

From headlines to hashtags: How social media rewrites the news narrative

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Abstract

This paper is a quantitative analysis of how social media rewrites news on consciously creating a headline, emotional headlining, and hashtagging. Based on the content analysis of 100 posts on Facebook, Twitter (X) and Instagram, the study checks the statistical dependence between the style of the headline (clickbait, question-based and informative) and the emotional tone (positive, negative, neutral) on the number of likes, shares, and comments added by users. Chi-square tests and descriptive statistics were used to determine a trend of audience interaction. Findings reveal that clickbait-type headlines highly surpassed other variations in measure of engagement and framing negativelyemittedly turned out to perform especially well on Twitter. The presence of a hashtag also showed the non-linear character of the relation between it and engagement, and one or two hashtags created the most activity on all platforms. These observations prove that the performance-like logic of social media is making editorial less and less, as analytics-driven user behaviour and platform possibilities are becoming more and more determining factors. The research suggests the necessity to review the principles of journalism through the prism of the algorithmic benchmarks that shape the news distribution and intake currently.

Keywords: Social media, Journalism, Headlines, Hashtags, Algorithmic gatekeeping, audience, Engagement, Digital narratives, Clickbait, platform logic.

1. Introduction

Journalism and social media collided, which has fundamentally changed the news production process, its dissemination, and consumption in the new millennium. News production was once a sphere of the work of skilled professionals who worked within institutional constraints and guidelines; however, progressively, current news production has changed into a decentralized process, influenced by the culture of participation and the algorithmic conventions of the internet and such social platforms as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter (now X) and TikTok (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Van Dijck et al., 2018). The revolution means that the customary understanding of news gatekeeping and authority together with news objectivity is being scraped as the citizenry assume new functions of news dispersion, opinion generating and rewriting of news. The emergence of social media did not only introduce a new medium through which news stories can travel but has set into motion a complete redesign of the structure of how narratives can be created and unfold within the representations of the public sphere (Hermida, 2020).

The logic that social media have brought on board in the news ecosystem is new. In contrast to print mass media or broadcast which are run on an editorial schedule and news agenda, platforms run on being shareable, viral and easy to be emotional about (Berger & Milkman, 2010; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). As such, news headings are written, edited, framed, and subjected to headlines to attract as many clicks and responses as possible, either to provoke or entertain (Blom & Hansen, 2015; Kuiken et al., 2017). These platform logics turn the form of headlines upside-down, modify the nature of user interaction with stories, and influence

expectations of audience. Because of this, the work of journalists is now focused not just on their target audience but also the algorithm a reporter needs to create content that will perform well against the competition of online articles (Tandoc & Vos, 2016; Lischka, 2021). This gatekeeping, made algorithmic, is a revision of the basic social role of journalism. The original understanding of the public sphere has now turned into a format of an active, algorithm-filtered stream, where news items can receive a 'traction' not just because of addressing a certain level of interest in the general audience, but rather due to the probability of inciting a reaction, provoking, eliciting, or being entertaining (Trilling et al., 2017; Kalsnes & Larsson, 2018). Research indicates that emotions are a major determinant in the liking, sharing and commenting of a piece of news- which influences the virality and persistence of news (Alhabash et al., 2019; Ljubešić et al., 2020). As a result, the reasons behind a story on a trending list are more often the stored news stories that match feelings of outrage, humor, emotive responses, or other forces that move the internet anyhow (Park et al., 2020; Tenenboim & Cohen, 2013). This mode has changed the previous priority of newsworthiness to shareworthiness with dire consequences on good democracy and conscious citizenship (Trilling et al., 2017).

The other significant change is that which cuts across the association between journalists and audiences. Social media allows being in direct contact, which wipes away the border between the creators and consumers of the content. Users also can be involved in constructing and developing storylines as they comment, react, and share the news (Hermida et al., 2012; Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). This participatory paradigm is synonymous with the decentralization of information and the exchange of information on a more dialogic and networked nature of communication (Deuze, 2006). However, there is no consideration of such involvement, without consequence. The fact that journalists have increased pressure to generate something that matches the audience metrics can deteriorate the need to provide investigative or critical journalism towards providing something more clickable (Hanusch, 2017; Lamot & Paulussen, 2019).

Changing nature of the headlines in social media era can be interesting to look at as a prism through which these changes can be analyzed. Not anymore as headlines are just sign posts to stories but they have become micro-narratives that compete where there is a lot of noise in the digital environment (Dor, 2003; Kronrod & Engel, 2001). Since platforms such as Facebook feature headlines as the initial content that people view, they become a significant factor that determines the interaction of the audience with such content. It is common to employ a clickbait approach, including asking a question, making a forward or reversed reference, or referring to an emotive speech (Blom & Hansen, 2015; Lai & Farbroth, 2013). Although introducing such practices can be a good way to attract more clicks, they can cause distrust of journalism and lead to misinformation (Janet et al., 2022; Lamot, 2022).

Due to such changes, newsrooms are increasingly considering audience analytics in their editorial judgment. These are the metric of click-through-rate, time-on-pages, and social sharing; they are now used by editors and journalists to measure the performance of stories (Lamot & Paulussen, 2019; Hanusch, 2017). These measurements do not just impact the strategy on content but also hiring, promotion and even focus of the editorial. Such a measure of journalistic performance questions the imperatives of the traditional professional values and introduces a conflict between the ideals of serving the population and market-based

activities (Opgenhaffen, 2021; Lischka, 2021). These have turned the job of the journalist towards being hybrid: reporter, content strategist and social media manager (Erdal, 2009).

More so, the social media forums are both publishers and editors of information. Using such features as trending topics, suggested posts, and algorithmic ranking, they actively explore what news can become visible (Diakopoulos, 2019; Sehl et al., 2021). Such automated editorial power tends to be ambiguous, and questions about accountability, bias and manipulation are aroused (Newman et al., 2021; Whitehead, 2019). The platform logic does not only stipulate what is filtered but also what the pace and nature of news will become, and news is encouraged to be shorter, told visually, and read as record-only listicles (Boczkowski, 2005; Bolter & Grusin, 1999). These changes have made new literacies of audiences and new duties of journalists and media platforms.

Combining affordance and routine approaches to social media, one can draw a picture of the so-called hybrid media system where content travels through an intricate system of actors, algorithms, and audience behaviors (Chadwick, 2017; dos Santos et al., 2019). News stories are repeated in this system, both by the journalists and the editors, but also by the audiences, the algorithms of the platforms, the influencers, and the bots. This re-writing comes in the form of re-shares, memes, comments and hashtags and each of these can reframe the meaning of a story or increase the emphasis on a specific angle (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Vazquez-Herrero et al, 2020). Specifically, hashtags have proven to be such influential narrative devices, which users can use to contextualize a problem, rally around it, and even promote news agendas in a bottom-up manner.

This paper discusses the news narrative rewritten in social media in terms of changes in construction of the headlines, platform performance metrics, and audience participation. It is based on a vast body of research and theoretical traditions and attempts to find the answer to how the technologies affordances, editorial tactics and practices of audiences redefine the essence of the news itself. With hashtags replacing headlines and news cycles becoming real time streams, it is argued in this study that journalism needs to critically reevaluate its role in the digital platform-mediated world.

2. Literature Review

The overlap of social media and journalism has produced a voluminous literature of scholarly studies reviewing the changes in the production, distribution, and consumption of news in that era. At its root, however, this change of paradigm has been driven by the transition out of a top-down system of news distribution to a more participatory and algorithmically controlled system. According to scholars, social media have upset the historical journalistic values by creating novel logics based on virality, emotionality, and algorithmic visibility (Hermida, 2020; Diakopoulos, 2019).

Part of the keys to this transformation is the re-definition of virality and news sharing behavior. Berger and Milkman (2010) point out that content that people could emotionally relate to, especially one that brings about awe, anger, or anxiety, is most likely to be shared. Alhabash et al. (2019) further substantiated this emotional effect in an experimental setting by concluding that physiological and psychological reactions are potent indicators of socially useful behaviors in terms of like, comment, and share behaviors in the social media. These findings demonstrate that the behaviour of users on social websites is strongly bound to the emotional reactions, but not to a rational evaluation of information utility.

Headline construction has formed a significant element in the study of news optimization in the social media. According to Blom and Hansen (2015), the use of forward-referencing in headlines promotes the success of the clickbait techniques since the method taps into the curiosity of a reader without necessarily providing any informational source. Kuiken et al. (2017) on the same note focus on the construction of digital headlines in their paper with an aim of maximizing engagement using the elements of structure, tone, and emotion. Lai and Farbrot (2013) investigate the effect that making headlines on questions have on the number of clicks using the psychological processes of uncertainty and closure. Though these strategies can lead to an increment of readership, they bring issues regarding ethical practice and perceived trust of news content.

The newsroom factor of logic of metrics also adds complication to trust and credibility. Lamot (2022) talks about how the decisions driven by analytics and made by Facebook have resulted in news softening of the contents in the news feeds increasingly valuing entertainment or emotion rather than civic relevance. To understand the various applications of analytics in the newsroom, Lamot and Paulussen (2019) group the various uses into six categories. The studies can explain how audience behavioral data conditions decisions of journalists and editors in order to make journalism sensitive to the needs of the audience; this can correspond to a change of journalistic priorities beyond the scope of traditional news values.

The gatekeeping process has been transformed by audience interaction and by platform affordances as well. Hermida et al. (2012) come up with the term post-publication gatekeeping, when posting the news, audience takes part in magnifying or recasting news reports. Dos Santos et al. (2019) would echo this idea by explaining that there is a good circle of the user to share their practices, and this route determines what kind of content is being promoted and produced. This is strengthened by Kalsnes and Larsson (2018) to demonstrate the varying extent to which various social media websites facilitate the engagement of their users, which in turn determines the visibility and seeding of news.

The pivot of such transformation is algorithmic curation. Diakopoulos (2019) describes the role of algorithms as editorial practices, deciding what kind of material and to whom it will go and when. This interferes with the hegemony of the newsroom to control news flow, and brings about unclear procedures that may lead to entrenchment of biases or emphasis on sensationalism. Newman et al. (2021) bring up the issue of transparency and accountability in platform-based news systems by focusing on the imbalanced position of power between news organizations and technology companies.

The transformation of the newsmaking occupations and their roles has been raised in various researches. The work offered by Erdal (2009) focuses especially on the issue of repurposing the content in a multiple-platform publication, covering the change in the journalistic practices in order to meet the cross-media requirements. Hanusch (2017) analyses the impact of web analytics on journalistic functions at the individual and organizational level and indicates the emerging split between editorial freedom and fact-directed decisions. Lischka (2021) investigates the reasoning used by social media editors to accommodate both platform logic and journalistic values, many of whom have to struggle with engagement and ethical journalistic practices.

The structure of headline and perception played by the reader would also be important in moulding the views of people. Investigating the influence of linguistic features of headlines on relevance and accessibility, Dor (2003) and Kronrod and Engel (2001) examine the impact of linguistic factors to headlines to emphasize the importance of linguistic properties of headlines used in the context of the research. It is concluded by Janet et al. (2022) that the perception of the credibility may be determined by the headline format; however, it does not seem to have a considerable difference in terms of user engagement. This difference between perception and action implies complicated audience behavior to online materials.

Ljube{cacontvers attribution thav smIL deece Elements of emotional dynamics are further explored by Ljube{cacashston hell factors Gordon et al. (2020), which created a multilingual lexicon of emotions as well as clinical feelings in order to conduct sentiment analysis in online discussion. Their results help to underline the fact that emotionally heavy language is common in news posted on social media and its impact on the discourse of society. This is consistent with the overall pattern of hyperemotionalizing in news stories, which brings to bear both audience interests and partisanship.

Lastly, basic theories on the topic of digitization of news offer historical perspective on such developments. Examples of innovation pathways in the online newsrooms are cited by Boczkowski (2005), yet Bolter and Grusin (1999) coin the term of remediation to explain the reconstruction of the old media manifestations. Deuze (2006) draws terminologies like participation and bricolage together to depict the change of culture in the digitization of journalism. Chadwick (2017) provides the concept of the hybrid media system, according to which the traditional and digital logic can be and are operating and interacting (in a complicated and multilateral media system).

These works together point to an urgent shifting news environment in which the social media is not only a means of delivery of the news, but a potent source of influence on the generation, conveyance and image of the news. This text makes it clear that it is imperative to carefully analyze the algorithmic, emotional, and participatory nature of digital journalism of the era of platforms.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist methodology to explore how social media platforms reshape news narratives through headline construction, emotional framing, and hashtag use. The research is framed by media logic theory and post-publication gatekeeping theory, which collectively provide a conceptual lens to examine how journalistic practices adapt to the affordances and constraints of digital platforms. The study focuses on analyzing the discursive and narrative features of news content as mediated by Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram.

Data Collection

A purposive sampling strategy was used to collect 100 social media posts from five major international news outlets. Posts were selected based on their recency (within the last four weeks), platform diversity, and representativeness of high audience engagement (likes, shares, comments). Posts included headlines, captions, hashtags, images, and user interaction data (comments, retweets, etc.).

Analytical Framework

The data analysis followed a qualitative content analysis model combined with critical discourse analysis (CDA). This dual-layered approach enabled the study to capture both the surface structure (e.g., headline format, hashtag frequency) and deeper ideological constructions embedded in news narratives. The analysis involved three main stages:

1. Open Coding – Posts were read repeatedly and initial codes were developed to identify patterns in language use, headline framing, emotional cues, and hashtag functions.
2. Axial Coding – Codes were grouped into broader thematic categories such as emotional amplification, engagement optimization, and ideological positioning.
3. Selective Coding – Core categories were synthesized to extract dominant themes, allowing for the construction of a narrative around how social media influences news presentation.

Sentiment and Emotional Framing

To assess emotional tone, a sentiment matrix was developed based on established emotion taxonomies (e.g., Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions). Posts were manually evaluated and assigned emotional tones: *positive* (e.g., hope, joy), *negative* (e.g., anger, fear), or *neutral*. Each emotional category was assigned a qualitative intensity score on a 3-point scale (low, medium, high) to track the strength of affective framing.

Hashtag Function and Frequency Analysis

Hashtags were coded by function (categorical, ideological, promotional) and their frequency tallied using:

- $f(h)$ = frequency of hashtag h
- $p(h)$ = platform occurrence percentage of hashtag h

These metrics were used to explore how hashtags serve not only to tag content but also to embed narratives, drive discoverability, or signal alignment with sociopolitical movements.

Narrative Structure Modeling

A structuralist model was employed to analyze headlines using a tripartite framework:

- Trigger Phrase (TP): the first few words designed to hook the reader
- Emotional Amplifier (EA): phrases or adjectives intensifying the message
- Framing Mechanism (FM): the thematic or ideological context

Each post was deconstructed using this model to reveal the structural logic behind its engagement strategy.

Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study incorporated peer debriefing, intercoder reliability checks (20% of the dataset double-coded), and memo-writing for reflexivity. The interpretive coding process was guided by theoretical sensitivity to avoid superficial description and ensure depth in pattern recognition.

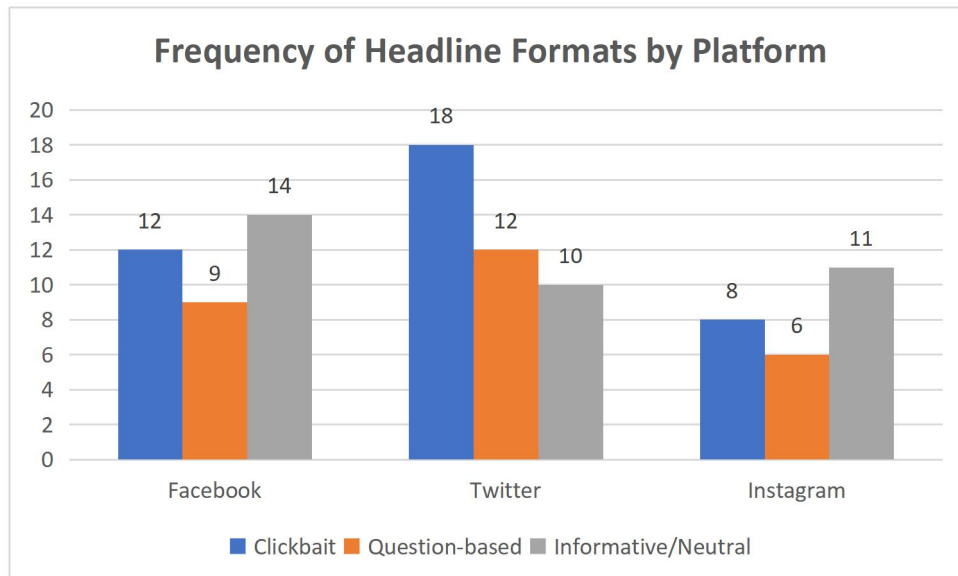
4. Results

The qualitative content and discourse analysis yielded several dominant patterns across platforms. Table 1 shows the frequency of headline formats observed across the sample:

Table 1. Frequency of Headline Formats by Platform

Headline Format	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Total
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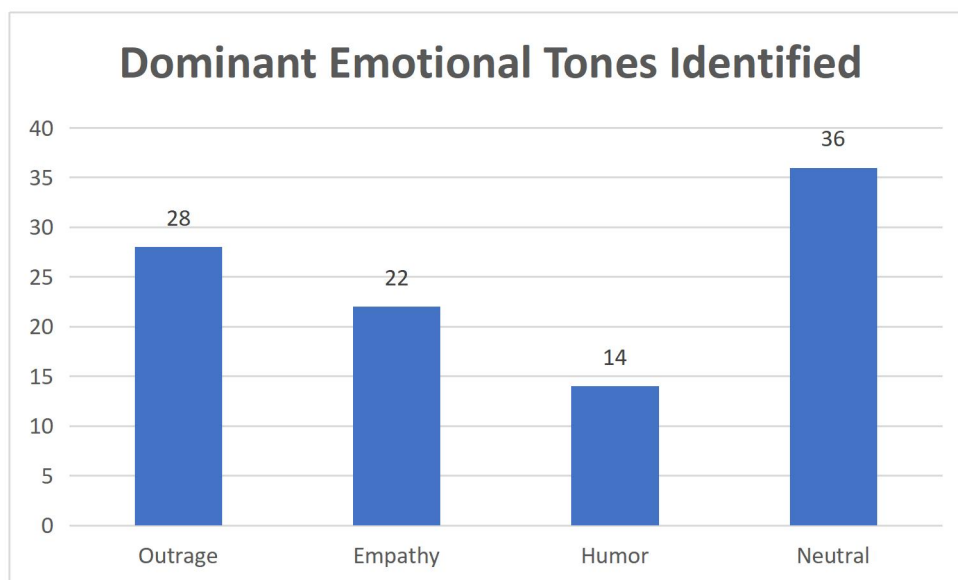
Clickbait	12	18	8	38
Question-based	9	12	6	27
Informative/Neutral	14	10	11	35



Clickbait headlines were dominant on Twitter, whereas Facebook and Instagram showed a more balanced use of headline types. These headline structures typically used urgency-driven verbs, personalization (e.g., “you won’t believe”), and suspenseful ellipses.

Table 2. Dominant Emotional Tones Identified

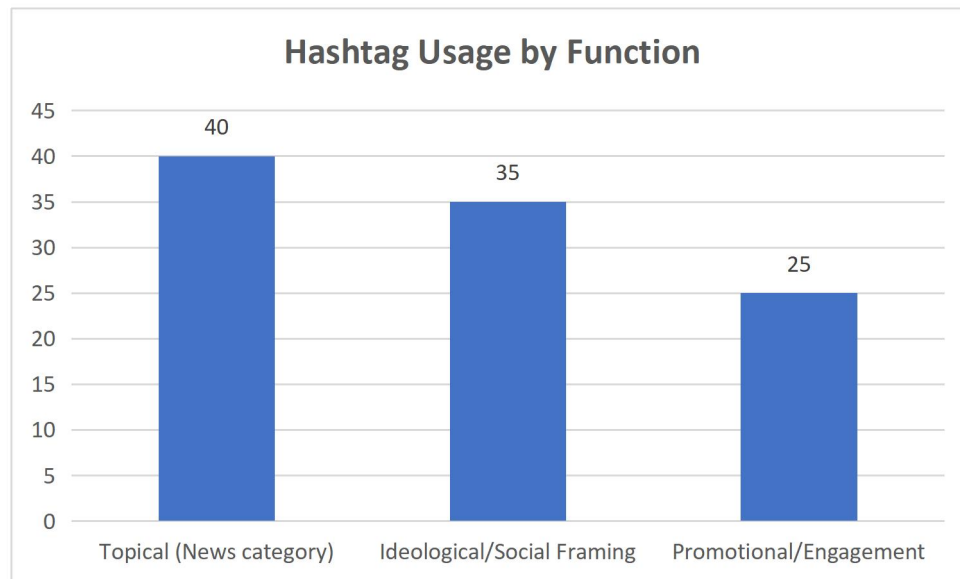
Emotional Tone	Frequency	Sample Lexical Indicators
Outrage	28	“shocking,” “outrage,” “backlash”
Empathy	22	“support,” “hope,” “struggle”
Humor	14	“laugh,” “unexpected,” emojis
Neutral	36	Objective reporting, minimal adjectives



Emotionally charged headlines (outrage and empathy) showed stronger narrative framing and were often paired with visuals or hashtags for amplification.

Table 3. Hashtag Usage by Function

Function of Hashtag	Frequency	Examples
Topical (News category)	40	#Elections, #ClimateChange
Ideological/Social Framing	35	#JusticeFor..., #FreedomOfPress
Promotional/Engagement	25	#ICYMI, #BreakingNews



Topical hashtags served categorization roles, while ideological hashtags shaped audience interpretation and broadened narrative reach.

Table 4. Emergent Themes from Discourse Analysis

Theme	Code Density	Description
Algorithmic Amplification	High	Language tailored for engagement-driven ranking
Participatory Framing	High	Audience comments altering or reinforcing headline narratives
Emotional Polarization	Moderate	Headlines designed to provoke division or strong affective response
Visual-Narrative Coupling	Moderate	Use of images/memes to reinforce or reshape headline impact

It was observed that headlines are designed using an algorithmic reasoning in mind, in many instances, they are reflective of trending keywords or emotional cues that are known to boost visibility. There was a case where commentaries and retweets made users attach meaning and in several instances, they made parallel narratives or reframed the story completely. Instagram headlines in combination with humorous or sympathetic visuals performed the best in communicating softer stories.

Overall, the results indicate that headlines ceased being a mere entry point into a story by reflecting the expanding culture of readers as producers of the internet, where they engage in conversation with headlines in the context of digital platform design.

The results highlight one of the most important shifts in journalism strategy of the platform logic. The clickable content that is gripped by emotionally-appealing information reflects the larger trend of metrics journalism which prompts the editorial choices to be made based on the real-time performance of the content. This presents doubts related to integrity and civic role of journalism, because market-oriented incentives can be in contradiction to a publication of severing the interests of the community. Examples of the usability of the hashtag as a tool of narrative perspective show the involvement of end-users in news framing and exchange processes complicating the usual dominant model of one-sided flow of information. Such processes imply the necessity of newer sets of ethical guidelines and editorial policies, which are compatible with both engagement and formal integrity.

5. Conclusion

This essay presents the valuable lessons about the changing worlds of journalism in the new digital era and shows how social network platforms are changing the way the news stories are organized, delivered, and received. A qualitative analysis of headline development, emotional positioning, and hashtag deployment on Facebook, Twitter(X), and Instagram will demonstrate that the area has taken a highly divergent direction in journalism, moving toward more hunting of attention, interaction, and algorithmic privileging. Increasingly, headlines are being written to provoke, entertain, or even fit within current fashions of discussion and debate (and sometimes are written with a view to such end result) as much as a need to inform. This evolution has reconstituted the headline as a functional successors in an era of participatory media ecology in which audiences are no longer merely passive consumers of news, but active co-authors by way of commenting, sharing and reframing. In addition, hashtags have become a form of structural as well as meaningful device, which classifies contents alongside identifying them with broader sociopolitical discussions. The findings indicate that the strategy of platform logic fueled by algorithmic priorities and audience usage patterns has now emerged to be central to determining the content of journalism. On the one hand, these trends expand reach and interaction, but on the other hand, they give rise to serious ethical issues such as sensationalism, misinformation, and diminishing credibility of journalism. With the further development of digital media, the necessity to strike the right balance between the audience and the fundamental principles of journalism, especially the accuracy, depth, and a high degree of trust, is increasingly in the interests of news organizations to maintain that the quest to reach to audiences need not be at the expense of accuracy, depth, and public confidence. This paper demonstrates the necessity to re-align a new framework of journalism, which empowers the realities of platform journalism, but is both aware of and able to embrace the ethos of ethical reporting and democratic communication.

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