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Journalists in the Digital Age: Between Viral Algorithms and the Collapse of Professional Standards

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***Abstract*—The digital environment has brought about radical changes in the structure of journalism; media organisations are no longer the sole actors in the production and distribution of news, but digital platforms and recommendation and ranking algorithms now largely control how content reaches the public. This shift has led to a transition in journalism from a model based on professional values such as accuracy, objectivity and verification, to one governed by metrics of engagement, reach and view counts, which has placed increasing pressure on journalists to produce content that aligns with the requirements of algorithms rather than adhering to professional standards.**

This study examines the relationship between digital platform algorithms and the transformations in journalistic practice, analysing how ranking and recommendation mechanisms have contributed to reshaping the priorities of media work, and the impact this has had on the quality of news content, the spread of disinformation, and the decline in the press's social responsibility. The study also seeks to provide a scholarly perspective on ways to reconcile the demands of the digital environment with the preservation of professional ethics, through enhancing algorithmic transparency, developing journalists' digital skills, and re-emphasising professional values as the foundation for the sustainability of journalistic practice.

***Keywords*—digital journalism; platform algorithms; digital dissemination; journalistic ethics; misinformation.**

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the media sector has undergone an unprecedented structural transformation driven by the digital revolution, with the production and dissemination of news shifting from traditional media organisations to a digital space dominated by social media platforms and search engines. These platforms are no longer merely channels for disseminating content; they have become key players in determining which news reaches the public through complex algorithms based on the analysis of big data and user behaviour.

Recent literature suggests that platform algorithms no longer merely influence the distribution of news, but are reshaping the agenda of media organisations themselves, as many newsrooms now rely on digital engagement metrics—such as the number of clicks, shares and viewing time—as criteria for assessing the

success of content. This has led to the emergence of the phenomenon of ‘algorithmic journalism’, in which professional considerations take a back seat to the demands of digital reach.

Faced with this new reality, journalists now find themselves grappling with a complex dilemma: balancing their commitment to professional values with the need to achieve digital reach. Algorithmic competition drives them to produce content that is fast, engaging and shareable, whilst professional ethics demand a commitment to accuracy, verification and independence. Consequently, the relationship between platform algorithms and professional standards represents one of the most significant research issues in contemporary digital media studies.

With this in mind, this article seeks to analyse the impact of digital platform algorithms on the reshaping of journalistic practice, focusing on their implications for professional standards, and to propose mechanisms that help media organisations and journalists adapt to the digital environment without compromising the fundamental principles of journalism.

Statement of the Research Problem

The digital revolution has radically reshaped the media landscape. The success of journalistic work is no longer linked solely to the quality of content or adherence to professional ethics; rather, it has become contingent upon the content’s ability to align with the algorithms of digital platforms that control the ranking of news stories, their reach and their access to the public. This reality has given rise to a new media environment in which technical considerations overlap with editorial ones, prompting many media organisations to realign their editorial policies to meet the requirements of digital platforms and engagement metrics, such as the number of views, likes and shares, and the time users spend on a page.

This has led to a gradual decline in a number of core professional values – such as accuracy, fact-checking, independence and balance – in favour of producing content that is fast, sensational and capable of going viral, even if this comes at the expense of quality and credibility. Recent literature suggests that the ‘Attention Economy’ has become the governing framework for the news industry in the digital environment, where competition to attract the audience’s attention has come to take precedence over the traditional function of news reporting.

These shifts are becoming increasingly concerning with the expanding use of artificial intelligence and predictive algorithms in managing the flow of information, raising fundamental questions about the future of journalistic independence, the limits of algorithmic interference in editorial decision-making, and the possibility of upholding professional ethics in the face of the dominance of digital platforms.

On this basis, the main research question of this study is as follows:

To what extent have digital platform algorithms contributed to reshaping journalistic practice, and what are the implications of this for professional standards in journalism in the digital age?

The following sub-questions stem from the main research question:

1. What is meant by journalism in the digital age, and what are the most significant transformations it has undergone?

2. How do digital platform algorithms function in organising and distributing news content?

3. What is the nature of the relationship between the requirements of algorithmic dissemination and the professional standards of journalism?

4. What are the most notable manifestations of the decline in journalistic professionalism in the context of the platform economy?

5. What mechanisms can ensure a balance between the requirements of the digital environment and the preservation of professional ethics?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study stems from several academic and professional considerations, which can be summarised as follows:

- It addresses one of the most topical issues in digital media, namely the impact of algorithms on the news industry.
- It helps to explain the structural shifts that journalistic practice has undergone in the face of the dominance of digital platforms.
- It provides a scholarly framework for understanding the relationship between technology and journalistic ethics.
- It assists media organisations in developing strategies that strike a balance between digital reach and maintaining professional standards.
- It enriches the Arabic literature in the field of digital media and journalistic ethics, an area which still requires further applied research.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The current study aims to:

- Examine the concept of journalism in the digital age and its characteristics.
- Analyse how algorithms on digital platforms work.
- Highlight the impact of algorithms on the production and distribution of journalistic content.
- Examine the implications of algorithms for professional standards in journalism.
- Propose mechanisms to promote journalistic ethics in the digital environment.

Journalism in the Digital Age: Concept and Structural Transformations

First: The Concept of Journalism in the Digital Age

Digital journalism represents an advanced stage in the evolution of journalism, as it is based on the production, publication and distribution of news content via digital media, utilising internet technologies, artificial intelligence, multimedia and real-time interaction with the audience. Digital journalism is no longer merely the transfer of print content to the internet; rather, it has become a new media model based on interactivity, speed, continuous updating and the use of big data in news production. (Pavlik, 2021)

Pavlik argues that digital journalism is the process of producing news in an environment reliant on digital technologies, where text, images, video, infographics and interactive media are integrated within a single media ecosystem, whilst providing the public with the opportunity to participate in the production and circulation of content.

Diakopoulos, for his part, asserts that digital journalism has entered a new phase characterised by an increasing reliance on algorithms to select, rank and personalise news for audiences, which has led to the emergence of the concept of ‘algorithmic journalism’, in which software has become an integral part of the editorial process. (Diakopoulos, 2019)

From another perspective, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism notes that digital platforms have become the primary source of news for a large section of the global audience, prompting news organisations to restructure their editorial strategies to align with the digital platform environment. (Institute, 2024)

Accordingly, journalism in the digital age can be defined as:

a media system that relies on digital technologies for the production, processing, publication and distribution of news, within an interactive environment governed by the algorithms of digital platforms, thereby imposing new patterns of journalistic practice and reshaping the relationship between journalists, the public and media organisations.

Secondly: Structural shifts in digital journalism

1. THE SHIFT FROM MEDIA ORGANISATIONS TO DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Traditional media organisations used to have a monopoly on the production and distribution of news; today, however, digital platforms have become the primary intermediaries controlling the delivery of content to the public, with media power gradually shifting from newsrooms to the companies that own these digital platforms. (Gillespie, 2018)

2. THE SHIFT FROM GATEKEEPER TO ALGORITHM

The journalist or editor-in-chief used to be responsible for selecting news according to professional standards; however, this role is now shared with or replaced by algorithms that rely on the analysis of user data and digital behaviour, leading to a shift from the traditional concept of the ‘gatekeeper’ to that of the ‘algorithmic gatekeeper’ (Napoli, 2019)

3.The shift from content quality to the attention economy

Content is now measured more by the level of engagement it generates than by its professional value, which has prompted media organisations to produce content that attracts clicks and sparks engagement, even if this is at the expense of accuracy, depth and fact-checking (Couldry, 2017)

4. THE SHIFT FROM A PASSIVE AUDIENCE TO A PRODUCTIVE AUDIENCE

The digital environment has enabled the public to produce, publish, comment on and share news, creating a new form of participatory media and undermining media organisations’ monopoly on information production (Jenkins, 2018).

5. THE SHIFT TOWARDS DATA JOURNALISM AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Recent years have seen an expansion in the use of artificial intelligence in news editing, data analysis, trend detection and automated content production, which has transformed the nature of journalistic work and required journalists to acquire new digital skills. (Beckett, 2023)

Taken together, these shifts confirm that journalism in the digital age is no longer merely a technical evolution of publishing methods, but has become a structural transformation that affects the very nature of the profession itself, redefining the roles of journalists, media organisations, and the public, in an environment where algorithms and artificial intelligence are increasingly dominating the processes of news production and distribution.

Theme 2: Digital Platform Algorithms and Dissemination Mechanisms

Definition of Algorithms:

They are also known as intelligent and complex programmes; they are not merely tools for filtering content, but rather dynamic mechanisms that sort, recommend and rank content based on users’ preferences and past behaviour. They are a set of logical rules and instructions executed by computer systems to perform specific tasks within the context of social media platforms, processing vast amounts of user data such as likes, shares, viewing time and even the pages they visit. This data is then used to identify content that will attract their attention. (Al-Shalah, 2026).

Definition of digital platform algorithms

These are defined as computational systems comprising a set of rules and programming instructions used by digital platforms to collect and analyse data, and then to organise, categorise and recommend content to users according to specific criteria, such as interaction patterns, previous interests and the context of use. The role of these algorithms is not limited Nicholas Diakopoulos defines media algorithms as: ‘a set of computational procedures used to automatically collect, categorise, organise and present information to the public, thereby influencing the nature of the knowledge received by users’.

From this perspective, digital platform algorithms can be defined as:

computational systems that rely on artificial intelligence, big data analysis and user behaviour, with the aim of organising and categorising digital content and recommending it to the public, thereby reshaping the flow of news and the priorities for visibility and dissemination within the digital environment.to managing the flow of content; it extends to influencing access to information, directing attention and shaping patterns of media consumption, making them a key player in shaping the digital public sphere. (Gillespie, 2018).

Thirdly: The technical foundations underpinning the algorithms

The algorithms of digital platforms rely on a set of integrated technical components, the most important of which are:

1. BIG DATA ANALYTICS

The platforms rely on collecting vast amounts of user-related data, such as browsing history, content viewing time, search queries, likes, comments, shares, geographical location and devices used. This data is then analysed to build accurate models for predicting user behaviour (Kitchin, 2021) .[3]

2.Machine Learning

Platforms use machine learning algorithms to continuously update their models; they learn from user behaviour and refine their recommendation results as the volume of available data increases, making the algorithm better able to predict which content will generate the highest level of engagement.

3. GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Generative AI applications are playing an increasingly significant role in content classification, identifying trending topics, summarising news stories, suggesting headlines, and even assisting in the production of some journalistic material, which has deepened the relationship between AI and journalism (Beckett, 2023).[4]

Fourth: Types of algorithms used by digital platforms

The algorithms that influence the journalistic landscape can be categorised into several main types:

1. RANKING ALGORITHMS

These determine the order in which news items and posts appear on the homepage or in search results, based on indicators such as content quality, user engagement with the content, and the credibility of the source.

2. RECOMMENDATION ALGORITHMS

These aim to suggest new content that matches the user’s interests, based on their digital activity history or on the behaviour of other users with similar interests.

3.Personalisation Algorithms

These algorithms work to create a unique news experience for each user, ensuring that each individual receives news that differs from that of others based on their interests and past behaviour; this has led to the emergence of the phenomenon known as ‘filter bubbles’ (Pariser, 2011).[5]

4. CONTENT MODERATION ALGORITHMS

These are used to detect content that breaches the platform’s policies, such as hate speech, misinformation or violent content, and rely on artificial intelligence techniques to process text, images and video.

Fifth: Mechanisms for the dissemination of news via algorithms

The dissemination of news no longer depends solely on its newsworthiness; rather, it has become the result of the interaction of a set of algorithmic indicators, the most notable of which are:

- Click-through rate.
- Time spent on the page (Watch Time/Dwell Time).
- The number of shares and reposts.
- The volume of comments and the quality of engagement.
- The speed at which content spreads during the first few hours.
- The credibility of the account or publishing organisation.
- The relevance of the content to the user’s previous interests.

The algorithm analyses these indicators in real time and continuously re-ranks the news, so that the most engaging stories have a greater chance of reaching a wider audience, whilst stories that do not achieve high levels of engagement are given lower visibility (Napoli, 2019).[6]

Sixth: Algorithms and the Media Agenda-Setting Process

The dominance of algorithms has led to the emergence of a new model of media agenda-setting, whereby news organisations are no longer solely responsible for determining news priorities; digital platforms have become key partners in this process.

Gillespie points out that platforms exercise ‘hidden power’ in determining the most widely discussed issues, through mechanisms that rank content and either highlight or minimise its visibility, thereby exerting an indirect editorial influence on the shaping of public opinion. Napoli (2019) also argues that algorithms now play a role that goes beyond technical mediation, actively participating in the production of news value and determining what is deemed worthy of public attention.

Consequently, the media agenda is no longer constructed solely on the basis of criteria of public importance or societal interest, but is now heavily influenced by indicators of digital engagement. This has led to a gradual shift from an ‘institutional agenda’ to a ‘platform agenda’, and from a public service ethos to the logic of the attention economy.

Theme 3: The Impact of Algorithms on Journalistic Practice and Professional Standards

First: The Impact of Algorithms on Journalistic Practice

Algorithms used by digital platforms have brought about a profound transformation in journalistic practice. Journalists no longer operate in an environment controlled solely by media organisations; rather, they now work within a digital ecosystem dictated by social media platforms and search engines, where algorithms control the ranking, distribution and delivery of content to the public. This transformation has reshaped the priorities of journalistic work, with considerations of reach, dissemination and engagement now becoming influential factors in the news production process, alongside traditional editorial considerations.

A study by Musa and Kazim indicates that Arab media organisations are increasingly turning to the use of artificial intelligence and algorithms in content production and management, and that this shift has helped to speed up news production and broaden its reach, but, conversely, has posed professional challenges relating to the independence of editorial decision-making and the preservation of professional journalistic values. The study also revealed that a significant proportion of Arab journalists believe that algorithms now have a direct influence on the selection of news topics and the mechanisms by which they are published. (Hassan, 2025)

On the other hand, a study by Haddad showed that the integration of artificial intelligence technologies within Jordanian media organisations has led to a change in the nature of journalistic work, as newsrooms have become increasingly reliant on digital tools for gathering news, analysing data and drafting content, which requires journalists to possess new digital skills alongside their traditional professional skills. (Thulaji, 2023)

A study by Khalouf also confirms that Palestinian media organisations' reliance on artificial intelligence applications and algorithms has helped to improve efficiency and speed up content production; however, it has also given rise to challenges relating to fact-checking, safeguarding credibility, and preserving journalists' independence in editorial decision-making. (Mahmoud, 2023)

Secondly: The impact of algorithms on professional standards

Professional standards, such as accuracy, objectivity, independence, balance and credibility, are among the most important pillars underpinning journalistic practice. However, the algorithm-driven digital environment has placed new pressures on journalists, as the evaluation of content has come to rely heavily on engagement and reach metrics – such as the number of views, likes and shares – rather than on the quality of the content and its news value.

The study by Mousa and Kazim highlights that one of the most significant challenges facing Arab journalism in the age of algorithms is the prioritisation of digital reach over professional considerations, which may lead to a decline in content quality and a weakening of commitment to the profession's ethical values, particularly given the fierce competition among media organisations to attract audiences.

A study into the factors influencing the professional performance of Iraqi journalists also concluded that the digital environment and the associated pressures of speed and competition affect the quality of professional performance, and that a lack of professional qualifications and training in modern technologies has a negative impact on adherence to ethical standards and the quality of journalistic coverage.

Rushdi's study indicates that the use of artificial intelligence technologies in the development of journalistic content yields significant benefits in terms of speed and efficiency, but requires the establishment of clear professional and ethical safeguards to ensure that the journalist's credibility or independence is not compromised. (Ismail, 2022)

Thirdly: The key professional challenges posed by algorithms

Algorithms have contributed to the emergence of a range of challenges facing journalists, the most notable of which are:

- The diminishing role of journalists in prioritising news stories, in favour of algorithmic systems.
- The prioritisation of the most engaging content over content that is most important to the public interest.
- Increased professional pressure to produce news that is fast and shareable.
- The potential for the spread of misinformation due to the speed of digital circulation.
- A growing need for digital fact-checking skills and proficiency in using artificial intelligence tools.

• The emergence of issues relating to accountability and transparency when using algorithmic systems in newsrooms.

Recent Arabic literature emphasises that these challenges do not signify a decline in the journalist's role, but rather necessitate a redefinition of their roles, so that they become better able to utilise technology whilst upholding the professional values that distinguish journalistic work from non-professional digital content. (Sabih, 2024).

The Fourth Theme: Mechanisms for Restoring Professionalism in the Digital Age

Firstly: Developing legislation and ethical codes governing digital journalism

Digital transformations have posed unprecedented challenges to journalistic ethics, necessitating a review of media legislation and codes of professional conduct to bring them into line with the environment of digital platforms and artificial intelligence. Traditional codes are no longer sufficient to address issues related to algorithms, such as public misinformation, algorithmic bias, content manipulation and privacy breaches.

In this context, Al-Ashri's study emphasises that the rapid development of artificial intelligence applications in journalism requires media organisations to adopt new ethical and legislative frameworks that ensure transparency and accountability whilst preserving editorial independence. The study also recommended that codes of professional conduct be updated in line with rapid technological developments. (Waleed, 2024).

Khaither also believes that the ethics of digital journalism are no longer limited to a commitment to accuracy and objectivity, but now also encompass the journalist's responsibility in dealing with algorithms, data and artificial intelligence, in a way that ensures respect for the public's rights and does not harm the public interest.

Secondly: Enhancing digital training for journalists

Digital literacy is one of the most important elements in restoring professionalism within the new media environment, as journalists are now required to master data analysis skills, carry out digital fact-checking, and use artificial intelligence applications professionally, without compromising the core values of the profession.

A study by Haddad indicates that media organisations that invest in the continuous training of their staff are better able to adapt to digital transformations, and their journalists are better equipped to utilise technical tools whilst maintaining the quality of their professional performance. (Haddad)

A study by Musa and Kazim also concluded that a lack of specialised training in the use of artificial intelligence technologies is one of the main obstacles limiting the ability of Arab media organisations to make the most of modern technologies, and recommended the establishment of ongoing training programmes for journalists in the fields of artificial intelligence, data analysis and digital journalism.

Thirdly: Fostering a culture of fact-checking and combating misinformation

The speed at which news spreads across digital platforms has become a major challenge for journalists, as the race for the scoop can lead to the publication of inaccurate or unsubstantiated information. Restoring professional standards therefore requires fostering a culture of fact-checking news before publication, relying on credible sources, and utilising digital fact-checking tools.

A study by Mahdawi and Ayadi confirms that digital platforms represent an important source of information for journalists; however, their use requires adherence to rigorous procedures for verifying the accuracy of information, as uncritical reliance on them may lead to the spread of fake news and damage the credibility of the media organisation. (Munir, 2024)

Fourth: Promoting transparency in the use of algorithms and artificial intelligence

Transparency is one of the fundamental principles for ensuring the responsible use of algorithms in journalism. This is achieved by disclosing the extent to which intelligent systems are involved in the production or curation of content, and by not leaving sensitive editorial decisions to automated systems alone.

Al-Dubaisi's study indicates that the use of artificial intelligence in newsrooms should be subject to human oversight, with clear policies in place defining the responsibilities of journalists and media organisations when using smart applications, thereby ensuring accountability and maintaining public trust. (Allah, 2024)

Fifth: Promoting media and digital literacy

The responsibility for restoring professionalism does not lie solely with media organisations, but extends to the public, who have become partners in the production and circulation of content. Consequently, promoting a culture of media and digital literacy helps to empower the public to distinguish between accurate and misleading news, and to understand how algorithms work and their impact on the content they are exposed to.

Recent Arab studies confirm that raising the public's media literacy reduces the impact of fake news, strengthens public trust in professional media organisations, and limits the spread of misleading content.

Sixth: Striking a balance between the demands of reaching a wider audience and adherence to professional standards

Media organisations are now required to strike a balance between harnessing the potential offered by algorithms to reach audiences and upholding the professional principles of journalism, foremost among which are accuracy, objectivity, independence, credibility and social responsibility.

The study by Musa and Kazim emphasises that the success of media organisations in the digital age should not be measured solely by the volume of digital engagement or the number of views, but rather by their ability to produce reliable, professional content that serves the public interest, whilst using algorithms as tools to assist editorial decision-making rather than as a substitute for it. (Kazim)

CONCLUSION

The digital revolution has brought about a radical transformation in the media landscape; journalistic practice is no longer governed solely by traditional professional standards, but is increasingly influenced by the algorithms of digital platforms that control the ranking, dissemination and reach of news content. This transformation has reshaped the priorities of journalistic practice, with engagement and reach metrics now playing a significant role in editorial decision-making; this has had an impact on a number of core professional values, such as accuracy, objectivity, independence and fact-checking.

This study has shown that algorithms, despite the opportunities they offer to broaden audience reach and improve the efficiency of content distribution, are not neutral technical tools; rather, they have come to play an active role in shaping the digital public sphere and influencing the media agenda. Furthermore, the competition to achieve the highest engagement rates has contributed to the rise of sensationalism, the acceleration of publication, and a decline in the quality of some journalistic content, thereby posing unprecedented professional and ethical challenges for journalists and media organisations.

Conversely, the study made it clear that restoring professionalism in the digital age is not achieved by rejecting technology or limiting the use of algorithms, but rather through their responsible use, within a clear ethical and legislative framework that preserves editorial independence and ensures respect for the

public's right to accurate and reliable information. Furthermore, developing journalists' digital skills, fostering a culture of fact-checking, ensuring transparency in the use of artificial intelligence applications, and updating codes of journalistic ethics are all essential mechanisms for striking a balance between the demands of the digital environment and the preservation of professional standards.

The study concludes that the future of journalism will not be determined by algorithms alone, but rather by the ability of media organisations and journalists to utilise modern technologies in the service of the media's mission, without compromising the ethical principles that form the core of journalistic practice. Consequently, upholding journalistic professionalism in the digital age remains a shared responsibility amongst media organisations, digital platforms, regulatory bodies and academic institutions, thereby contributing to the creation of a more transparent and credible media environment, capable of fulfilling its role in serving society and promoting the right to knowledge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the study's findings, the following recommendations can be made:

1. Updating codes of journalistic ethics to address the challenges posed by algorithms and artificial intelligence.
2. Enacting legislation to regulate the use of algorithms in media organisations and to promote the principles of transparency and accountability.
3. Incorporating courses on artificial intelligence and digital media ethics into journalism training programmes.
4. Organising ongoing training programmes for journalists in the areas of digital fact-checking, data analysis and the use of artificial intelligence tools.
5. Strengthening cooperation between media organisations, universities and research centres to conduct applied studies on the impact of algorithms on the quality of journalistic content.
6. Promoting a culture of media and digital literacy amongst the public, thereby enhancing their ability to distinguish between reliable news and misleading content.
7. Encouraging media organisations to adopt indicators for assessing the quality of journalistic performance that are not limited to the number of views or engagement, but which also take into account adherence to professional standards and the public interest.

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