PARADIGMATIC TRANSFORMATIONS AND VULNERABILITIES OF JOURNALISM IN THE DIGITAL SPACE

TRANSFORMĂRI PARADIGMATICE ȘI VULNERABILITĂȚI ALE JURNALISMULUI ÎN SPAȚIUL DIGITAL

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Rezumat. *Jurnalismul multimedia poate fi înțeles ca o extensie naturală a integrării și operaționalizării tehnologiilor emergente, care pătrund rapid în toate sectoarele societății. Prin practicile sale specifice, jurnalismul multimedia permite crearea unor experiențe media mai imersive, captivante și durabile. În centrul său se află convergența media, un principiu fundamental care contestă liniaritatea formatelor jurnalistice tradiționale și permite publicului să acceseze și să interpreteze conținutul într-un mod personalizat și neliniar. Interactivitatea constituie o componentă centrală a acestei paradigme, oferind utilizatorilor un grad sporit de acțiune și control asupra proceselor de consum și înțelegere a informațiilor. Concomitent, extinderea jurnalismului multimedia aduce în prim-plan o serie de provocări substanțiale, inclusiv cererea de competențe tehnice avansate în domenii precum programarea, designul interactiv și producția audiovizuală, precum și cerințe sporite de transparență și responsabilitate în colectarea și diseminarea informațiilor în sfera publică. Aceste provocări sunt agravate și mai mult de disparitățile în ceea ce privește alfabetizarea digitală în anumite segmente de public media.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *jurnalism tradițional, new media, știri false, content media, standarde etice, interactivitate.*

Summary: *Multimedia journalism can be understood as a natural extension of the integration and operationalization of emerging technologies, which are rapidly permeating all sectors of society. Through its specific practices, multimedia journalism enables the creation of more immersive, engaging, and enduring media experiences. At its core lies media convergence, a foundational principle that challenges the linearity of traditional journalistic formats and allows audiences to access and interpret content in a personalized and non-linear manner. Interactivity constitutes a central component of this paradigm, granting users an increased degree of agency and control over the processes of information consumption and comprehension. Concurrently, the expansion of multimedia journalism brings to the fore a set of substantial challenges, including the demand for advanced technical competencies in areas such as programming, interactive design, and audiovisual production, as well as heightened requirements for transparency and accountability in*

the collection and dissemination of information within the public sphere. These challenges are further compounded by disparities in digital literacy among certain segments of media audiences

Keywords: *traditional journalism, new media, fake news, media content, ethical standards, interactivity.*

Introduction

Multimedia journalism seeks to align itself with the implementation of new technologies in order to create and develop for audiences more effective experiences with media content [1, p. 141]. In this respect, its essence refers to the concept of convergence, a defining feature that distinguishes new media from traditional formats by offering information consumers the possibility to assimilate content in an interactive and personalized manner. The key strength is interactivity, which ensures the audience a higher degree of “control over the process of consuming and assimilating information” [2, p. 674]. At the same time, the development of multimedia journalism outlines a series of challenges, including the need for advanced skills in programming, interactive design, and video production, as well as transparency and responsibility in the collection and dissemination of information in the public sphere. Additional challenges relate to the low level of digital literacy among certain categories of media consumers, as well as among some representatives of the profession. The conveyor-like, uninterrupted nature of information exposure indicates that content is produced and distributed in real time and is accessible anywhere. Complementarily, vast opportunities emerge for creating multimedia content that is far more engaging than traditional formats. Moreover, the personalized nature of information published in the online environment transforms platforms into “personal assistants,” offering users information tailored to their interests at significantly lower costs compared to traditional journalism [3, p. 212].

Context

Thus, the fundamental differences between new media and traditional journalism concern several aspects: the uni- and bidirectional nature of communication, the characteristics of the production process, the actual format of content, credibility and ethical considerations, and, of course, the specific features of the information user in the online environment. In new media, the flow of information is bidirectional and participatory, even though it also entails a certain level of risk of errors, since the production process is instantaneous and the time available for validating and publishing information is limited [4, p. 113]. A fundamental issue, however, concerns the credibility of content displayed on online platforms, as this requires strong competencies in data and information verification on the part of journalists, especially in the context of the expansion of the fake news phenomenon. Another aspect relates to the journalist’s preparedness to demonstra-

te “multiplatform thinking” [5] in order to adapt to the diversity of online information carriers: social networks, websites, blogs, newsletters, podcasts, and others. An important issue also refers to the competition between media platforms and social networks, given the speed with which users themselves generate informational content. Within the framework of the initiated research, we conducted an extensive interview with experts in the field of mass media and journalists representing the professional practice, addressing several aspects of the research topic. The outlined results summarize the responses of 12 journalists and media experts to 8 questions, yielding the following findings:

In response to the question *“List the main 3–4 differences between traditional journalism and journalism practiced in new media in terms of the processes of producing and distributing informational content,”* the majority of answers referred to the following aspects: the speed of delivering journalistic content; the use of cutting-edge technical tools; the reporter becoming multifunctional, capable of producing and distributing media content; interactivity and audience involvement in the distribution of materials; diversification of distribution channels and target audiences; and lower costs for content production and distribution. Thus, the responses highlight the significant and evident transformations of journalism following the emergence of new media. According to experts in the field, the focus shifts from the slow and costly processes of traditional media to speed, interactivity, and high accessibility to various multimedia formats. At the same time, the journalist becomes a content creator with multiple competencies in the production and distribution of media materials.

In response to the question *“To what extent have new media influenced the credibility and ethical standards of journalism as a profession?”* respondents referred to the following aspects: new media have had an enormous impact on the credibility and ethical standards of journalism; the visibility and importance of information are dictated by algorithms, which lead to the creation of “echo chambers,” where each consumer lives within their own informational bubble; intensified competition among media institutions, driven by the imperative of speed, inevitably contributes to violations of journalistic ethical standards; and the new-media journalist must be attentive to what they distribute, how, and in what contexts the product is delivered, in order to avoid falling victim to disinformation and manipulation. As can be observed, journalists demonstrate a major concern regarding the impact of new media on the ethics and credibility of the journalistic profession. The algorithmization of information distribution and competition for speed often lead to superficiality and the erosion of professional standards. Journalists face pressure to be first, sometimes at the expense of accuracy and source verification, which results in the erosion of professional integrity. In this context, individual responsibility, accountability, self-regulation, and ethical values become essential for maintaining the credibility of new media.

In response to the question *“How does the role/competencies of the journalist change in the digital era compared to those in traditional (print, radio, TV) media?”* respondents’ answers focused on the following directions: communication within the editorial team takes place simultaneously across multiple platforms and channels (such as editorial groups on Telegram or Signal, text editing using specialized software to which the editor, producer, and reporter have real-time access, live transmission of photo/video images from the field or instant file sharing, etc.); a journalist in the digital environment is in direct contact with their followers and can interact with them directly, which is only a short step away from personal branding—something that was more difficult to achieve in the past—these journalists being perceived as credible sources worth following. The analysis of responses shows that the journalist’s role has expanded significantly in the digital era, involving technical, interactive, analytical, and personal image management competencies. Thus, direct interaction with the audience transforms the journalist into an active, omnipresent, and influential communicator, while personal branding becomes an essential component of professional credibility and visibility. The new-media journalist tends to be validated by the audience, as immediate reactions (likes, shares, comments) are direct indicators of the impact of their materials. These indicators also influence style and approach, steering the journalist toward creating content that attracts and maintains audience attention.

In response to the question *“What controversies arise in relation to the ‘fake news’ phenomenon and the way it is managed by traditional newsrooms versus online platforms?”* the following ideas were extracted from the answers: controversies related to the “fake news” phenomenon may arise at the stage of information dissemination, between journalistic responsibility and freedom of expression, professional ethical values and a certain degree of subjectivity, as well as between normative regulation and the risk of excessive control; newsrooms must have internal fact-checking mechanisms; and the loss of credibility in the eyes of the public may cause audiences to lose trust and migrate to other sources of information. The analysis of the responses reveals the existing tension between freedom of expression and professional responsibility in managing the phenomenon of “fake news.” Both traditional media and online platforms are compelled to adapt their strategies for verifying, validating, and disseminating information in order to prevent disinformation—the most serious error. Thus, the current practical context imposes the need for the operation of an internal fact-checking system, which becomes an essential condition for maintaining credibility.

In response to the question *“In what way do interactivity and audience participation (comments, shares, citizen journalism) change the interaction between journalist and audience?”* the recorded answers addressed the following points: the journalist is able to identify in a timely manner the public’s expectations, needs, and interests regar-

ding specific topics; this dynamic obliges the journalist to pay closer attention to audience reactions, to adapt their discourse, and to take responsibility for explaining editorial choices; interaction between journalist and audience, sometimes even in real time, brings benefits to both sides, as the public can provide information to the journalist or signal the existence of societal problems, which the journalist can later revisit with a more in-depth and well-documented approach; this interactive relationship increases the journalist's sense of responsibility; the digital public sphere is highly heterogeneous, therefore journalists must face waves of criticism and hate, which can often affect the creative process. The analysis of the responses highlights the fact that interactivity has profoundly transformed the relationship between journalist and audience, making it more direct, transparent, and participatory. The audience becomes an active actor, capable of influencing the media agenda and contributing to the identification of relevant topics. This bidirectional communication increases the journalist's accountability, obliging them to be more responsive, empathetic, and fair in their relationship with the audience. At the same time, the digital environment also brings challenges related to managing criticism, since audiences have full freedom not to validate certain media content.

In response to the question *"How does the heterogeneous nature of the public/ audience fragmentation influence the quality and outcome of the media process?"* respondents emphasized the following ideas: in the face of a heterogeneous audience, journalists and media institutions in general are compelled to adopt content personalization strategies in order to retain existing audiences and "win over" new ones; whereas in the past an article or report had to be attractive and relevant to a broad audience, the focus now lies on creating targeted messages that resonate with smaller but highly active subgroups; this tendency toward adaptation leads to a diversification of journalistic styles, ranging from detailed reports and complex analyses to short, straightforward news items that are easy to distribute and consume quickly; traditional newsrooms face additional tasks, as they must also maintain a presence in the digital space; a heterogeneous audience demands increasingly diverse information, which does not always result in content of high quality or in compliance with ethical standards. The analysis of the responses shows that audience fragmentation forces media newsrooms to adopt innovative, flexible, and personalized interaction strategies, adapting content to the needs of various audience segments. This trend capitalizes on the diversity of journalistic forms and distribution channels, but it also generates increased pressure on journalists. In the effort to attract multiple audiences, there is a risk of diminishing the quality of media messages. Therefore, maintaining a balance between attractiveness, responsibility, and comprehensiveness becomes essential for preserving the credibility of contemporary journalism.

In response to the question *“What difficulties does the journalist face in the digital era?”* respondents referred to: the speed of publishing and distributing information; pressure to produce content rapidly; the risk of falling into the trap of false news or disinformation; competition with social media platforms; technical challenges related to algorithms; and the lack of resources for a well-developed fact-checking process. The analysis of the responses highlights the fact that the journalist in the digital era faces a series of complex challenges generated by the accelerated pace of work and intense competition in the online environment. The pressure to publish quickly can lead to a decline in quality and an increased risk of disinformation. In addition, dependence on algorithms affects the visibility of journalistic content, while social media platforms impose unfair competition oriented toward visibility rather than accuracy.

In response to the question *“Which aspects of the traditional economic model of the press have undergone changes in the era of digitalization?”* the recorded answers addressed the following aspects: online advertising has become predominant, with its concentration on major digital platforms (Google, Facebook); dependence on algorithms for content distribution has increased, and monetization models such as subscriptions have become common; production and distribution costs in the digital space are lower. The analysis of the responses shows that digitalization has profoundly transformed the economic model of the press, shifting the emphasis from traditional advertising to online advertising and alternative forms of monetization. At the same time, production and distribution costs have decreased, but competition for public attention has increased considerably. The introduction of subscriptions and exclusive content reflects the need for the press to adapt to new patterns of digital consumption. It can be concluded that the economic sustainability of journalism increasingly depends on innovation, adaptability, and the diversification of funding sources.

Conclusions

In conclusion, as technology advances, journalists will be required to continuously adapt their practices and ethical standards in order to respond to emerging challenges. Combating disinformation, respecting privacy, preventing the publication of manipulative information, and maintaining a transparent and sustainable relationship with the public represent only some of the complex responsibilities of the profession in the coming years. In order to preserve and strengthen public trust and protect journalistic integrity, a proactive approach is essential, supported by collaboration among media institutions, social media platforms, and independent organizations involved in fact-checking and validation. In an environment of constant transformation, journalism must remain a credible source of information while continuously adapting to new technological and social realities.

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