

Journalism in the 21st Century: Evolution, Functions, and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the historical trajectory of communication technologies, from the printing press and industrial-age mass media to digital platforms and artificial intelligence, to examine how each wave has reshaped media systems, professional practices, and communicative power structures. Journalism has long served as a cornerstone of public communication, holding actors accountable and sustaining the deliberative sphere essential to democracy. Yet contemporary journalism faces profound structural challenges: the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation, declining trust in legacy news organizations, and mounting economic pressures within platform-driven ecosystems. These developments are not merely crises of content quality but signal a reconfiguration of communicative authority, as control over visibility, distribution, and credibility shifts from editorial judgment to algorithmic systems and platform governance. In response, the article introduces the concept of hybrid journalism, where technological innovation is integrated with human judgment, professional ethics, and civic responsibility. Practical strategies include strengthening media literacy, advancing data-driven storytelling, and fostering participatory journalism alongside constructive news practices. The study concludes that journalism's durability depends not only on technological adaptation but also on the regeneration of legitimacy, transparency, and its civic role as a democratic institution.

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Introduction

Journalism is a field grounded in ethical principles and systematic processes for collecting, verifying, analyzing, and disseminating information to the public. The primary goal of journalism is to provide accurate and meaningful content that supports citizens' decision-making in democratic societies (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). The core components of journalism include (1) public communication, (2) a commitment to factual accuracy, and (3) the role of serving as a watchdog over power. These elements contribute to the

formation of a rational public discourse--understood as processes of communication, deliberation, and the exchange of meanings concerning issues of public interest that take place within spaces open to public participation and that influence social and political beliefs, attitudes, and decisions (McNair, 2017). For this reason, journalism functions as a vital social instrument, not only in transmitting knowledge and upholding truth, but also in creating a public sphere that enables informed and inclusive civic participation.

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Tracing back to ancient civilizations, early traces of journalism can be identified in foundational communicative practices in Chinese, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Roman societies (Briggs & Burke, 2005; Conboy, 2004). In ancient Rome, for instance, a daily publication known as *Acta Diurna* (Latin for “daily records” or “daily public notices”) served as an official chronicle of governmental activities and public announcements during both the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire (Conboy, 2004; Stephens, 2014). This publication is often regarded as a prototype of the modern newspaper, as it demonstrated systematic news reporting and the public dissemination of information (Briggs & Burke, 2005). Nevertheless, access to such media remained limited, and it did not yet reach the mass public in the sense associated with modern mass media (Stephens, 2014).

In China during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the imperial court disseminated information through a medium known as *Bu*, which functioned similarly to official proclamations or a court gazette. These notices were issued by central authority and distributed to regional officials and, in some cases, to the general population, conveying imperial edicts, major events, and developments within the court. Over time, *Bu* evolved into a more formalized system of court reporting known as *Di Bao*, or “palace reports,” in subsequent dynasties (Fang, 2012).

In ancient Egypt, public communication occurred through the activities of priests and scribes who inscribed royal decrees, religious doctrines, and legal announcements on papyrus—writing material produced from the papyrus plant found in the Nile Delta—or carved them onto temple walls. These texts functioned as forms of semi-public communication within a theocratic state structure (Conboy, 2004). Meanwhile, in Mesopotamia, located in the Tigris–Euphrates River basin, significant events such as wars, changes in leadership, and religious rituals were recorded on clay tablets using cuneiform script. The term *cuneiform* derives from the Latin *cuneus*, meaning “wedge” or “triangular shape,” referring to the wedge-shaped impressions pressed into clay. Cuneiform writing served both communicative purposes and the archival preservation of state records (Briggs & Burke, 2005).

Although these forms of communication in ancient societies cannot be fully classified as journalism in the modern sense, they nonetheless reveal early structures of information dissemination. These practices involved identifiable senders and receivers, systematic transmission of messages, and an intention to communicate with a broader public, reflecting a fundamental human drive to share knowledge. However, such communication remained limited in scope, typically confined to elite

groups and subject to strict control by state or religious institutions. Moreover, these practices lacked the systematic production processes characteristic of contemporary journalism.

The invention of the movable-type printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-fifteenth century represented not only a major technological breakthrough but also a structural turning point in Europe’s communication system. It is widely recognized as the true beginning of journalism in the modern sense (Briggs & Burke, 2005). Prior to this invention, books and documents were produced through manual copying by monks or scholars within religious institutions—a process that was time-consuming, resource-intensive, and costly. As a result, access to written knowledge was largely restricted to elites and ecclesiastical hierarchies (Eisenstein, 2013).

Gutenberg’s printing press fundamentally transformed this system. The new printing technology enabled the mass production of printed materials within shorter timeframes and at significantly lower costs. Consequently, newspapers, pamphlets, newsletters, and books increasingly became accessible to the expanding middle and lower classes across Europe (Conboy, 2004). Information dissemination, once monopolized by centralized state and ecclesiastical authorities, gradually became a tool of the public, enabling individuals to question authority, engage in debate, and participate in political mobilization.

Media historian Elizabeth Eisenstein introduced the concept of the “printing revolution,” arguing that the invention of the printing press served as a powerful catalyst for profound transformations in European society, knowledge systems, culture, and politics during the early modern period. She described the printing press as an “agent of change” that paved the way for major historical movements such as the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and ultimately the emergence of representative democracy. This form of democracy does not entail direct participation by citizens in every decision but rather involves the election of representatives to legislate, govern, and oversee state power through parliamentary or legislative institutions (Eisenstein, 2013). Thus, the printing press was not merely the starting point of the print industry; it also laid essential foundations for journalism as a form of mass communication and played a crucial role in the formation and expansion of the “public sphere”—a conceptual space for the exchange of opinions among citizens that later became a key element of democratic societies (Habermas, 1989).

In the early seventeenth century, journalism began to take concrete form as a continuous printed medium. This period marked the emergence of some of the first newspapers in Europe, including

Relation aller Fürnemmen und gedenckwürdigen Historien (1605), published by Johann Carolus in Strasbourg, Germany, and *The Weekly News* (1622), published by Nathaniel Butter in England. Although the latter remains subject to scholarly debate—with some scholars viewing it as a “news book” rather than a modern newspaper—it is nonetheless recognized as one of the earliest newspaper-like publications (Conboy, 2004; Briggs & Burke, 2005). Early newspapers primarily focused on foreign affairs, court news, and commercial information, as their main readership consisted of merchants and nation-states were not yet fully developed. Over time, as readership expanded, newspaper content broadened to include wider public issues such as politics, economics, and social problems. Consequently, the target audience expanded from merchants and elites to the middle class and the general public, reflecting the evolution of journalism as a medium increasingly oriented toward serving society at large.

A major transformation in the development of journalism occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, coinciding with Europe’s transition into the Industrial Revolution. This era profoundly shaped journalism’s evolution into a media industry. Innovations such as the steam-powered printing press, the availability of inexpensive paper, and the expansion of railway networks and postal systems enabled newspapers to be produced in large quantities and distributed rapidly across vast areas (Eisenstein, 2013). As a result, newspapers became economically valuable commodities, increasingly reliant on advertising revenue and engaged in content competition to attract readers. At the same time, newspapers functioned as a “public sphere”—a conceptual space for political and cultural debate—despite limitations related to class, gender, and state power. This development aligns with Jürgen Habermas’s view that journalism plays a crucial role in facilitating rational-critical debate, which constitutes a foundation of liberal democracy (Habermas, 1989).

The growth of “free media” in many countries thus extended beyond the mere transmission of news. It functioned as a mechanism for knowledge production, state power scrutiny and critique, public awareness formation, civic consciousness cultivation, and the establishment of foundations for modern democracy in Europe (Habermas, 1989; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; McNair, 2017). This period marked a pivotal shift in which journalism evolved from news reporting activities into a fully developed system of mass news production, marketing, and consumption—commonly referred to as “mass media” (Briggs & Burke, 2005; Chalaby, 2000; Conboy, 2004).

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, journalism encountered a new wave of

transformation driven by the emergence of the internet and digital technologies. News and information were no longer monopolized by traditional media organizations; instead, new spaces emerged for “citizen journalists” to report news through blogs and social media. This shift reflects the structural transformation of media that McLuhan (1994) anticipated, emphasizing that the medium itself shapes social communication. Contemporary scholarship on citizen journalism further clarifies this role (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). Castells (2000) argued that the rise of the network society fundamentally restructured power relations and communication flows. Information no longer moved solely in a top-down manner but circulated horizontally through interconnected networks of diverse nodes. This decentralization challenged the authority and status of professional journalists. While such decentralization expanded voice and visibility for marginalized or previously silenced groups, the power over visibility and information flows remains shaped by network structures and digital platforms, which Castells (2000) emphasized are not entirely free from power relations.

Although digital technologies have greatly expanded access to news and information, journalism in the digital era faces multiple challenges, including information overload, misinformation, and the escalating decline of trust in mainstream media (Reuters Institute, 2023). Moreover, the economic pressures confronting news organizations stem not only from the inefficiencies of traditional business models but also from the structural power of digital platforms that control distribution infrastructures, advertising systems, and audience data. These conditions systematically constrain news organizations’ bargaining power and revenue-generating capacity (Young & Hermida, 2024). Such challenges are often conceptualized in terms of a “trust gap” and platform dependency, both of which are recognized as structural problems rooted in the platform economy, algorithmic governance, and contemporary news consumption patterns. The Reuters Institute (2023) identifies these trends as structural issues affecting the credibility, sustainability, and future role of journalism worldwide.

The Diffusion of Disinformation: A Threat to Truth

In the digital communication era, news and information can circulate globally within seconds through social media and various online platforms such as Facebook, X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. These platforms enable audiences to both produce and consume content extensively within the architecture of digital platforms. However, this

very ease of access and content creation has generated a major challenge often termed an “infodemic,” referring to a condition in which an overwhelming volume of information—both accurate and misleading—floods the public sphere. This phenomenon became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when UNESCO reported that false information about treatments, vaccines, and speculative theories spread rapidly, influencing public behavior and, in many cases, exerting pressure on or distorting governmental policy decision-making processes across multiple countries (UNESCO, 2021b).

Deliberately fabricated disinformation and misinformation have thus become complex and difficult-to-control threats within today’s media ecosystem. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) explain that false information in the digital age appears in multiple forms, ranging from intentionally manufactured news to factual information deployed in misleading contexts. The problem is not only the volume of information but also the speed of dissemination and the amplification of visibility through digital platform algorithms, which typically prioritize high-engagement content regardless of informational accuracy. A clear example is the rapid spread of the false claim that “gargling with salt water can kill the COVID-19 virus.” Despite the absence of scientific evidence, misleading messages promoting hot water, salt water, vinegar, and other purported remedies were widely forwarded via WhatsApp in India, resulting in widespread misunderstanding and the rejection of accurate medical guidance (UNESCO, 2021b). Similarly, the United States faced extensive election-related disinformation surrounding the 2020 presidential election, which undermined public trust in democratic procedures and contributed to an atmosphere of suspicion that culminated in the violent storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

One key issue concerns the rise of citizen journalism—namely, internet users who, in many cases, disseminate news without training in media ethics or professional fact-checking procedures. While freedom of expression is a foundational principle of democratic societies, the exercise of such freedom without responsibility tends to degrade the quality of online information and weaken the role of professional journalists as credible producers of knowledge and as watchdogs over power (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

In response to this crisis, many countries—both developed and developing—have initiated fact-checking projects led by news organizations, civil society groups, and academic institutions. Notable examples include AFP Fact Check (France), BOOM (India), Rappler (the Philippines), and Cofact (Thailand). These organizations have

systematically verified false claims and disseminated accurate information to the public. Nevertheless, fact-checking alone remains insufficient. A persistent challenge lies in reaching grassroots populations, particularly older adults and individuals who lack media literacy skills.

Another crucial strategy is the promotion of media and information literacy across all age groups through formal education systems and lifelong learning initiatives. UNESCO and educational agencies in many countries advocate integrating media and information literacy into primary and secondary school curricula, with an emphasis on critical thinking, source evaluation, and information verification prior to publishing or sharing content. Such efforts aim to cultivate responsible digital citizens who can engage with media thoughtfully, exercise sound judgment, and participate constructively in public communication.

At the same time, technology platforms such as Facebook, X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube need to be held to higher standards of accountability. Measures may include adjusting algorithms to reduce the spread of disinformation, labeling misleading content with warnings, and collaborating with independent fact-checking organizations. In some countries, legal frameworks have been introduced to support such efforts. For example, Germany enacted the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) in 2017, requiring platforms to remove clearly unlawful content—such as hate speech or incitement to violence—within 24 hours. In addition, France introduced an anti-fake-news law during election periods in 2018, granting courts the authority to order the removal of false information within 48 hours through judicial procedures.

Although these measures are important, the role of quality journalism remains the most critical frontline defense against disinformation. Professional media organizations committed to ethics, accuracy, and rigorous source attribution should be actively promoted and supported. Investment in independent journalism is therefore not merely a matter of press freedom; it is also a matter of informational security for democratic societies.

Ultimately, combating false information in the digital era requires participatory governance that mobilizes cooperation among the state, mass media, technology companies, civil society, and media-literate citizens. This is especially vital in Southeast Asia, where large segments of the population primarily access news through social media. National policies should therefore prioritize media literacy education alongside the establishment of transparent, responsive systems for monitoring platforms, in order to safeguard the stability and democratic values that depend on access to trustworthy information.

The Decline of Trust in Mainstream Media: A Crisis of Credibility

Historically, mainstream media—referring to large and influential mass media institutions with clearly defined editorial structures, professional newsrooms, and broad public reach, such as daily newspapers, television, radio, and leading digital news outlets—have played a central role in setting the public agenda and disseminating information to society at large. These media institutions once enjoyed high levels of public trust as “gatekeepers of truth,” in accordance with the normative role of modern journalism, serving to filter, verify, and deliver accurate information to the public. However, over the past decade, public trust in mainstream media has declined significantly. According to the Reuters Institute (2023), only 40 percent of respondents worldwide report a high level of trust in the news they consume regularly, and in many countries trust levels have fallen below 30 percent. This trend reflects a global crisis of confidence that affects mainstream media across multiple dimensions.

1. The declining power of agenda-setting: Whereas mainstream media once played a dominant role in determining which issues entered public discourse, this influence has diminished markedly as audiences increasingly turn to alternative sources such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, X, Instagram, online news outlets, and influencers. Many of these channels do not adhere to journalistic ethics and regulatory standards to the same extent as mainstream media institutions.

2. The erosion of legitimacy as watchdogs of democracy: Mainstream media have traditionally been regarded as key mechanisms for scrutinizing power in democratic societies. However, as trust declines, investigative journalism and state accountability reporting are increasingly perceived by some segments of the public as biased or politically motivated. As a result, the social power and impact of such journalism are weakened.

3. Economic insecurity and business sustainability: Declining trust also affects audiences’ willingness to financially support news organizations, whether through subscriptions, readership engagement, or advertising revenue. Consequently, mainstream media face increasingly fragile business models and heightened difficulty competing with major digital platforms such as Facebook, Google, and TikTok.

4. A widening gap between media and the public: When mainstream media are perceived as unrepresentative of society, biased, or primarily serving particular interests, they risk losing their audience base—especially among the middle class and the broader public. This condition generates

what can be described as “structural distrust,” which is difficult to repair in the short term.

5. The expansion of disinformation and unregulated alternatives: As trust in traditional media declines, audiences are more likely to rely on alternative channels that lack editorial standards, creating fertile ground for the spread of misinformation and disinformation. This, in turn, intensifies public confusion and uncertainty in information perception (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

To address these challenges, a range of approaches has been proposed. First, news organizations must enhance transparency in reporting by disclosing sources, explaining verification processes, and clearly distinguishing between factual reporting and opinion. Second, public-interest journalism should be strengthened, particularly investigative reporting, local journalism, and content that amplifies marginalized voices. Third, media literacy must be actively promoted to empower citizens to critically evaluate news and information. Fourth, sustainable business model innovations are required, such as subscription systems, public media funds, and partnerships with academic institutions.

One significant factor contributing to declining trust is the perception of political bias in mainstream media, particularly in coverage of elections and socially divisive issues such as environmental policy, gender diversity, and war. Critics and scholars in political communication argue that some media outlets fail to provide space for diverse perspectives or employ emotionally charged language rather than in-depth factual reporting. For example, in the United States, Fox News is often associated with right-wing ideology and former President Donald Trump, while CNN and *The New York Times*, although not explicitly positioned as far-left outlets, are frequently criticized by conservative audiences for perceived liberal bias (Benkler et al., 2018).

Another critical factor is economic pressure under platform-based systems, which not only threatens the survival of news organizations but also reshapes the logic of news production. In this environment, speed, emotional appeal, and engagement are rewarded more than professional verification processes, ultimately undermining journalism’s credibility as a public institution over the long term (Young & Hermida, 2024).

In the Asian context, distrust in mainstream media is further complicated by state intervention, national security laws, censorship, and the use of legal mechanisms to silence critical voices. For instance, in the Philippines, the government under Rodrigo Duterte filed defamation lawsuits against *Rappler* and allowed the broadcasting license of ABS-CBN to expire without renewal. In Thailand,

Voice TV was once suspended from broadcasting and instructed to avoid criticizing the government following the 2014 military coup (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Such constraints erode the independence of mainstream media and push citizens toward alternative platforms that often lack professional standards.

In political contexts that are more conducive to reform, one concrete solution is the promotion of media transparency. News organizations should clearly and accessibly disclose sources, editorial policies, and verification methods. The establishment of independent regulatory bodies—such as press councils or ethics committees free from state or corporate influence—may help restore public trust through impartial oversight. Furthermore, public-interest journalism can be supported through crowdfunding, public funds, or state subsidies, provided that strong guarantees of editorial independence are in place. The BBC, for example, operates under such a model, receiving funding through license fees and functioning within a rigorous regulatory framework designed to safeguard its independence.

Ultimately, restoring trust in mainstream media requires collective adaptation. Journalists must adhere to ethical standards and transparency, while citizens must develop media literacy skills to navigate an increasingly complex information environment. Trust does not emerge automatically; rather, it must be built through accountability, openness, and sustained commitment to the core values of journalism.

Economic Pressures: The Precarity of News Organizations

The transition from print media to digital media has not merely involved a change in distribution channels; rather, it has fundamentally reshaped the revenue structure of journalism. The decline in circulation and print advertising revenues has systematically eroded the operational capacity of news organizations, particularly in a context where they have become increasingly dependent on digital platforms to reach audiences (Young & Hermida, 2024).

At the same time, digital giants such as Facebook and Google have risen to dominate the global online advertising market in a quasi-monopolistic manner. In many countries, more than 60-70 percent of digital advertising revenue is concentrated in the hands of these two companies, placing news organizations at a competitive disadvantage and increasing their dependence on these platforms for content distribution (Napoli, 2019).

As a consequence, many news organizations have been forced to downsize, cut newsroom budgets,

and reduce investment in in-depth content such as investigative journalism and local news. Prominent examples include the closure of *BuzzFeed News* in 2023 and large-scale staff reductions at *The Guardian* in the same year. These cases underscore the severity of the contemporary journalism crisis.

This situation heightens the risk of what may be described as “low-quality journalism,” characterized by shrinking professional reporting teams, the reuse of existing content, and an emphasis on light or sensational news designed to generate clicks—often at the expense of accuracy and depth. Such practices undermine journalism’s role as a watchdog over power in democratic systems.

Moreover, many news organizations have become increasingly reliant on algorithm-driven social media platforms that prioritize audience preferences over public value. As a result, emotionally charged or sensational content is amplified more readily than accurate and substantively informative reporting (Tufekci, 2015).

These challenges are particularly acute in developing countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand, where resource-constrained local news organizations must compete with low-cost yet highly engaging content produced on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. At the same time, many governments lack effective mechanisms to support public-interest media, limiting citizens’ access to quality journalism (UNESCO, 2021a).

One policy solution proposed in several countries involves taxing digital platforms in order to support public-interest journalism. For example, Australia implemented the News Media Bargaining Code, which requires Google and Meta (Facebook) to compensate news organizations for the use of their content. Although Meta initially responded by blocking news on its platform in Australia, both companies ultimately entered negotiations and agreed to pay more than AUD 200 million to local news organizations in the first year (Flew, 2021).

In addition, alternative funding models have gained increasing prominence, including membership models in which readers voluntarily support media outlets, as seen in the case of *The Guardian*, and crowdfunding initiatives such as those employed by *Rappler* in the Philippines, which relies on direct public support to sustain investigative journalism and editorial independence.

To sustain journalism’s role in democratic societies, governments should implement policies that support the infrastructural foundations of news organizations, including subsidies for high-quality local journalism, the promotion of media literacy, and the protection of press freedom from legal and economic threats. At the same time, news organizations themselves must adapt by investing in

investigative reporting, adopting new technologies such as interactive media and podcasts, and building partnerships with academic institutions and civil society organizations in order to restore public trust in credible news.

The Crisis of Journalism: The Transfer and Re-centering of Power in the “Organization of Visibility” and the “Governance of Credibility” from Newsrooms to Platforms and Algorithms

Although the crisis of journalism in the twenty-first century has been explained through a variety of phenomena—such as the spread of fake news, the decline of trust in news organizations, and the economic precarity of news institutions, as discussed above—these phenomena are not isolated problems. Rather, they are consequences of one of the most significant structural transformations in the contemporary media system: the transfer, or re-centering, of power over the organization of visibility and the governance of news credibility from newsrooms to digital platforms and algorithms. This transformation lies at the core of convergent journalism and provides a systematic framework for understanding the multidimensional nature of the crisis, rather than viewing its symptoms as fragmented or disconnected (Young & Hermida, 2024).

In traditional journalism, journalists and newsrooms functioned as gatekeepers, relying on professional ethics, public responsibility, and fact-checking processes to determine what should enter the public sphere (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; McNair, 2017). In a convergent media ecosystem, however, this role has increasingly been supplanted by what scholars describe as algorithmic or platform gatekeeping, in which the visibility of news is determined not by public value but by engagement metrics, popularity, and the commercial interests of platforms (Gillespie, 2018; Napoli, 2014). This shift therefore represents not merely a change in “distribution channels,” but a transformation in the very “principles governing truth” in contemporary society. Importantly, the gatekeeping role of newsrooms has not disappeared; rather, it has been diminished and now operates under an additional layer of algorithmic and platform-based gatekeeping.

A major consequence of algorithmic and platform gatekeeping is the erosion of the legitimacy of professional journalism. Even when news organizations produce rigorously verified content, such material may remain invisible in the public sphere if it does not align with platform-ranking mechanisms. Conversely, content that is emotionally charged, misleading, or lacking crucial context is often amplified systematically (Tufekci,

2015; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Under such conditions, the public increasingly questions the meaning of “truth” and the role of journalists as credible producers of knowledge.

Although fact-checking has been widely proposed as a key strategy for addressing disinformation, at the structural level it often operates in a reactive mode, chasing problems rather than addressing their root causes. The speed of news circulation within algorithmic systems frequently outpaces the capacity of fact-checking organizations. Moreover, verified information is not disseminated through the same mechanisms as misleading content, limiting its ability to reach broad audiences and effectively correct public misunderstandings (Graves, 2016; UNESCO, 2021a).

Similarly, the promotion of media literacy is often premised on the assumption that the primary problem lies in audiences’ lack of skills. However, emphasizing media literacy without interrogating the structural power of platforms risks shifting responsibility onto individuals while leaving fundamentally unequal systems of visibility and ranking intact (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Media literacy must therefore be paired with a critical examination of algorithmic power; otherwise, it risks becoming a moral remedy rather than a driver of systemic change.

The author therefore proposes that convergent journalism should be understood not merely as an adaptation to platforms, but as a process of power negotiation with new communication structures. Journalism must develop its capacity for institutional bargaining through mechanisms such as inter-organizational collaboration among news outlets, demands for algorithmic transparency, and the design of storytelling formats that are not solely driven by virality (Flew, 2021; Pickard, 2020).

Such negotiation, however, faces clear limitations in developing countries and semi-democratic societies, where media organizations confront not only platform pressures but also state intervention, national security laws, and strategic litigation designed to intimidate critics. Under these conditions, many media outlets are compelled to rely on platforms for survival, inevitably weakening journalism’s bargaining power (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Within a democratic framework, journalism is expected to function as a shared space for collective reasoning in society (Habermas, 1989). Yet when the public sphere is organized by algorithms that reward conflict and emotional intensity, this role is further undermined. The central question, therefore, is not merely how journalism can “survive” in the digital age, but whether it can preserve the conditions necessary for rational public deliberation.

The author thus advances the position that the contemporary crisis of journalism is fundamentally a structural crisis of communicative power, rather than solely a crisis of content quality. If convergent journalism continues to focus on technical adaptation for survival without questioning platform power, it risks losing its civic role in the long term.

Ultimately, restoring the role of journalism in the twenty-first century does not require a return to the print era, but rather the construction of new forms of legitimacy, transparency, and bargaining power within the convergent media system. Journalism must therefore do more than report news; it must function as an institution willing to confront communication structures that distort the conditions of truth and to sustain a public sphere for collective reflection in democratic societies.

Convergent Journalism in the Age of AI: From Algorithmic News Filtering to the Domination of Automated Decision-Making

If algorithmic and platform gatekeeping constitute the mechanisms through which the power of visibility is transferred from journalists to platforms, artificial intelligence is driving this transition even deeper. AI expands the role of algorithms from merely “ranking news” to actively “producing news,” participating in editorial decision-making, or replacing human actors in certain stages of the news production process (Diakopoulos, 2019; Lewis et al., 2019). AI thus no longer functions solely as a supportive tool within the newsroom; it increasingly operates as an agent of practical power that shapes the meaning of truth, relevance, and the public value of news.

A significant gap in contemporary journalism scholarship lies in the tendency of much academic work to frame AI primarily in terms of “efficiency” and “innovation,” rather than through analyses of power and ethics (Carlson, 2020). The application of AI in news work—such as automated writing, data summarization, trend detection, or even headline generation—is often based on the assumption that technology can neutrally enhance or substitute human judgment. In reality, however, AI systems are trained on historical data that reflect existing biases, power structures, and social values embedded within society (Noble, 2018).

What remains insufficiently examined is the impact of AI on professional journalistic ethics. Whereas journalistic ethics traditionally rested on the responsibility of individual journalists and news organizations (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014), in the AI era such responsibility becomes dispersed across opaque systems in which it is difficult to clearly identify an “actor.” Responsibility may lie with algorithm developers, technology companies, or

news organizations that deploy AI without adequate transparency.

Ethical questions therefore extend beyond whether AI makes errors to the more fundamental issue of who should be held accountable for the consequences of automated decision-making in the context of public information (Floridi et al., 2018). News content produced or filtered by AI may lack “intent” in the moral sense, yet its outcomes can systematically distort public discourse, marginalize certain voices, or amplify hatred and exclusion.

The author thus argues that the future of convergent journalism does not lie in rejecting AI nor in surrendering to technological determinism, but in the development of hybrid journalism—an approach that integrates AI capabilities with human ethical judgment within clear governance frameworks (Lewis et al., 2019). AI should function as a cognitive aid rather than as a substitute decision-maker determining truth on behalf of journalists.

However, a critical practical gap persists: many news organizations, particularly in developing countries, lack the resources, expertise, and bargaining power to define the conditions under which AI is deployed. The adoption of commercial AI systems without internal ethical frameworks may further entrench informational inequalities and deepen uncritical dependence on technology (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Viewed through a democratic lens, the use of AI in journalism demands particularly rigorous scrutiny. If automated systems reward speed, virality, and emotional intensity over reasoned argument, the public sphere is distorted from a space of rational deliberation into a battlefield for attention (Habermas, 1989; Tufekci, 2015). AI is therefore not merely a “new challenge,” but an accelerant that intensifies the structural crisis of journalism. Without ethical and institutional governance, AI risks permanently undermining journalism’s role in sustaining the public sphere as a space for collective reasoning.

The crisis of convergent journalism in the twenty-first century is ultimately a crisis of public decision-making power, now being transferred and reorganized under automated systems. If journalism continues to treat AI merely as a tool for efficiency without interrogating its power and ethical implications, it risks becoming little more than a content manager within systems it does not control. Restoring journalism’s role in the age of AI does not require competing with machines, but reaffirming human values—judgment, public accountability, and a steadfast commitment to defending the conditions of truth within democratic society.

Conclusion

Journalism is both a science and an art: a process grounded in the collection, analysis, verification, and presentation of information to the public, with the aim of providing accurate, comprehensive, and useful knowledge that supports rational decision-making in democratic societies (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). In addition, journalism functions as a mechanism for holding power accountable and as a facilitator of a public sphere for reasoned deliberation (McNair, 2017). The foundations of journalism can be traced back to state communication practices in ancient civilizations, such as Rome's *Acta Diurna*, the Han Dynasty court proclamations known as *Bu*, and the recording of cuneiform on clay tablets in Mesopotamia (Briggs & Burke, 2005). Although these practices do not yet constitute journalism in the modern sense, they represent the beginnings of a public information system.

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century marked a critical turning point that enabled information to circulate more rapidly and at lower cost. This transformation expanded knowledge and opened space for questioning the authority of both the state and religion (Eisenstein, 2013), forming the foundation of the "printing revolution" that led to modern journalism. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, newspapers began to take recognizable shape, such as Johann Carolus's *Relation* (1605) in Germany and Nathaniel Butter's *The Weekly News* (1622) in England, gradually broadening their content to meet the needs of an emerging middle class seeking information about public affairs (Conboy, 2004). The Industrial Revolution accelerated the production and distribution of news through printing technologies and transportation systems, turning newspapers into powerful economic and political instruments and giving rise to mass media (Habermas, 1989; Eisenstein, 2013).

In the twenty-first century, journalism is undergoing a major transition from print to digital media. Information is no longer monopolized by news organizations but circulates freely through platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, X, Instagram, and YouTube—developments consistent with McLuhan's (1994) proposition that "the medium is the message" and Castells's (2000) "network society" theory, which highlights decentralized and horizontal communication structures. The spread of misinformation and disinformation has become a significant threat to democracy, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which produced an "infodemic" and widespread misunderstanding (UNESCO, 2021b; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Responses include the promotion of media literacy and the establishment of local fact-checking centers.

At the same time, trust in mainstream media has continued to decline, with an average of approximately 40 percent of respondents in surveyed countries indicating that they still trust the news they regularly consume (Reuters Institute, 2023). This crisis is rooted in perceptions of political bias and state interference, which are particularly evident across several Asian contexts (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Moreover, news organizations face economic pressures as advertising revenues flow toward digital platforms, forcing them to reduce staff, cut investment in in-depth reporting, and adjust news formats to align with the logic of clicks (Young & Hermida, 2024). Proposed solutions include establishing public-interest journalism funds and developing alternative revenue models not dependent on advertising. Despite these multidimensional crises, journalism remains central to democratic life. Advancing public-interest journalism, transparency, and the cultivation of critically minded digital citizens are essential conditions for sustaining communicative freedom and democratic resilience in the digital era.

However, within an uncertain and information-saturated digital environment, journalism can no longer rely on traditional modes of news presentation. Restoring trust does not mean returning to a "golden age of print," but moving forward through transparency, accountability, and creative storytelling that connects meaningfully with audiences (Graves, 2016). Trust cannot be demanded without institutional change. Journalism in the twenty-first century must develop approaches aligned with digital contexts, such as data journalism, which uses digital tools to analyze and present large-scale data in ways that render public issues more evidence-based and comprehensible. One example is *ProPublica* in the United States, which has employed data journalism to scrutinize COVID-19 management and police violence, earning substantial public credibility (Howard, 2014).

Amid the crisis of trust and the dominance of algorithmic and platform gatekeeping, the development of data journalism is not merely a technical innovation; it is a structural mechanism with significant potential to restore journalism's legitimacy as a public institution. Data journalism connects news to "empirical evidence" rather than to emotional competition or virality, aligning with Habermas's (1989) ideal of a rational public sphere in which political debate is grounded in reason and facts.

Conceptually, data journalism integrates reporting, data analysis, and explanatory storytelling, using large-scale quantitative data as a basis for exposing power structures, inequalities, and public policy dynamics (Gray et al., 2012). Its distinct value lies not only in enhancing credibility, but in

transforming the role of news from recounting events to systematically explaining them—an undertaking that traditional journalism often struggles to sustain under pressures of time and limited resources.

A major practical gap, however, is that data journalism depends on multiple structural conditions: (1) access to open and verifiable government data, (2) personnel with cross-disciplinary skills spanning journalism, statistics, and programming, and (3) organizational cultures that value in-depth reporting over speed (Howard, 2014). In Thailand, these conditions remain significant constraints, as much government data is still not provided in practically usable formats, while most newsrooms lack both the budget and specialized staff.

In this respect, data journalism in Thailand cannot develop through news organizations alone; it requires institutional collaboration among media outlets, universities, civil society, and technology developers. This aligns with the concept of collaborative journalism, which Horska (2021) argues enables media—especially smaller organizations—to share resources, reduce production costs, and increase bargaining power in reaching audiences within a platform-dominated digital media ecosystem. International examples such as *ProPublica* also demonstrate that data journalism can be sustained when embedded within nonprofit organizational structures oriented toward public benefit (Benson, 2018).

Given the economic pressures confronting Thai news organizations, the development of data journalism is also significant as a “value-based strategy” rather than a volume-based competition. In a system where advertising revenues are absorbed by global platforms, news organizations cannot sustainably compete through speed or click volume (Napoli, 2019). They can, however, differentiate themselves through content that requires expertise, credibility, and time—core attributes of data journalism.

In the Thai context, business models compatible with data journalism should therefore move away from advertising dependence toward hybrid models, including (1) membership models in which readers voluntarily support in-depth reporting, (2) support from public funds or nonprofit organizations with guarantees of editorial independence, and (3) partnerships with academic institutions to develop data-driven reporting (Pickard, 2020). These models reduce commercial pressure and expand the space for media to fulfill civic functions more fully.

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that such models face constraints within Thailand’s political context, where news organizations continue to confront state intervention, national security laws, and strategic litigation designed to

intimidate critics (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This environment raises the political costs of accountability-oriented data journalism beyond what is typical in liberal democracies. Promoting data journalism must therefore be coupled with protections for press freedom and safeguards against legal harassment; otherwise, data-driven reporting may be confined to politically “safe” topics.

Based on the analysis above, the author argues that data journalism should not be understood merely as a new journalistic skill, but as the infrastructural foundation of a rational public sphere in the digital age. Evidence-based reporting reduces the dominance of emotion and virality in agenda-setting and enables citizens to access verifiable facts—an essential condition of democratic frameworks (Habermas, 1989).

However, if data journalism is developed only as a technical practice without connection to professional ethics, transparency, and political context, it may become journalism that is technically correct yet deficient in public meaning—producing information without social significance. The real challenge of convergent journalism in Thailand, therefore, is not simply learning new tools, but creating the conditions under which data, news, and rational deliberation can coexist sustainably within the public sphere.

Another important approach is participatory journalism, which emphasizes citizens’ roles in agenda-setting, information verification, and the articulation of local perspectives. Projects such as Hearken demonstrate the potential of public-powered journalism to build trust and a shared sense of ownership (Batsell, 2015). At the same time, collaborative journalism has become increasingly important in addressing complex global issues, as illustrated by the Panama Papers investigation led by the ICIJ, in which journalists from more than 80 countries jointly exposed networks of tax evasion and money laundering—work that no single newsroom could accomplish alone (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016). Transparency in news production—such as releasing source documents, explaining verification methods, and inviting reader feedback—also serves as a key to restoring trust by shifting journalism’s image from a closed institution to a social partner.

Digital storytelling tools—such as infographics, interactive websites, and short videos—enable news to reach diverse audiences quickly; narrative innovation is therefore essential for re-engaging the public with journalism. For example, Ian Urbina’s *The Outlaw Ocean* project integrates articles, a book, videos, and music to communicate maritime human rights issues (Urbina, 2019). In addition, journalism must take a proactive role in promoting media literacy through schools and

communities. BBC initiatives in partnership with schools in the United Kingdom and the training materials developed by First Draft reflect global efforts to address misinformation through education (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Structurally, restoring trust also requires alternative revenue systems—such as membership models and public-interest journalism funds—to reduce reliance on advertising. One example is *The Correspondent* in the Netherlands, which builds long-term relationships between journalists and readers through direct support and shared editorial agendas (Batsell, 2015).

Ultimately, journalism must adapt to a changing world without abandoning its foundational values and ethics. Journalists must serve simultaneously as communicators, analysts, and trust-builders. Commitment to truth, accuracy, and fairness remains the essence of journalism, regardless of changes in media or platforms. The future of journalism, therefore, is not simply about surviving the turbulence of the digital era, but about redefining its civic role through practices grounded in reflection, participation, and genuine transparency.

Recommendations: Convergent Journalism and Communication for the Public Sphere and the Restoration of Trust in the Era of Digital Politics

Within the framework of communicative action and Habermas's concept of the public sphere, democracy rests upon collective reasoning, open deliberation, and citizens' participation in policy making in order to build shared understanding and reach conclusions that society can collectively accept (Habermas, 1989). In contemporary journalism, the public sphere does not exist solely in physical form; rather, it is increasingly abstracted through media systems and digital technologies. Journalism therefore functions as a crucial mechanism for "organizing public conversation" and mediating between the state and the public—not only transmitting information from the state to citizens, but also opening spaces in which citizens can respond, contest, and meaningfully interact with political power (Chambers, 2003; Habermas, 1989).

However, the public sphere in the twenty-first century is no longer shaped by mass media alone. It is increasingly organized through digital platforms and algorithms grounded in commercial logics, which tend to reward conflict, emotion, and virality rather than informed deliberation (Gillespie, 2018; Tufekci, 2015). These conditions distort the core of a rational public sphere and risk pressuring journalism into producing emotionally charged content to chase clicks, instead of cultivating shared reason and truth. As a consequence, society

becomes more fragile and moves toward "post-truth politics," in which factual accuracy is diminished within public discourse (Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

In this context, convergent journalism must be re-conceptualized not merely as a distributor of news within a digital system, but as a "designer of the conditions of public conversation." This requires moving beyond the role of simply informing the public toward acting as a "facilitator" of public deliberation—by posing critical questions, scrutinizing policy, and producing in-depth reporting that encourages citizens to think critically rather than consume information passively. Practices by outlets such as *ProPublica* and *The Guardian* illustrate the integration of investigative reporting with the creation of online discussion spaces that enable public participation in substantive policy debate, thereby supporting democracy in concrete and practical terms.

At the same time, restoring trust in media in the digital era cannot rely on one-way communication based on a producer–consumer relationship. It requires shifting toward participatory relationships that recognize "diverse voices," especially marginalized communities that are often overlooked within mainstream media systems. Designed engagement, as proposed by Lacy (2024), is therefore significant because it treats audiences as people with experience, knowledge, and perspectives that can shape the news production process from the outset, rather than merely offering comments after publication. For example, *The Correspondent* invites members to contribute from question formation and field-based information gathering to the interpretation of public issues. Such practices reduce distance between media and the public, transforming news from an "information product" into a continuous "process of public conversation."

At the level of content, the concept of constructive journalism can function as an operational framework that aligns meaningfully with public sphere theory. Constructive journalism does not aim to "reduce critique" or simply "produce positive news." Rather, it continues to scrutinize power and raise structural questions while adding dimensions of explaining alternatives, outcomes, and policy possibilities so that citizens can use information for meaningful deliberation (Bro, 2019; McIntyre, 2019). Compared with related approaches such as solutions journalism and civic journalism, constructive journalism places particular emphasis on "designing news discourse" to reduce the logic of despair and polarization without abandoning structural critique—distinct from civic journalism's primary focus on community participation or solutions journalism's emphasis on empirically grounded "solutions" as case-based reporting (Friedland et al., 2012; McIntyre

& Gyldensted, 2018). Nevertheless, structural constraints remain: even high-quality constructive journalism may fail to generate real impact in the public sphere if it does not align with algorithmic logics of visibility and distribution.

For this reason, the central recommendation for restoring the public sphere and trust in the era of convergent journalism is that at least three levels must be integrated: 1) the level of content and professional ethics (e.g., constructive/solutions/civic journalism grounded in accountability and evidence), 2) the level of media institutions and structural collaboration (e.g., collaborative journalism, resource sharing, and networks with universities and civil society to strengthen in-depth reporting), and 3) the level of platform and algorithm politics (e.g., demands for transparency in ranking and distribution, measures to reduce incentives for polarizing content, and governance designs that prevent “public value” from being subordinated to “commercial logic”). Without any one of these levels, restoring the public sphere risks remaining a theoretical ideal rather than a practical possibility.

In conclusion, the relationship between journalism and democracy is not merely a theoretical framework but an urgent mission for contemporary journalism. In an era of information overload, polarization, and declining trust, convergent journalism must do more than narrate events: it must weave diverse voices into public conversations that enable collectively reasoned decision-making, while also negotiating with platform-driven structures of visibility in order to sustain the conditions of truth and shared deliberation that underpin contemporary democracy.

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