CHAPTER 3

The rise and fall of journalism

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we study how the electronic revolution marked by the telegraph system and the digital revolution marked by the Internet impacted journalism and the public's access to information. We suggest that the former network contributed to journalistic professionalisation and made factual and contextualised information widely available, while the latter enhanced journalistic deprofessionalisation and made access to reliable information difficult for the public. Currently, citizen journalists producing and sharing content on social media, including YouTubers, TikTokers, vloggers, and podcasters, fail to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information, do not check their sources, and are often unable to provide background information. Big Tech companies such as Meta and Google do not produce any public interest content yet absorb a huge portion of the advertising revenues. A policy solution may be to tax them and to channel the revenue thus generated to traditional news organisations.

KEYWORDS: access to information, citizen journalism, influencers, professional journalism, telegraph

Bajomi-Lázár, P., & Boldog, D. (2026). The rise and fall of journalism. In A. Balčytienė, P. Bajomi-Lázár, & H. Sousa (Eds.), *Digital media shadowing democracy: Technology, communication, and power* (pp. 45–62). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
https://doi.org/10.48335/9789189864290-3

Introduction: Communication technology and social change

When studying the impact of communication technologies upon societies, media scholars often seek historical analogies. Comparisons of the electronic revolution marked by the telegraph network and of the digital revolution marked by the Internet are particularly popular because of the similarities between the two information systems (e.g., Kovarik, 2015; Standage, 1998/2007). This chapter follows this tradition. Taking a historical perspective and offering a critical review of the literature, we compare the societal impacts of these two binary and global networks. While finding some similarities, we also suggest that the two greatly differ in their impacts on journalism and the public's access to information. We argue that the rise of the telegraph network in the mid-nineteenth century contributed to journalistic professionalisation and hence indirectly eased access to factual, verified, and contextualised information for the public, while the Internet, and in particular the Web 2.0 in the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, enhanced journalistic deprofessionalisation and thus indirectly hampered access to reliable information. We also suggest that the telegraph network stabilised knowledge, while the Internet destabilised it, hampering informed political decision-making.

What is the nature of the impact that communication technologies in general may exert upon societies? Kovarik (2015) argued that caution is needed when describing historical cause-and-effect relationships. He warned of the pitfalls of monocausal "technological determinism" and observed that communication technologies and societies develop in interaction, mutually shaping each other, and that changes in communication technology are at best *contributory* causes, as they do not explain, in and by themselves, the complex transformations of societies, also owing to changing economic, political, and regulatory contexts. Further, Kovarik distinguished between the primary, secondary, and tertiary impacts of communication technologies. For example, the primary impact of the invention of printing was the (relatively) massive publication of the Bible; its secondary impact was the standardisation of written language; and its tertiary impact was the Protestant Reformation enhanced by printed religious pamphlets and treatises.

Hodkinson (2011) noted that a distinction must be made between the intended and the actual impacts of technology. For example, when inventing the phonograph, Thomas Edison envisaged recording human speech, yet society opted to use his device as a means to store and share music. Media are born twice – first in a technological and then is a societal sense – and sometimes they are continually reborn. In fact, many communication technologies are never complete but, as Chadwick (2017: 23) observed, undergo "continuing evolution", adapting to new demands and offering new uses; for example, the black-and-white television of the 1950s was quite

different from the interactive television of our day. Hodkinson (2011: 31) also suggested that, despite the widely held view that communication technology is neutral and may be used for both virtuous and evil purposes depending on the societal context, it is plausible to maintain that “communication media such as newspapers, radio and television also have particular capacities and constraints – sometimes referred to as affordances”, favouring certain social uses over others.

Following Kovarik’s approach, one may suggest that the invention of the telegraph was, among other factors, a contributory cause for journalistic professionalisation. To be more precise, the primary impact of the telegraph was immediate communication over long distances, its secondary impact was the professionalisation of journalism, and its tertiary impact was the stabilisation of knowledge, including information on public matters. Of course, the telegraph has had many other societal impacts as well, such as the development of the railway systems (Briggs & Burke, 2009), the rise of multinational companies (Carey, 1989/2009), and the consolidation of the British Empire (Barbier & Lavenir, 2004). One might add, in line with Hodkinson’s above-cited observation, that Samuel Morse, the inventor of the electronic telegraph, did likely not envision the professionalisation of journalism as an impact of his telegraph, which came about in a specific societal setting. In a similar vein, the rise of the Internet – “the network of networks” – was a contributory cause for journalistic deprofessionalisation; this was one of its many secondary impacts, unforeseen by its developers. In this angle, the primary impact of the rise of the Internet was the immediate transfer of greatly increased quantities of data over long distances, and its tertiary impact was, among other things, the destabilisation of knowledge.

The comparison of the electronic telegraph system and the Internet is warranted by the number of similarities between the two – so much so that Standage (1998/2007) called the telegraph system “the mother of all networks” and “the Victorian internet”. Both the telegraph system and the Internet were created as collaborative projects, involving several inventors from a variety of countries; both were initially accompanied by both optimistic and pessimistic predictions regarding their impact upon society; both were based on the common carrier model; and both have contributed to the rise of information monopolies (Kovarik, 2015). Further, both networks enhanced the globalisation of communication (Putnis, 2008; Sterling, 2003) and the economy (Carey, 1989/2009; Castells, 2009). Also, both gave rise to virtual communities, generated problems of data protection, contributed to information overload, and blurred the line between the public and private spheres (Standage, 1998/2007).

Differences between the two networks are, of course, also numerous and important, including the scope of the people personally accessing and using the two communication technologies, the quantity and format of the information delivered, and the physical length of the infrastructures. Of the various

differences, in this chapter we focus on the impact of the two communication systems upon journalism and the public's access to information, studying industry-level developments and illustrating them with historical examples.

It is noteworthy that on the eve of both the electronic and the digital revolutions, mainly optimistic predictions were voiced, suggesting that the new communication technologies would improve and democratise access to information. Samuel Morse himself suggested in 1838 that,

> the whole surface of this country would be channeled for those nerves which are to diffuse, with the speed of thought, a knowledge of all that is occurring throughout the land. (as cited in Czitrom, 1982: 11–12)

Likewise, Vannevar Bush, who first outlined the future Internet in an essay published in 1946, suggested that,

> wholly new forms of encyclopedias will appear [...]. The applications of science [...] may yet allow [mankind] truly to encompass the great record. (as cited in Kovarik, 2015: 504)

We argue that the former prediction has largely come true, whereas the latter has failed to do so. In the first instance, the intended and the actual uses of the new communication technology were largely identical; in the second, the new technology has had a reverse impact upon society.

The professionalisation of journalism

In the early nineteenth century in England and the US, and later in the rest of the Western world, the press became an industry addressed to a mass market (Høyer & Lauk, 2003). The industrialisation of the press was triggered by a series of developments described as the bourgeois and the industrial revolutions (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016).

Owing to the bourgeois revolutions, England's expiring Licensing Act was repealed in 1695, and the US Constitution's First Amendment was adopted in 1791, marking the beginning of the rise of the free press. Political changes also enabled journalists to sit in on Parliament and Congress; the first outlet to have a team of parliamentary reporters was the *Morning Chronicle* in London at the end of the eighteenth century (Chalaby, 1996). Journalists began to give up the idea that they were to speak for the government or political parties and increasingly associated themselves with the public, that is, taxpayers who have the right to know what the government spends their money on. As Thomas Paine put it in 1792,

> in the representative system, the reason for everything must publicly appear. Every man is a proprietor in government and considers it a necessary part of his business to understand. It concerns his business because it affects his property. (as cited in Peters, 1998: 62)

The new philosophy of journalism is illustrated by Joseph Pulitzer's oft-quoted words, published in the *St. Louis Post and Dispatch* in 1878:

> The Post and Dispatch will serve no party but the people; […] will not support the "Administration," but criticize it; […] will advocate principles and ideas rather than prejudices and partisanship. (as cited in Ibold & Wilkins, 2008: 85)

The idea that journalists were to represent the general public instead of particular interest groups was corroborated by the introduction of self-regulatory mechanisms such as ethical codes that established an "invisible contract" with the audiences, making the news production process transparent and accountable and thus establishing trust; the first newspaper ever to have a code of its own was the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, with 24 rules published in the 1860s.

The industrial revolution has contributed in many ways to the rise of the mass press, including the construction of roads and bridges, canals, and railway lines that accelerated the delivery of news and the distribution of newspapers (Briggs & Burke, 2009). Industrialisation, coupled with the rise of capitalist economy, also established massive working and middle classes that came to constitute "the public" (Carey, 2003/2007), whose demand for news could be satisfied owing to the introduction of steam printing in 1814 and wood-based paper in 1835. The first outlet to use steam printing was *The Times* in London, which almost quadrupled its circulation (Innis, 1950/1986).

The industrial revolution was also instrumental in bringing about an advertising market. Urbanisation established geographically condensed audience markets for newspaper distribution: At a busy traffic hub in an urban centre, a newsboy could sell hundreds of copies in an hour. The number and circulation of newspapers grew exponentially. In 1800, there were 235 newspapers in the US; a hundred years later, there were approximately 16,000 (Czitrom, 1982). At the end of the nineteenth century, some of the New York papers sold a million copies a day (Høyer, 1998). In Europe, there were about 2,400 titles in 1820, as opposed to about 12,000 in 1900 (Kovarik, 2015).

The industrialisation of the press was coupled with a process of journalistic professionalisation whereby,

> the journalistic field developed their own discursive norms and values such as objectivity and neutrality. The journalistic mode of writing became characterized by particular discursive strategies and practices, neither literary nor political in character. (Chalaby, 1996: 304)

Among the innovations of the industrial revolution, the establishment of the telegraph network in the middle of the nineteenth century was especially instrumental to the rise of the mass press. The news no longer focused on local

events; for example, *The Times* in London hired 19 foreign correspondents (Chalaby, 1996) and some of the New York papers jointly established the wireless agency Associated Press in 1848 (Boorstin, 1961/1992). The new communication technology allowed for near real-time reporting: Some outlets such as *The Evening Bulletin* in Philadelphia had as many as seven editions a day (Sterling, 2003). The telegraph turned the news into "a saleable commodity" (Boorstin, 1961/1992: 13). For example, in the first week of 1848, *The New York Herald* printed 79,000 words of telegraphic content (Czitrom, 1982). On 30 October 1878, the foreign news page of *The Times* offered 32 news items from almost as many countries (Chalaby, 1996).

But why stress the importance of the telegraph among so many different factors contributing to the industrialisation and professionalisation of the press? It is no accident that several papers referred to the new communication device in their titles, including, among others, *The New York Telegraph* (New York, 1845), *The Daily Telegraph* (London, 1855), and *The Telegraph* (Brisbane, 1872). The telegraph was a reason behind and a symbol for a new reporting style and business model. As correspondents had to pay for every single word delivered via cable, it inspired reporters to use economical language:

> The telegraph reworked the nature of written language. [...] It snapped the tradition of partisan journalism by forcing the wire services to generate "objective" news. [...] The wire services demanded [...] something closer to a "scientific" language, a language of strict denotation [...] language had to be flattened out and standardized. (Carey, 1989/2009: 162)

As a result, the "news paradigm" was born:

> The news paradigm consists of several related journalistic techniques. First the news interview to collect information, then balance and objectivity in reporting, and the fact-condensed "inverted pyramid" in production [abandoning the convention of the chronological description of events in favour of the "outcomes first" approach]. The combined product became the "omnibus newspaper" which catered for a wide variety of different readers. [...] Objectivity was obtained by using many different sources and authorities to a story, quoting the contending parties to an issue. [...] Part of this strategy for larger circulation and larger audiences was the common denominator equation. Topics and programs should appeal to the largest possible number, even if that meant that no one got what they most wanted. (Høyer, 1998: 57–58)

In other words, owing mainly to the telegraph, a new business model was established: Professional journalism was no longer based on the idea that the content produced should please as many people as possible, but that it should displease as few people as possible. Partisan journalism had driven away

those who did not share the same convictions, while, under the new business model, partisan considerations were increasingly ignored, offering a reporting style acceptable for all. This change was of course largely facilitated by the advertising and audience markets established by the industrial revolution: A precondition for professional journalism is political independence, which may only be guaranteed by economic self-reliance.

Of course, it was not only the telegraph that has enhanced the industrialisation and the professionalisation of the press; newspapers also contributed to the rise and development of the telegraph network (Innis, 1950/1986; Schudson, 1978). In particular, an increasing demand for news was a key factor behind the development of the cable system, the demand for which was at least in part generated by the war between the US and Mexico (1846–1948). But the competition for news had begun earlier. In the 1820s, the *Journal of Commerce* and the *Courier and Enquirer*, both based in New York, established pony express services between New York and Washington so that they could deliver political news first; then they used carrier pigeons; finally, they switched to the telegraph (Standage, 1998/2007). Newspapers had a vested interest in establishing and developing an efficient communication system: About one third of the total costs of the 1866 trans-Atlantic cable were covered by the newspapers constituting the Associated Press. William Swain, the owner of the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, invested heavily in the Magnetic Telegraph Company and later became its director and president (Czitrom, 1982). The demand for a fast information system was generated by the rivalry among competing newspapers. Profit was a main motivation for innovation.

A professional model of journalism pursuing the "social responsibility" or "public service" ethos was thus born around the end of the nineteenth century (Siebert et al., 1956/1963), albeit with some researchers suggesting that it did not consolidate before its institutionalisation in the first half of the twentieth century, marked by the establishment of the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1927 in the UK and the introduction of the Fairness Doctrine in 1949 in the US (Chadwick, 2017). Even so, there were considerable national variations (Høyer & Lauk, 2003). According to the 2016 Worlds of Journalism Study, the Anglo-American standards of professional journalism have been exported to other parts of the world and have a normative appeal even in the Global South, where the technological, economic, and political conditions for its realisation are often missing (Hanitzsch et al., 2019).

Professionalism includes aspirations to gain and preserve autonomy vis-à-vis political and business powers while serving the public's "right to know" – that is, by "enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government" (Siebert et al., 1956/1963: 73–74). For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, professional journalists were distinguished by their specific education, participation in professional organisations, disinterested

approach to the topics covered, and commitment to accuracy (Høyer & Lauk, 2003). Journalists came to play a key role in setting an agenda in line with the public interest, checking facts, presenting information in a meaningful way, and moderating public discourse by eliminating extremist voices. They used a factual language and hence provided joint references, meanings, and shared understandings of the world. Professional journalism was instrumental to establishing common values shared by most of the democratic community (Schulz, 2000), making an important contribution to societal cohesion. It has stabilised the public's knowledge of the world.

Hence, most researchers suggest that the telegraph had a positive impact on journalism and on the public's access to information; some, however, think otherwise. Czitrom (1982) observed that by the end of the nineteenth century, most of the American telegraph network came to be owned by Western Union, a company that had a quasi-monopoly and was therefore capable of manipulating the information publicised. Chadwick (2017: 28) argued that while the history of the press has often been described as "the victory of reason and informed debates", it has in reality always featured "a hybrid blend of entertainment and information [...] including fictional storytelling and sensationalism". Postman (1985/2006: 76, 78, 85) suggested that the telegraph and the mass press jointly paved the way for a great deal of irrelevant, incoherent, and context-free information to emerge, which does not serve "social and political decision-making and action", as "in a sea of information, there was very little of it to use", and the information thus provided had "no genuine connection to our lives". While acknowledging that some accounts of the professionalisation of journalism have been over-optimistic, one may object to Postman's view that in the rapidly globalising world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people's lives were increasingly influenced by distant events, which events therefore came to be perceived by the public as relevant for decision-making. Arguably, it was only the Digital Age, beginning fifteen years after the first edition of Postman's oft-quoted book, that an undisputable overload of fragmented and decontextualised information began to emerge – as the next chapter demonstrates.

The deprofessionalisation of journalism

The digital revolution at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, marked by digitalisation, computerisation, platformisation, and the advent of the smartphone, had, once again, a thorough impact on journalism and hence on the public's access to information – not only in the Anglo-American world, but globally. It is important to recall, however, that the current state of professional journalism, often described as a crisis (see Zelizer et al., 2022), may not be explained by technological change alone. As Tófalvy and Vobič (2025) have noted, it is also explained by changing

perceptions of the societal role of journalists, as well as hostile political and business environments.

The rise of Web 1.0 and especially that of the interactive Web 2.0 gave birth to a new breed of journalist: the citizen journalist who produces and shares content via blogs and social media without regard to professional considerations. Splichal and Dahlgren (2016: 6–8, 12–14) described this phenomenon as the "de-professionalisation of journalism", noting that,

> the Internet has [...] given rise to more participatory communication by people who are not professional journalists, such as bloggers and citizen journalists. ... Citizen journalists are largely avocational. [...] Also, citizen journalism is more likely to reach smaller, specialised audiences and is often socially engaged in some way. It thus tends to adhere less to traditional norms of fairness and balance and renders the distinctions between fact and opinion less sharp. [...] There is little or no accountability.

As a general rule, citizen journalists have their own agendas. They do not distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information, nor do they check their sources, provide context for their stories, or moderate the public discourse to keep extremist views away. Not bound by ethical codes and collective contracts, citizen journalists' news production processes lack both transparency and accountability. Misreporting entails no consequences of any kind. (One might add, though, that citizen journalism emerged well before digitalisation; the authors of fanzines of the 1970s alternative music movements or those of the samizdat publications in the former communist countries were not professional journalists. Also, arguably, the boundaries between professional and citizen journalism are sometimes blurred, owing to the convergent nature of the digital eco-system; see Tófalvy, 2015). Citizen journalists' influence has been steadily growing in recent years, so much so that the latest *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* available at the time of writing refers to social media influencers, vloggers, podcasters, and other social media personalities as constituting an "alternative news ecosystem" (Newman et al., 2025: 5).

Social media give voice to everyone, but "without filters and mediation" (Bayer, 2019: 128). Platforms may have a huge impact upon public opinion, while they do not behave as publishers or editors (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2019). They are lacking transparency and, as relatively new and global communication platforms, are largely unregulated, albeit recent years have seen several efforts by nation states and supranational organisations to regulate them, especially as they tend to abuse their quasi-monopoly positions (Bayer, 2019; see also the last section).

In recent decades, owing to the information revolution, professional journalism has encountered multiple other challenges, too, none of which seem to improve people's informed political choices. These include the following:

First, news consumption patterns have changed. Newspaper circulation has been dropping, and television viewership figures have been falling, especially among the younger generations. The reach of traditional news organisations has been declining for years, albeit with temporary changes (Newman et al., 2021, 2022). An increasing number of people access professional news sites via social media platforms (Wojcieszak et al., 2021). In the 48 countries covered in the latest *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, accounting for more than half of the world's population, 36 per cent of the sample use Facebook and 30 per cent use YouTube for news each week, followed by Instagram (19%), WhatsApp (19%), TikTok (16%), and X (12%) (Newman et al., 2025). The online versions of the traditional news organisations have been increasingly exposed to the algorithms of social media platforms, which lack transparency and are changed unilaterally by the platforms. For example, Facebook has deliberately hindered access to political content, with Meta, its parent company, announcing this in July 2022:

> Our tests have concluded and demonstrated that placing less emphasis on shares and comments for political content is an effective way to reduce the amount of political content people experience in their Feed. We have now implemented these changes globally.

The advent of social media platforms has exponentially increased the quantity of information available, but the quality of information seems to have worsened.

Second, in the online environment, automated disinformation campaigns have grown in numbers, including in democratic countries. Global studies have found evidence of organised disinformation campaigns in 28 countries in 2017, 48 countries in 2018, 70 countries in 2019, and 81 countries in 2020 (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Bradshaw et al. 2021). As a general trend, false news travels faster and farther online than accurate news stories do (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Online propaganda is arguably more efficient than offline propaganda, as several disinformation sites may be operated simultaneously and at virtually no cost, and the echo-chamber effect created by cross-references between those sites may make disinformation more believable for the public. Also, before digitalisation, the links between legacy propaganda outlets and political interest groups were fairly transparent. Since digitalisation, however, the link between online propaganda sites and political interests has often been hidden from the public eye. To date, disinformation sites may claim independence while serving political agendas, and faked independence may enhance the perceived credibility of the disinformation publicised. While some of the traditional news organisations are also known to have delivered fake news, it is to date arguably more difficult to determine fake from accurate stories; hence, the knowledge of the public has been destabilised, rendering it difficult for people to make informed political decisions. This is also including, in addition to downright political

disinformation, pseudo-scientific information. A sad example of the impact of the latter is the number of those who died of Covid-19, having believed online rumours about the harmful effects of vaccination.

Third, in the Analogue Age, there was a modus vivendi, or co-dependence, between professional journalists and politicians. Politicians needed journalists to reach out to voters; in exchange, they shared information with them. This is no longer the case. In the Digital Age, politicians have the ability to directly communicate with voters via social media platforms, bypassing traditional news organisations (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2019), a phenomenon often referred to as disintermediation (Giacomini, 2023). Professional journalists, no longer in the position to ask questions, are losing their ability to set and frame the public agenda. As politicians do not need them anymore, they are often denied access to information. It is no accident that some senior politicians such as Donald Trump are known to have excluded leading journalists from press events while in office.

Fourth, digital platforms in general and Big Tech companies such as Facebook and Google in particular have in recent decades driven advertising revenues away from traditional news organisations without, however, producing any public interest content that would facilitate voters' political choices. In 2024, for example, the digital media's share of the total advertising revenue was 72.7 per cent globally, and that of social media platforms within the total online advertising spending was 30.8 per cent (We Are Social, 2025). At the same time, most people are reluctant to pay for online news. In 2025, the proportion of digital subscribers was highest in Norway at 42 per cent among the 48 countries studied by the Reuters Institute (Newman et al., 2025); the same figures in most of the Western markets were between 12 and 22 per cent. Online sites have lost significant parts of both their advertising and audience markets.

It follows that traditional news outlets have increasingly less to re-invest into content production. Unsurprisingly, then, the number of professional journalists has been falling steadily. In the US, for example, there were 85,000 newsroom employees in 2020, as opposed to 114,000 in 2008, marking a 26 per cent decline in their numbers (Pew Research Center, 2021). Job cuts continued after the Covid-19 pandemic, albeit at a reduced pace; in 2021, 1,500 newsrooms employees lost their jobs, followed by 18,000 in 2022 and 3,000 in 2023 (Statista, 2025). At the same time, an increasing number of people have turned away from the news media or have been disconnecting from the news altogether, and the trust vested in traditional news organisations has been falling in many countries (Newman et al., 2022). In recent years, though, the level of trust has stabilised: In the OECD countries, currently around 39 per cent of the audiences have high or moderate levels of trust in traditional news organisations, as opposed to 44 per cent with low or no trust at all (OECD, 2024). The reasons may be manyfold, including a

perceived decline in the quality of the news produced by fewer journalists. Also, some politicians attempt to discredit critical media, calling them "fake news" with a possible impact on their followers (Chadwick, 2017). This is a vicious circle: Fewer journalists produce poorer content which drives away some of the public, enhancing further the financial problems of traditional news organisations.

What may cause frustration among audiences? Zelizer and colleagues (2022: 21, 14) have argued that a "massive exodus" from legacy media to online platforms is owing to journalists being "disconnected from the everyday realities of everyone who matters". The Reuters Institute (Newman et al., 2021: 36–37), in a similar vein, has suggested that some of the audiences, including, among others, Black and Hispanic Americans in the US and the people in the states that were formerly parts of East Germany, think that their lives are often misrepresented or are lacking adequate and fair coverage, and hence the research organisation suggests that "journalists and the news media are elitist, out of touch with people". Arguably, professional journalism has been too focused on ideological issues such as the "woke" movements, while ignoring some of the more concrete problems of their readers.

To be sure, there is a lot of discussion going on about the origins of the deprofessionalisation of journalism. Splichal and Dahlgren (2016) suggested that it began well before the digital revolution, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the telegraph accelerated the routinisation of news production, turning journalism from an intellectual into a technical occupation. To this view, however, one might object that in the age of the telegraph, the actual use of the communication technology and its application to content production were two different work phases, with the telegraph machines being handled by dedicated operators – at least until the 1870s, when the automatic telegraph machine was invented and newsrooms began to use it. Arguably, the technologisation of the profession began much later, with the advent of social media platforms whose journalistic uses requested more complex technological skills. To date, journalists are expected to produce, in addition to textual and audiovisual content, multimedia products, including video, podcast, and hypertext content – that is, "mobile journalism" or "multimedia storytelling" (Burum, 2016). The time pressures and the commercial logic of platforms also encourage journalists to bypass the traditional editorial practices and favour immediate and live news publication. Furthermore, artificial intelligence is to date widely used in the production of editorial content, including by traditional news organisations such as the Associated Press, Bloomberg, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post* (Tölgyes, 2023). The use of artificial intelligence in the newsroom may of course save costs for the outlets facing financial challenges, yet it is still unclear whether, or how, it can observe the standards of ethical journalism. Contemporary communication technologies turn some of the skills traditionally needed for professional journalism obsolete.

In sum, the proliferation of communication technologies, channels, platforms, and outlets at the turn of the millennium has led to the fragmentation of the audiences, as digitalisation has been "reducing the number of media experiences that national populations share with one another" (Hodkinson, 2011: 183). Professional news organisations are no longer able to provide joint references, meanings, and shared understandings that bind societies together. The advent of the Internet may have eased direct access to information but, increasingly lacking mediation by professional journalists, it has undermined factual and contextualised information and destabilised knowledge. Postman's "sea of information" has turned into an ocean with, of course, some islands of reliable information in it.

While most researchers are sceptical about the impacts of the rise of citizen journalism, some welcome it. For example, Keane (2022: 6, 139) has argued that digitalisation has brought about the new era which he calls "monitory democracy" and is,

> tied to multimedia-saturated societies – whose structures of power are continuously tracked and resisted by citizens and representatives acting within the digital media ecosystem. […] We know about the organized manipulation of information by hidden algorithms, corporate data harvesting, political gaslighting, state surveillance, and other decadent trends, yet equally striking is the way the decadence breeds stiff public resistance. Communicative abundance feeds the restless spirit of monitory democracy […] the age of monitory democracy witnesses constant spats about power, to the point where it seems as if no organization or leader or area within the government and civil society is immune from political trouble. Every nook and cranny of power becomes the potential target of "publicity" and "public exposure.

Keane's argument may be an indication that an overall consensus is still lacking among scholars when it comes to assessing the societal impacts of digitalisation, yet his remains a minority position with little evidence to support it.

Conclusion: Policy recommendations

Is there a way out of the current crisis of journalism? And who is to act so that the challenges journalism is now facing may be overcome: journalists, media owners, or the state?

Some scholars and practitioners in search of answers focus on journalists' role and call for a thorough revision of the standards of journalism developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Zelizer and colleagues (2022) have argued that journalism is at a crossroads and must choose either the "reformist" or the "revolutionary" path to meet a changing public demand.

The former would mean that "the elites that journalism would prioritize would no longer be high-status elites, but those representing the voices of historically disenfranchised groups" (Zelizer et al., 2022: 96), and the latter would include "creative acts of resistance" (Zelizer et al., 2022: 102), coupled with a revolt against the authority of elites, including those within the newsrooms, along with a more active audience participation in the news-making process.

Either way, the authors' view that journalism ought to give up its "elitist" aspirations of leading the public and to expand the set of voices in the news may raise some concerns. Should professional journalists really not seek to maintain their agenda-setting and framing roles in the age of fragmented audiences and destabilised knowledge? To be sure, the audiences must be given what they want. But journalism must also continue to lead the public, not just follow it; a common agenda is much needed to counter the ongoing disintegration of societies. That said, there is little doubt that current *modus operandi* of journalism should be revisited and the "invisible contract" between professional news organisations and the public should be reinstated. Trust must be regained.

One way to do this is to better ensure the transparency and accountability of the news production process by redesigning self-regulatory mechanisms, including codes of ethics, ethical commissions, complaint mechanisms, press ombuds, and professional fora such as blogs and journals for the discussion of ethical issues. This should, of course, be done in dialogue with the representative bodies of the public, not in isolation.

The owners of traditional news organisations might also need to act. Digital subscription rates are still low and will likely remain so as long as at least some of the online news sites continue to offer news free of charge, as some of the audiences migrate to free digital outlets once they hit paywalls. This is a problem of collective action. Publishers may need to consider acting jointly and establishing a consortium that collects online subscription fees collectively and redistributes them within the industry. This, however, seems to be an impossible mission as long as the market is distorted by public service media that provide free news online. It follows that public service media should also join the initiative and charge those who access their online platforms, which, however, would likely raise criticisms. That said, the fact that people are willing to pay for streaming platforms such as Netflix, Disney Plus, HBO Max, and Spotify on a massive scale is promising to the extent that it is an indication that they might also be willing to pay for high-quality online news services.

The state should also engage in regulatory action, which in fact has been on the agenda for years now, as several governmental reports have looked at how Meta, Google, and other Big Tech companies monetise traditional journalism. For example, the Australian Competition and Consumer

Commission (ACCC) started an investigation into the impact of platforms upon competition in media and advertising markets and especially upon the supply of news and journalistic content (ACCC, 2019), recommending that Big Tech companies pay for news media content accessed through their ecosystems (Birch & Cochrane, 2022). Likewise, the US Federal Trade Commission has sued Facebook to roll back its anticompetitive conduct and to restore competition (FTC, 2020). Also, to counter power imbalances, foster quality journalism, and improve citizens' access to information, the European Copyright Directive has introduced the right for press publishers to enter into licensing agreements with platforms for the publication of their news content. As a result, in 2023, Google announced that it had signed agreements with various publishers, covering over 1,500 publications across 15 countries (Rozgonyi, 2024). The rationale underlying these regulatory efforts is that Big Tech should make their algorithms transparent and accountable and that they should pay for the news produced by professional journalists and mediated via their platforms.

The example of Austria is particularly noteworthy. While being a small country, it played a pioneering role in 2020 by introducing a 5 per cent tax on online advertising for Big Tech companies such as Meta, Google, and Amazon – that is, companies with a global turnover of at least 750 million euros and a domestic turnover of at least 25 million euros a year. According to a 2023 recommendation by the Minister of Finances, the income thus generated may be used to subsidise online journalism, including digital content production and journalism education. In 2022, for example, the tax collected amounted to 96 million euros (Der Standard, 2023). In that year, 115 projects were granted a total of 20 million euros from the tax collected (OTS, 2023). There is also a press subsidies scheme supporting the daily and weekly print press, and another fund subsidising the broadcast media, managed by the media regulatory authorities KommAustria and the Austrian Regulatory Authority for Broadcasting and Telecommunications (RTR), respectively. In early 2024, RTR set out to redistribute another 20 million euros in support of quality journalism (RTR, 2023). The redistribution scheme is based on applications, to be evaluated in line with objective criteria, which is to exclude the preferential treatment of some outlets for political reasons. Outlets with extremist views, however, are denied support – a criterion in line with the efforts of professional journalists to keep extremist views away from public discourse and to enhance democratic cohesion, albeit controversial from a free speech perspective.

The taxation of digital media revenues in support of traditional news organisations would not be without precedent. Since the introduction of television advertising starting in the mid-1950s and especially in the 1960s, several European countries have established press subsidy schemes to make up for the losses of printed newspapers (De Bens & Østby, 1998; Humphreys,

1996). In the Netherlands, for example, television advertising was directly taxed, and the revenues thus generated were channelled via a press fund to loss-making newspapers, the underlying rationale being that traditional news organisations deliver content that most commercial television channels do not, yet without public interest content, voters may find it difficult to make informed decisions (Brants & McQuail, 1997). As Carey (2003/2007: 13) put it – "no journalism, no democracy".

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