flawed stories. Following the Blair scandal, a committee suggested that *The New York Times* set up “an error-tracking system” (Seelye, 2005, C6).

Corrections

While it is difficult to know whether an error-tracking system would have prevented either of the aforementioned scandals, Nemeth & Sanders (2009) reported an increase in corrections at both *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* between 1997 and 2007, but noted that the way corrections are formatted emphasizes objective errors. Indeed, a study of corrections at four newspapers (*The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, & *The Wall Street Journal*) found that more than 90% of corrections were considered objective errors (Hettinga et al., 2018). Other aspects of corrections’ style suggest ways of being more or less effective to readers. Hettinga & Appelman (2016) found that corrections were perceived as more important when they did not repeat the error that was being corrected and when they did not cast blame on a responsible party. Despite these practices and Nemeth & Sanders’ (2009) suggestion that corrections increased reader dialogue, other research has found that transparency regarding errors had a limited effect of audiences (Karlsson et al., 2017) and that it was unclear whether corrections fostered the development of credibility (Appelman & Hettinga, 2015). Yet, there remains a professional perception that corrections equal credibility. Shepard (2010) wrote “One of the surest ways for a news organization to keep and gain credibility is to have an easy-to-use mechanism for reporting mistakes and a quick process for correcting them” (para. 1). Despite the importance of corrections, when and how journalism students learn to address errors and make corrections is somewhat unclear. In a review of 10 common journalism and media writing textbooks, Hettinga (2016a) found that while the textbooks stressed the importance of accuracy.

Most of them also dedicate relatively little real estate to covering or defining the concept, and only a few of the books give students explicit, concrete practices for how to be accurate. This lip service may be doing a disservice to future journalists. (p. 15) further, fewer than half of the examined textbooks mentioned corrections and none offered details about how to write corrections, what information to include, etc.

Student journalists often learn through hands-on experience in student newsrooms (Smith et al., 2019). However, these newsrooms and their associated materials may also offer limited guidance on the drafting of corrections. Hettinga (2016b) found that a third of examined student newspaper handbooks and manuals did not address corrections. Of those that did, the policies were vague and typically did not address what should be corrected or how. Moreover, Appelman & Hettinga (2020) found that the use of corrections in one student newspaper spanning 50 years depended heavily on individual student editors who publicly committed to accuracy and transparency, rather than established newsroom policy.

Democratic theory of the press

While the conflict between research and practice—both professionally, and in terms of journalism education—remains, it is difficult to argue that corrections practices don't serve as a kind of transparency. Further, attempts to be transparent uphold a democratic theory of the press. McChesney (2004) wrote that:

Democratic theory posits that society needs journalism to perform three main duties: to act as a rigorous watchdog of the powerful and those who wish to be powerful; to ferret out truth from lies; and to present a wide range of informed positions on key issues. (p. 57)

It should be noted that McChesney considers American journalists as failures in their efforts to meet these obligations to the public. Yet in striving to fulfill these duties—that is, by providing people with accurate information to support an informed electorate—it could be argued that news organizations that provide corrections as a form of transparency are serving a function of democratic theory. As Pulitzer Prize-winning articles

are considered among the highest quality and most impactful journalism in the United States, the corrections that appear on those articles are significant. Because students are not often taught correction-writing skills in textbooks (Hettinga, 2016a) or newsrooms (Hettinga, 2016b), these highly visible corrections can also serve as educational materials for future journalists. As such, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do corrections on Pulitzer Prize-winning articles serve readers?

RQ 2: How do corrections on Pulitzer Prize-winning articles serve journalistic standards?

Research methodology

For this research, the authors relied on the Pulitzer.org website to collect all Pulitzer Prize-winning articles published in the last 20 years (2005-2024). All articles that were part of the winning submission were counted. So, for example, *The Anchorage Daily News*, which won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service Reporting, published 17 articles that were reviewed in consideration of the prize. From 2005–2024, there were 1,812 articles that were considered Pulitzer Prize winners across 12 writing-focused journalism categories. All articles were reviewed for corrections and, wherever possible, the original articles were reviewed on the publications' websites to ensure any corrections added after the prize was awarded were included. In later years, links on the Pulitzer site redirected to original articles; however, earlier years in the sample were sometimes affected by broken links on the publication pages and paywalls. By the late 2010s, the majority of articles linked to their original publications. Between roughly 2009 and 2018, a limited number of articles linked to their original site, and articles that won prior to 2008 were not linked. In total, the researchers identified 87 total corrections to Pulitzer Prize-winning articles during this time period.

Due to the relatively small data set ($N=87$), extensive quantitative analysis was not feasible. However, the authors still chose to code the data to report basic frequencies. The authors used the codebook established by Appelman & Hettinga (2019) to code for the year of the prize, the publication that won, the category of the prize, the number of days it

took to correct the error, the correction's identification or label (correction, clarification, etc.), where the error occurred (article, headline, etc.), any reported cause of error, the number of errors addressed in the correction, the type of error (misquote, number error, etc.), whether it was an objective or subjective error, the impact of the error, and whether the mistake occurred in specific editions, online only, etc. The frequencies of these data points are detailed below.

In this data set, the greatest number of corrections ($n=11$) were generated in 2017, with 2018 and 2023 following with eight corrections each, and 2021 recording 7 corrections ($n=7$); interestingly, among the 2008 and 2019 winners there were no corrections posted. The National reporting category had the greatest number of corrections ($n=16$), followed by the International

Reporting and investigative reporting categories with 12 corrections each. *The New York Times* had the most corrections ($n=35$) in the data set. Most of the corrections ($n=34$) were identified between 1 and 7 days of publication and corrections were mostly ($n=64$) connected to errors directly in the article. Interestingly, there was "no cause of error" for most of the corrections ($n=76$). The type of error was most commonly identified as "personal references" or "other" with 21 errors each. Objective errors ($n=77$) were the most common type of correction, and most corrections ($n=62$) had a low impact on the reader, meaning these errors did not reflect information that would have a significant effect on the reader's understanding of the story. For nearly all of the corrections ($n=77$) the edition of the original error was not specified. For the complete results from the data set see Table 1.

Then, the authors performed qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) to identify commonalities among the 87 corrections. The authors began with open coding informed by the extant literature. The authors noted, for example, whether the correction repeated the error, was difficult to understand, whether the correction seemed to be opinionated or editorializing, whether the "correction" was not actually addressing a specific error at all, but served as more of a note, update or clarification and so forth. After the initial coding was complete, the authors re-reviewed the corrections and the initial coding and began collapsing commonalities into three dominant themes. Two of these

themes were negative and indicated room for improving corrections, whereas the third theme demonstrates publications' dedication to transparency efforts.

Findings

In analyzing the corrections, three dominant themes emerged. The first two themes indicated problems with the corrections that may be detrimental to readers: 1) Multiple corrections were extremely lengthy and difficult to follow; and 2) Several corrections repeated the incorrect information or didn't provide the correct information. However, the third theme was more positive: 3) some of the corrections were not corrections in the traditional sense but were editor's notes and updates that served to clarify journalistic decision-making. These findings are discussed in greater detail below in the context of the research questions.

RQ 1: How do corrections on Pulitzer Prize-winning articles serve readers?

First, multiple corrections were long and confusing. Take, for example, this 2010 correction from *The New York Times*, which appeared on an article that won the prize for National Reporting. An article on Monday about the trucking industry's concerns over proposals to ban texting while driving referred incorrectly to statistics regarding large trucks and fatal crashes. The statistics, from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, cover trucks that were involved in fatal crashes; they do not specify the number of crashes "caused" by the trucks. The article also misstated the change in numbers of fatal crashes involving large trucks from 1997 to 2007. According to N.H.T.S.A., that number declined to 4,808 in 2007, from 5,416 in 1997; it did not increase to 4,808 in 2007, from 4,777 in 1997. (In 1997, N.H.T.S.A. data differentiated between medium-weight and heavy trucks; in the 2007 data, they were counted together as large trucks.) This correction is 120 words, with 12 numbers including years, and includes acronyms and industry jargon (differentiating between "medium-weight and heavy trucks"), which may be challenging for the average reader to understand. Similarly, this 2009 correction, also from *The New*

York Times for Breaking News Reporting, is 96 words and includes six numbers referring to times and train numbers.

An article on Tuesday about the night that Gov. Eliot Spitzer of New York spent with a prostitute named Kristen in a Washington hotel, as detailed in an affidavit filed as part of a federal investigation of a prostitution ring, included incorrect information from the affidavit about an Amtrak train referred to in a text message as a possible itinerary for Kristen's trip from New York to Washington. Train No. 129 leaves Pennsylvania Station at 4:25 p.m., not 5:39, and arrives in Washington at 7:40 p.m., not 9. (The later timetable applies to Train No. 193.). Interestingly, the error itself is relatively simple—the misidentification of a train. Yet, it is the context and set up of the correction that is difficult to follow. In clarifying that the error occurred because of information provided, the correction of the actual mistake is buried. Other corrections/clarifications were shorter, but number laden, such as this note, “Note: The police report for Bulacan indicates a total of 32 killed and 109 arrested but the data within the report tallies up to 31 killed and 110 arrested. The latter is visualized in the Bulacan map” from Reuters, which was in an article that won the International Reporting Prize in 2018.

These corrections raise questions as to whether they are effective and actually serve the audience. As such, they share similarities with the second theme, which found that some corrections repeated the error itself or failed to actually provide the correct information. For example, in 2014 an Explanatory Reporting winner from *The Washington Post* included the correction, “A previous version of this article incorrectly identified Southerland's eldest daughter as Amanda. This version has been corrected.” This correction fails to include the correct information though the article itself is now accurate. The daughter's name is Samantha. So, in this case, the correction actually provides the incorrect information rather than the correct information. Likewise, this 2018 correction (Investigative Reporting, *The Washington Post*) fails to provide accurate information. A previous version of this story incorrectly said the NFM Lending office a Post reporter called to verify Jaime Phillips's employment was in Westchester County. The company has no offices in that county. This story has been updated with a statement from Maryland-based

NFM Lending indicating that Phillips's brief employment with the company ended in the summer of 2016.

This correction is particularly confusing because it appears in an article about a woman who attempted to deliberately mislead *The Washington Post* with false claims that then Senate candidate Roy Moore had impregnated her as a teenager. The woman claimed to work for a company, NFM Lending, in its office in Westchester County. The company, which is real, indicated that the woman had briefly worked for the company, but does not have offices in that county. However, in the way this correction is written, it seems as if the error being addressed is the location of the office that a reporter called, and the correct information—where the company actually has offices—is not provided in the correction.

As noted, these corrections raise serious questions about their effectiveness in actually solving or explaining the inaccuracy. However, some corrections on Pulitzer Prize-winning articles are models for best practices in correcting errors. For example, in an article about an oil spill that won the 2013 prize for National Reporting (*Inside Climate News*), the following correction was appended, "This story has been corrected to reflect that BP's Macondo well was capped on July 15, 2010, ten days before the Enbridge spill occurred." This correction is simple and direct and provides only the correct information. Likewise, a 2015 Editorial Writing winner from *The Boston Globe* added a simple correction that provides the correct information without repeating the error, "Correction: A previous version of this story misstated the results of a survey on education levels of fast-food workers over age 20. One third have attended college."

RQ 2: How do corrections on Pulitzer Prize-winning articles serve journalistic standards?

In addition to the limited number of effectively written corrections, 12 "corrections" or notes were indicative of a theme of transparency, either in the editing and reporting process or in newsroom policy. This correction, labeled as an editor's note, published by the *Salt Lake Tribune* explained why a victim of sexual assault had been named in this story, when names were not used in other stories about sexual assault, "Editor's note: This

story has been updated since its original publication. The Tribune generally does not name victims of sexual assault, but Barney agreed to be identified after other media used her name.” The decision to use or not use names of sources was a common reason for the use of editor’s notes within this sample. In the 2024 Pulitzer winner for Local Reporting, the editor’s note read.

In this article, anonymous sources have their names and credentials checked and double checked by reporters and editors, though their identities are not revealed to the public. Sources may be granted anonymity if they provide unique and critical perspective or information and are at risk for personal or professional harm if their identities are revealed. In a similar vein, the Associated Press discussed its decision to hold back the name of a journalist and appended a note to its winning Public Service journalism work that covered the attack on Mariupol Ukraine. This story only mentions two of the three AP journalists in Mariupol at the time. The AP deliberately left out Stepanenko’s name for her own safety at the time, so that the Russians would not realize that she also was present. Still, other corrections rooted in transparency described why specific errors made it to publication. One such correction, published in 2017 in *The New York Times*, described a photo that had been inappropriately altered in the production process and why that alteration did not match the newsroom’s ethical standards for photo alteration.

An Editors’ Note published that an earlier version of the main photograph with this article, of a filing cabinet and computer at the Democratic National Committee headquarters, should not have been published. The photographer had removed a framed image from the wall over the filing cabinet — showing a Washington Post Watergate front page — because it was causing glare with the lighting. The new version shows the scene as it normally appears, with the framed newspaper page in place.

Similarly, an editor’s note published in 2014 by *The Center for Public Integrity* called attention to reporting that breached an ethical standard in regard to interviewing sources and potential conflicts of interest, “Editor’s note: Brian Ross and Matthew Mosk work for ABC News. Retired judge Edward Miller’s daughter is employed by the network. The Center contacted him before ABC News joined the reporting for this story.”

Still other corrections or editor notes disclosed other aspects of reporting, such as what sources responded to requests for information. A 2017 editor's note by the *Salt Lake Tribune* was transparent about a source's frustration with the publication given the time frame for a comment: Editor's Note: The LDS Church was invited to comment shortly after this story was posted online Thursday. A spokesman expressed frustration that the church had not been invited to comment earlier and declined to comment for that reason. BYU, asked to comment Wednesday, has not responded to submitted questions.

Discussion

These three themes demonstrate both the best and worst of corrections. A limited number of the corrections fulfilled their basic job—they corrected inaccuracies. A small number also were indicative of news organizations' dedication to transparency and sought to clarify journalistic practices or decisions. In these cases, corrections were fulfilling their role in a democratic theory of the press and ensuring that readers had correct information on which to base their decisions and opinions. However, the confusing and wordy corrections, as well as those that repeated the error, are noteworthy because they do not support a democratic theory of the press and may do more harm than good in efforts to be transparent and cultivate credibility and reader trust.

Past research has found that audiences perceive corrections that do not repeat the error to be more important than those that do (Hettinga & Appelman, 2016). Further, that research speculated that "perhaps people assume that overly complicated corrections are more trivial than direct ones" (p. 257). As such, some of these overwritten corrections may be an exercise in futility—they may confuse the readers more than the original error. For example, the aforementioned "overwritten" 2009 correction from *The New York Times* about an incorrectly described train could be simplified down to "The article 'Client 9 in Room 871: Notes on a Rendezvous' provided incorrect information about the possible itinerary for Kristen's trip. Train No. 129 leaves Pennsylvania Station at 4:25 p.m. and arrives in Washington at 7:40 p.m." This simplified version reduces word count by 60%, does not repeat the erroneous information, and reduces the amount of numbers used.

Further, the original correction also casts blame and indicates the erroneous information came from an affidavit. However, Hettinga & Appelman (2016) found that corrections “without error attribution were seen as more important than corrections with error attribution.” In that study, an interaction effect did note that corrections that repeated the error and included error attribution were perceived as more important than corrections that included blame/attribution but did not repeat the error, but readers liked the source more when the publication did not include error attribution/blame. Since both error attribution and repetition detract from correction importance, corrections that avoid these practices are more likely to be perceived as important by readers.

Transparency emerged as an important theme in this data set. As journalists and scholars seek to better understand the complicated decline of trust in the news, transparency in the journalistic process has become an important focus (Tameez, 2020). The Society of Professional Journalists lists “Be Accountable and Transparent” as one of the four categories of its ethical code (SPJ Code of Ethics, 2014). This is described in the code of ethics as “Explain ethical choices and processes to audiences. Encourage a civil dialogue with the public about journalistic practices, coverage and news content” (SPJ Code of Ethics, 2014, para. 8). Although transparency specific to newsroom practices and decision making only emerged in six corrections in the entire data set, it should be noted that these corrections were related to issues that may not have ever been evident to the reader, even upon a close read or fact-check. Yet, revealing information that might never be known to a reader is the essence of transparency (Heim & Craft, 2020).

Ethical codes may be reflective of these types of corrections. The *Salt Lake Tribune* is responsible for three of the 12 transparency corrections in the data set. Individually, each of these three transparency corrections revealed a different aspect of the news gathering process revealing the name of a sexual assault victim, identifying a suspect after criminal charges have been filed, and sharing the frustration of a source in a story for not being given enough time to respond to an interview request. Interestingly, the *Salt Lake Tribune* explicitly states its commitment to transparency in its ethics policies on its website. Under the section titled, “Corrections and Clarifications” the policy states, “Transparency is a core value at The Tribune and it’s our duty to correct mistakes when an

error is discovered” (Professional Standards and Ethics, 2021, para. 11). In fact, transparency is described alongside accuracy in the newsroom’s ethical code (para. 1).

In addition to being transparent about the reporting or editing processes, these corrections were relatively concise compared to many of the other corrections in the data set and immediately identified the issue being addressed in the correction or editor’s note. The error was identified immediately and most sentences in the corrections used active voice. Sentences were written to be focused and use a straightforward subject-verb-object construction. This points to a focused intention of clarity, in both the sharing of specific information and in how that information is presented to the reader.

In terms of journalism education, given the prevalence of verbose and confusing corrections that do not actually provide accurate information, journalism educators and student journalists should heed research-supported best practices of corrections writing rather than only following published examples. Ultimately, while not all corrections appended to the sample of Pulitzer winners were flawed, the first two themes provide strong evidence of what *not* to do. In contrast, student journalists *should* follow the example set by new organizations that used corrections or editor’s notes to add transparency to the journalistic process. Interestingly, nearly half ($n=5$) of the transparency notes occurred between 2022 and 2024, and came from four different news outlets. This may suggest a more modern tendency to be forthcoming with readers about journalistic practices.

Journalism educators could consider incorporating these findings into class activities. They could, for example, ask students to read corrections from prominent news articles and evaluate them based on effectiveness and potential for improvement. Students could be asked to rewrite published corrections for conciseness and clarity, to remove the incorrect information and add the correct information, and to highlight the journalistic decision-making process that led to these errors. Student media advisers could also task students with reviewing published corrections from their own archives. Such assignments could provide the opportunity for students to learn about the importance of corrections, as well as to experiment with best practices for writing them. Further, student journalists should be encouraged to write corrections to address their own errors when appropriate.

Conclusion & recommendations

Notably, this research had a limited data set. Though, perhaps it is meaningful that among award-winning journalism there is a correction rate of just under 5%. Of course, lack of corrections does not necessarily indicate lack of errors; it may be that there are errors that have gone unacknowledged and uncorrected. Also, as previously noted, while the authors tried to cross-check all winning articles on both the Pulitzer site and the original publication site, the authors did encounter problems with broken links and paywalls, which suggests that some of these articles might have had corrections we were unable to access. Future researchers may wish to explore a greater subset of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism (going back further in the archives) and it should be noted that the current study did not look at corrections on Pulitzer Prize-winning photos. Additionally, scholars may wish to explore the winners of other prizes, such as the winners of the Edward R. Murrow Award given by the Radio Televisions Digital News Association, the National Journalism Awards given by the Scripps Howard Foundation or the Sigma Delta Chi Award from the Society of Professional Journalists.

While this study reviews a small number of corrections, the corrections examined for this study appear on the “best of the best” of journalism. As such, these findings shed light on some of the most important and quality journalism practices when it comes to handling errors. As many smaller news organizations and student journalists often rely on the practices of industry leaders to inform their own decisions and policies, understanding how prize-winning pieces of journalism address inaccuracy can help both professional and student practitioners in establishing their own standards and practices. It should be noted that mistakes are part of the news media. While journalists strive to verify information and report accurate information, journalists are still human, and errors do get by—even for the best reporters and editors. Yet, how those errors are addressed is an important space for understanding measures of journalistic accountability, which is critical in fulfilling news media’s role in a democracy and for cultivating trust in an era when institutions such as the press are under intense scrutiny. While there were certainly positive examples of quality, effective corrections, and efforts to cultivate transparency, many of these corrections failed

in their obligation to clearly amend the record, suggesting room for improvement even among leading publications. Though this work has been recognized as preeminent journalism, their related corrections are not always prize-worthy.

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What if journalism went wild? A re-imagining of journalism practice and journalism education amid the climate crisis

Holmes, K.*

Abstract

Journalism occupies a sphere of influence and a field under economic, political and social siege. Noticing, documenting and feeling the climate crisis from Canada's North presents a crucial perspective and a unique opportunity to distill and highlight cracks in assumptions, norms, and narratives. It exposes a conundrum of representation, mobilization and a fidelity to standards that produces inadequate conceptualizations and incomplete stories. For journalists and journalism educators, the climate crisis necessitates asking what shifts, what crucial conversations we could bring to our work. Journalism isn't simply an industry and a public service. It's also an ecosystem that could create the kind of connective tissue needed now and more than ever. What if journalism and journalism education went wild? What if we creatively considered the role of journalism in responding to the climate crisis by breaking conventional boundaries, centring land, creatures, and the more than human? How might hyper-localized, place-immersed and infused storytelling prompt journalism to form a key part the infrastructure, dialogue and curiosity of civic life? How might journalism, as collaborative intelligence, nourish residents, community and place? As an exploration of wild journalism as a concept and practice, as epistemology, this paper weaves place- and land-based inquiry with the emerging field of wild pedagogies. It interrogates paths forward with critical place theory and decolonization scholarship. It reconsiders purposes, practices, and shapes of journalistic stories and the possibilities we, as journalism educators, open to our students.

Keywords: *wild pedagogies, environmental education, journalism education, Yukon*

Introduction

I stand on a sandy, gravelly lip, looking at a valley of newly greened and growing aspen, willow, lodgepole pine and black spruce. Trees and sky frame mountains and glaciers that both move and anchor. Mountains astride Áa Tlein/Atlin, the largest natural lake in British Columbia in an oft-forgot part of the province that shares a closer kinship to another territory, the Yukon, a bit further north. This land, long home to the Taku River

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Tlingit and to people attracted by a life at the end of a road, or better yet, where there are not roads, gravitating to land replete with lakes, forests and creatures.

I run loops through the woods around an off-grid cabin here, exercising mind, body, and dog. Moving from outside to inside to sit behind a desk and perch on a hard wooden chair. I'm here to think, to write. Writing as a method of inquiry and discovery, one that honours and encourages the trying (Richardson, 2001, p. 30). Writing done in a specific, local and historical context. Writing affected by geography (p. 35). I ponder, wonder, consider this place. What and who it presents. What I see, hear, touch and feel. How these sensory and emotional responses get translated along limbs, neural pathways and seep into soul. Channeled through life experiences encompassing joy, hope, doubt, hurt, grief and consequent, ongoing, belated, and belaboured learnings.

Place and land entwined, sweaty, sticky spruce-gum, conductors and conduits. Watching and breathing while tending to responsibilities and reciprocities. Time for sighing, laughing, singing, angering, waiting, hoping. Wooden chair creaks. Creek growl. Head and heart burst. Who am I to even try to describe? Some alchemies cannot be summoned or adequately articulated. They are clearly here and always has been, writing, voicing, themselves. At the ridge, just east of the cabin, I notice. Winds choose a specific point to join the rumble of the swift water below, creating an orchestral, perhaps even an orchestrated, roar. Change and stillness. Companionship and solitude. Curiosity and fear. Something closer to "truth" tucked within the binaries we construct, tolerate and find haven.

A news director once encouraged me to weed out the word, "but" from scripts, the texts that introduce and help tell journalistic stories. He said that "but" created too hard a line, suggested conflict, misconstrued opposition, presented a false choice, false balance, a perceived limitation. He suggested substituting "but" with another short, wide word "And." The vista in front of the cabin verges on being too much to be absorbed, believed, interpreted. Though the crusty cluster of black fly bites on the back of my neck counter any illusion that I dream. And so. I scratch.

This paper, a research and pedagogical proposal, comes from this land. Co-authored. I couldn't have written this by myself. The connection and debt I feel to the Yukon, a slice of Canada's far Northwest, 30 years since travelling here, burns strong and bright. I am a relative newcomer, not born on this land. With three decades of connection, I feel like I've been, at least, partially raised and certainly uplifted by it. I believe when we consider our relationships to place and the land on which it's situated, we uncover multiple, complexly rich and surprising layers, the kinds of truths and the sorts of stories that could converse with many places and many people. Stories as palimpsests. Stories we need to hear.

In 2023, Canada's North saw its hottest summer ever recorded (CBC, 2023). Residents of Yellowknife dislocated thousands of kilometres from home for weeks, waiting for an evacuation order to be lifted after wildfires came within 15 km of scorching the Northwest Territory's capital. Here in my home in Whitehorse, Yukon, another remote capital city, we've watched those N.W.T. fires unfold, highly aware, but that could have been us. It likely will be us one day. We live amid the forest. Whitehorse is a wilderness city. A spruce, living in the yard of a local friend for the past three decades, wept sap that summer, reacting to the stress of heat and lack of moisture. Perhaps trying to protect herself. My friend posted on Facebook asking for answers and advice about this spruce. This had never happened before. The taiga talks. The world speaks of change. It tells us we're living beyond its means.

This research considers the climate crisis, how it connects to the destruction and decay of journalistic reach and journalistic storytelling. At their roots, both crises stem from failures to empathize, to listen, and to trust, symptoms of and contributors to wider systemic political, social and economic crises. In this context, I believe journalism, journalism norms and forms and ethics must be reconsidered, adjusted, changed and adapted for the craft, the profession, the institution and its practitioners to remain relevant, to fulfill and expand their functions — to serve a widely conceptualized public — and to thrive. We need to disrupt, creatively, and from a place of caring and with vested interest, deconstruct to reconstruct journalism and its foundations. As problematic and as frayed as journalistic storytelling has become, it retains affordances to reach, attract and connect wide audiences, which is an essential part in tackling wicked problems. Echo chambers

grow, TikTok extends its reach, and the membranes of communication bubbles grow more impermeable. I believe journalism could find new purpose, resonance, and reach if it could open and change. This paper explores what journalism could look like if it went wild.

My hope is that wild journalisms — as manifestations, adaptations and enactments of wild pedagogies help awaken audiences and ignite interest in planetary protection. Part of its power lies in the invitation to imagine. The meandering that suggests there's something of substance beneath porous sand. The possibility of connections that compel meaningful shifts. Wild journalism(s) could become an application of wild pedagogies — an outgrowth, an offshoot — a core journalism course, part of a larger curricular offering, a touchstone for a re-imaged program in climate crisis journalism and communication. When I consider wild pedagogies — as evolving theory and method — I'm encouraged to think differently and disruptively about journalism. A hope floats that thinking differently, supporting and expanding thought with example and action, may make a wider contribution and persuade some colleagues and students to do so too. A constructive contagion.

Literature review

As a medium of stories, wild journalisms will require re-storying. As Indigenous scholar, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013, p. 9) writes -- acknowledging the work of Gary Nathan -- *re-storying* is a form of "re-story-ation," and ecological, cultural, and social restoration. The dynamics and obligations of relationship are central to wild pedagogies and could also be to wild journalisms. Questions of representation and agency — who tells stories, how they're expressed and under what terms form key questions. When I think about re-story-ation and restoration, it's not to rebuild something back to what it once was, a misplaced sense of the glory days of journalism. Rather, I see potential for a paradigmatic shift, characterized by journalist scholars Callison and Young (2019) as nothing short of a reckoning.

When Kimmerer asserts in *Braiding Sweetgrass* that "our" relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories and she asks who will tell the (2013, p. 9), she extends

responsibilities, accountabilities and concerns. A sense of fleeting time, impending loss — of land, story, and storyteller. In her wondering about the future, there's an implicit nudge to co-authorship. Land and people working together.

Theory can catalyze change when it entwines with methodology and practice. Momentum in the form of walking on the land (Donald, 2021; Garbutt, 2019; Judson, 2018; Ylirisku et al., 2024), as positionally informed conversations among colleagues (Yee & Davidson, 2021), as blood/ancestral memory (Weber-Pillwax, 2021), and when land becomes the teacher (Styres, 2011). Wild journalism gathers inspiration from wild pedagogies which is an approach to and philosophy of outdoor education. Wild pedagogues seek to challenge some traditional education practices and to deepen and more meaningfully connect with nature. By extension, wild journalism also implicates and reconsiders professional norms, settings, practices and purposes. Reconsideration could mean relinquishing control over narrative and form. It could also stretch epistemological boundaries and “beats” — well beyond what could currently be classified as climate-change reporting.

Wild Pedagogies took flight as a graduate course (Jickling, 2011), developed by Bob Jickling at the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University (Thunder Bay, Canada) in 2011. The first course outline organizes the class as a series of unscripted “ontological experiments.” It promises to combine intentional activities without exerting control over the outcomes. Canoes, paddles and life jackets are all taken care — so says the syllabus — so that students — training to be teachers — can use the time to reflect on and re-imagine their assumptions, philosophies, pedagogies, experiences and stories. Course requirements include generosity of spirit, good humour and mutual high regard.

Jickling, an environmental educator, openly juggles the irony of identifying “course expectations” in the syllabus with a class that aspires to relinquish power and to challenge “dominant cultural ideas about control — of each other, of nature, of education, and of learning (Jickling 2011). As instructor and course instigator, Jickling expresses hope that in a 10-day experiential course — much of which would be spent in a canoe — wild intent, thoughtful activities and willing participants would stay afloat amid controversial and provocative material and unconventional course delivery. He addresses irony and

inconsistency in his course outline in keeping with Aoki's notion of tensionality, a form of friction that emerges from dwelling in a zone between two curriculum worlds: a world of curriculum as plan and a curriculum as lived experiences (Aoki et al., 2005). Tension arising from a gap between normative and aspirational. A dissonance between our espoused values and our actual practices. A space for surprise and uncomfortable encounters with expectations. Perhaps there's a connection here to what Donald refers to when he writes about "tensioned juxtaposition," as he, in his context, notices traditional buffalo stones resting on a prominent hill surrounded by colonially cultivated fields (2021, p. 57). Zones of tension offer energetic lessons. Where there is, irritation and discomfort, there's also spark. Jickling et al (2018) describe these zones as interstitial moments. Digging into intersections, adjacencies, identifying areas of resistance and relief, could offer cues for educators, and many others. Where there are tensions, questions rise, and different combinations and options seem possible.

Wild pedagogies frame its endeavouring as education for cultural change (Morse et al., 2018, p. 310). It calls out extractions and hierarchies embedded and perpetuated by colonialism. Its advocates emphasize the urgency of the environmental crisis and the role of education and educational reform in preparing students for an uncertain future that will require information, insight, aptitudes, and empathies that status quo schooling often does not and does not seem capable of providing (ibid). Barrow notes the contributions to wild pedagogies of Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding, eco-psychology and environmental education theories (2019, p. 88).

Wild pedagogies challenge educational conventions and disciplinary silos. They pull from, encourage, develop and break open place-based education approaches (Greenwood & Smith, 2014,) to engage directly and thoughtfully with concepts of wild and wildness. Wild pedagogies aim to centre and align its perspectives and practices with the natural world. Nature animates so that it's much more than backdrop and context. Rather, nature is a vibrant, more-than-human collaborator (Jickling et al, 2018).

In his course outline, Jickling also offers insight about the importance of playing with form, paying homage to several educators, public intellectuals and even a former Canadian prime minister (Pierre Trudeau), whose work, in Jickling's view, revealed wild-

practices/expressions/learning/pedagogies. Included on his list of indebtedness are Norwegian deep-ecologist Arne Naess, lyric philosopher Jan Zwicky, photographer/documentary filmmaker Edward Burtynsky, Na-Cho Nyak Dun First Nation storyteller Louise Profeit LeBlanc, street artist and social activist, Banksy. American philosopher and environmental educator, Anthony Weston, is also on the list.

Seven years before Jickling launched *Wild Pedagogies* as a course, Weston published an essay entitled, “What if teaching went wild?” in the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*. The piece suggests school buildings are among the most stifling places to teach and learn, that classrooms disenfranchise students from nature, from animals, the more than human, and Earth herself (Weston 2004). These disconnections, says Weston, root and represent the global environmental crisis.

“The task of environmental education, then very broadly speaking is address our disconnection, reverse it, to re-situate us, to welcome us home, to make all of this an everyday practice is the urgent agenda (Weston, 2004, p. 33). Weston suggests infusing the outdoors into classrooms, for example, by bringing rocks for a show and share, and asking students to smell and eat flowers picked by the instructor. He also proposes releasing Daddy Longlegs spiders inside the classroom to encourage students to think from an arachnid’s perspective.

Jickling and Weston riff off each other, with Weston circling back and pinpointing as instrumental a 1995 conference in the Yukon on environment, ethics and education convened by Jickling. Where and how things definitively started and when the name wild pedagogy came to be, is a little muddy, more appropriately organic than linear. By some accounts, wild pedagogy, as a conversation, started appearing more often in journals, book chapters and at conferences around 2014. In 2018, Jickling and 14 other teachers and scholars, working as the *Crex* collective, (named after a bird whose ranges include Scotland), co-created *Wild Pedagogies* as series of essays, experimenting with pinhole photography and poetry. The papers form a book, building a heuristic. The body of work encourages new relationships between humans and more-than-humans, characterized as a renegotiation that honours the agency of nature, its capacity to co-teach and the necessity

for us to all — humanly animate and differently animated — to listen to each another, to interrupt destruction and to care take.

As a response to and rebellions against constraint and control in education, Wild pedagogies extend an invitation to experiment and enable a “multiplicity of stories,” to write some new ones and as a lens for converging stories (Jickling et al. 2018, p. xi). The process of writing and the journeys to wild places — broadly defined — are all integral to the outcomes, which are best characterized as works in progress. Learning as doing. The Wild Pedagogies book emerged, in part, from the experiences of three wild colloquia, on the Yukon River in the Yukon, Canada, on the Franklin River in Tasmania and along the coast of northwest Scotland.

Work with and through wild pedagogies has been taken up, chewed on (and sometimes spit out) like the wildflowers Weston brought to class — by a range of scholars (Beeman, 2021; Hemsall, 2022; Irwin, 2019; Morse et al., 2018; Schmidt, 2022). Reviews of Wild Pedagogies have been mostly supportive, acknowledging the work as part of a growing body of literature intended to provoke dramatic change in teaching and learning (Irwin, 2019, 375), especially crucial during a climate crisis. Henderson sees wild pedagogy as “more as a call for re-membering than a prompt for something radically new.” (2018, p. 331).

While it challenges professional identities and practices and provokes educators to soul search and radically re-imagine their work (Renshaw, 2021, p. 290), others request additional and more concrete direction on how wild pedagogies can be taught as well as how its teaching impacts children and youth (Barrow, 2019, p. 89). Renshaw spies an elephant in the room by noting “there remains a palpable tension between their privileged context as authors sailing west of Scotland, delighting in the experience of ‘the more-than-human,’ and the complex context of teachers and learners trying to forge a new a vision of education while contending with neo-liberal policies and shifting accountabilities (2021, p.291).

Renshaw, a faculty member at the University of Queensland, also identifies a sobering tension between the freedom and imagination embraced by wild pedagogues and

the mounting toll of climate disasters — including wild storms and wildfires. “The willfulness of the wild across the Australian summer was dramatic and terrifying. It is not possible to speak only of enchantment and delight when such incredible loss and grief are central to our experience of the wild, and this will increasingly be our collective experience (2021 p. 291). Renshaw’s question and comments serve as an admonishment, a word of caution to educators to not be naive or tone deaf, to protect themselves and their work, to read the environment — people and animals losing their lives, their homes, their communities. He asks: “How can Wild Pedagogies give these stories of terror and grief more prominence, without excluding stories of delight and enchantment?” (Ibid). It’s a fair question and prompts us to consider contradiction and discomfort, to acknowledge tension and the possibility that wild pedagogues offer more than an either/or proposition. Enchantment and delight and loss and grief aren’t mutually exclusive. I believe there’s room to work, constructively, with purpose, and sometimes joy, to address and respond to fear and grief and loss wrought by the climate crisis. There are also opportunities to learn from these impacts and responses and let them inform pedagogical approaches with cycles of iteration and response.

Wild pedagogues and some other environmental educators argue that opening pathways and building relationships with nature could lead could —in the longer term — to better, more thorough, more attuned environmental caretaking. I see a parallel to Renshaw’s comments and questions unfolding in journalism. Reporters and producers are much better at reacting to and “covering” climate and other disasters than we are in anticipating, preparing and understanding these events and phenomena. There’s often a belief and expectation that audiences want strife, struggle and tragedy in their menu of news stories [Panetta, 2025]. The much more challenging work is to find space for new, different, and deeper narratives.

As work on different fronts — reactive and proactive — unfolds, I hear in Renshaw’s words a need to temper, not necessarily, suppress, the longer-term, experimental, experiential and vulnerable educational work. At the very least, we should ensure that, as educators, as journalists – we are educators when at our best -- we don’t appear oblivious to the immediate context and risk accusations of tone deafness.

Research methodology

As I learn more about wild pedagogies and ruminate on how and if wild approaches to teaching and learning could be initiated and adapted to other fields, such as journalism, I am both curious and uneasy. The land and landscape, physically and politically moves beneath our feet. As it must. Blenkinsop & Ford (2018, p. 315) reflect on the impact of bringing students into a relationship with nature and the more than human, noting an identity crisis for students that can come with recognition of profound suffering and loss in the world. Another source of angst, something that can occur “with the coming to recognize oneself as benefitting from and/or being privileged by our colonization of the non-human world” (ibid.) is acknowledged as something environmental educators may have been slower/too slow to confront (ibid). Environmental and outdoor educators and environmental education have also been taken directly to task (Korteweg & Russell, 2012, p. 8) for advocating a neutralized, ahistorical, guilt-free, “romanticized” version of the environment and environmental education. Morse et al. 2018, also acknowledge these critiques (p. 245), in part by acknowledging the importance for environmental educators to rethink concepts of wilderness. Recent work from other disciplines (Ylirisku et al 2024) problematizes generalized, nostalgic, and romanticized understandings of child/youth/human nature relations, including logics of representation by drawing from critical, feminist, ecofeminist, Indigenous, post humanist, multispecies theories and more-than-human methodologies (Tuck et al., 2014).

“The problem is that embracing only the benefits of nature-connection and highlighting the restoring and beautiful encounters with nature problematically reasserts human exceptionalism and separates the human from the rest of nature, (Ylirisku et al 2024, p. 1).

Tuck, McKenzie & McCoy develop and deploy critical Indigenous approaches to place (Tuck et al., 2014). They call out environmental educators claiming Indigenous land as special places where settlers can feel connected to the natural world (p. 14). They also resist and resent self-anointment by non-Indigenous outdoor educators to learn and pass

on Indigenous knowledge and traditions (ibid). These Indigenous scholars differentiate between place-based education and land education, arguing the latter aligns more authentically with Indigenous rights, values and worldviews and serves to better reconstitute and re-story a shared or parallel future for settlers and Indigenous peoples.

“Land education puts Indigenous epistemological and ontological accounts of land at the center, including Indigenous understandings of land, Indigenous language in relation to land, and Indigenous critiques of settler colonialism,” write Tuck, McKenzie & McCoy (2014 p. 13). “It attends to constructions and storying of land and repatriation by Indigenous peoples, documenting and advancing Indigenous agency and land rights. Gruenewald suggested that critical pedagogy and place-based education are mutually supportive educational traditions, so much so that he blends them as two discourses into a critical pedagogy of place (2003). However, for some Indigenous scholars, including Tuck, McKenzie & McCoy, this critical pedagogy of place has blind spots and inconsistencies and has asserted, perhaps unwittingly, its own kind of hegemony. Despite “earnest in attempts to acknowledge colonial histories of particular places, the place-based and broader environmental education literature has replicated some of the very problematic assumptions and imperatives of settler colonialism” (2014, p. 15).

I haven’t yet seen a similar critique of wild pedagogies, but I wonder if it could, because of its roots in place-based and environmental and despite its openness and sensitivities and desire to uproot power structures in education, be vulnerable by not addressing settler colonialism more directly. When Tuck & Yang (2012, p. 2) say decolonization is not a metaphor, they decry superficial adoption of the language of decolonization and the caption and subsummation of social justice specific to and only to decolonization. Wild pedagogies reference decolonizing and the damages wrought by colonialism. However, with aspirations to creatively and rebelliously defy and dismantle system-level culprits; create new ways to think, teach, connect and understand, do wild pedagogies sufficiently engage with and acknowledge the role and contributions of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing?

As Morgensen writes, “Historically, a desire to lie on Indigenous land and to feel connected to it — bodily, emotionally, spiritually — has been the normative formation of

settlers,” (Morgensen, 2011, p. 157). How can there be talk of nature as co-teacher and wild as self-willed without also explicitly honouring the role and teachings of Indigenous knowledge keepers and Indigenous epistemologies and how they connect and inform understandings of the natural world and its more-than-humanness? I don’t see this as denying or diminishing the agency and voice of wild. I think it’s about adding vital layers that could also contribute to new and different conceptualizations, deepen our understandings, relationships, entanglements and sovereignties. Some Indigenous conceptualizations of critical place (Bang et al., 2014; Calderon, 2014; Engel-Di Mauro & Carroll, 2014; Paperson, 2014), warn of settler emplacement in which environmental education narratives masquerade or perform as decolonization, when they might actually represent recolonization (Tuck, McKenzie & McCoy 2014, p. 15, citing Morgensen 2009). “The settler nation’s need to continually code, decode and re-code social norms and social spaces so as to secure a meaningful (read: proprietary) relationship to the territories and resources at stake” (Tuck, McKenzie & McCoy 2014, p. 8).

For these scholars, what they conceive of as land education can intervene and disrupt place-based and environmental education by rejecting emplacement and instead de-centering settlers and settler futurity “as the primary referents for possibility,” (Tuck McKenzie & McCoy 2014, p. 18). Styres considers positionally as peeling back layers, accounting for culture, geography and locating herself in relation to everything she does as a core principle of Indigeneity (2019, p. 39). “The only place from which any of us can write or speak with a degree of certainty is from the position of who we are in relation to what we know” (ibid).

I see in wild pedagogies and, by extensions, wild journalism, a need for accountability and vulnerability as well as the potential to contribute to decolonizing education and public narratives. This could come through challenging the settler gaze, a humbling to the natural world, and daring to acknowledge existing ontologies, to re-create, re-invent and interrogate new ways to educate. Callison and Young and McCue demonstrate different ways to decolonize journalism, often closely linked to community-engaged journalism that embraces Indigenous values of respect, relationship, representation, relevance, responsibility, and reciprocity (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Tsosie et al., 2022).

My work will also be rooted in and informed by the intellectual labour and profound insights of Patel (2021), and of Indigenous scholars who helped lay the groundwork with decolonization and Indigenization theories, including (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Pidgeon, 2016; Scobie et al., 2021, 2019; Weber-Pillwax, 2021).

In their 2020 book, *Reckoning: Journalism's Limits and Possibilities*, Callison and Young critique the colonial structures and practices upon which much journalism is built. Combining sociology and ethnography, the authors explore issues of power and social justice and interrogate a media landscape that is gendered and racialized (Callison & Young, 2020, p. 7). Their work challenges norms of legacy media and show how they sustain settler colonialism. They also expose systemic failures of journalism by focusing on Indigenous journalists and representations of Indigenous people in Canada and the U.S. They speak of the possibility of multiple journalisms in their assessment of a handful of media start-ups aiming to do journalism differently (Callison & Young, 2020, p. 135). Their work also shines a light on Indigenous journalists (p. 161) in North America who are redefining relational frameworks in journalism. This work guides and informs this research in identifying what's broken, the barriers to change and in exploring new structures, models, and new possibilities for relationality. It will be a touchstone for my findings and discussions about collaborative, relational, land-infused journalism. Callison and Young reference feminist standpoint epistemology (Durham, 1998), as an approach to putting subjects and objects on the same footing, a way to challenge claims to impartiality. This work also draws from feminist scholars and philosophers (Harding, 1998), who, with Durham, seek a "strong objectivity" that makes subjectivity transparent and open to critical intervention. Callison and Young are also informed by Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge that could require journalists to acknowledge their own located-ness and how it is fraught (Haraway, 1988).

How wild journalism might be taught and enacted

In the Journalism Manifesto, (Zelizer, Boczkowski & Anderson, 2021), have a-come-to-Jesus conversation with journalism. It's time, these long-time journalism and

communication scholars say, to change or die. Time for journalists to ask hard questions, including, are we even relevant? “Before it’s too late and journalism as know it vanishes into thin air, we need to rethink and reimagine the environment in which journalism resides to better envision a more productive link to the world around it. In other words, we need to recouple the conditions in the imagination with the conditions on the ground (p. 23).

While the authors are not explicitly referring to the environment or the world as the natural world, I believe there is place for considering this. The journalism manifesto encourages imaginative ideas while also pointing out how, to date, journalism’s most influential imaginaries have fallen far short. Default settings that limit and entrench. One of the many and complicated reasons why journalism is stuck. I see wild journalism is a path less travelled and, potentially, an act of resistance. I would like to untether journalism from structural, and normative conventions – such as objectivity and impartiality-- to see where we land, to see what sticks, what disappears, what’s presented, and re-presented, what’s created, made and/or seen anew.

A context for this research, one of the wicked problem areas it revolves around, is a gradual and profound loss of public trust in the media, dwindling engagement with news linked to challenges in constructing a social contract, sustaining interest, attracting next-generation audiences to journalism’s callings and offerings (Fenton, 2019; Sharma et al., 2022). The Reuters Institute’s annual *Study of Journalism* (Newman et al., 2023) confirms weakening connections between audience members and traditional media outlets, due in part, to an ongoing transformation of digital media. The authors also say that conventional news offerings struggle to engage younger audience members who seek more participatory, personable and personalized options and not necessarily news (p. 5).

Foundational cracks have weakened journalism’s reach and dulled its lustre. As some scholars have characterized it, journalism is experiencing an existential crisis prompted by an unravelling of economic and professional alignment (Callison & Young, 2020; Conboy, 2019; Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Graves & Konieczna, 2015), new ways of working (Deuze & Witschge, 2018), social movements calling out privilege, the absence of representativeness, an overbearing presence of misrepresentation (Alcoff, 1991; Alemán,

2014; Rice, 2020) and the politics of distrust that helped create or perpetuate the rise of fake news, an epistemology that challenges a consensual core of journalism (Fink, 2019; Jahng et al., 2023; Lewis, 2019; Robie, 2022; Usher, 2021; Zelizer, 2004).

The crisis in which journalism finds itself — including a crisis of relevance made more urgent by societal and environmental needs for information, insight and dialogue — will affect how a new kind of journalism gets taught and enacted. My fear is that it will be more difficult to take risks and suggest novel approaches, even when they are most needed. Fear and insecurity may well prompt defensiveness and retrenchment. It's also no small thing to be unearthing different ways of knowing, to challenge what and how we know in journalism as a discipline that anchors its sense of self, its central occupation in its own, guarded theories and production of knowledge. With talk of a post-fact world (Brian McNair author, 2018); when truth morphs into “truthiness,” and alternative facts (Sparrow, 2018), the notion of engaging with, listening to and valuing more than human in mainstream journalism may seem far-fetched. Is it not, also, essential?

Wild journalisms suggest the prospect to reconsider and re-conceptualize journalism and journalism education. Ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies. Relationships, norms, and, up to now taken for granted. What counts as rationality, knowledge, meaning and truth (Tischauser & Benn 2019, p 130)

Findings & discussion

Wild journalism — anticipating, that license to create a new course in the program where I teach — is a joyful prospect. It would certainly stand apart from what's currently on curricular offer. It would probably come closest to a narrative non-fiction technique class. With the right “messaging,” and scope to encourage, there's the possibility of attracting students who are dissatisfied with their early encounters with status quo reporting. I'm thinking here of students who got into journalism because they liked writing, especially creative writing, only to find those skills weren't welcome in news journalism. Creative writing in journalism suggests taking liberties facts, not to mention wandering outside the rules for form that journalism has established for itself. Journalism that also

aspires to help save the planet, could also be quite a draw to students in their 20s who want to actively respond to pressing problems and move beyond paralysis of climate grief.

Journalism that considers the possibility of land as co-teacher would be so far “out there” that it could, in similar measure, both attract and repel some students. A wild journalism course could offer a great chance to work on the wild journalism manifesto that I started in this paper, evolving principles guidelines to ground and elevate such an offering. Co-creation with students would also prompt me as instructor/learner to ask, throughout the course, several questions — many of which I continue to ask myself, including:

- What made, continues to make you want to be a journalist/do journalism? (hopes, dreams, concerns)
- What does the climate crisis mean to you -- individually and collectively? (journal?)
- How does the climate crisis and journalism intersect? How could they connect?
- What are some examples of what you’d consider as “climate journalism?”
- What do you notice about this work? (characteristics, assumptions, format, narrative devices, voices — in other words, a thorough deconstruction and re-construction)
- What does the idea of “wild journalism” mean to you?
- What are your thoughts on nature as co-teacher?
- How could the voices of more than human be brought into journalism? Where and how could it fit? What are the implications of this inclusion?
- What are your reflections, enthusiasms, worries about wild journalism?

Conclusion

As I gaze from the door of the cabin where I write, out into the valley below, I’d like to know where there are places to dip toes in a cold creek with yet-known, maybe never knowable, depths and currents. Wild journalism seeks to connect with any journalism educator and any journalist who’s ever felt stuck inside a classroom or newsroom, anticipating the moment they can depart from a hermetically sealed room and step

outdoors. Onto a sidewalk. Onto grass. Into a puddle. With a strong desire to simply, appreciatively, and deeply breathe, whatever the weather.

Wild journalism searches for kindred spirits. It will need allies as it extends tendrils to an equally tough-to-articulate, unsettling, and hopeful stirring that wonders and rumbles for change. Change in the way we teach, our prompts and perspectives, how we work, what we consider “stories,” what we value, what we think others value, who we ask, what we ask, how we ask.

For me, as a journalist and journalism educator, there’s a tentativeness and aspen-like trembling in the contemplation of wild journalism. It also feels important. And so, I wade in and caution, and gratitude, supported by gut instinct, curiosity and, of course, wild enthusiasm.

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Combating fake news through education: The Georgian experience

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Abstract

The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation has eroded public confidence in media worldwide. Transitional democracies like Georgia, characterized by external propaganda, domestic political polarization, and tenuous media regulation, provide an essential perspective for analyzing the function of journalism education in restoring confidence. This study examines how journalism schools in Georgia confront the problems of the post-truth environment by providing future journalists with media literacy competencies, fact-checking tools, and comprehensive ethical frameworks. This study integrates a thorough literature review, a nationwide program analysis, faculty interviews, and a multi-university student survey to assess the potential of journalism education in Georgia to combat disinformation and enhance public trust in media organizations. The findings indicate an increasing focus on critical thinking, verification practices, and public involvement, while also highlighting structural constraints—such as limited resources, politicized media settings, and curricular deficiencies—that impede advancement.

Keywords: *journalism education; misinformation; trust; media literacy; Georgia; post-truth; disinformation*

Introduction

In the 21st century, the global media landscape has experienced a profound transformation due to the expansion of digital technology, social media platforms, and the rapid dissemination of inaccurate or misleading information. The so-called post-truth era has undermined conventional journalistic standards and considerably diminished public confidence in media institutions. Although these obstacles are apparent in both established and emerging democracies, nations in transition—like Georgia—encounter these dynamics more intensely due to internal political instability and persistent external influence campaigns.

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This paper examines the function of journalism education in restoring public confidence in Georgia's media landscape. It contends that journalism schools are essential in combating disinformation, fostering transparency, and cultivating a generation of journalists prepared to address the problems of the digital era.

Literature review

Public confidence in journalism is associated with perceived professionalism, autonomy, and precision in reporting (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). The algorithmic enhancement of misinformation has intensified public skepticism about news organizations (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Recent research underscores journalism education as a crucial mechanism for enhancing media resilience (Carlson et al., 2021); programs that prioritize media literacy, critical thinking, verification, and ethical standards have been demonstrated to bolster graduates' capacity to navigate and combat misinformation (Craft, Vos, & Wolfgang, 2016).

The scholarship on journalism education and disinformation encompasses various fields, including media studies, communication, political science, and education policy. This body of work emphasizes that journalism education serves as both a professional training platform and a normative space for cultivating democratic principles (Deuze, 2006). A prevailing theme in contemporary studies associates diminishing public trust in media with a wider issue of institutional legitimacy, intensified by the swift proliferation of misinformation and disinformation. According to Hanitzsch et al. (2018), trust in journalism depends on perceived impartiality, accuracy, and professionalism—criteria that are progressively compromised by the dynamics of the digital ecosystem. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) assert that disinformation constitutes not merely a content issue but also a structural one, ingrained in attention-driven algorithms and media economic frameworks.

Journalism education has been assigned the responsibility of advancing beyond its conventional scope. Carlson et al. (2021) contend that journalism programs should integrate digital competencies, critical data analysis, and verification abilities as

fundamental components of their curriculum. This necessity has intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing "infodemic," which highlighted the perils of unregulated digital misinformation (WHO, 2020).

Craft et al. (2016) argue for media literacy education that emphasizes both audience awareness and production ethics. A sophisticated methodology incorporates experience learning for identifying misinformation, including case-based assignments and simulated newsroom settings. Mihailidis & Viotty (2017) emphasize the necessity of enabling students to analyze and transform digital public spaces, especially via participatory and civic media.

Institutional frameworks have likewise addressed the call for transformation. The redesigned 2021 UNESCO model curriculum for journalism education advocates for the incorporation of digital verification modules, encompassing visual fact-checking, OSINT tools, and ethical decision-making inside algorithmic frameworks. The European Journalism Observatory and the European Journalism Training Association (EJTA) have emphasized the importance of multidisciplinary training that integrates journalism with data science, sociology, and civic education.

In regional contexts such as Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, journalism education faces structural problems including restricted academic freedom, reliance on donors, and politicized regulatory frameworks. Gross (2010) and Nodia and Scholtbach (2006) emphasize that inadequate institutional independence hinders curriculum innovation. The IREX Media Sustainability Index (2022) indicates that Georgia experiences significant media polarization, opaque ownership, and public distrust, hence rendering journalism schools extremely strategic.

Moreover, comparison analyses indicate deficiencies in teacher readiness. A 2019 survey by the Reuters Institute revealed that although more than 70% of journalism educators recognize the significance of digital verification, less than 30% have undergone formal training in imparting these skills. This substantiates McDougall et al.'s (2022) assertion that sustainable reform should prioritize faculty development, inter-sectoral collaboration, and infrastructural investment.

The worldwide landscape presents various exemplary initiatives, ranging from Finland's early childhood media literacy initiative to Taiwan's national coalition combating election deception. Effective adaptation relies on localized implementation that considers political environment, technological accessibility, and institutional independence. The literature collectively endorses a holistic framework for journalism education that integrates ethics and civic responsibility with technical proficiency, policy insight, and community involvement. This study seeks to evaluate the manifestation of these concepts in Georgia's journalism education sector and the potential for their reinforcement through strategic reforms.

Research methodology

A mixed methods approach was employed to elucidate both systemic tendencies and individual experiences.

1. Curriculum Analysis - evaluation of core and elective courses, practical elements, and assessment distributions within accredited journalism programs.

2. Faculty Interviews — semi-structured discussions with program directors, senior lecturers, and curriculum coordinators to investigate instructional methodologies and institutional impediments.

3. Student Survey - a structured questionnaire distributed to undergraduate and graduate journalism students at various universities.

Findings

Journalism programs across the country generally incorporate a fundamental media literacy course (4–6 ECTS) during the first or second year. These courses cultivate essential critical thinking abilities, acquaint students with media ecosystems, and instruct on fundamental disinformation detection methods. In recent years, numerous institutions have implemented elective programs focused on disinformation and fact-checking (3–5 ECTS). These electives frequently include practical OSINT training, encompassing reverse

image searches, geolocation, and metadata analysis, and may be integrated into capstone investigative labs collaborating with newsrooms or NGOs.

Extracurricular activities, such as investigative journalism clubs and donor-funded seminars, enhance traditional curriculum by providing real-time verification projects that serve the public interest. Notwithstanding these advancements, assessment techniques are inconsistent: certain programs assign as much as 15 percent of total grades to verification and digital literacy competences, while others give less than 5 percent, indicating that these skills are not routinely emphasized. Furthermore, multidisciplinary engagement with computer science or data analytics departments is constrained, and numerous advances depend on external donor financing instead of institutional budgets. The curriculum study indicates significant progress while highlighting the necessity for consistent incorporation of misinformation education, sustainable resource distribution, and enhanced interdisciplinary collaboration.

Insights from faculty interviews

Discussions with journalism educators highlighted a common belief that disinformation poses a systemic threat to Georgia's democratic goals. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, guided by a protocol that included the following thematic areas:

1. Perceptions of misinformation and its impact on journalism in Georgia.
2. Current curricular approaches to teaching fact-checking, media literacy, and ethics.
3. Challenges in equipping students with practical tools to resist misinformation.
4. Institutional constraints in updating curricula and teaching methods.
5. Recommendations for improving journalism education in the digital age.

Key findings and thematic analysis

Recognition of misinformation as a systemic threat: All participants unanimously acknowledged that misinformation poses a serious threat to democratic processes and public discourse in Georgia.

Curriculum strengths and shortcomings: While faculty noted the presence of media ethics and basic journalism theory in existing curricula, they mentioned that without the support of an international donor, the textbooks might be outdated and no local books exist.

Teaching approaches and pedagogical innovations: Faculty employed a mix of traditional lectures and interactive discussions but emphasized the need for experiential learning. Practical assignments involving real-time fact-checking, collaboration with newsrooms, and simulation exercises were identified as rare but effective strategies. Some expressed interest in incorporating open-source intelligence (OSINT) tools and AI-assisted verification methods.

Barriers to innovation: Respondents identified several structural obstacles:

- Limited funding for curriculum reform or technology integration.
- Institutional bureaucracy and resistance to change.
- Lack of continuous professional development opportunities for instructors.
- Political sensitivities discouraging investigative or controversial topics.

Student preparedness and engagement: Most faculty agreed that students are aware of the misinformation problem and eager to engage, but often lack confidence and practical training. A gap was noted between theoretical understanding and field-based competencies.

Discussion

Interviewees proposed the following:

- Creating dedicated separate courses on misinformation, media literacy, and trust-building.
- Strengthening university-media partnerships to offer students newsroom experience.
- Engaging alumni and journalists as guest speakers or mentors.
- Seeking international collaboration and funding for curriculum modernization.

Participants identified Russian influence efforts and domestic political media as the principal sources of misinformation. Many advocate for case-based learning and journalistic simulations; yet, opportunities are limited by financial constraints and curricular change rigidity.

Identified key constraints encompass inadequate funding for technology, restricted professional development, bureaucratic approval procedures for curriculum modifications, and intermittent self-censorship over politically sensitive subjects. Nevertheless, faculty members demonstrated a robust commitment to reform, endorsing compulsory fact-checking courses, a national repository of Georgian language verification materials, and enhanced industrial collaborations.

Results of the student survey

The student survey conducted across multiple journalism programs in Georgia yielded valuable insights into how future journalists perceive their educational preparedness in the context of misinformation and public trust. While students generally expressed appreciation for the ethical grounding provided in their coursework—particularly in subjects such as media ethics, journalistic responsibility, and public-interest reporting—a consistent theme across responses was the desire for more hands-on, practical experience with disinformation management.

Less than one-third of respondents reported direct exposure to professional fact-checking tools such as reverse image search, metadata analysis, or geolocation platforms within their university training. Most students encountered these tools through informal online resources or extracurricular projects. When asked about their confidence in independently verifying online content, only one in three felt "very confident," while the majority rated their abilities as moderate or limited. This reflects a significant skills gap between theoretical awareness and practical application.

Students also raised concerns about the trustworthiness of Georgian media. Approximately 68% expressed apprehension about political manipulation of news content, ownership opacity, and biased reporting. These perceptions appear to shape their expectations of journalism education, with many students emphasizing the need for courses that address power dynamics in media systems and the role of journalism in upholding democratic accountability.

Open-ended responses further underscored the demand for practical reform. A majority advocated for greater access to real-world fact-checking platforms, integration of digital forensic tools into the classroom, and opportunities to collaborate with civic tech or investigative NGOs. Several students called for interdisciplinary modules that combine journalism with information technology, data science, or political communication. Internship opportunities in newsrooms that actively engage in verification work were also viewed as essential to professional growth.

Overall, the findings highlight a clear discrepancy between the normative intentions of journalism education and the operational competencies needed to navigate contemporary information threats. Students are aware of the ethical stakes involved but often lack the technical fluency and experiential learning necessary to apply this understanding in the field. Bridging this gap requires a deliberate shift toward practice-based learning, stronger partnerships with media actors, and the institutionalization of verification training as a curricular priority.

These findings indicate a disparity between theoretical comprehension and practical abilities, highlighting the necessity of integrating practice-oriented verification

training throughout the curriculum. To make journalism education more effective in combating disinformation, the following factors must be considered and strategically implemented:

1. *Progressive skill development*: Disinformation education should be vertically integrated across the journalism curriculum. Students must begin with foundational media literacy in early coursework, then progress to advanced tools and techniques in open-source intelligence (OSINT), data verification, and AI-assisted forensics.
2. *Experiential learning methods*: Journalism programs should adopt practice-centered pedagogies by embedding newsroom laboratories, student-led verification initiatives, disinformation hackathons, and collaborations with local communities on debunking efforts. These formats simulate real-world reporting environments and enhance skill application.
3. *Cross-disciplinary integration*: Disinformation is a multifaceted problem. Effective responses require interdisciplinary collaboration. Journalism faculties should co-develop courses and modules with computer science, data analytics, sociology, and law departments to address both technological and societal dimensions of misinformation.
4. *Ethical and reflective thinking*: Curricula should cultivate ethical reflexivity by engaging students in discussions about the trade-offs between speed and accuracy, the implications of algorithmic bias, and the role of journalism in navigating uncertainty and public trust. Ethical decision-making should be embedded in both theory and practice.
5. *Collaborative networks and partnerships*: Journalism education must extend beyond the university. Programs should formalize partnerships with independent newsrooms, NGOs, international fact-checking networks, and civic tech communities to provide mentorship, tools, and internship opportunities.
6. *Institutional sustainability and faculty training*: Short-term donor-funded innovations should be institutionalized through long-term budgeting and strategic

planning. Faculty must be continuously trained in emerging verification technologies and disinformation trends to keep pace with the evolving digital landscape.

7. *Evaluation and assessment reform:* Traditional assessments should be updated to prioritize the quality of verification, transparency of sources, and societal impact of student reporting. Rubrics should reward evidence-based analysis, accuracy under pressure, and audience-centered journalism.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that although journalism education in Georgia has acknowledged the gravity of the disinformation crisis, its response has been inconsistent and often reliant on temporary donor interventions. Faculty, students, and curriculum analysts all agree that while there is a solid ethical basis and increasing awareness, practical verification skills, interdisciplinary cooperation, and long-term institutional change are not given enough attention.

Journalism education needs to shift toward organized, practice-based reform if it is to go from recognition to impact. From basic media literacy to sophisticated OSINT and AI-driven verification, curricula should be redesigned to guarantee vertical skill development. Real-time verification labs and simulation-based instruction ought to be the standard rather than the exception. The complexity of modern newsrooms, where accuracy, speed, and moral judgment all clash, must be reflected in these settings.

Furthermore, journalism departments cannot continue to fight misinformation in isolation. In order to integrate multidisciplinary modules that examine disinformation from both technical and societal perspectives, universities must formally connect with the faculties of computer science, civic technology, sociology, and law. To guarantee that students are exposed to changing international standards and resources, external collaborations—with fact-checking NGOs, investigative media, and international coalitions—should also be formally established.

Journalism schools must make a sustained institutional investment in faculty development to guarantee that their instructors stay up to date on verification technologies and are capable of instructing students in real-world investigative methods. Reforming student assessments is equally important. Performance metrics should reward not only theoretical knowledge or writing quality, but also the social impact of reporting, verification accuracy, and transparency of evidence. Practically speaking, Georgian academic institutions ought to:

- Provide required, stand-alone classes on disinformation, verification, and establishing credibility.
- Start "disinformation hackathons" and newsroom simulations across universities.
- Distribute institutional funds in order to lessen reliance on donors.
- Create training programs for faculty that emphasize cutting-edge technologies in verification.
- Encourage collaborative initiatives with other fields to foster the development of hybrid expertise.

Journalism programs in Georgia and other similarly vulnerable democracies can become active centers of resilience by putting these strategies into practice. This will prepare the next generation of journalists to protect the truth and public confidence in an increasingly contaminated information environment.

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From numbers to narratives: Enhancing data journalism education in Georgia

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Introduction

Data journalism has emerged as a critical field within modern journalism, offering new methods for uncovering, analyzing, and communicating complex information. Globally, the integration of data analysis and storytelling has become a cornerstone of investigative journalism, enhancing transparency and accountability in the public sphere. However, in Georgia, the integration of data journalism into journalism education remains fragmented and inconsistent.

An initial mapping of journalism education programs in Georgia revealed that only a small number of universities include data journalism as a distinct subject. Among those, the course is often offered as an elective rather than a core requirement. Courses typically focus on basic skills such as locating open data sources and using spreadsheets for simple analysis. Comprehensive instruction covering the full workflow of data journalism—data collection, cleaning, analysis, visualization, and storytelling—is rare. Tools such as Excel and Google Sheets dominate classroom practice, while exposure to advanced statistical software, programming, or interactive visualization platforms is largely absent.

Lecturers often develop their own syllabi based on personal experience or informal training rather than standardized curricular guidelines. Non-formal education initiatives, such as workshops and short-term courses organized by organizations like Transparency International Georgia, ForSet, and IDFI, have played a significant role in supplementing these gaps. However, reliance on non-formal training risks uneven skill development across the sector.

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Employers in Georgian media outlets increasingly seek journalists with data skills, but also report a shortage of qualified candidates. As a result, Georgian journalism graduates may find themselves at a disadvantage in an industry increasingly shaped by data-driven practices. These circumstances necessitate a critical evaluation of existing pedagogical approaches and the development of a structured, practice-based curriculum that aligns with both international standards and local market needs.

This study evaluates the current state of data journalism education in Georgia, drawing on desk research, stakeholder interviews, and expert consultation through the Delphi method. In doing so, it situates Georgia's challenges within the broader international context and proposes reforms to better prepare future journalists for the demands of data-driven storytelling.

Literature review

The growth of data journalism has spurred a significant body of research exploring the pedagogical strategies necessary to teach this complex and interdisciplinary field effectively. Internationally, scholars have examined the structure, content, and challenges of data journalism education, offering valuable insights that are directly relevant to the Georgian context.

Heravi's (2019) analysis of 219 data journalism syllabi across 24 countries highlighted a critical gap between curriculum breadth and depth. While the majority of programs surveyed covered the complete workflow—data acquisition, cleaning, analysis, and presentation—the actual technical competencies taught were often superficial. Heravi found that courses tended to favor introductory training on accessible tools such as Excel and basic visualization platforms, while statistical analysis and programming skills were rarely emphasized. This discrepancy suggests a widespread reluctance or difficulty in integrating more complex technical training into journalism education.

Bradshaw (2018) proposed a rethinking of journalistic practice through his "inverted pyramid" model for data journalism. Unlike traditional narrative structures where reporting leads to a final story, Bradshaw's model emphasizes a cyclical process where data exploration and editorial decision-making occur simultaneously. His approach underscores the importance of teaching students to critically interrogate datasets at every stage of the journalistic process, integrating technical and editorial thinking rather than treating them as separate domains.

Several studies have further elaborated the interdisciplinary tensions inherent in teaching data journalism. Parasie & Dagiral (2013) observed that journalists often perceive computational methods as alien to traditional newsroom culture. Their ethnographic work in French and American newsrooms revealed that despite widespread enthusiasm for data journalism, actual practices remained constrained by cultural norms privileging narrative over analysis. This finding suggests that education programs must not only impart technical skills but also work to shift professional identities and newsroom values.

Similarly, Appelgren & Nygren (2014), in their comparative study of Nordic countries, found that while data journalism was celebrated as a means of enhancing transparency and democratic accountability, its implementation was often superficial. Courses tended to prioritize storytelling aesthetics—visualizations and infographics—over rigorous data analysis. They emphasized the need for journalism education to foster "critical numeracy," enabling students to not only present data attractively but also to understand its epistemological underpinnings.

Student attitudes toward quantitative methods pose another major challenge. Splendore et al. (2015) argued that "number anxiety" is a significant barrier to effective data journalism education. Their survey across European journalism schools found that many students deliberately chose journalism to avoid numerically intensive disciplines, leading to resistance when confronted with statistical concepts. Splendore and colleagues suggest pedagogical strategies that gradually build quantitative confidence, such as starting with simple descriptive statistics and contextualizing data within familiar storytelling frameworks.

In addition to cognitive and cultural challenges, resource limitations impact the quality of data journalism education. Borges-Rey (2016) pointed out that even in technologically advanced countries, lack of access to appropriate software, computational infrastructure, and qualified instructors hinders deep learning. He stressed that without systemic investment, data journalism risks becoming an elite skillset confined to well-resourced institutions.

The Georgian case mirrors many of these international trends but add further structural constraints. Study of syllabi of different journalism programs also show that the Georgian universities largely treat data journalism as an elective subject. Course content varies widely across institutions, and instructors often lack formal training in data science or statistics.

Recent global pedagogical innovations offer potential models for addressing these issues. Howard's (2014) data journalism MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) experimented with modular, project-based learning, allowing students to progressively build skills through real-world assignments. Franklin (2014) emphasized the value of newsroom simulations, where students are embedded in data-driven investigative projects, learning through intensive collaboration and mentorship rather than through traditional lectures.

These innovations suggest that effective data journalism education must prioritize experiential learning, interdisciplinary thinking, and gradual development of technical skills. Curricula should move beyond merely teaching tools toward fostering critical inquiry, ethical reflection, and creativity in working with data.

The international literature converges on several core imperatives for advancing data journalism education: integrating critical numeracy into journalism curricula, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, building student confidence with quantitative methods, and investing in instructor development and institutional resources. Complementing these insights, the WJEC 2019 Data Journalism Syndicate underscores three essential areas for preparing emerging journalists: cultivating foundational data

literacy to enable students - particularly those apprehensive about mathematics - to engage confidently and accurately with quantitative information; fostering computational thinking by teaching students to apply logic, recognize patterns, decompose problems, and develop reproducible solutions; and promoting the ethical and effective communication of data, ensuring that complex numbers are meaningfully translated into words or visuals that audiences can readily grasp. Collectively, these recommendations advocate a holistic approach that balances technical proficiency with critical reflection, ultimately equipping future journalists to navigate and articulate an increasingly data-driven world (WJEC, 2019). Applying these insights to Georgia requires not only curriculum redesign but also broader institutional commitment to rethinking journalism education in a data-driven world.

Research methodology

This study employed a qualitative, multi-method research design to evaluate the current state of data journalism education in Georgia and to propose a curriculum framework aligned with both global best practices and local needs. The research integrated semi-structured interviews and the Delphi method to ensure comprehensive, triangulated insights.

Selection

The selection of active journalism programs was based on the list of undergraduate programs published by the National Assessment and Examinations Center (NAEC). The next step involved gathering information from the websites of selected universities about the content of their bachelor's and master's programs in journalism and mass communication. The study focused on programs that offer data journalism either as a separate subject or integrated within investigative journalism courses that may include work with open data. Out of 14 higher education institutions that offer journalism

education across Georgia, only five universities teach data journalism course, and all of them were studied for the purposes of this research.

Interviews

To gather nuanced, context-specific insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four key stakeholder groups:

1. University Lecturers: Faculty members teaching data journalism courses were interviewed to understand their pedagogical approaches, perceived challenges, and resource needs.

2. Professional Trainers: Representatives from NGOs and independent organizations providing non-formal training in data journalism, such as ForSet and Transparency International Georgia, were consulted to explore alternative educational models.

3. Students: Journalism students from three leading Georgian universities were interviewed to capture their learning experiences, skill gaps, and perceptions of current curriculum effectiveness.

4. Employers: Editors and media managers from digital and investigative news outlets were interviewed to ascertain the skills demanded in the labor market and the preparedness of recent graduates. The interviews were conducted between October and December 2023, using an interview guide designed around key themes: course structure, skill acquisition, pedagogical challenges, and industry expectations. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically. All participants provided informed consent prior to interviews.

Delphi Method

Following the initial phase, the Delphi method was utilized to achieve expert consensus on key components of an ideal data journalism curriculum. A panel comprised of lecturers, journalism program heads, and professional trainers participated in three rounds of iterative surveys. The first round sought open-ended feedback on preliminary findings regarding current practices and ideal course structures. In subsequent rounds, panelists rated specific curriculum elements such as course prerequisites, teaching methods, learning outcomes, and assessment strategies — using Likert scales. Consensus was defined as 70% agreement among respondents. Aspects that achieved consensus were integrated into the proposed curriculum model. The Delphi method was particularly suitable for this study given the diversity of perspectives among stakeholders and the emerging nature of data journalism education in Georgia and not only.

Data analysis

Data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings from the interviews were synthesized to identify similarities and differences between current educational practices in Georgia and international standards. The iterative feedback from the Delphi panel further refined these insights, ensuring that recommendations were grounded in both empirical evidence and expert judgment.

Results

The study revealed a multifaceted landscape for data journalism education in Georgia, characterized by both systemic challenges and emerging opportunities. One of the most salient findings was the fragmented and inconsistent nature of data journalism curricula across Georgian universities. In the majority of programs analyzed, data journalism remains an elective rather than a mandatory course.

Data Journalism course content varies widely across universities: in some programs, the primary focus is on locating open government data and conducting basic narrative projects, while others offer elementary training in data analysis and visualization.

“Based on the course objectives, lectures on data journalism begin with open data available in Georgia, with public information in registers. Requesting information from public agencies, navigating the database system, searching for information, discovering interesting topics in databases, obtaining information from various databases around the topic, combining, minimal analysis and presentation around the topic” - these are the requirements for the project presented at the end of the course offered in one of the university's bachelor's program. However, during the course, there is less emphasis on processing and analyzing data in any program, and there is less time left to study visualization tools, but the students in the interview still say that the the course was about "an interesting area of journalism" and that they gained important knowledge.

Another course, which begins with the study of databases at another university, is a mandatory subject in the master's program. During the course, students learn to process, filter and perform simple analysis of data in Excel, along with data extraction. The course is pre-requisite for digital storytelling and visual communication, where students learn Adobe Illustrator and use that knowledge to create their final data journalism project - an infographic about a researched story. “My goal is to help students see the story behind the numbers and data... When students pass this course, they understand what data journalism is and see the perspective of what else they can tell with data,” the course instructor said in an interview.

The elective course offered in one of the university's undergraduate program is significantly different, having been created by simplifying and compiling the content of a separate Western European data journalism program. “The main goal is to teach how to work with data using innovative methods,” notes the course lecturer in an interview, who, in addition to finding interesting stories in data, teaches students how to read data, analyze it in Excel, and use visualization tools such as Flourish, as well as HTML and CSS for building a website. In the second half of the course, students learn the basics of the Python

programming language, which is difficult for students, but attractive. They note in interviews that data journalism “is the most modern direction of journalism and the course was very difficult, but very interesting [...] one semester is too short for this subject, more time should be devoted to studying Python.”

The interviews show that comprehensive education that encompasses the full data journalism workflow - from data acquisition, cleaning, analysis, and visualization, to narrative presentation - is rare – among others because of the lack of time. As one of the interviewed lecturers explained, “Our students learn to find open datasets, but advanced work with data - like statistical analysis or scraping - is something we barely touch.” Another interviewee also mentioned: “It really depends on the lecturer's background and how much time they have. In one semester, you can barely scratch the surface.”

Technical skill deficits present another important barrier to effective teaching and learning. Both, lecturers and students, reported a heavy reliance on basic tools such as Excel and Google Sheets, with limited exposure to more sophisticated software like Python, R, Tableau, or Flourish. One of the interviewed graduate students mentioned: “Excel is fine for small datasets, but it feels like you are being left behind if you don't learn at least some basic coding.” One of the lecturers echoed this concern, noting, “We are teaching students tools that are becoming outdated. Meanwhile, in international newsrooms, Python is almost mandatory for data work.” Both, the students and lecturers mentioned in the interviews that the course will need to be reconsidered given the changes brought by artificial intelligence tools. As one of the students mentioned, “The course should include teaching the capabilities of data analysis with the help of AI.”

In addition to technical gaps, students often enter these courses without foundational competencies in research methods, statistical reasoning, or critical information retrieval. This lack of preparation severely impedes their ability to engage with data journalism at an advanced level. One professor mentioned, “I spend half the course just trying to get students comfortable with the idea of percentages and averages. It delays everything else.” Another added, “They don't know how to tell if a dataset is reliable or biased — this is a critical journalistic skill that should be taught earlier.” Interviewees

mention that different level of skillset impedes the group works on projects, as part of the group often have to learn less than they could have because of the other, less prepared students. This problem is also evident when talking to students, when one graduate of the program notes that “time should not be wasted on explaining how to calculate percentages in Excel and no grades should be given for that,” while another thinks that time should not be spent on teaching Canva, and in general, they note that there should be less emphasis on detailed learning of tools. A similar view is shared by lecturers, who, as mentioned above, say that there is less time left during the course to teach storytelling directly with the help of data, and it is desirable that students have already acquired some technical, information retrieval, and storytelling knowledge and skills before starting their course.

Quantitative anxiety among students emerged as a constant challenge across interviews. Many students pursue journalism because they perceive it as a field free from numerical reasoning. As a student candidly shared, “If I liked numbers, I would have studied economics, not journalism.” Lecturers repeatedly stressed that this mindset poses a major pedagogical challenge. One instructor noted, “We have to demystify numbers for them. They need to see that storytelling and statistics are not opposites - they complement each other.” Several lecturers described strategies that had proven effective, such as integrating numbers into familiar storytelling frameworks or using small, tangible datasets for initial exercises. “When they see that simple Excel formulas can answer real-world questions, the fear starts to fade,” one instructor observed. However, when dealing with large amounts of data, it is very new to them and, accordingly, they have difficulty navigating and finding the story - “If someone gets stuck in big data, then they get a little confused and everything seems important, because this (working with data) is new and it is difficult to distinguish what is important.” Lecturers agree that it is difficult for novice journalists to understand how to tell a story with data, without the help of heroes and respondents, where the main “hero of the story is the data.” According to one lecturer, data journalism often “requires a very different approach, which is unfamiliar to journalists, it is very different.” Lack of practice and lack of digital literacy or the ability to operate with mathematical concepts ultimately lead to more complex problems in teaching data journalism, which hinders the achievement of the course’s goal. As one respondent noted,

"My main concern is that they are so untrained in the practical use of numbers that it is very easy to deceive them, they do not compare numbers to each other, and they have difficulty telling the story."

Material and technological constraints further limit the effectiveness of data journalism education. Several universities lack sufficient computer laboratories, updated software, or even stable internet access necessary for working with larger datasets or online visualization tools. One of the lecturers recounted, "I had to conduct sessions where half the class was sharing one laptop. You cannot teach data storytelling like that." Even where infrastructure exists, financial constraints often limit the acquisition of proprietary software, forcing reliance on free, but less powerful, alternatives.

Instructor preparedness emerged as another significant barrier. While many educators are experienced journalists, they often lack formal training in computational methods or statistical analysis. As a result, the curriculum tends to emphasize narrative construction at the expense of analytical depth. "I can teach students how to ask questions and write compelling stories," one instructor said, "but if you ask me to show them how to scrape data or build interactive charts, I would need training myself." Some lecturers reported participating in professional development workshops to fill these gaps, but access to ongoing training remains limited.

Despite these challenges, there is strong evidence of emerging momentum toward reform. Students increasingly recognize the value of data journalism skills. Several expressed enthusiasm for more technical training, particularly in areas like data visualization and basic programming. "It's not easy, but I want to learn," said one student. "I can see that if I know how to work with data, I will have more opportunities after graduation."

The media market strongly favors graduates with data journalism competencies. Editors from leading online media outlets confirmed that demand for such skills far exceeds supply. One editor commented, "We urgently need journalists who can find stories hidden in datasets. Right now, we have to either train them ourselves or settle for

superficial reporting." However, employers also acknowledged that the work environment must evolve to support data journalists adequately. "It's not enough to hire one data journalist and expect miracles," one editor remarked. "They need teams, tools, and time."

Ultimately, the findings suggest a clear path forward. Georgian journalism education must systematically integrate data literacy, analytical thinking, and storytelling into its core curricula. Overcoming fear of numbers, addressing technical skill gaps, investing in resources, and supporting instructor development are all essential steps toward producing a generation of journalists capable of meeting the demands of a data-driven media landscape.

Findings & discussion

The findings of this study underscore the need for comprehensive reform in data journalism education in Georgia. While the challenges identified are consistent with international trends, such as those outlined by Heravi (2019) and Bradshaw (2018), the Georgian context introduces specific structural and cultural barriers that require tailored responses.

One of the central insights emerging from the research is the necessity of embedding data journalism more firmly within journalism education as a core, rather than peripheral, competency. The current elective status of data journalism courses marginalizes them, reducing their perceived importance among students and university administrators alike. As several lecturers noted, students often treat data journalism as an optional "bonus" rather than an essential journalistic skill. This perception must be challenged. Data literacy is as fundamental to journalism today as interviewing skills or media ethics.

Closely connected to curriculum status is the issue of student preparedness. The study clearly shows that students lack foundational competencies in basic research methods, statistical reasoning, and digital literacy before entering data journalism courses.

This results in a "remedial" model of teaching where significant class time is spent covering elementary topics, thus delaying engagement with more advanced data storytelling. In this respect, data journalism education must not be viewed in isolation. It should be scaffolded throughout the journalism curriculum, with prior coursework in research methods, introductory statistics, and digital investigation techniques serving as prerequisites.

Quantitative anxiety presents another major barrier. The aversion to numerical reasoning among journalism students, while common globally, appears particularly acute in Georgia. As one lecturer observed, students often equate data work with "math class," a subject many deliberately sought to avoid by choosing journalism. Overcoming this deeply rooted cultural aversion requires more than technical training.

Pedagogical approaches must be designed to demonstrate that data journalism is fundamentally about storytelling, critical inquiry, and holding power to account - activities that align with journalism's core mission. Lecturers must "rebrand" data skills as storytelling tools, using small victories in data analysis to build student confidence progressively. Integrating data exercises into narrative assignments early in the curriculum could also help normalize the use of numbers as journalistic evidence.

Resource constraints further exacerbate the situation. Without adequate access to updated software, reliable computers, and stable internet connections, both students and instructors are limited in the scope and ambition of their projects. While some workarounds are possible—such as using free online tools or collaborative work models—these are suboptimal solutions. Systematic investment in technological infrastructure is essential if universities are serious about preparing students for modern media environments.

Instructor capacity also emerged as a critical factor. The research revealed that many lecturers, although strong in traditional reporting and narrative skills, lack training in computational thinking, statistical analysis, or data visualization. This imbalance inevitably shapes the focus and limitations of current data journalism education. As one lecturer candidly stated, "I know what a good story looks like, but I struggle when it comes

to manipulating large datasets." Institutions must recognize that faculty development is as important as student education. Regular professional training, access to workshops on data tools, and opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration with computer science or statistics departments could significantly enhance teaching quality.

Interestingly, the findings also highlight positive developments and avenues for hope. Non-formal educational initiatives in Georgia have shown that data skills can be successfully taught through practice-based, immersive models. Programs such as ForSet's data communication course and Transparency International's workshops demonstrate that when students and professionals work intensively on real-world projects, their technical skills, confidence, and motivation improve markedly.

This suggests that adapting the "teaching hospital" model to university education — where students complete complex, mentored projects over an extended period — could yield better outcomes than traditional lecture-based courses.

Moreover, the labour market is sending strong signals that demand for data journalism skills is growing. Editors expressed frustration at the shortage of qualified candidates and emphasized the competitive advantage for students who can navigate datasets and visualize findings compellingly.

However, employers also acknowledged the need to support data journalists within organizations, providing the necessary time, tools, and collaborative environments. Without institutional support, even highly skilled data journalists risk burnout or marginalization.

Overall, the research highlights the interconnectedness of curriculum structure, student preparedness, pedagogical strategies, resource allocation, instructor development, and market expectations. No single intervention will be sufficient to address the challenges.

A holistic reform strategy is needed — one that repositions data literacy as a fundamental journalistic competency, builds technical skills progressively, normalizes the

use of numbers in storytelling, invests in technology and faculty development, and strengthens connections between education and industry needs.

Addressing these issues is not merely an academic exercise; it is a democratic imperative. In a world increasingly driven by data, journalists who can interrogate numbers critically, uncover hidden stories within datasets, and present them ethically and engagingly are essential for public accountability and informed citizenship. Georgia's journalism education system must evolve accordingly if it wishes to nurture such professionals.

Conclusion

In response to the identified challenges in data journalism education in Georgia, this study proposes a streamlined, practice-oriented curriculum framework that aligns with global best practices while addressing local needs.

The curriculum should be organized in two stages. First, foundational competencies must be built through integrated courses in research methods, basic statistics, digital literacy, and visual communication within journalism programs. These courses would prepare students with the critical thinking and technical skills necessary to approach data journalism meaningfully.

Following this, a compulsory core course in Data Journalism should be introduced. This course would cover data acquisition, cleaning, analysis, and basic visualization, emphasizing storytelling techniques rooted in empirical evidence. Ethical considerations and critical evaluation of datasets would be embedded throughout. Students would produce a capstone project applying these skills to a real-world dataset. For advanced students, an elective course could be offered, introducing more complex topics such as data scraping, statistical analysis, and interactive storytelling.

Pedagogically, a project-based approach is recommended. Courses should be modeled on the "teaching hospital" method, where students collaboratively complete full-cycle data journalism projects under faculty supervision.

Practical exercises and continuous assessment through portfolios should replace traditional examinations to foster applied learning. Successful implementation will require investment in technological resources, including updated computer laboratories and access to modern software. Equally important is continuous professional development for instructors to enhance their proficiency in both data skills and interdisciplinary teaching methods.

Through this framework, Georgian journalism education can better equip students with the competencies necessary for data-driven storytelling, ensuring alignment with contemporary media industry demands and global educational standards.

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Trust in journalism in Ukraine: Challenges and prospects in wartime

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Abstract

This article investigates the dynamics of media trust in Ukraine amid the ongoing armed conflict initiated by Russia and explores avenues for enhancing journalism education. Based on a comprehensive analysis that includes a survey of 500 university students from major regions of Ukraine, the study demonstrates that trust in official media sources surged during the early stages of the full-scale invasion—as citizens demanded timely, transparent information—but later declined due to information fatigue and critical scrutiny of unilateral communication formats. Despite these shifts, interest in news has remained consistently high throughout the war, reflecting the vital role of journalism in society. The survey revealed that 94% of respondents primarily rely on digital platforms (notably Telegram) for updates. Moreover, only 20% of participants rated their media literacy as high, underscoring a critical need for improved fact-checking and analytical skills. Additionally, the article highlights the crucial role of artificial intelligence (AI) in enhancing media literacy by automating verification processes and supporting deeper critical analysis, a capability that can be effectively used as an instrument in the fight against disinformation. In light of these developments, the article highlights the urgent need to reform journalism education by integrating comprehensive media literacy and fact-checking modules, fostering interdisciplinary approaches, and strengthening critical thinking skills. The sustained prestige of the journalism profession—despite its risks—underscores the necessity of these reforms, which will equip future journalists to counter disinformation and media manipulation while ensuring the resilience of democratic discourse in an increasingly volatile information environment.

Keywords: War, media trust, information warfare, journalism education, media literacy, digital platforms, martial law, disinformation, Ukraine, students, artificial intelligence

Introduction

The Reuters Institute Report (Reuters, 2024) indicates that deliberate news avoidance has risen to 39%, with this percentage of people worldwide reporting that they avoid news, particularly due to prolonged conflicts such as the war in Ukraine. Consequently, the challenges posed by the proliferation of disinformation, malicious

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information manipulation, and societal polarization are intensifying and rank among the top five global risks (world economic forum global risks report 2025).

Trust in journalism is an essential element of a democratic society, as it enables citizens to obtain reliable information necessary for making informed decisions and holding power accountable. Journalism is an intermediary between the government and society, fostering transparency and democratic accountability (Garusi & Leonhardt, 2024). Its primary role is to provide rigorously verified information that empowers citizens to adapt effectively to a changing environment (Kalogeropoulos, Newman, & Fletcher, 2024). Under extraordinary circumstances, trust in journalism becomes pivotal for ensuring governmental transparency and accountability (Toff, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2024). The imposition of martial law and constraints on media freedom present a significant challenge to journalism: maintaining objectivity while addressing matters of national interest (Garusi & Leonhardt, 2024).

On the night of 23–24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, continuing the aggression that began in 2014 and prompting the imposition of martial law. In crises, timely and reliable information is essential—even life-saving. Over the subsequent three years, news consumption has remained high as the war persists and many individuals have family members or close acquaintances involved in combat (Ukrainian media landscape 2022–2024).

Shortly after the invasion commenced, Ukraine introduced the “Unified Telethon,” uniting all national television channels to broadcast uniform content. There has been a shift in the structure of the information landscape. Television is now dominated by a single channel, which is a drastic change from the pre-war situation, where multiple channels competed and were owned by different oligarchs. Initially justified as a crisis measure, its effectiveness was questioned due to censorship and diminishing trust in official media. By 2023, a decline in confidence in the Unified Telethon drove audiences to seek alternative information sources, indicating a gradual erosion of television’s role as the primary news medium (KIIS, 2024).

Simultaneously, Russian disinformation targeting Ukraine increased considerably, aiming to influence both Ukrainians and citizens in supportive countries (Reporters without borders, 2023; Reuters, 2024). Russia actively employs modern media platforms—

including social networks, messaging apps, and artificial intelligence—to propagate disinformation and propaganda. These campaigns have escalated to include direct incitements to hostility, the denial of Ukrainian statehood, and the encouragement of war crimes (Kyiv international cyber resilience forum, 2025).

In the context of conflict, digital literacy has assumed critical importance. Recent studies indicate that improved media literacy enhances the ability to detect fake news and manipulative messaging (Detector Media, 2024; OPORA, 2024). The Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine (MDTU, 2023) has implemented initiatives to foster critical thinking and information analysis skills, which are vital for countering disinformation. This issue is especially urgent in higher education, where future journalists must be equipped to discern reliable data from disinformation amid ongoing informational challenges.

Statement of problem

The study aims to identify key factors influencing trust in journalism amid wartime conditions and socio-political changes in Ukraine. Special attention is given to analyzing trust levels among journalism students and integrating the findings into educational curricula to enhance transparency, professionalism, and ethical standards in journalism. Such an analysis can also help predict the level of national trust in journalism by comparing journalism students' trust with the overall national sentiment. Furthermore, understanding the level of trust journalism students have in the media products of their senior colleagues is crucial for forecasting the future development of journalism in the country.

Research hypothesis

In wartime Ukraine, the increasing demand for reliable and timely information provokes a two-phase transformation in public trust toward the media. Initially, particularly during the full-scale invasion, Ukrainians, including students, exhibit heightened trust in official sources (e.g., national television and state-run Telegram channels) due to the urgent need for stable governmental messaging and transparent communication. Over time, however, factors such as information fatigue, homogeneous

media formats (e.g., Telethon), and the growing appeal of digital alternatives (e.g., Telegram, YouTube, Instagram) have led to a decline in trust in official media, with audiences increasingly turning to independent projects and alternative sources. This shift is accompanied by media literacy and the development of critical thinking among youth, underscoring the pressing need to reform journalism education by incorporating modern fact-checking tools and digital information analysis.

Research objectives

- Analyze sociological data to assess the dynamics of public trust in media.
- Determine the impact of wartime conditions on students' media perceptions.
- Measure media trust among the target audience using quantitative (standardized surveys) and qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews, content analysis of educational programs).
- Develop recommendations to optimize journalism education, fostering critical thinking and effective countermeasures against contemporary information threats.

Literature review

Analysis of media trust in Ukrainian studies

Media trust in Ukraine is a critical issue amid full-scale armed conflict and socio-political change. Several organizations have systematically measured citizens' trust in media through annual surveys (Ukrainian media landscape, 2022–2024). These studies indicate that before 2014, media trust was moderate; however, following the Donbass conflict and ensuing Russian hybrid aggression, public reliance shifted toward independent, pro-Ukrainian sources.

After the February 2022 full-scale invasion, trust in official sources and national television surged—exemplified by the Unified Telethon—with reported trust rates of 65–70% for government messages, approximately 60% for the telethon, and 40–50% for reputable Telegram channels, although anonymous channels remain largely distrusted (KIIS,

2024). Over time, however, this trust has declined, with surveys by KIIS (2024) reporting a drop from 43% in December 2023 to 36% by February 2024, prompting audiences to seek alternative sources.

Concurrently, Russian disinformation campaigns have intensified, aiming to undermine Ukrainian statehood and incite hostility (reporters without borders, 2023, Reuters, 2024). The rapid rise of digital platforms—especially social media and messaging apps—has contributed to media space fragmentation and the formation of “information bubbles.”

Enhanced digital literacy is crucial for discerning credible news from disinformation. Recent studies show that improved media literacy strengthens critical news consumption (Detector Media, 2024; OPORA, 2024), prompting initiatives by the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine (MDTU, 2023) aimed at boosting critical thinking and analytical skills.

Overall, the multifaceted challenge of media trust in Ukraine—driven by social media influence, state regulation, and evolving consumption patterns—calls for further interdisciplinary research and comprehensive policy reforms. Faculty of Journalism at Grinchenko University routinely assesses Ukrainian students' trust in journalism (Hutsol & Hutsol, 2024; Balabanova, 2024). Given the importance and relevance of this topic, we conducted a new study in April 2025 to further assess shifting media trust trends among university students.

Research methodology

The study uses a multidisciplinary approach to examine how wartime conditions, free speech restrictions, and disinformation affect journalism students' trust in media. Its goal is to analyze students' information practices, counter-disinformation strategies, and the need to enhance educational programs on modern methods, including AI technologies. In the first phase, an online survey of journalism students from various Ukrainian higher education institutions gathered data on news consumption, trust in media sources and fact-checking skills. The survey data were analyzed using statistical software. For deeper insights, the study conducted semi-structured interviews and a content analysis of media

literacy educational resources, comparing current data with past findings to clarify wartime media trust dynamics. The integrated results highlight the relationship between wartime conditions and media trust, while also identifying the educational needs of future journalists regarding disinformation. Ethical standards were maintained through informed consent and data anonymization.

Findings

To test the hypothesis, an online survey was conducted among students from five Ukrainian universities. This study builds on a pilot survey conducted in December 2023, in which 205 students from three institutions—Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, Vinnytsia National Technical University, and Chernihiv Polytechnic—responded. The follow-up survey was carried out in April 2025. The study surveyed 500 students from five universities: Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Vinnytsia National Technical University, Lviv Polytechnic, and Vasyl Stefanyk Prykarpattian National University. These institutions collectively represent higher education across Ukraine, excluding the eastern regions. Universities were selected based on their willingness to participate and the feasibility of conducting in-person surveys; however, a formal sampling procedure was not employed.

The respondents, aged 17–21 years, answered 18 questions regarding their media consumption habits, trust in media, perceived media manipulation, and media literacy, as well as their views on potential new electives in their curricula. Notably, the gender distribution shifted from 63.8% female (in 2023) to 81.6% female in 2025, with corresponding percentages for male respondents at 38.7% and 18.4%, respectively.

When asked about their frequency of news consumption across various media (television, newspapers, internet, radio), 63.8% of respondents reported reading the news frequently, 32.7% occasionally, and only 3.6% rarely. This high engagement indicates a strong interest in sociopolitical processes, reflecting an active and concerned student demographic, likely influenced by the ongoing war and the fact that many respondents have relatives or close acquaintances actively involved in the conflict.

Discussion

Journalism in wartime: A profession under threat and the rising prestige of journalism

In Ukraine today, journalism has become one of the most dangerous yet vital professions, demanding unwavering presence at the heart of events—amid death, destruction, and violence—while risking one's own life. In combat zones, journalists face constant, life-threatening dangers, yet their work remains indispensable.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, 125 Ukrainian media professionals have been killed while fulfilling their duties or defending the country on the battlefield (NUJU, 2025). Additionally, over 30 media workers and citizen journalists remain in Russian captivity, including five women, who face torture and fabricated terrorism charges (Ukrinform, 2025).

Journalism is not simply a profession—it is a lifelong mission. Despite overwhelming challenges, most Ukrainian journalists continue reporting, ensuring that even the most vulnerable regions receive essential, timely news. Nowhere in Ukraine is truly safe for journalists. Russian missiles and drones deliberately target television studios, newsrooms, and media infrastructure in both frontline cities and deeper within the country. War correspondents are particularly vulnerable—every hotel near the front lines, where journalists traditionally stayed, has been bombed. Moreover, Russian forces employ a brutal "double-strike" tactic, intentionally launching second missile attacks aimed at rescuers, medics, and journalists (NUJU, 2024).

Following the invasion, 40% of Ukrainian media companies were forced to close due to security threats and financial hardship (NUJU, 2024). Despite these dangers, most journalists remain in Ukraine, committed to their work. Remarkably, young Ukrainians continue to pursue journalism, fully aware of its risks and responsibilities in defending their nation's information sovereignty.

In 2025, 61 higher education institutions in Ukraine will offer journalism programs, reflecting a deep and enduring interest among young professionals in shaping the country's media landscape (Education.ua, 2025). Nearly all of these universities endure relentless bombing attacks, forcing them to adapt to wartime realities. Shelters have become an integral part of campus infrastructure, ensuring a measure of protection for students and

faculty. Yet, the walls of these institutions also bear witness to profound loss—memorial walls honoring fallen students and faculty continue to grow, a tragic testament to the devastating toll of the war on Ukraine’s academic community.

We aimed to study how students perceive news information in wartime conditions while acknowledging the specific limitations that exist in such circumstances. The research itself remains objective, but the reality is complex. Complete transparency is difficult due to wartime restrictions—governments do not disclose data on casualties, military operations, or infrastructure damage. Additionally, information about government misconduct, abuse of power, and corruption is often limited or selectively reported, making it harder for citizens to access a full picture of political and institutional accountability. However, we took these factors into account when conducting the study. The paradox is that much of this information is already accessible on social networks and YouTube, while official sources either do not publish it or do so with delays. This study examines the challenges of the wartime information landscape and analyzes how students navigate and interpret news in these conditions.

Since the beginning of the war, the government has used official channels to broadcast positive mobilizing information. However, over time, Ukrainians began to perceive this approach as lacking objectivity, leading to a decline in trust and a shift away from traditional media toward alternative sources. This trend is evident not only in national studies but is also confirmed by the results of our survey.

As shown in Figure 1 regarding trust in media, the 2025 survey revealed that 77.5% of respondents predominantly trust the media while remaining alert to the possibility of manipulative presentation; 19.5% mainly distrust the media, 2.5% expressed complete trust, and 0.5% reported complete distrust. In comparison, the 2023 survey found that 88.1% of students expressed partial trust, 6.4% complete trust, and 5.4% complete distrust. These results suggest a significant increase in skepticism among students over time.

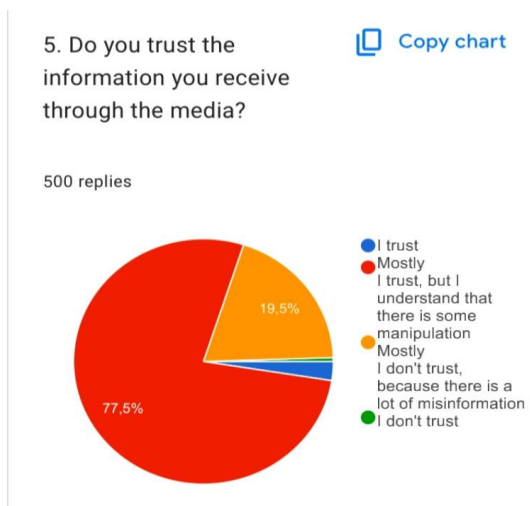


Figure 1.

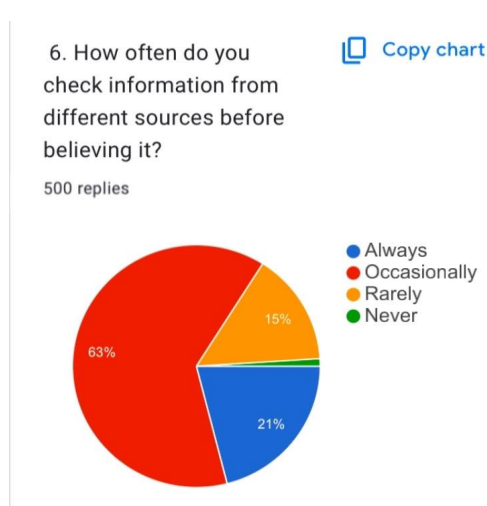


Figure 2.

The decline in trust—shifting from relatively high levels in 2023 to heightened skepticism in 2025, may be linked to a growing awareness of media manipulation in the context of ongoing conflict. According to Figure 2, students exhibit an active approach to verifying received information: 21% always fact-check news, 63% do so occasionally, 15% rarely verify, and only 1% never verify. This pattern indicates a high level of critical thinking and caution in media consumption. Moreover, **Figure 3** highlights young people's critical stance toward official information sources, reinforcing a broader societal trend in Ukraine.

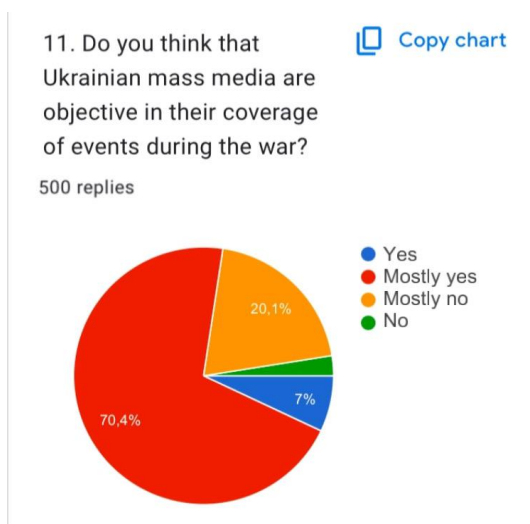


Figure 3.

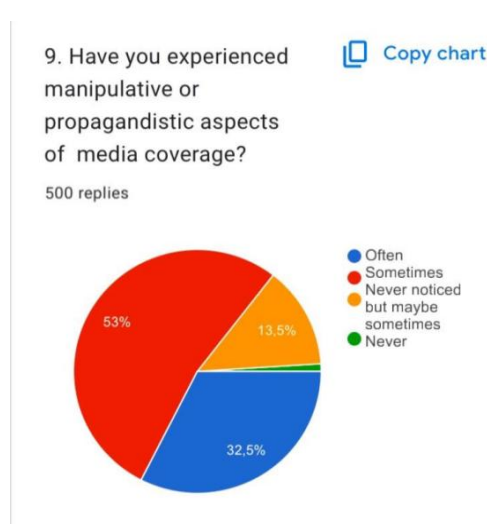


Figure 4.

This rising skepticism toward institutional media is shaping how younger generations engage with news and information during crises, presenting a dual challenge

for media organizations: maintaining the integrity of factual, unbiased reporting while mitigating the influence of political manipulation.

The survey on news and information sources confirmed a prevailing tendency toward social media usage. Specifically, 94% of respondents reported primarily receiving news via Telegram channels, followed by news websites (45.5%), international media (40.5%), public media (22.5%), and the telethon (7.5%). This diversity in sources suggests a strong desire for rapid and varied information that may be less subject to filtering. Most students tend to passively consume content, relying primarily on social networks rather than professional media. Key challenges include low trust in traditional media, high trust in unverified influencers, difficulty distinguishing facts from opinions (notably on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, & TikTok), and a tendency to interpret subjective content as objective. Moreover, manipulative techniques (e.g., clickbait, emotional headlines, & out-of-context information) are often not recognized, while fake news and disinformation are actively disseminated via messaging applications, particularly during crises.

It is plausible that a pro-government information campaign advocating for restrictions or a total ban on Telegram in Ukraine during 2024–2025 contributed to its surge in popularity (94% usage). For example, in October 2024, the National Council for Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine—the principal state regulator of the information space—issued calls for an expedited complete ban on Telegram for Ukrainian residents (TSN, 2024). Nevertheless, Telegram has emerged as the primary source for urgent news, such as air raid alerts, explosions, attacks, and official government announcements, due to its ability to instantaneous messages dissemination. Amid declining trust in traditional media and the limited alternatives provided by the telethon, Telegram has fostered source pluralism by featuring both official and independent outlets, including investigative journalists, analysts, and volunteers. Telegram channels often publish exclusive insights, unofficial analyses, and on-site photographs that do not appear in mainstream news feeds, appealing to audiences who wish to be “in the know” before others. Consequently, according to data from Kantar and Inter-news (2023–2024), Telegram has emerged as the leading social network for news consumption in Ukraine.

It is evident that the degree of media influence—and its perceived effectiveness—depends significantly on both the intensity and manipulative nature of the media’s impact,

as well as on the recipients' critical thinking and media literacy skills. Media literacy is crucial for distinguishing reliable information from noise, maintaining emotional and psychological resilience, averting mass panic, and making informed decisions based on verified information. In times of war, media literacy is indispensable for protecting one's life (Filter, 2024).

Regarding media literacy, 66.5% of students rate their level as average, and 20% as high. Figure 4 illustrates that in terms of identifying manipulative aspects in media coverage, only 13.5% reported that they had never noticed such elements, while an additional 1% completely denied their presence, indicating that a substantial majority are aware of potential propagandistic and manipulative techniques. Survey responses on effective methods for teaching media literacy reveal that 38.2% of respondents support a comprehensive approach (combining lectures, practical exercises, and workshops), 23.6% prefer solely practical exercises, and 21.6% favor workshops alone. Furthermore, 45.5% of students are fully satisfied with existing curricula, and 41% are partially satisfied. As shown in Figure 5, students are motivated to improve their media literacy skills: 25.1% have attended relevant courses, 50.8% have not yet participated but are willing to do so, and only 10.6% express no interest in such training.

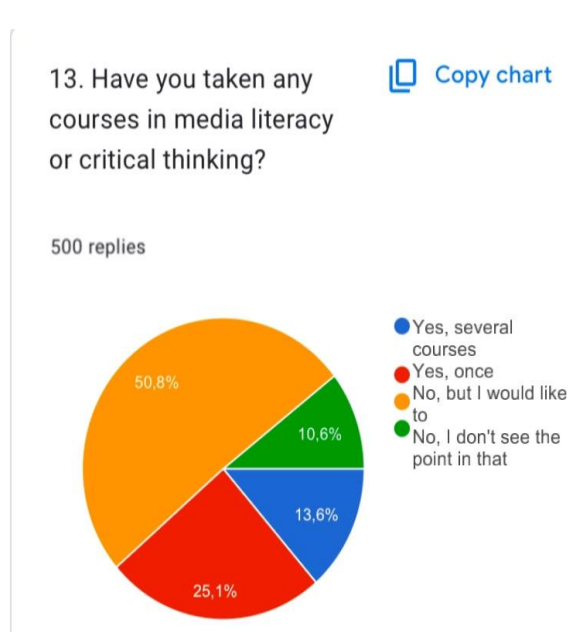


Figure 5.

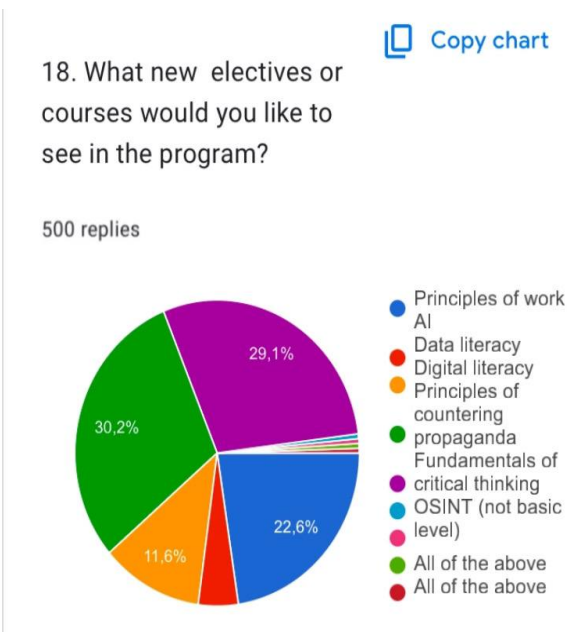


Figure 6.

As shown in Figure 6, interest in new elective courses was highlighted by the survey results. Specifically, 30.2% of students support courses on countering propaganda, 29.1%

favor classes on the fundamentals of critical thinking, and 22.6% endorse learning about the principles of artificial intelligence (AI).

An additional survey was conducted among approximately 80 undergraduate journalism students (aged 16–19) enrolled in an “Advertising and Public Relations” program. Respondents answered two supplementary questions beyond the socio-demographic items: (1) how frequently do you use AI (e.g., ChatGPT)? And (2) Do you use AI to verify the credibility of information (texts, podcasts, videos), and if so, which applications or platforms do you use? Approximately 52% of respondents reported using AI “frequently,” 47% “occasionally,” and nearly none selected “rarely.” However, only about 35% indicated that they use AI for information verification, with ChatGPT emerging as the most popular tool for this purpose.

According to data from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS, 2023), 80% of Ukrainian citizens now access the Internet daily, an increase of 8% over 2023. Although the Razumkov Center reported that only 14% of Ukrainians used AI in daily life (Razumkov Center, 2023), the true figure is likely higher due to the integration of many AI services within common digital platforms. Generative AI models—such as GPT-4 and Gemini—are becoming increasingly widespread and accessible for everyday users in Ukraine, automating routine tasks and enhancing educational productivity

AI plays a significant role in enhancing media literacy by providing new avenues for fact-checking and critical analysis. For example, the NewsGuard platform employs algorithms to assess the credibility of news sources and assign reliability ratings, thereby helping users distinguish accurate information from misleading content (NewsGuard, n.d.). Similarly, the Ukrainian company OSAVUL has developed an AI-driven platform that detects disinformation and counters propaganda, particularly from Russian sources, by analyzing online content using machine learning and natural language processing techniques. In addition, the Mantis Analytics platform monitors the information space in real time, quickly identifying coordinated information attacks and hostile narratives, which supports state agencies and security services in counteracting disinformation campaigns (OSAVUL, n.d.; Mantis Analytics, n.d.).

In summary, the intensification of Russian aggressive information campaigns during the war in Ukraine creates an urgent need for integrated measures to improve digital literacy, strengthen cyber defense, and enhance the capacity to counter propaganda. These

factors are critical for maintaining a stable information environment, fostering media trust among students, and advancing quality journalism in Ukraine.

Conclusions and recommendations

An analysis of media trust dynamics in Ukraine confirms that socio-political transformations and wartime realities have significantly shaped perceptions of journalism. The primary threat significantly impacting journalism and journalism education remains Russian aggression. Targeted attacks on journalists, destruction of media infrastructure, the tactic of double missile strikes on civilian sites—including universities—and the systematic use of disinformation all create unprecedented challenges for freedom of speech and the professional activities of media workers and educators.

At the same time, state regulation of the information space should not take on an overly restrictive character, as excessive limitations lead to a decline in trust in official news channels, a trend reflected in our research. Journalism students increasingly turn to alternative sources, including Telegram channels, YouTube, and independent media projects. Today, verifying information obtained from traditional or online media has become a common practice for consumers. Surveyed students increasingly evaluate sources critically, analyze the reliability of data, and pay attention to potential manipulation. However, only 20% of students rated their media literacy skills as high, and fewer than half expressed satisfaction with the quality of media education in their institutions. This gap highlights a pressing need for stronger educational frameworks that equip students to navigate the complexities of modern information landscapes.

To address these challenges, integrating media literacy across all journalism disciplines is essential. Universities must go beyond technical training, ensuring students develop the skills to analyze, verify, and critically assess information—ultimately fostering a deeper understanding of democracy and media culture.

Educational programs should incorporate AI-driven tools for content analysis and misinformation detection, alongside hands-on crisis training, interdisciplinary approaches to media studies, and resilience-building workshops to help students navigate trauma, information overload, and manipulative narratives. Media literacy must also be framed as a

civic responsibility, reinforcing democratic principles, fact-checking skills, ethical journalism, and public awareness. Furthermore, journalism education should draw from real-world examples, showcasing the experiences of war reporters, investigative journalists, and those providing life-saving information in crisis zones. By studying the courage, integrity, and accountability of these professionals, students will gain a deeper appreciation for the role of journalism in safeguarding truth and democratic values.

These recommendations aim to prepare a new generation of journalists who are adept at critical digital analysis, capable of identifying and countering propaganda, and committed to upholding democratic values in times of both global and local crises (Schafer et al., 2024; Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Integrating these measures into journalism education is expected to reinforce media trust and strengthen the quality and ethical standards of journalism in Ukraine.

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Ask not what your community can do for you: The democratic contribution of journalism education's WIL pedagogy

Smith, S. & Vine, J.*

Abstract

While most research into Work Integrated Learning in the journalism discipline focusses on benefits to students, this paper concentrates on knowledge and value-creation that WIL projects contribute to the wider community. Using Barnett's philosophy of knowledge co-creation (2000; 2011; 2017; 2024) this paper analyses a learning and teaching project in which first year RMIT journalism students profiled all candidates who were standing in one of four LGAs in Melbourne's west during the 2024 Victorian local government elections for the hyperlocal news outlet, The Westsider. This paper analyses The Westsider's readership statistics to draw conclusions about the democratic and social potential of journalism education's WIL pedagogy. Based on these conclusions, this paper puts forward a new 'JFK' WIL model. This is particularly important in the current climate where community news is rapidly filling the democratic void left by the implosion of the commercial local news sector (Simons & Dickson, 2019; Hess & Waller, 2016). By shifting the emphasis from the classroom to the community, the paper is able to reveal the value of tertiary journalism education WIL programs to wider social processes when collaborating with multiple stakeholders – in this instance, industry, local government and community leaders.

Keywords: *Hyperlocal; community journalism; journalism education; Ronald Barnett; knowledge co-creation; Ecological University.*

Introduction

WIL (Work Integrated Learning) is a keystone of journalism education pedagogy (Dodd et. al., 2018; Skinner, et. al., 2001; Bromley, 2012). Commonly known as the 'hospital model', WIL can be broadly defined as "a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposely designed curriculum" (Patrick et. al., 2008: p. v). There are a number of Journalism WIL models that have emerged since the turn of the century that have moved journalism from the traditional internship model (where students spend a specified number of hours in the newsroom of an industry partner), to newsroom simulations in the classroom and event-based

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‘pop up’ models, some produced by tertiary institutions (Dodd et. al., 2018) and some produced with industry partners (Forrester, 2020b). These have largely developed to overcome inherent issues related to providing WIL experiences on a large-scale and to deal with matters of equity (Thomas & Goc, 2004; Mabweazara & Taylor, 2012).

Although it is still true that WIL in journalism education is an under-researched area (as noted by Forde & Meadows in 2011), concern for perfecting the ‘learning as doing’ framework has stimulated Journalism academics to examine the principles, processes and outcomes of WIL pedagogy. However, much of this research is focussed on student outcomes, rather than on the public service these students are being trained to fulfil as journalism professionals. This paper goes some way towards filling the gap in the body of work on journalism WIL by reversing the gaze to examine the community impact of our first-year cohort WIL project: coverage of the 2024 Victorian Local Government elections. By focussing on actual community impact, we also shift the teaching of journalism’s role in a democratic society out of the theoretical realm and into the real world.

This paper contributes to the already-existing body of knowledge on WIL in Journalism education by moving the focus away from students and academics, to the public service role of WIL. In doing so, we suggest that by introducing real-life WIL experience earlier in a student journalists life-cycle we can move the teaching of traditional theoretical concepts (such as ethical practice and legal and regulatory frameworks) out of the classroom and into the community. To do this, however, we need to shift our research focus away from students to the knowledge and value-creation that WIL projects contribute to the wider community. In other words, we hypothesise, focusing on students’ public service impact as emerging journalists may embed a stronger predisposition to public service post-graduation and into industry. This paper, using the 2024 Victorian local government elections as a case study, puts forward a framework to make this possible.

Literature review

Barnett, knowledge co-creation and ecological pedagogy

Barnett's philosophy of knowledge co-creation (2000; 2011) is a useful paradigm through which to analyse Journalism WIL projects. Barnett's theory of knowledge co-creation proposes a collaborative and dialogic approach to education, in which knowledge is shaped collectively by students, educators, and wider communities. With an emphasis on fostering collaborative partnerships between academic institutions and stakeholders in the community, the knowledge co-creation framework aims to not just advance the learning of students, but to also contribute meaningfully to society.

The knowledge co-creation model is particularly relevant to journalism education and, by extension, the journalism profession. Since the demise of the business model, journalism pedagogy has moved from focussing on the 'businesses of journalism to focussing on its public service role. This is not to say journalism pedagogy ignores the 'business' of journalism, but it is more concerned with making its crucial civic and democratic mission transparent as a means of regaining public trust and consolidating a sense of social responsibility (Lynch & Rice, 2023; Fowler-Watt, 2023; Robinson, 2023). By aligning the co-creative process of learning with journalism's normative commitments to public service, accountability, and deliberative democracy (Gans, 2004; McNair, 2009), journalism education can cultivate not only employable graduates but also ethical, reflective, and civically engaged journalists while, at the same time, meaningfully and authentically, contributing to the community's democratic participation.

At the heart of Barnett's philosophy is the concept of super complexity (2000), a condition in which multiple and competing frameworks of meaning render simplistic, instrumental approaches to knowledge obsolete. In response, co-creation fosters epistemic humility, where learners become comfortable with uncertainty and engage critically and ethically in meaning-making. Knowledge is seen as emergent, relational, and socially embedded. This aligns with the fluid, contested, and contextual nature of modern journalism practice, where contemporary challenges - algorithmic news feeds, misinformation/ disinformation and public disengagement have complicated journalism's ability to fulfill its democratic role. Journalism education, particularly WIL programs, are adapting by fostering critical, collaborative, and ethically grounded

pedagogies that prepare students not just to report, but to engage with the complexities of the public they serve. In other words, Barnett's co-creation theory offers a way to reorient journalism WIL towards a more transformative model, one that fosters crucially required professional skills in reflexivity, civic engagement, and ethical responsibility. But possibly of most relevance, at least in relation to this project, is Barnett's concept of the Ecological University (2017; 2024). Barnett's ecological model articulates a vision of the university as a socially responsible, interconnected, and world-responsive institution. Here we explore Barnett's Ecological University as a framework for journalism education's social responsibility by examining how it can reimagine our first-year pedagogy's relationship with knowledge, society and itself. Through this lens, we consider how, even in just their first year, Journalism students can play a role in addressing the news 'crisis', foster civic agency, and fulfill their democratic responsibilities to wider society.

Says Barnett: "...the ecological university is an ethical venture ... has regard for the totality of the world ... through those networks it seeks to play its part in repairing and improving the world" (2024, p.17).

With Barnett's concept of the ecological university, we sought to frame social responsibility, not as just about 'doing good' or industry engagement. But rather we framed it as about *being* and *knowing* in ways that are oriented toward the flourishing of participatory democracy. As Barnett argues, under this model, the university cultivates a responsibility for the world, as a multi-layered, interactive and contested set of domains (Barnett, 2017). We posit that this multi-layered view of responsibility moves our first-years from the second-and-third year WIL models, which often emphasize portfolio outputs and industry networking, towards a deeper, more expansive and, above all, future-proofed, form of understanding of journalism's democratic responsibility.

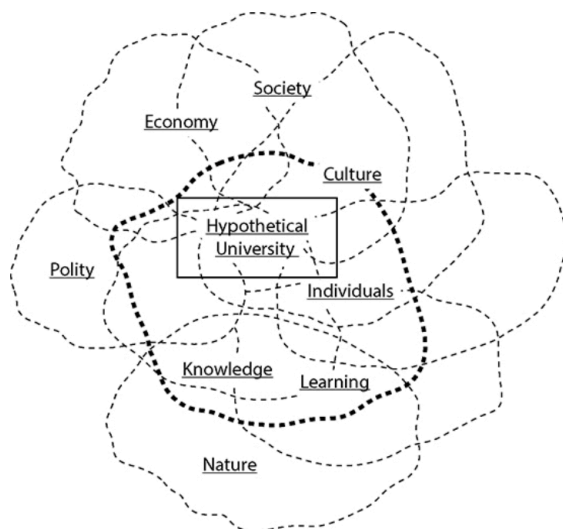
Barnett has recently added to his seven traditional categories of ecology (2017) to include 'Polity' as a key system for learning engagement (2024). This is significant, particularly in this case, with our first-year journalism project's concern with political dimensions of Melbourne's West during the 2024 Victorian local government elections.

Barnett's *eight ecologies* with which the university should, arguably, engage responsibly are: 1) The Knowledge Ecology; 2) The Learning Ecology; 3) The Ecology of

Individuals; 4) The Culture Ecology; 5) The Ecology of Society; 6) The Economic Ecology; 7) The Polity Ecology; 8) The Nature Ecology.

Although Barnett has, in effect, categorised these various ecosystems, it is important to remember that they are “fluid” and in perpetual motion “in a sea of ecosystems”, interacting “haphazardly”. Barnett argues all are “characteristically impaired” and do not live up to their “possibilities”, mainly because of human action. However, argues Barnett, humans have agency to “mitigate” those impairments. In other words, taking decisive action can “open the way to new possibilities” (2024, p. 18).

Barnett’s eight (entangled) ecosystems of the university (2024, p. 19).



For Barnett, social responsibility is pedagogical. He criticises traditional curricula that focus solely on technical rationality or disciplinary knowledge, arguing instead for a pedagogy of *ecological being*. This involves nurturing in students an “ecological imagination”, or a capacity to understand interdependencies, anticipate consequences, and act ethically in complex systems (Barnett, 2017, p. 137). Barnett argues this kind of education is inherently transformative. It challenges students to see themselves as world citizens, capable of contributing to a society’s democratic well-being. But it also requires educators to rethink their roles, not as mere transmitters of knowledge but as facilitators of dialogue, reflexivity, and ethical action. In this, the project’s course work involved extensive tutorial discussion and self-reflection, not only for students but also for their educators.

In other words, the university's mission extends beyond academic instruction to include fostering human understanding and contributing positively to community development and well-being. Barnett emphasizes the interconnectedness between universities and the broader society. He posits that universities should not exist in isolation but rather engage actively with external communities, contributing to the public good. This involves a shift in focus from academic excellence – grades, portfolio outputs and industry networks - to social responsibility and community engagement, which is, after all, what journalism education aims to train students to do.

Statement of problem

The 'JFK' model

Since its inception, this project has affectionately been known as the 'JFK' project within RMIT journalism, due its core philosophy of—with apologies to the 35th American President—asking not what WIL can do for journalism students, but what journalism students can do for their community. Our model for conducting this type of WIL has four components:

1. Involves first year or novice journalism students
2. Meets a specific community need within a defined news desert
3. Employs community partnership and engagement and
4. Operates in a hyperlocal news environment

1) Involving First-year students

Most WIL projects are designed for second or third year students to ensure requisite skills and knowledge (Valencia-Forrester, 2020a; Schonell & Macklin, 2018, p. 2). However, at RMIT we wanted to experiment with WIL as a means of embedding a journalistic sense of democratic and social responsibility within our cohort nearer the beginning of the program, for students to carry through their degree and beyond. We were striving, on the advice of Mensing (2013), to “realign” journalism education from an “industry-centred model to a community-centred model” as a means of “re-engaging journalism education in a more productive and vital role in the future of journalism”: “A community-centred focus could provide a way to conceptualize a

reconstitution of journalism education to match that taking place in journalism beyond the university” (Mensing, 2013, p.76).

Our first-year cohort was in its second semester, so students had developed basic news-writing skills and foundational understandings of ethical practice. We wanted to build on these to foster a world view about journalism and its social and democratic role that extended beyond the classroom. Under normal conditions, first-year curriculum would be focussed on applying theoretical frameworks to case studies, etc. However, challenging the cohort through a real world, authentic experience – where students actually *do* facilitate the democratic process – we hoped to begin that transformation of world views from journalism *students* to professional public service practitioners much earlier in their learning journey.

The cohort was relatively large, with 72 enrolments. These were spread across three tutorials, taught between two academics. The third and final assessment in this course was deliberately designed to be general in nature – a portfolio of work embarked on across the semester – so it was reasonably unproblematic to introduce coverage of the 2024 Victorian Local Government elections as part of that assessment and incentivise student engagement.

We partnered with Melbourne’s inner west hyperlocal media outlet, *The Westsider* (see below for details) to publish a Special Election Edition in both hard copy and online. *The Westsider* covers four local government areas: Brimbank City Council; Maribyrnong City Council; Hobsons Bay City Council and Wyndham City Council. Between the four, coverage spans almost 295 square miles from Melbourne’s inner suburban west, out to the coast and along the regional growth corridor, with a combined population of almost 700,000. Between the four LGAs, about 100 candidates had nominated for election. We were, therefore, able to allocate at least one candidate to each student.

Because the first-year cohort was inexperienced, we did not want to allow a margin for legal or ethical error, so we developed a strict framework for the students to work within. The framework required students to ask their allotted candidate to respond to a series of questions, therefore reducing the possibility of (perceived or actual) bias or inaccuracy in publication. The questions posed were:

- 1) Are you a member of a political party, political group, or community advocacy group? (eg; Labor, Liberal, Greens, Socialist, My Place, Angry Victorians, Better West, environment groups, etc)
- 2) What is the most important issue facing your electorate?
- 3) Should/how can Council support local businesses?
- 4) Should/how can Council support local creatives and industries?
- 5) Should/how can Council help alleviate the impact of climate extremes on local communities and ecosystems?
- 6) Should/how can Council help alleviate cost of living and homelessness?
- 7) What should Council stop spending money on?
- 8) Should the public be allowed to ask live, unscripted questions of councillors during council meetings?

Each student was asked to phone their candidate (yes, phone!), introduce themselves, introduce the special edition of the newspaper and ask for the candidate's email address to send questions. Students were also required to ask the candidate to supply a profile picture. For those who were uncertain about 'cold calling' a local government election candidate, a suggested script or talking points were offered as a guide. Here we had to strike a balance: at RMIT, students are usually required to conduct face-to-face or phone interviews for their assignments, while those in second- or third-year are also required to conduct independent research, formulating their own questions and conducting face-to-face interviews. Further, we would have insisted on the formulation of their own written content, but as these were first-year students we felt obliged to provide a relatively risk-free editorial environment.

2) Meets a specific community need within a defined news desert

We partnered with Melbourne's inner west hyperlocal media outlet, *The Westsider*, to publish a Special Election Edition in both traditional hard copy format and online. The production of a special edition and lift out of the newspaper exemplifies Marchetti's (2005) application of field theory to explain how the treatment of a given

subject (in this case, local government elections) is connected to its readership or audience, reflecting its demographic and community needs. In practice, this emphasis on public interest journalism is no small part due to the fact *The Westsider* covers areas that are considered ‘news deserts’. At the time of its inception in 2014, Melbourne’s western suburban community was serviced by two weekly newspapers: News Corp’s *Leader* group and *The Star News Group*’s community newspapers. In 2016, News Corp closed the Brimbank, Hobsons Bay and Melton *Leader* papers and, in 2020, moved the Maribyrnong and Wyndham content online (and behind a paywall) as part of its larger Victorian daily, *The Herald Sun*. Currently, *The Westsider* serves Melbourne’s western suburban community, along with *The Star News Group*’s *Brimbank and Northern Star Weekly*, and the *Maribyrnong and Hobsons Bay Star Weekly*.

No other local journalistic output profiled candidates with questions emerging from the community. The age—Victoria’s metropolitan daily newspaper—published a survey of 677 candidates from the wider Melbourne area (www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/we-surveyed-your-local-election-candidates-see-what-they-really-think-20240929-p5kec0.html, accessed June 17, 2025). The age coverage, however, differed from *The Westsiders*’s questions were not sourced directly from the community; it lacked hyperlocal focus and, significantly, it was not openly available to the public in its position behind a paywall. *The Brimbank North West Star Weekly* and its sister paper, *The Maribyrnong and Hobsons Bay Star* published some election coverage, but this was limited to changes to Local Government Area restructure (<https://brimbanknorthwest.starweekly.com.au/news/local-government-reforms-introduced/>, accessed June 17, 2025) and an initial call for candidates (<https://maribyrnonghobsonsbay.starweekly.com.au/news/consider-standing-for-council/>, accessed June 17, 2025). *The Westsider*, therefore, was alone among local news media to profile candidates, and was the only news outlet to source questions from the community.

3) Employs community partnership and engagement

The Westsider is a semi-volunteer-run organisation. It receives on-going financial backing from Bendigo Bank’s Local Impact fund and sources other funding through sponsorship from local education institutions and small businesses. Its economic capital

funds two part-time professional positions: an editor, with knowledge and skills of media law, journalistic story composition and the vagaries of professional norms and practices; and a graphic designer with knowledge and skills around content presentation. All management, however, including business management, is volunteer-based and all editorial content is sourced from voluntary contributions. *The Westsider's* website articulates its objective: "Our purpose is to nurture a cycle of awareness, engagement, interaction and participation within the local community" (*The Westsider*, <https://thewestsider.com.au/about-2/>).

Therefore, in collaboration with *The Westsider* we asked the community to nominate questions *it* wanted candidates to answer. These questions are listed above. The area's readership was directly consulted in framing the questions to be posed to the local government election candidates as important step to begin the process of shifting first-year pedagogy from an 'industry-centered model, to a community-centered model' of learning (Mensing, 2013, p. 76).

Interestingly, those candidates who didn't respond to the students' invitations to take part in the lift-out subsequently approached either the students or the newspaper's editor, asking to participate post-publication, indicating its value as form of social capital. These profiles were uploaded onto *The Westsider's* digital edition. In the end, only one candidate from a total of approximately 100 was not profiled. Considering candidates sought communication with the voting public through the Special Election Edition, we can suggest a level of democratic impact, with students playing a key part of the process.

4) Operates in a hyperlocal news environment

The Westsider covers four local government areas: Brimbank City Council; Maribyrnong City Council; Hobsons Bay City Council and Wyndham City Council. Between the four, coverage spans 764 square kilometres (or almost 300 square miles from Melbourne's inner suburban west, out to the coast and along the regional growth corridor, with a combined population of almost 700,000. Between the four Government Areas, approximately 100 candidates had nominated for election. We were, therefore, able to allocate at least one candidate to each student.

Although *The Westsider* does have a digital presence, its policy is ‘print first’, producing a monthly printed edition. This project initially produced a 13-page Special Election Edition of the newspaper, with an Explainer written by the editor and 20 candidate profiles sourced by students on October 6, 2024. Shortly after, we uploaded a live digital edition.

Results

The online Special Election Edition was uploaded five days after the October 2024 regular edition (October 6). The following results show how *The Westsider* performed during the whole of October when both the regular edition (October 1) and the Special Election Edition (October 6) were uploaded. Using data from Google Analytics, we compared activity across October (October 1 – 31) with activity across September (September 1 – 30) to show the Special Election Edition’s impact, reach and value to the community. Reading the below graphs, the broken line (Compared Custom Range) represents September 2024 viewer statistics and the solid line (Custom) represents October 2024 viewer statistics.

Attention and engagement

Figure 1.1 shows the total number of page views rose from 8,250 in September to 29,000 in October. This means the total number of pages people looked at between September and October increased by 20,750, or more than 251 percent. As we can see, page views started spiking after the October 6 publication of the Special Election Supplement.

Figure 1.1: Page Views

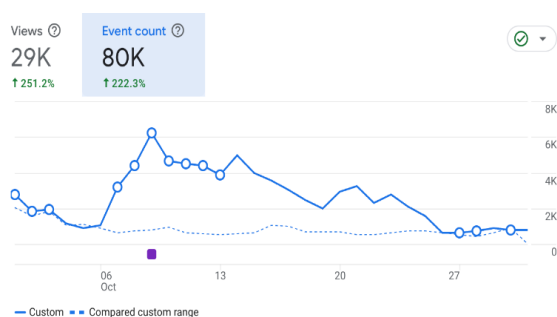


Figure 1.2 shows the event count, or all types of interactions (clicks, scrolls, etc) in September was 24,800, compared to 80,000 of in October. This means the October attracted 55,200 more clicks, scrolls, etc, or a rise of more than 222 percent.

Figure 1.2: Event Count (clicks, scrolls, etc)

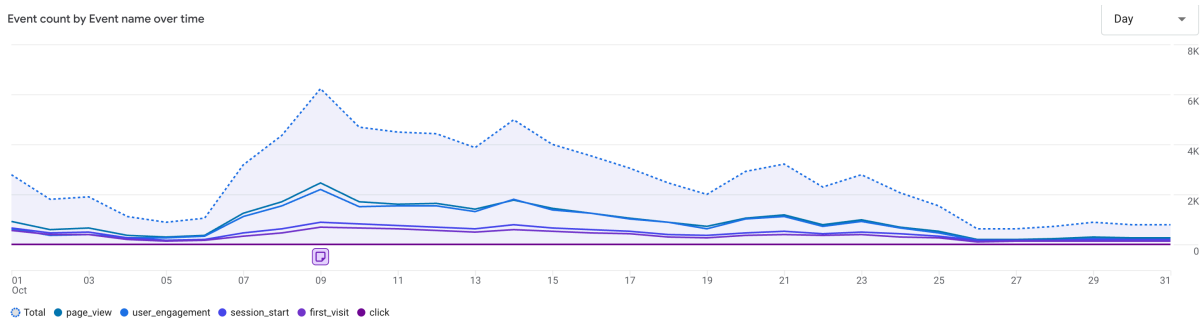


Figure 1.3 shows the number of New Visitors in September was 6000, compared to 11,000 New Visitors in October. This means October attracted 6,500 more new visitors than in September, an increase of more than 142 percent.

Figure 1.3: New Visitors

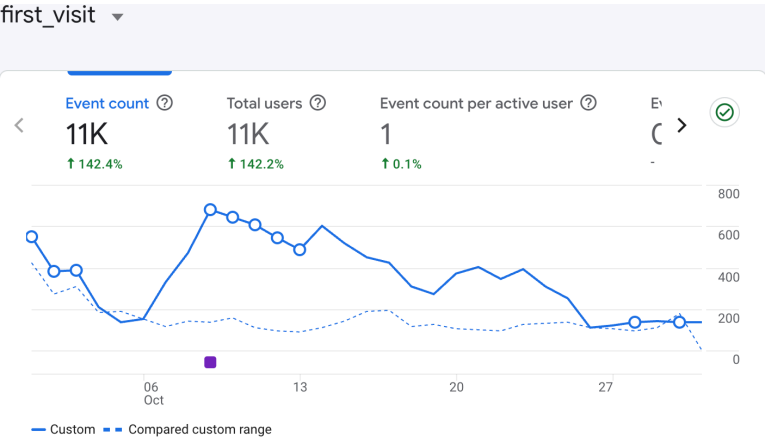
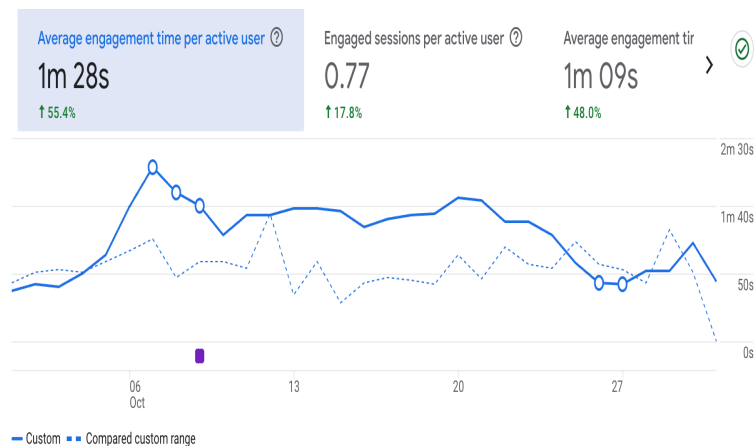


Figure 1.4 shows the average time spent on the September edition, where users actively read or scrolled through the content, for was 57 seconds, compared to 1.28 seconds of average time spent in October Election. This means average amount of time

users spent actively reading or scrolling through October content increased by 31 seconds or by more than 55 percent.

Figure 1.4: Average Engagement



Collectively, these figures suggest that, compared to regular editions, the October Special Election Supplement attracted an upsurge in attention and engagement. The October Special Election Edition did not just attract more visits, but people stayed longer and came back more often. This leads us to surmise that value of tertiary journalism education WIL programs can go well beyond student outcomes or curriculum improvement; tertiary journalism education WIL programs can provide a crucial democratic function, particularly in news-deprived local areas. In other words, using Barnett's philosophy of co-creation, tertiary journalism education institutions have as much to give to the community as the community has to give to them.

Findings & discussion

These results demonstrate that traffic to the October *Westsider* website, more than tripled when the Special Election Edition was published, compared to the September regular edition. Further the October election content was *The Westsider's* top performer. Most visitors found the content through Google, suggesting readers in the community were actively searching for election information. It is important to note that these figures apply to the digital version of the Special Edition only; an even greater

number of readers would have read this information in its printed form. *The Westsider* special Election Edition reached thousands of new readers, many of whom had never previously visited its website. In other words, the community turned to the RMIT first-year Journalism-*Westsider* partnership as a trusted source of local election coverage.

Viewing these results through Barnett's theory of knowledge co-creation, we can see a demonstration of Barnett argument that universities ought to extend their responsibilities beyond internal academic concerns and actively engage with the broader ecosystems—social, cultural, political, and environmental—within which they are embedded (Barnett, 2011; 2018).

The dramatic spike in readership (251 percent increase in page views, 222 percent more interaction events, and 142 percent more new visitors) following the Special Election Edition's digital uploading illustrates a case of knowledge engagement that is both responsive and co-productive. Rather than acting as a closed knowledge system, our first-year RMIT Journalism cohort became an active player in the public domain.

Here, RMIT first-year journalism students, as well as involved academics, engaged in the cultural production of news through meaning-making with the community, contributing to civic participation through accessible and locally relevant electoral information. The community, in turn, validated this knowledge by spending significantly more time on the content (55 percent increase in engagement time).

Barnett's theory of knowledge co-creation focusses pedagogy on listening to and learning from communities; a core journalistic skill often underemphasised in conventional second-and-third year WIL projects. With interview questions developed directly from the community (through our industry partner, *The Westsider*), this project emphasised communal participation in the news-production process. The aim of our model is that when students co-produce stories with communities rather than about them, they develop a deeper understanding of journalism's democratic role. Journalism WIL, then, becomes not just career preparation but civic engagement.

Barnett's notion of knowledge co-creation involves the distribution of agency across university and non-university actors. The evidence that readers searched for specific content and guided their own information journeys (e.g., via search terms or

time spent reading) supports the idea that knowledge wasn't simply delivered—it was co-constructed between producers (i.e. first-year RMIT Journalism students, involved academics and our industry partner and the community. This points to an ecological knowledge relationship: students, involved academics and provided structured content; community members brought intentionality, contextual understanding, and civic goals to their consumption and interpretation. Mutual benefit occurred: students learned, and citizens gained civic information. First-year Journalism became a living, civic institution. In other words, we took RMIT first-year Journalism curriculum about journalism's democratic role out of the theoretical realm and into the real world, with demonstrable real-world impacts.

The sharp rise in page views—from 8,250 to 29,000—represents more than a statistical anomaly. Through Barnett's ecological lens, it can be read as evidence of a moment in which a university, in partnership with industry, acted in socially responsible and ecologically aware ways. It fostered civic engagement, reached broader publics, offered epistemic openness, and modelled a new form of ecological pedagogy for journalism education.

Conclusion

This case study suggests that employing Barnett's philosophy of knowledge co-creation is not a theoretical ideal, but a viable model for journalism WIL. This not only enhances learning but, more importantly, has genuine community impact. We contend that a focus on students' public service impact as emerging journalists has the potential to embed a stronger predisposition to public service post-graduation and into their working lives. The challenge now is to sustain this kind of impact, not as a one-off success, but as part of a broader transformation in how Journalism WIL pedagogy thinks, acts, and serves.

This research suggests that, with mindful student guidance, any journalism education institution can meaningfully contribute to the democratic participation of its community. This 'JFK' model - as it has been affectionately named at RMIT Journalism - could be transferred to any journalism education institution with a hyperlocal news outlet in its reach. In other words, this model has demonstrated that asking not what

your community can do for you, but what you can do for your community, means journalism education can genuinely contribute to the journalism profession's ideal social responsibility.

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Journalism education in colonial settings: The case of Puerto Rico

Subervi-Vélez, F. & Dueñas Guzmán, D.M.*

Introduction

Journalism education around the globe has multiple similarities as well as distinct local approaches. However, few countries have had to develop their journalism programs under colonial conditions and restrictions as long as has been the case in Puerto Rico, the oldest colony in the world: four centuries under Spain and more than 127 years (since 1898) under United States domination. This paper begins with a synopsis of the historical development of journalism education in Puerto Rico, followed by a brief description of the Island's colonial status, which molds that field at the university-level. The subordinate character of the Island's journalism pedagogy is then discussed through the presentation of a theoretical framework that also helps to understand not only what is prioritized, but also what is omitted in the journalism curricula.

The data for this work in progress paper were derived from the undergraduate course descriptions of the academic unit at the flagship university at which that discipline is offered: the University of Puerto Rico-Río Piedras (UPR-RP) campus. Our goal in subsequent analysis is to assess course descriptions not only of this university's journalism program, but also of the journalism programs at two other academic institutions: the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón (USC), and the Universidad de Ana G. Méndez (UAGM). UPR-RP and USC have the largest and most diverse undergraduate and MA programs in journalism. Course descriptions and syllabi of those MA programs are also on our agenda for future research. UAGM only has an undergraduate program in communication that includes journalism education.

Our preliminary findings about the UPR-RP will offer initial insights into journalism pedagogy at that institution. As the main campus of the eleven-unit public university, the Río Piedras Campus has a reputation for being one of the centers of anticolonial thought

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and action in the island (EnciclopediaPR, 2021). The degree of colonial pedagogy in this campus' journalism program will also serve as a significant benchmark for assessing the extent of colonialist pedagogy in journalism programs on the island.

As part of our goal to assess colonial characteristics of journalism education in Puerto Rico, we tried to answer the question: What are the distinct factors of the Island's journalism-related pedagogy and to what degree does its colonial status shape/influence the content of that curricula? As a framework for our work, we used the UNESCO's journalism curriculum model because it represents the consensus of "twenty senior journalism educators who were deemed to have considerable experience working in developing countries and emerging democracies" (UNESCO, 2007, p. 4). Their proposed curricula include syllabi for undergraduate and graduate courses, and received additional evaluation at a UNESCO experts' meeting in Paris before it was formally presented in Singapore at the World Journalism Education Congress in June 2007. It thus represents a broad collaborative effort by journalism educators throughout the globe, including those from areas that have suffered the ravages of colonialist education. For our study, we selected two of the objectives established in the UNESCO curricula as criteria to evaluate the degree of colonial influence in the journalism program:

1. The degree to which the content of the program promotes a "basic understanding of one's own country's system of government, its constitution, system of justice, political process, economy, social and cultural organization, its relation with other countries, and the place of journalism in the architecture of democracy" (p. 11).
2. The degree to which the content of the program promotes a "basic knowledge of national and international history and geography and an introduction to contemporary social and other issues of importance to journalists, including gender, cultural diversity, religion, social class, conflict, poverty, development issues and public health issues" (p. 11).

These two criteria were selected because they include matters that we consider indispensable for helping students understand journalism in a colonial setting, namely, learning about the colonial heritage (history and current reality) and the political economy

of media institutions, which in the case of Puerto Rico are definitely structured and operated under colonial parameters (Vélez, Cotto & Ocando, 2020, 2023; Vélez, 2024 & Vélez, forthcoming).

Literature review

When compared to Latin America (Tillson, & Salwen, 2000; Nixon, 1982), United States (Folkerts, 2014) or other regions (Deuze, 2006), the history of journalism education in Puerto Rico at the university level is relatively recent. It began only in 1972, when the publicly-funded University of Puerto Rico-Río Piedras campus (UPR-RP), inaugurated a master's program at the then named *Escuela de Comunicación Pública* (Subervi-Vélez, Rodríguez Cotto & Lugo-Ocando, 2020). As these authors point out, that “program was finally established after more than five decades of academic and political deliberations about whether or not journalism should be offered as a degree at that institution” (Coss, 2019; Serrano, 1997, p. 117). One notable reason for not having field of studies at the UPR was the concern that many “leftist” students would enroll and subsequently use their new communication skills to advocate more effectively for the Island's independence. Nevertheless, the program continued and in 1977 also started an undergraduate journalism and other communication concentrations to meet the media industries' needs. In 2023, the school was incorporated into the Facultad de Comunicación e Información, which as its name suggests, includes information studies.

Subervi-Vélez, et al. (2020) also document the development of subsequent journalism and communication programs across the Island. These include the Escuela de Comunicación at the Universidad de Sagrado Corazón, which started in 1981 at that privately owned institution, and the communication programs which started in 1994 at the Universidad Ana G. Méndez, also a private university. A very large number, if not the majority, of journalism and communication professionals employed by the Island's newspapers, television and radio stations, and Internet-based and social media news and entertainment outlets have studied at the first two of these programs (UPR and USC).

Most journalism programs in Puerto Rico, including the one studied here, look north (to the U.S.) for the parameters of what courses to offer and teach. As Subervi-Vélez, et al. (2020) point out, those programs are:

...molded from, or significantly influenced by, US academic programs and nowadays even by the US accreditation standards. Thus, the tenets of “American” journalism (e.g., news objectivity, balance, freedom of the press) are integral to the curriculum and numerous of the required and supplemental readings, many of which are in English from US authors. (p. 119)

Two of the three aforementioned programs (UPR-RP and UAGM-Gurabo campus) have sought and obtained accreditation from the U.S.-based Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC). Moreover, all journalism and communication programs in Puerto Rico are necessarily orientated to educate students to work for predominantly privately-owned companies the majority of which are owned, dependent on, or related to U.S. capital and media corporations (Subervi Vélez, et al., 2022, 2024). As documented extensively by Lugo-Ortiz (2015), the U.S. influence is also evident in the types of news, news gathering, Internet dissemination, and the continued predominance of infotainment, especially on television.

Not surprisingly, journalism education in Puerto Rico is geared to maintaining and sustaining the consumerist society, under which mostly privately media are structured, operate and depend. In this paper, we seek to identify the curricular specificities that contribute to supporting this colonial status. To a significant degree, Puerto Rico's reality is shared by many societies in the peripheries of capitalist development. What makes Puerto Rico's distinct is the lack of control over decision-making processes that determine and direct the colonial status and thus the colonial education system, including journalism.

The Colonial condition

By definition, a colony is a country or territory that is governed by people from another more powerful country (Oxford advanced learner's dictionary, 2021). However, the concept is more complex as can be discerned from Balandier's (1970) seminal book in

which he elaborates that a colonial condition is a social and political construction that organizes the lives of colonized peoples and is characterized by an asymmetrical power relationship between colonizer and colonized, the imposition of an external political, economic, and cultural order, the production of marginal identities and people trapped between two worlds. It also conveys a permanent conflict between domination and resistance. All of these conditions apply to Puerto Rico.

As mentioned above, since that Caribbean archipelago was “discovered” in 1493, it has been ruled first by Spain and since 1898 by the United States. The history of the Island’s colonial subjugation can be found in numerous sources and legal determinations. A recent confirmation of the multiple controls the U.S. has on the Island was the Congressional imposition of the Financial Oversight and Management Board in 2016, which since then decides in its own terms, Puerto Rico’s budget and numerous other fiscal policies; decisions made without significant oversight from or veto power by any locally elected government officials, not even the Island’s governor or legislature.

This reality implies, among many other things that the Puerto Rico’s education system has to be in agreement with the United States’ political and economic parameters, which include sustaining and continuation of a capitalist, consumerist society. As a colony, Puerto Rico’s agricultural and manufacturing development has also been curtailed so that it remains dependent on U.S. exports for most of the goods purchased and consumed by the local population. Moreover, the colonial parameters also entail that pro-independence efforts are to be *restricted or curtailed* in the political, educational, cultural and media arenas. In chapter 2 of their book, Subervi-Vélez et al. (2022) document numerous examples of direct and indirect repressive activities that for decades have impacted the Island’s media.

Theoretical framework

The literature on U.S. imperialism, and by extension media / cultural imperialism, as well as related to globalization offers a very accurate theoretical framework for analyzing Puerto Rico’s colonial condition and by extension its education system (including as related

to journalism & media). As documented by de los Ángeles (2023), one of the main reasons for the U.S. to invade Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, and intensify its economic, political and military incursions into Latin America in the late 1800s was to expand markets and development opportunities for Wall Street capitalists.

The U.S.'s political, economic, and military imperialism was subsequently accompanied and sustained by media and cultural imperialism, too. Over various decades, U.S. capital (primarily but not exclusively) ended up dominating the systems, structures, content, and distribution of television, radio, news agencies, cinema, and even newspapers in Latin America and other parts of the world (see Beltrán & Fox, 1980; Boyd-Barrett, 1977; Hermann & McChesney, 1997, 1999; Mattelart, 1977; Mirrlees, 2006, 2016, 2019; Schiller, 1976, 1992; Tunstall, 1977, 2008). Authors such as Boyd-Barrett & Mirrlees (2020), Jin (2015, 2020) document and critique the economic, technological, and cultural dominance that has also emerged via the internet and social media.

As can easily be inferred, Puerto Rico became a subject, pawn and victim of the U.S.'s imperialistic expansions not only in terms of the Island's economic and political subordination, but also with respect to the Island's media system, structures, content, and distribution as well. By extension, U.S. cultural imperialism also made inroads on the Island's population, by way of the mass media as well as via educational and religious institutions (Subervi-Vélez et al., 2022). Since many other neo-colonial countries have also been impacted by cultural imperialism stemming from the U.S. and elsewhere, a major difference with the case of Puerto Rico may be solely a matter of degree of the cultural and media influence. Nevertheless, in the case of Puerto Rico, a salient feature of its colonized condition is the direct domination of the United States government—its agencies and policies—in the legal structures and operations of the Island's media.

Finally, globalization is also inescapably intertwined with the imperialist capitalist incursions and expansions, and thus also serves as a framework for the analysis of Puerto Rico's colonial condition and journalism education practices. Economist Vélez Cardona (2024), for one, offers detailed and extensive examples of how the Island is irremediably immersed at the mercy of global markets and the commodification, not only of products and services, but also of the knowledge imparted in educational institutions. Undoubtedly,

innumerable academic fields of study, including journalism are not exempt nor at the margins of the imperative to train future professionals to adapt to and serve in globalization processes. This includes working for traditional and/or social media that are indispensable for the continuation and expansion of the marketing globalization of products and services. As Sampedro Blanco (2023) and Waisbord (2016) have pointed out, the globalization of the media, particularly their news function, is characterized by the transformation of their profitability goals, the proliferation and constant change of dissemination platforms, the commercialization of information (e.g., with infotainment) and the depreciation of truth. Sampedro Blanco (2023), addresses these globalization trends with the concept of pseudo-democracy, including the use of disinformation and misinformation as main instruments of governance.

Given Puerto Rico's colonial status since 1898, its dominant commercial media system and communication outlets and much of their content were developed for and/or fostered to be part of the economic and cultural framework necessary to support and reassure the continuation of that colonial status (Subervi- Vélez et al., 2022), which currently includes the expansion and consolidation of the globalization processes. That stated, it must also be acknowledged that in such matters, Puerto Rico is not an isolated case compared to other countries in the hemisphere or elsewhere in the world. But the island is distinguished for two reasons: first, by the length (centuries) of its continuous colonial subjugation, and second (therefore) because that colonial status prevents it from deciding on its own, without strictures from the U.S. Congress, how to confront and overcome the challenges of either colonization or globalization.

The above framework provides an understanding of Puerto Rico's colonial condition at a general level. In this paper, we seek to focus particularly on journalism education to explore how it reflects and repudiates colonialism.

In addition, for the analysis of the content of the journalism program at UPR-RP we made use of the concept of ideology as it refers to ambiguity in the interpretation of words, phrases and sentences. Ambiguity is a privileged area of ideological operations, an affirmation supported by many theorists of ideology (Barthes, 2013/1957; Althusser, 1971/1970; Jameson, 1981; Hall, 2007; Eagleton, 1991; Žižek, 1989; Butler, 1997). Hall

(2007), for example, argues that words, phrases and sentences are polysemic—prone to a variety of meanings—so that “it is at the connotative level of the sign that situational ideologies alter and transform signification” (p. 97). He posits that the polysemy of words, phrases and sentences can be classified into preferred, negotiated or antihegemonic interpretations. Due to the advantages—psychological and social—of preferred and negotiated meanings, most people’s interpretations will tend to fall into these categories. Interpretations that ‘go against the current’ are emotionally and intellectually more difficult to arrive at and have social costs associated with marginalization. Althusser (1970/1971) identifies education as a key structure for the reproduction of society, a place designed to teach “‘know-how’, but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its ‘practice’” (p.6). Udas & Staggs (2019) elaborate Althusser’s ideas to address how “the university’s role as an auxiliary agent of the state restricts the university’s ability to engage in critical dialogue about state-sponsored capitalist forms of democracy and the state’s role in privatizing the common good” (p. 67).

Research methodology

As stated above, two UNESCO criteria were used to evaluate exact matches and suggested equivalences with the wording in the flagship UPR-RP campus undergraduate journalism program descriptions. Also analyzed were the descriptions of the required courses of that undergraduate program. The analyses required searching for the exact words or phrases mentioned in the each of the two criteria. Specifically, regarding criteria 1, we looked for a word or phrase exactly related to a country’s system of government, Constitution [Puerto Rico’s], system of justice, political process, economy, social and cultural organization, relation to other countries, and place of journalism in architecture of democracy. Regarding criteria 2, we looked for a word or phrase exactly related to basic knowledge of national history, international history, geography, contemporary social issues, gender, cultural diversity, religion, social class, conflict, poverty, development issues, and public health issues. In addition, we looked at words or phrases in the program and course descriptions that may suggest or be equivalences of the words or phrases in the UNESCO criteria.

Findings

In the description of the UPR-RP undergraduate journalism program, there are no exact matches between words/phrases used in that description and the words/phrases of the UNESCO criteria. However, we did find what could be construed as approximate equivalences.

For example, the UPR-RP journalism's program statement that it will "guide students towards critical study, research, and practice of journalism within a framework of ethics and social responsibility" could be purported as being related (albeit indirectly) to social and cultural organization, place of journalism in architecture of democracy, and helping in the gaining of basic knowledge of contemporary social issues, conflict, poverty and/or public health issues. And where the program description states "cultivate an ethical commitment to information dissemination processes, addressing human rights advocacy and respect for diversity in all its forms" might also be somewhat related to system of government, system of justice, economy, political process, cultural diversity, contemporary social issues, gender, cultural diversity, religion, social class, conflict, poverty, development issues, and/or public health issues. Similar extrapolations could be done of the UPR-RP journalism's program description and the UNESCO criteria. That stated, each of these would be primarily deductions of the equivalences, not explicit or direct inclusion or affirmations of the UNESCO criteria.

Thus, for a deeper look as to whether or not the UNESCO criteria are present in the actual teaching, we assessed the actual descriptions of the fifteen UPR-RP journalism program's required courses (Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras, 2022). Only one, an introductory course about journalism, provides an exact match to the UNESCO criteria, but only in its mention of teaching about the history of that profession. Equivalencies could be deduced in some, but not the majority of those required courses. For example, Introduction to Media includes learning about the "evolution, organization and structure of the media ecosystem," which could be related to learning about economic issues and/or the country's social and cultural organization, or it might also have some

topics about national or international history, and/or development issues. The descriptions of courses such as Theories of Communication, Introduction to Journalism, Media Law and Information Ethics, Theories and Meaning of Culture and advanced seminar classes suggest that they may cover some of the UNESCO criteria. Moreover, eight of the fifteen required courses do not even provide suggested equivalences to the UNESCO criteria. Thus, they have no relation at all with these criteria.

If and how much those cornerstone international criteria are part of the journalism education process in Puerto Rico's flagship program would best be evaluated by taking close looks at the syllabi of the required courses. That is a subsequent goal regarding all the journalism programs in Puerto Rico.

In the meantime, we learned from one of our UPR-RP sources that several of the topics we inquired about, "such as the constitutional status of Puerto Rico, the Fiscal Control Board, and political economy," are addressed the Journalistic Writing I course, "particularly when addressing political and judicial coverage, as well as the discussion of the island's government structure and democratic processes." Our source added that much of the content of our query is "reinforced in general education, core, and elective courses that are part of the baccalaureate program and allow our students to delve deeper into history, government, geography, and contemporary social issues." Moreover, he pointed out that the UPR-RP journalism program offers thematic seminars "which are scheduled in alternate semesters to address more specifically emerging issues or those of ongoing interest... [Such as topics related to]... "Gender, human rights, transparency, legislative processes, and the relationship between journalism, power, and citizenship." One last point of information shared by our source is that the UPR-RP Communication and Information Faculty "is currently immersed in a comprehensive curricular review of all its programs, including the Journalism program" [and that] this process will strengthen and update content to better respond to the current situation and the needs of our students."

The absence of the crucial concepts in the program and course descriptions are insufficient to conclude the degree to which, if at all, journalism education at the UPR-RP is colonial. However, the affirmations provided by our source suggest that at least some of the

education received by that programs students will be conducive to understanding the Island's colonial condition.

Discussion

Based on the data analyzed, there are no exact matches between words/phrases used in the UNESCO criteria and words/phrases used in the year 2022 UPR-RP undergraduate journalism program description. Exact match was found in the description of only of the required courses. Although various equivalencies were found, these are more indirect than direct evidence of inclusion of UNESCO criteria. This absence suggests that the information that a prospective journalism would read about the program does not directly address Puerto Rico's colonial condition. However, based on the correspondence with our source, it seems that journalism students might learn about the Island's colonial condition and media in general education courses or in special journalism seminars.

To recapitulate, we have presented two findings in our evaluation of the UPR-RP undergraduate BA program: First, neither the program description nor 14 of the 15 descriptions of required courses present exact matches with the words or phrases of the UNESCO criteria for journalism programs. Second, there are a considerable number of equivalences of words and phrases in the BA program description and in nine of the fifteen required course descriptions with the UNESCO criteria. In consideration of these equivalences, we have noted the role that ambiguity plays in ideological domination. And it is the absences and ideological ambiguities identified in the program description and course descriptions of the University of Puerto Rico's flagship undergraduate program in journalism that serve to contribute to the status quo, particularly in the context of neoliberalism and globalization.

Our subsequent research agenda includes analyzing the UPR-RP journalism syllabi, especially the required and recommended readings. We also plan to do the same with the program and course descriptions, as well as the syllabi, of other journalism programs in Puerto Rico. One additional analysis will entail comparing these with course descriptions and syllabi of journalism programs in other Latin American countries. The comparison will

then allow us to more accurately assess if the Island's journalism programs are distinctively colonial given omissions of key topics related to that condition, including the political economy of the Island's media and their relationships with the colonial economic and political powers in Puerto Rico and from the U.S. or elsewhere. We will also be able to assess if the Island's programs are similar or different to comparable journal programs in other countries that are colonies or can be classified as neo-colonial.

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Principles, values and roles: Comparing journalism education in the U.S. and China

Yin, J.*

Introduction

Journalism schools in the United States are going through challenging times with declining enrollments, less than promising employment prospects for its students, sagging public trust in the news industry, and inadequate resources in the classroom at a time when advancing digital and mobile media technologies are blurring the lines between academic disciplines and media majors. As a result of fast changes in the profession, faculty need continuing re-training while curriculums are in a constant flux. Are journalism schools in China facing similar challenges? How are they responding to the changes? What are their priorities? How do their priorities differ from priorities of journalism schools in the U.S.?

Comparing journalism education in the United States and China may seem to be an impossible task given the fundamental differences in the media systems of the two countries – commercial media versus state media, or capitalist media versus communist media. But labels often fail to accurately describe media systems around the world (Yin, 2008) and do not help provide deeper understanding of the nature of different media systems - how they operate, why they operate the way they do, or what the aspirations of journalists and journalism educators are.

Regardless of where they are, journalists around the world follow the principles and values and use the skills they are taught and trained at journalism school in gathering and producing news. What kind of principles and values are instilled in future generations of journalists in the two countries? How is the dichotomy of press theories - Libertarian versus Authoritarian/Communist - reflected in the journalism curriculum of the two

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countries? How is journalism curriculum structured in the two countries? What are the challenges facing journalism schools in the two countries? And how are journalism schools adapting to meet these challenges?

Statement of problem

More specifically, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the principles, values, and roles of journalism taught in the two countries?
2. How is journalism curriculum structured in the two countries?
3. How is the new media impacting journalism education in the two countries?
4. How are journalism schools responding to the new media environment?
5. What are the differences and similarities in journalism education of the two countries and why are there such differences and similarities?
6. What are the views of journalists and journalism educators on these questions?

Media systems and journalism schools are shaped by the political, cultural, social and economic environments they operate in. In this paper, contrasting but brief historical contexts and experiences of the two countries are also provided for a deeper insight into the media systems of the two countries. Research reviews focus on curriculums, challenges and responses in journalism programs. Data collection consists of analysis and comparisons of journalism curriculums in the two countries and interviews with journalists and journalism educators on the research questions.

The United States and China are as different as any two countries can be, one with a history of more than 200 years while the other boasting a continuing civilization of 5,000 years. The two countries also differ drastically in their political and economic systems, cultural traditions and social norms, all of which form the environment media operates in. While the U.S. dominates the global media scene, China is still trying to have its voice heard on the world stage. Given all the differences of the two countries, it is interesting to explore

how different journalism education is in the two countries and why there are such differences. Findings from this study can not only shed light on journalism education in the two countries, enrich our understanding and knowledge of global journalism education, but also provide insight into their potential impact on the coverage of international news as the future of global journalism is shaped by younger generations of journalists, who receive journalism education informed by their respective cultural traditions, political systems, and unique social norms.

Literature review

Roots of press systems: Revolutions and philosophies

Friedman (2011) gave a speech introducing American journalism to journalism students in China. He acknowledged that “Each society molds journalism to reflect its own values. Journalism’s primary goal is to educate the people of a country how to behave, what to believe and how to understand the rest of the world.” He focused on the different attitudes toward authorities, especially the government, in the two countries and promoted “adversarial” as the ideal media-government relationship.

Knight & Hawtin (2010) raised the concept of “intellectual colonialism” in discussing the UK and the US teaching of social sciences, especially journalism, in the Global South, as “journalism is as much about the values of a society, its adherence to a set of understandings about the role of the media, and its relationship to its audience and the state as it is about the technical and practical skills of writing and news production.”

The development of the press followed very different paths in China and the U.S. However, the developments in both countries are, to a huge extent, shaped by the revolutions in their recent history, one gave birth to a new China – the People’s Republic, and the other gave birth to a new nation - The United States of America. The revolutions witnessed the establishment of different political systems in the two countries meeting the aspirations of their peoples and provided very different lessons – to be strong versus to be free.

The Communist revolution in China and the communist press

Today's China is a major country in the Global South and a fast-developing country as well. The ancient China regarded itself as the "Central Kingdom," which is the literal meaning of the name of the country, before China was invaded and humiliated by Western powers starting in the mid-19th Century. Like many of its Asian neighbors, China suffered at the hands of western colonial and imperialist powers. But unlike its neighbors, China was never completely colonized by any of the western powers perhaps because of its size or the long shadow of its dynasties. To gain independence and eliminate mass poverty, a group of revolutionaries in China looked toward the Soviet Union for inspiration and support. After decades of fighting, Chinese communists prevailed and founded the People's Republic when they declared that the Chinese people had since stood up. The wars ended, but the communist revolution did not as the new government inherited a vast war-torn, semi-feudal and semi-colonial country. Party leaders in China from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping learned the lesson that when a country is weak, it will be bullied. The top priority for the country is to be strong through development. The party has been employing the media to rally efforts and support for nation-building despite detours of political fights.

The People's Republic was founded in Soviet's image, following its ideologies, as well as its political, economic and educational systems. It also adopted the Soviet media system, where the media is owned by the state and the party, and play an activist role in nation-building. The belief that news media should play a major role in assisting the government and the party in nation-building is deep-ingrained in the DNA of the Chinese media. While western news media, especially American journalism schools, emphasizes media freedom and adversarial relationship with the government, Chinese media is taught to believe in the party's leadership and be partners in development. Many Chinese journalists place high importance on the media's responsibilities in society. (Yin, 2018) Since the founding of the People's Republic, the news media in China has seldom deviated from that role.

The concept of the party press and its activist roles came from German philosopher Karl Marx and was first implemented and further developed by Soviet Communist

revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin. Successive Chinese Communist Party leaders emphasized the political nature of the news media. Mao Zedong elaborated on “statesmen’s papers” (Zheng, 2019, p.12) while Deng Xiaoping reaffirmed the central role of Marxism in party’s ideology during his push to open up the Chinese economy. Jiang Zemin focused on channeling public opinions and called for “a news team with strong political, professional, and disciplinary training and a positive style.” (Tong, 2020, p. 329) Current leader Xi Jinping unapologetically raised the banner of “the party’s media is surnamed party,” “the unity of the party and the people,” and “putting the people above all else.” (Zheng, 2019, p. 15) In research and news coverage in the West, Chinese media’s revolutionary roots and activist role in nation-building are often omitted.

The American revolution and the libertarian press

The history of America and its press has a prominent theme running through it – the unalienable rights of the people, particularly liberty. The American press is often regarded as the prototype of the Libertarian Press, well-known around the world for its freedom guaranteed in the First Amendment. Ever since the victory of the American Revolution, the press has been pushing the boundary of the freedom to report, which is also reflected in the American journalism curriculum as Zibluk (2016) said, journalism education “is a free speech education.” Dewberry et al (2018) believed that classrooms should focus on free speech because of its importance to democratic societies. After the revolutions in both countries gave birth to new nations, America has been focusing on individual rights to be free following its democratic ideals while China has been preoccupied with building a strong nation with the help of the party press, which was advocated by Marx.

The American Revolution was prompted by frustrations against the unjust colonial rule of a far-away ruler and colonists’ aspirations to be free. Of all the unalienable rights, liberty has been regarded as the most fundamental as Patrick Henry wrote: “Give me liberty or give me death.” The history of the American press started with local journalists’ resistance to the royal governor’s attempts to control critical reporting. John Peter Zenger’s trial for seditious libel is often cited as a legal precedent that the press could break free

from the will of an unjust government. (“Arguments,” 1735) Rights, liberty and independence are the objectives of the American Revolution.

No ideal is more fundamental than to be free in America. And it is no coincidence that the economic system of the country is capitalist, predicated on a free market. The media in America is part of the democratic and capitalist system of the country - free to pursue the truth and profits protected by the First Amendment. Even during periods of press excesses, attempts at restricting the press rarely succeeded.

Philosophically, the American media follows a long line of libertarian thinkers, including John Milton, who promoted “the marketplace of ideas,” Adam Smith, John Locke, David Hume, Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill among others. John Merrill, a lifetime journalism educator, focused on press freedom in his teaching as well as his writing. His books, *The Imperative of freedom* (1974, 1990) and *Existential Journalism* (1977, 1995) best summarized his thinking on the imperative of press freedom.

Research review on journalism education: New media technologies vs. the mission

Research on journalism education in the U.S.

Journalism schools in the U.S. are facing the double challenges of trying to catch up in new media technologies while also trying to stop declining enrollment as the legacy media continues to shrink. The best way to meet both challenges is to increase the employability of students through overhauling curriculum. As a result, many studies address specific issues of changes in curriculum, such as the balance of new media skills versus traditional journalism skills, skills courses versus theory/context courses, platforms versus content, the design of capstones, the gap between the academia and the profession, and the value of accreditation. Overall, there are more studies about technological issues in the curriculum than about the fundamental principles or roles of journalism, unlike studies in China where the role of journalism and the right values of students are emphasized.

Journalism schools in the U.S. are focusing on new media skills seen as more significant contributors to post-graduate hiring — a key priority of journalism programs (Henrichsen & Shelton, 2023), intensifying the debate about the right mix of traditional

journalism skills versus digital media skills (Marta-Lazo et al, 2018), “core skills” versus “context courses” – ethics, law, regulation, diversity (Clark, 2016), the concerns over sacrificing message for the medium – the right balance between how to find and research stories versus how to tell, present and share stories (Holman, 2016).

There is also a lack of agreed principles, standards, and best practice to guide the design and implementation of final-year journalism capstone course, especially regarding the demonstration and measurement of required graduate capabilities. (Cullen, 2016) A content analysis of journalism job advertisements found that even “companies do not seem to know precisely what skills a journalism graduate must have.” (Marta-Lazo et al, 2018). Another study (Thomson & Sternberg, 2022) tried to glean some insight from job applicants’ resumes and cover letters through qualitative thematic analysis. All of this has sharpened the debate about the values, standards, and compliance criteria of journalism accreditation, so much so that some journalism schools let their accreditation status lapse. (Blom et al, 2019) The reality is that the current journalism curriculum is in a constant flux, which appears to show that more uncertainty and debate about the direction of journalism curriculum in the U.S. than in China

Nevertheless, updating journalism curriculum has become imperative for survival (Hunter & Nel, 2011). Urgent calls for innovation as an essential part of journalism education could be heard at many journalism schools. Some proposed hybrid teaching models that include multidisciplinary applied research focusing on the development of new formats, graphic languages, techniques, processes and prototypes of content production platforms. (Machado & Teixeira, 2016, Hirst & Treadwell 2011) believed that journalism curriculum should “better reflect the impact of online media” so that it remains “relevant.” They pointed out that while the digital and mobile media has become integral in the life of the younger generation today, many students were not comfortable with it in professional work and not experimenting with it – promoting stories, crowdsourcing, visual and mobile presentation, and web management systems.

More specifically on the skills side, Kothari & Hickerson (2020) and Carlson (2015) discussed the impact of automated journalism on journalism curriculum. The emergence of generative AI will no doubt intensify the debate. On coding, one study (Foust & Bradshaw,

2020) found that less than a quarter of the accredited journalism schools require students to learn code despite industry desires for journalists with coding skills. The study also found that nearly 40 percent of the programs offer no coding classes. Zhu & Du (2018) emphasized the importance of data journalism teaching while Field & MacMillan (2011) focused on teaching research skills throughout the curriculum. Hunter & Nel (2011) explored entrepreneurial journalism so that students would see their potential as self-managing, independent entrepreneurs.

Beyond new media skills, some scholars called for more diverse curriculum – a mix of concepts and capabilities (Martin et al, 2020), and more attention on the topics of free speech (Zibluk, 2016; Dewberry et al, 2018), fake news (Walsh, 2019), ethical challenges (Rao and Malik, 2019), and hostility (Mesmer & Miller, 2024) or safety training (Durkin & Garner, 2020).

One study (Hossain & Wenger, 2024) surveyed accredited journalism and mass communication programs and identified three key challenges due to media's disruptive innovation: the need for long-term investment, the ability to predict future change and demand, and difficulty in hiring faculty expertise. When asked which technologies will affect journalism curriculums in the next three to five years, artificial intelligence (AI) topped the list, followed by drone journalism, virtual reality, and augmented reality.

Research on journalism education in China

Research and discussions on journalism education in China pay as much attention to values and “Marxist’s views of journalism” as to new media skills. Lai’s study (2023) noted the importance of “ideology and political attributes” in journalism programs in China. Lai found that after the Communist Party took power in China in 1949, courses in Marxist theories and the history of the Chinese Revolution were introduced, in addition to an increase in literary and artistic courses. Another researcher, Zhenglin (2017), believed that today’s China is building a model of journalism education with more specific Chinese characteristics, including ideology, humanities, social sciences, and publicity, with Marxist views of journalism at its core. The emphasis on ideology, the direction of journalism and

positive news comes from the revolutionary tradition as well as the need to tell China's stories given prevailing negative coverage in the West, particularly the U.S.

Research review shows that Chinese journalism education leaders and researchers prioritize the role the news media should play in society more than their U.S. counterparts. They see the rise of the Global South and new media technology disruptions both as an opportunity and a challenge in introducing China to the world. According to Gao and Tu (2022), the promise of new opportunities and the urgent need for a new generation of well-trained journalists led to growth in journalism education in China in recent years with more universities starting their journalism programs, and enrollment at journalism schools saw a 5.8 percent increase in the 2016-19 period, in contrast to the decline in the U.S. However, in more recent years, enrollment growth has also cooled.

Gao and Tu listed three priorities of journalism education in China: 1) it should serve the party and the people and China's strategic goals; 2) it should nurture talents with both practical abilities and values, including knowing and loving China; 3) it needs bold innovations to update traditional educational models and meet the challenges posed by new media technologies. For innovation, they recommended theories and practice feed into each other, with more weight on practice.

At an academic forum on "New concepts and new missions: Building new humanities, social sciences, and journalism and communication programs," a group of journalism school deans from across China believed that in an age of global changes unforeseen in the last 100 years, the only way to keep a clear and the right direction of journalism is to be well educated in Marxist views of journalism, which can help sharpen insight and strengthen the abilities in distinguishing what is right and what is wrong. (The Editorial Board, 2022) Echoing Gao and Tu, some deans proposed that journalism programs should be interdisciplinary and involve multimedia platforms and different industries. Just as American educators did, other deans urged narrowing the gap between classrooms and newsrooms to speed up the adoption of new media technologies. Some researchers believe journalism education lags behind changing media technologies (Long & Zeng, 2016) and the gap is widening as the advance of media technologies is accelerating. (Xiao, 2021) The deans defined well-trained journalism students as having the right values

and views as well as strong abilities and skills in practicing journalism. They also envisioned an innovative, open and multi-platformed Chinese media system that focuses on positive information, citizens' rights, transparency, and news media's watchdog role. (The Editorial Board, 2022)

To adapt to the new media environment, Shi (2019) expanded the concept of journalism education to include the whole process of media productions and marketing, such as content generation for multimedia platforms, distribution and circulation, and audience analytics. He discussed new roles and skills in newsrooms that are related to social and digital media, interactions with the audience, audience analytics, and data, statistics and coding skills. Shi addressed the issue of values too, highlighting the opportunities and challenges presented by algorithm journalism and reaffirming Marxist views of journalism, professional ethics and the sense of responsibilities, such as providing public service. Zhang & Xiong (2014) agreed that political education is a crucial part of journalism education in China.

Other researchers explored the relationship between politics and professionalism. Long & Zeng (2016) believed the larger factors impacting journalism education in China are the social system and media policies, which require the media to be the voice of the government and promoter of a "peaceful and harmonious society" but hamper the development of students' critical and independent thinking skills and agency. They also believed that the biggest challenge in journalism education in China is the balance between policy and professionalism. They applauded the development of "open courses" where students can explore "unconventional" and even "sensitive" topics, which is a welcome start, they believe.

There are also researchers who share American journalism educators' concerns about the mix of traditional journalism and new media skills. Tian & Huang (2021) pointed to universities rushing to set up new media labs to better train students' abilities in working with digital media, visual news, and data journalism in the blind pursuit of media technologies while neglecting basic skills of journalism. They reaffirmed the core values of journalism – objectivity, neutrality and journalism ethics.

Despite highlighting Marxist views of journalism, journalism education in China is influenced by western journalistic teachings. Friedman (2011) promoted “adversarial” as the ideal media-government relationship. Mott (2010) discussed the need and the expansion of journalism education in China and how he taught journalism there – by focusing on the concept of “journalists as scientists of facts.” But internationalization and monetization of journalism education around the world is not without its problems. Knight & Hawtin (2010) discussed concerns with “intellectual colonialism” after teaching western style of journalism in China and the Middle East. They acknowledged that “journalism is as much about the values of a society, its adherence to a set of understandings about the role of the media, and its relationship to its audience and the state as it is about the technical and practical skills of writing and news production.”

Tang & Chand (2021) did a comparative study of journalism programs at Xiamen University in China and Western Sydney University in Australia and found that both schools keep updating their curriculums and emphasize practical skills in teaching. They also found heavy investment by the Chinese government in journalism education so that journalists can tell China stories to the world. Curriculum structure-wise, Xiamen adopts the “1 + 1 model” where students take liberal arts courses in their first year and journalism courses their second year and then branch out following their own interests as diverse journalism positions are created in the age of the new media. To close the gap between the academia and the profession, the universities invite media professionals to guest lecture while placing their faculty with media organizations to get updated on the trends of the industry.

Journalism curriculum comparisons

Journalism curriculums in China

While China has a much longer history of producing news, the time period when the two countries started journalism education was surprisingly close. In 1918, the Association for Journalism Studies at Peking University was established, which marked the beginning of

journalism education in China (Lai, 2023) while in 1912, Joseph Pulitzer founded the Columbia Journalism School, one of the oldest journalism schools in the world.

In America today, journalism educators are exploring the right balance of courses and a clearer direction in journalism curriculum in adapting to the new media environment and the challenging job market. In China, journalism education appear to have a clear direction – follow the party and Marxist views of journalism and serve the people, even though journalism schools face similar challenges in curriculum.

Marxist views of journalism

Any researcher examining journalism curriculum in China will find that “Marxist views of journalism” is a critical part of the curriculum. But what exactly are “Marxist views of journalism?” According to Zheng (2019, p. 9), they consist of a collection of views and statements by communist leaders from Karl Marx all the way to Xi Jinping. Marx & Engels crystalized their journalistic experience during European revolutions in 1848 into one concept – the party press. (Zheng, 2019, p.9) The two believed that party papers are the party's important ideological weapons and political battleground and that the party press should follow and expound the party's platforms and policies. (Zheng, 2019, p.10) They also believed that the party press should truly represent and defend the interests of the proletariat and the public. They also addressed the need for critical reporting within the party and believed that the party press should work under party's leadership and supervision.

Lenin founded the Soviet Union, the first socialist country in the world, with the help of his own party papers, which he used as powerful weapons in organizing the masses and publicizing his revolution in overthrowing the last Czar of Russia. He passed along his experience to future communist leaders. (Zheng, 2019, p.10-11) Chinese Communist Party leaders further developed these Marxist views, culminating in current leader Xi Jinping's affirmation that “the party's press is surnamed party” as discussed earlier. (Zheng, 2019, p. 15) Xi is unambiguous about the role of the party press. In his speeches, he called on the press to serve the people by educating and guiding them (Xu & Hua, 2013), perhaps an

example of “expert journalists.” Specifically, Xi urged the media “to bridge the Party and the people by consistently and patiently publicizing the Party’s guiding principles and policies and explaining the Party’s positions and views so that the people can be well-informed of the major events within the Party and the country and, therefore, are willing to follow the Party line.” (Liu, 2016)

In a book chapter on journalism education in China, Tong (2020, p. 350) wrote that Chinese education officials worked with journalism schools to develop overarching learning objectives. For general education, the State Education Commission recommends textbooks while journalism schools select their own materials for teaching journalism courses. Tong (2020) also wrote that the goal of Chinese journalism programs is to train expert journalists versus the goal of U.S. journalism programs - to train professional journalists.

The concept of “expert journalists,” which was adopted from the Soviet model, is highlighted as the objectives of journalism programs across China, including Communication University of China (CUC) and Renmin University of China, two of the top journalism schools in the country today. Both schools are in Beijing. Tong found that there are many similarities in journalism curriculums across China. CUC, a rising star, used to be the Beijing Broadcasting Institute, which trained talents for China Central Television and Radio Beijing, both state broadcasters. Now the school has substantially expanded its offering. But its mission has not changed - to train expert journalists. (Tong, 2020)

What makes “expert journalists”? According to CUC’s program descriptions (CUC, 2024), they should be innovative multimedia talents, who are guided by Marxist views of journalism and equipped with a broad knowledge foundation and a global view of the world. They should be experienced in practicing journalism and international journalism, be able to adapt to industry changes, and work for mainstream media, government media, and commercial media as journalists, public relations specialists, and media managers. It is clear from the descriptions that the school trains not only journalists but also communication specialists for the government.

To keep up with industry changes, the school has added another journalism major with an emphasis on data journalism. But what distinguish this school as the forerunner in reinventing journalism curriculum in China are its ever-growing list of media labs equipped with advanced media technologies funded by information technology companies and the government. Journalism curriculum at CUC is divided into two groups – Basic courses and Core courses, with the former focusing on journalism theories while the latter more on journalism skills. The two groups of courses offer a mixture of traditional journalism courses and newer courses related to the new media, which include new media and society, analysis of internet uses, theories and applications in data visualization, principles of data journalism, data journalism practice, and multimedia news editing. The journalism major acknowledges the merging of media platforms to include audio-visual basics, videography, and broadcast news. Traditional journalism courses include theory courses, such as Marxist views of journalism, journalism theories, Chinese and international journalism histories, culture and society.

What reflects the changes is the journalism major with an emphasis on data journalism, which is a much more rigorous major. The program goals have been upgraded to include strong abilities in data mining, data analysis, data integration, and data visualization. Basic courses cover introductions to data journalism and computational communication, python, web scraping, and data processing. Additional core courses include audio/video production, information design, and media user experience, analysis of online public opinion practice, data journalism practice, and digital economy and data industries.

The promise of the school lies in its growing number of media labs. The school's Practice Center houses three labs – the Adobe Lab, the Multimedia Journalism Lab, and the Journalism and Communication Psychology Lab, where practical learning and innovative research are integrated. The Adobe Lab was established more than twenty years ago in 2000 when Adobe gifted the school forty-one sets of original Adobe software. The lab became Adobe's first digital video software training and testing center in China, meeting the school's needs in teaching digital information design in its undergraduate programs.

The Multimedia Journalism Lab was opened in 2018, which provides hardware support for teaching and practicing visual media. It also facilitates practice and research projects on big data under the guidance of professional news media organizations. It helps cover some of the major news events in the country using multimedia reporting skills and keeps turning out Gifs, short videos, and reporting projects incorporating H5. These projects are promoted online, and many of them are published at the top of the home pages of major news organizations. These stories are often well-received by the public and generate revenue for the school, paving the way for more experiments with restructuring curriculum. Some of the best works by students have also won awards. The school also plans to build a 5G AI journalism media lab and a data journalism lab.

The specialized psychology labs were created to facilitate the teaching and research of journalism and communication. The labs are equipped with eye trackers, electroencephalogram (EEG), facial emotion recognition systems, psychological assessment systems, and sand tray systems. Students are encouraged to conduct their own research projects there.

In contrast to CUC, Renmin (People's) University of China has long been established as one of the best journalism programs in the country. According to the school's website (Renmin, 2024), the objectives of its journalism program are even closer to the concept of "expert journalists" than CUC – to train high-end professional and innovative communication talents with multimedia skills who can adapt to media transformations and meet the needs for social development. The program requires the students to be exemplary in moral character and pillars of society. The students are also required to master basic Marxist theories, familiarize themselves with government policies and have a strong sense of social responsibility. The students are expected to follow the facts in reporting, abide by professional ethical principles, and have a rich foundation of liberal arts and strong abilities in reporting using new media skills. They are also required to master a foreign language, which comes from the deep awareness that a new global order is taking shape as discussed by the deans of journalism schools. The objectives show that the school has set a high standard for its students and expects a lot of them, a lot more than being a professional journalist – "exemplary in moral character and pillars of society."

For students at Renmin, their curriculum consists of four areas: 1) general education – political theories, readings of classics, basic skills – a foreign language, math, statistics, and gym; 2) courses in the major; 3) research and practice – training in innovation, social studies, volunteering and community service, internships, and thesis; 4) personal development and career planning – freshman seminar, education in public art, labor theories and practice, mental health, military theories and training, and career planning. The first two areas account for the bulk of the credit hours in the program. Courses in the major are divided into foundational and core courses. The foundation includes basics in journalism practice, journalism theories and strategic communication. The core consists of a mixture of concept and theory courses and skills courses. Theory courses include introductions to journalism, communication, public opinion, and journalism ethics and law; Marxist views of journalism; histories of Chinese and international journalism; and media management. Skills courses at Renmin appear to emphasize traditional journalism skills more. Required new media courses include application of digital communication skills, multimedia labs I and II. More of the new media courses are in the electives, catering to potential career options and students' interest, and perhaps, also testifying to the experimental nature of these courses. They include data journalism, principles and applications of news visualization, newscasting across multimedia platforms, algorithm news. One interesting elective is about big data and analysis of public opinions on legal cases. What is interesting is that there is also an international journalism and communication program at Renmin, which reflects China's desire to tell its story to the world in its own voice. It includes most of the courses in the journalism major while the journalism skills courses are taught in English. One additional course is international journalism and global communication.

Journalism curriculum in the U.S.

The University of Missouri and Columbia University have two of the oldest as well as best-known journalism schools in the U.S. The Missouri School of Journalism is known for hands-on teaching, "The Missouri Method," where students learn by working at a multi-

platform community paper, a magazine, an NBC affiliate, and an NPR station. The emphasis on practice and skills highlights the school's program as "career-focus studies."

Undergraduate curriculum at Mizzou is flexible with extensive options, which break into six career paths, 29 specialty areas (elective courses), ("Curriculum," 2024) and 12 capstone options. To add to the wide range of career options, 16 percent of the students earned dual degrees in 2024, up from 13 percent in 2020. Two of the six career paths point to new careers in media professions - cross-platform editing and producing, and social and audience strategy - in addition to broadcasting, photojournalism and documentary, reporting and writing, and strategic communication. Students are expected to select one of the six career paths in their junior year. Students can also use journalism electives to further tailor their program in subject areas including sports, science, health, business and the environment, according to program descriptions.

The options appear to be designed not only to cater to students' individual interest but also increase their employability as shown in the even longer list of "careers in a wide range of journalism and communication professions" in the school's program descriptions. ("BJ," 2024) The emphasis on practical skills, diverse sets of skills and new media skills is supported with diverse professional background of its faculty, ranging from digital media, to innovation, entrepreneurship, magazine, TV, radio, and much more. The school also classifies its faculty into groups, such as journalism professions and professional practice. Faculty job titles, such as "director of innovation" and "digital director," point to the future of the profession as it keeps evolving. More specifically, the freshman year is designed for developing "core knowledge about journalism and strategic communication," including principles of journalism in democracy, fundamentals of visual journalism and strategic communication, and fundamentals of written journalism and strategic communication, which are a mixture of lectures and lab classes. Sophomore and junior years are for "building on knowledge and skills," where more lab classes are offered so that students can learn through applied projects. More aspects of media professions are also introduced, including cross-cultural journalism, audience and persuasion, social media foundations and practice, newsroom content and creation or principles of strategic communication, and media history. Junior year will also see the start of career path courses and specialty

courses - electives. Senior year has a required media law course in addition to more specialty courses depending on students' interest. The last semester of the senior year focuses on the capstone, which helps students polish their portfolios with work published in professional media and showcase their readiness for their first job. Capstone is offered in 12 areas, including news production, documentary postproduction, digital news editing, media management and leadership, the picture story and photographic essay, journalism and democracy, innovation and audience research in digital media, and more. The 29 electives range from account management to visual editing management.

Columbia Journalism School offers only graduate programs. One shared characteristic of the curriculums of the two journalism schools, despite at different levels of study, is the options available for students. Data collection here focuses on the M.S. and M.A. programs at Columbia. The school does not distinguish M.S. degree specializations by medium but by students' interest, including investigative reporting, and visual journalism and documentary video. The M.S. in data journalism digs deep in data reporting, requiring learning in different disciplines. The M.A. program has four concentrations - arts and culture, business and economics, politics, and science. These are mostly one-year programs for updating the skills of working journalists. The only exception is the data journalism program, which requires three semesters to complete. M.S. students are expected to be able to do reporting at the beginning of the program. Classes comprise segments in writing, image & sound, investigative techniques; professional guest speaker series; journalism essentials: law, ethics, history, business forces; semester-long production courses, and Master project.

The M.S. Investigative Specialization program provides training on investigative tools and a seminar that addresses changes in investigative reporting. The tools are actually about the process: a story idea, an investigative hypothesis, and the actual reporting and writing. The course pays special attention to the importance of documentary evidence and introduces types of sources and records. The seminar introduces students to new financing models for investigative reporting, where projects are supported with grants and done for non-profit media organizations such as ProPublica. It also trains students to produce, pitch and fund their investigative stories.

The M.S. Documentary Specialization program trains students on documentary videos and visual journalism. The program is divided into three stages: 1) core skills and a workshop for story ideas, 2) working on film project, 3) complete Master's Project documentary.

The M.S. Data Journalism program is perhaps the most demanding as the program requires training across disciplines of journalism, data science, and computer science. The program is also divided into three stages: 1) foundations of computing, data & databases and reporting, 2) workshop on data, computation, and innovation for the foundations of data visualization to build on skills in writing and storytelling with data. Data tools include the D3 JavaScript visualization framework for building custom interactive graphics and web-friendly maps. 3) Working on the Master's Project, a substantive piece of data-driven journalism, with the help of a class on storytelling with data and the second workshop on data, computation, and innovation.

The M.A. Degree has four areas - arts and culture, business and economics, politics, and science. Central to the program are a seminar, which combines deep subject instruction with high-level journalistic mentoring by experts, and classes in the subject areas - statistics, concepts of data journalism, research, and investigative techniques, including examining public records and conducting background check. For the master's thesis, a piece of long form journalism is required. The school also offers dual degree options partnering with programs in computer science, international affairs, law, business, and religion.

Research methodology

Interviews

About 10 Chinese and five American journalists and journalism educators were interviewed for this study despite repeated efforts that reached out to more of them. Journalists of various lengths of professional experience were selected for this study. Quite a few of them guest speak in journalism classes, supervise student interns and do the hiring for their news organizations. They were invited to reflect on their own journalism

education and provide their assessment on journalism programs today. Repeated email invitations to U.S. and Chinese journalism educators for interviews produced the responses presented here. The limited number of responses might be due to the fact that interview questions started with principles, values and roles of journalism taught, which, some might feel, cannot be answered in a couple of sentences. The reason for the questions is for comparisons.

It might be surprising to some researchers that there is a high-level of agreement among interviewees from both countries on the principles and values of journalism – pursuing the truth and objectivity in reporting – and whether interviewees find their jobs fulfilling – all answered in the affirmative, despite major political and cultural differences in the media systems of the two countries. An American interviewee said, “I feel it was a calling.” “You can dig into real stories that will make a difference in the world or tell someone’s story in a meaningful way that might change lives, and that’s when it is fulfilling the most.” The interviewee emphasized that it takes a lot of dedication to the field to get to that point. Another one said, “I enjoyed writing and interacting with people and telling stories. I have found it very fulfilling because every day brings something new, and there are new stories worth pursuing and being told.”

Chinese perspectives

One Chinese interviewee said when, in the past, the law was not the main means for conflict resolution, the media became the main channel where justice was pursued and promoted, which was very fulfilling for journalists. The interviewee likes the fact that the profession requires expert knowledge and a broad knowledge base and provides opportunities for further personal development in new learning and in becoming brave, confident and better at surviving. The interviewee said now the profession faces new challenges from new media technologies, which makes it even more exciting. Another one said he was in awe of the power of forerunners like Shao Piaoping, whose pen was said to be more powerful than a troop of 10 million soldiers. He said that Shao used the power for the people. Shao was active in the early 20th century China and was killed by a warlord for

critical coverage. The interviewee said he feels enormous honor and pride while fulfilling his journalistic ideals – contributing to social progress through his writing, reporting and educating the public. He also likes the daily sense of wonder in pursuing every news lead.

On the principles and values of journalism taught, every interviewee from China underscored the importance of truth and objectivity in reporting. One senior journalist said factual reporting contributes to the credibility of journalism, and it is the only way to win public trust. She said she upheld public trust as her life in her decades of journalism career. She condemned the rampant expansion of social media, which, she said, violates journalistic principles and does huge damage to the credibility of the profession. That is why, she believed, that traditional journalism still exists because people still want the truth. Another one recalled the unforgettable stories of well-known journalists introduced in classes. The interviewee said these journalists' love for their work, devotion to journalism when faced with risks and danger, and their accomplishments touched the students deeply. The interviewee said he learned the lessons of "carrying justice on your shoulders, writing good stories," and "do not forget the people" and used these lessons as his career guide. Still another discussed objectivity, timeliness, proximity, and news' entertainment values. No one mentioned Marxist views of journalism, but most talked about serving the people.

When answering questions on the role of the news media in society, more than one interviewee discussed the activist role of the media. One interviewee listed to inform, to watch power, to serve readers, and to connect China with the rest of the world. The interviewee said he was fortunate enough to experience the "golden age" of watchdog journalism in China and believed that the news media made major contributions and played the enlightenment role in people's understanding of the rule of law and in people's acceptance of the scientific concept of democracy and the idea that the party and the government ought to serve the people.

Another interviewee mentioned that media is the fourth estate. She believed that the news media should be the beacon and observer for society, promoting kindness and justice, condemning evil, and helping build a better society and country. One believed that today's college students should have the right ideals and values even though there are gaps between ideals and the reality. More interviewees discussed media's role in channeling

public opinions as advocated by the government. One interviewee believed that the media should serve as the main forum for exchange of ideas, play the watchdog role and advocate for social progress. The media should have a strong sense of political and social responsibility, the interviewee said. Another interviewee also promoted the activist role of the media by saying that the news media should play an active role in promoting political progress, economic development and social harmony by ensuring the people's right to know, to participate and to supervise through public opinions.

On the question of what important qualities journalists should possess today, one interviewee said professional and political training while another emphasized abilities in observing and critical thinking. More than one interviewee discussed having a wide knowledge base, being an expert in a field, as well as having new media skills, such as AI and big data analytics. One interviewee said that journalists should be able to provide more in-depth, more authoritative, more professional and multi-faceted reporting as content is the king. Another interviewee emphasized the capacity for continued learning, such as multimedia skills. One was concerned about the lack of digital and mobile media skills, such as the command of software applications, video editing, and interviewing on camera. The interviewee also mentioned the ability in reporting, writing and connecting with people.

About adequate training, there is a feeling of anxiety among journalists that they are not up to speed with new media technologies. One interviewee said that current journalism curriculum can help students get a job but not help them be competent in their job. To excel, the interviewee said, students need cross-disciplinary training so that they can innovate and use new media applications. One interviewee discussed disconnect between theories and practice and said that only an intense internship helped him overcome that gap. Still another who guest speaks in journalism classes believed that current curriculum is outdated and barely makes the grade. She provided the example of some textbooks that still limit news page design to paper copies instead of including news webpage design.

On questions of challenges and what journalism schools should focus on, the consensus is that the journalistic principle of telling the truth is being severely challenged because the field is getting closer to the market – the pursuit of clicks and market share as traffic means profits in the age of digital and social media. As a result, a massive amount of

fake news is squeezing out quality content. Interviewees believe that journalism schools should focus on students' ability in new media applications and new thinking in content creation, including AI so that news media can compete with social media. One interviewee said that as social media has broken down traditional structures of the media sector, schools should also teach courses related to media marketing, such as new media management and sales, and live streaming. The interviewee also said that journalism curriculum focuses too much on theories and not enough on practice. There is also the concern over students' lack of understanding about the society and the need for more general education courses. Most of all, the interviewee emphasized students' ability in lifetime learning.

One interviewee pointed out the mediocre pay of journalists, which prevents news organizations from attracting the best talents to compete with social media. One key for journalism schools to succeed is to lean forward, the interviewee said. Still another interviewee pointed to the need for investment in journalism programs so that schools can retain journalism faculty and update facilities in journalism classrooms and labs. More than one interviewee emphasized the need for closer ties between schools and media organizations. One educator emphasized the political nature of the media in China.

American perspectives

American principles and values of journalism are well known around the world. One journalism educator said, "The goal of every course at the Missouri School of Journalism is to strengthen democracy and the common good by informing and empowering Missourians and people around the globe through our professional news outlets and agencies, anchored in the highest ideals of truth, integrity and public service." One senior journalist said her journalism classes taught her about honesty, bravery, and hard work as a journalist. She said journalists should own up to their mistakes and be brave in asking questions. Another journalist said, "... accuracy and impartiality are paramount," and "Earning your reader's trust is essential," and inaccurate reporting could jeopardize that. One interviewee mentioned being fair and balanced, having no slant or agenda, and being "the eyes/ears of

the people, not the enemy of the people,” which is also the role media plays in society, the interviewee said.

Other interviewees stressed the watchdog role, especially about “the words and actions of key decision-makers in their communities,” one said. Another one said that every organization she worked for did important watchdog work, but many stories were just “mediocre daily work.” One other interviewee believed the media’s role is to educate, inform, and tell compelling stories. He specifically discussed the media’s role as a business and the need to make money, which was a new concept to him as he was not taught about that in journalism classes, the interviewee said.

About the most important qualities of a journalist today, answers prominently show the impact of the new media. Two interviewees emphasized “adaptability” and “flexibility.” One interviewee listed research and interview skills, adaptability, analytical thinking, and multimedia skills. The interviewee elaborated on adaptability: “company goals and focuses can shift, forcing reporters to adjust and maybe cover things a little differently or present information differently. Or sometimes data and metrics can show readers aren’t as interested in certain topics, and beats could adjust accordingly.” However, another interviewee said, “While social media still has a place, I think it’s dying as a source of clicks for media organizations.” The interviewee reaffirmed the value of traditional journalism skills of reporting, interviewing, editing and research. However, she did agree that “students need to learn how to be flexible and pivot to the changes in digital spaces.” Others mentioned being curious, analytical, effective in communicating, and being able to dig deeper, open up sources, and craft an interesting narrative. One interviewee pointed to the partisan environment today and sees objectivity as the most important quality, in addition to multimedia reporting and AI skills.

On the question about the effectiveness of their journalism training, most felt that their journalism education provided a good foundation, but one interviewee felt that it was not even close to reality. The interviewee said that she had to learn a lot more on the job. Another one acknowledged that there were gaps, such as not introducing the expanding opportunities in media organizations, such as digital producers, newsletter editors, audience managers and product leaders. “The curriculum needs to reflect all these new

career paths. Classes need to reflect skills like newsletter marketing, how to send push alerts and managing a website,” the interviewee said. One journalism educator said, “A course on social media should be all-encompassing across all platforms and delve into the pros and cons of social media as a whole. Some journalism programs have adapted their strategies regarding teaching social media better than others.”

On the question of challenges facing journalism education and the profession in the digital and social media environment, one journalism educator said, “Keeping students interested in journalism as a career seems like the No. 1 challenge facing journalism education today.” He said that it's become really difficult because of the shrinking job market in traditional media outlets and how the industry has adapted to the shift in new job markets such as social media, marketing and public relations. The interviewee discussed journalism schools' struggle to adapt as artificial intelligence has become more prevalent. The interviewee also pointed to the growing concern that outlets whose work is used as teaching materials have become more partisan. Another one believed it is public's distrust of the media and misinformation flowing across social media. Still another interviewee believed the major challenge is “Finding sustainable business models without sacrificing journalism integrity. I think social media should be used as a tool for reporting but not as a substitute.” Safety concerns and harassment issues are part of the challenges as well. One interviewee discussed concerns over doxing, burnout, and mental health issues due to social media harassment campaigns.

About the future of journalism education, the concern over students' employability is apparent as one journalism educator stressed the importance of students being versatile in their skills and knowledge “at a high level” so “this in turn makes them more attractive job candidates and creates more professional opportunities for them.” The interviewee reported that his school is trying to adapt its curriculum to the rise of artificial intelligence but cautioned against overselling the new media. He also advocated “having tough conversations” about the status of the old media. Two younger interviewees emphasized the importance of keeping up with current trends in the industry, such as multimedia and digital components, as well as balancing that with traditional reporting skills. They also believed it is important to invite media professionals to guest speak in classes so that they

have a role in guiding the next generation. One veteran in the industry who often guest lectures in journalism classes emphasized investigative reporting skills and the need to win back the trust of the public.

Discussions and findings

There appear to be two levels of journalistic principles, one political and one professional. The difference in the political principles is as wide as teaching Marxist views of journalism and the party press versus teaching the role of the media in a democracy. Both media systems support the political systems they operate in. These principles are at the core of journalism curriculums in each country. In China, the principles are translated into media's political and activist role in nation-building while in the U.S., media freedom and the watchdog role are emphasized.

The philosophical differences are manifested in the objectives of journalism programs today. In China, journalism schools aim to train "expert journalists" and "pillars of society" with the right values so that they will help push for social progress and tell the stories of China to the world. In the U.S., the objective is more immediate – train students well so that they can find journalism jobs, help sustain the industry and keep democracy healthy. With state-supported education in China, the market pressure is less acute than in the U.S. even though enrollment in journalism programs in China has also stalled.

While political principles diverge, professional journalistic principles, values and roles in the two countries highly converge – truth, objectivity, educating and informing the public. There are different emphases though. Chinese interviewees emphasize media's responsibilities, or activist role, in pushing for social progress and development while their American counterpart highlight media's watchdog role and being fair and impartial. Such differences are apparently shaped by the political systems they operate in.

Journalism schools in both countries face similar challenges and opportunities in the new media environment and have taken similar steps in their curriculum in strengthening training in new media skills. But their approaches and objectives still vary. In China, it's more about mastering new media technologies to fight misinformation from social media

and get the right message out. In the U.S., in addition to keeping up with new media technologies and fighting fake news, the focus is on offering more specializations and options in the curriculum to capitalize on new career paths.

Conclusion

This study has provided a comparison of journalism education in the U.S. and China with sample curriculums from top journalism schools in both countries. Future studies could expand the examination of curriculums to include mid-rank schools, which are more representative of the whole field. New studies could also focus more on specific areas of journalism programs, such as political education in journalism curriculum in the two countries, student employment challenges, student motivations in pursuing a journalism major, the balance between general/liberal arts education and the journalism major, the balance between theory/context courses and skills courses, the balance between traditional journalism skills and new media skills, best practices on integrating journalism classrooms with newsrooms, profiles and expectations of journalism students, and profiles, aspirations and expectations of journalism faculty. As journalism education is going through fast changes, there is so much to learn. And comparative analysis can often reveal deeper insight.

One major drawback of this study is not being able to secure more interviewees for this research project. It appears that inviting journalism professionals and educators for interviews through email, especially sources the researcher does not already know, is an ineffective data-collecting method. But it may also have inadvertently showed the challenge of the journalism field – how overwhelmed and burned-out everyone related to journalism feel as some potential interviewees replied that they would get back but never did. Perhaps the more effective way to reach out is through snowball sampling even though the pool may be smaller.

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