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**New media and news quality.
Contemporary challenges
and problems of journalism**

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Abstract

New media and news quality. Contemporary challenges and problems of journalism

The development of media technologies has for many years been one of the more frequently discussed phenomena affecting changes in the media and journalism. Nowadays, both media theorists and practitioners point out that media technologies not only change the form of publication or the journalist's work style but can also affect the quality of journalistic publications. The purpose of this article is to attempt to identify contemporary approaches of the media community to the role of new media in relation to the quality of news, journalism and contemporary media challenges on the basis of qualitative research conducted among representatives of the Polish media community.

Keywords: journalism, new media, news quality, media studies, communication

Questions about the quality of the media, the quality of journalism or the quality of media information itself in contemporary discussions of communication are becoming extremely relevant and topical all the time. News is no longer the domain of only a limited number of editorial offices and professional media organizations, but with the development of new media technologies, Web 2.0 journalism or social media, media information is transmitted (and even created) by journalists, editorial offices, new grassroots initiatives and individual creators. In this changing world of journalism and new media, it is still relevant to analyze how new media and new technologies affect the quality of information and what challenges news journalism will face in the coming years.

Journalism in the new media

American journalist and new media researcher Mark Briggs begins his book "Journalism Next" with the following words: "What is coming next in journalism? No one knows for sure, but we can all agree that it will be digital" (Briggs, 2019, p. 9). The technological changes seen in recent years and the aforementioned shift to the digital side of communication are presenting journalism with ever-new challenges. Journalism and information occupying

an important place in the whole environment of new media face new technological and communication phenomena, the new role of the audience, or systems of publishing and receiving content that are just emerging. It is worth noting that the term “new media,” commonly used today, is not a new term, and over the years, it has described very different phenomena emerging in the media and communications market. Denis McQuail notes that the term “new media” began to appear in scholarly and journalistic discourse in the 1960s and has expanded steadily since then to include a collection of applied communication technologies (McQuail, 2005).

Today, in the analysis of new media, the Internet plays a key and important role. Maria Nowina Konopka notes that although “new media” is a very broad conceptual category, “today the term is understood mainly in relation to the Internet, which is the most important medium, the most perfect magnum opus of the new media evolution” (Nowina Konopka, 2017, p. 17). The researcher states that the Internet is widely recognized as the essence of the new media, as it becomes the platform for the emergence of further new forms of communication (such as social media, blogs, etc.) as well as brings them all together, becoming the environment for their natural occurrence (Nowina Konopka, 2017).

A key phase of a major transformation in the media world is unfolding before our eyes during the first years of the 21st century. Some call this multifaceted process the change of traditional journalism into Web 2.0 journalism (Briggs, 2007) and Web 3.0 (Dowd, 2016) or call this new phase in the development of the world media environment the era of “new new media” (Levinson, 2013). Moreover, the evolution of media in the last few years has been so deep, clear and multifaceted that, according to some researchers, it deserves to be called a paradigm shift (Dutta & Gangopadhyay, 2019).

Problems of journalism in new media

The main doubt still debated today is the question of the professionalism of user-produced “civic” and grassroots content. Paul Levinson argues that this lack of professionalism is one of the characteristics of the “new new media,” which is a guarantee of the authenticity of the published content (Levinson, 2013). News as a result of the work of professional journalists is losing its importance, grassroots, amateur forms are developing, rooted in the active

attitude of network users, who — according to the title of Dan Gillmor’s work “We the Media” (Gillmor, 2004) — are becoming media.

Researchers note that although the speed of information and the ability to reach the audience is apparently greater than in traditional media (such as print, radio and television), we face a high risk of receiving unprofessional, low-quality content. In media study discussions, there are increasingly voices about the crisis, or even the end, of journalism as we knew it (Palczewski, 2018). The paradigm of journalism based on the message from the newsroom to the viewer, in which journalism is identified with a particular profession and occupation, is beginning to give way to an approach that broadens the definition of the journalistic profession. This definition, under the influence of the new media and the phenomena described above, as Stuart Allan notes, is under constant negotiation, and the concepts of “authority” or “prestige” used in the context of the journalism profession are increasingly fluid (Allan, 2006).

Marek Palczewski also points to the increasingly apparent cognitive relativism about journalism and news itself in the new media:

In the conceptual chaos, the very notion of journalism and journalist has been relativized, which can be anyone publishing on social media. Once unambiguous criteria have been distorted, genres have become hybrids and lost their differentiating features, and previously valid values have been devalued. The news paradigm has changed; the old paradigm no longer sets journalistic standards, and the new paradigm is not strong enough to shape them. (Palczewski, 2018, pp. 205–206)

Palczewski points out the following as the most important problems and issues in contemporary journalism that affect this state of affairs: the expansion of the Internet, the processes of globalization and media convergence, the breakdown of news and journalism paradigms, the disappearance of the division between sender and receiver, the development of the blogosphere, social media and citizen journalism, the production of user-generated-content, i.e., content produced by users outside media institutions, the decline of the printed press and the shrinking audience in European countries and the US, the deprofessionalization of the journalism profession, the personalization of content, the emergence of profiled news and news portals, the dominance of soft news over hard news, the increasing tabloidization of content, post-truth and fake news (Palczewski, 2018).

It can be noted that at the current stage of the discussion of the role and direction of journalism in the new media, there are more and more voices pointing to the challenges and even threats posed by contemporary processes in the new media. However, this discourse is not unequivocal, because despite the diagnoses evident and presented above, voices that treat the contemporary situation as part of the normal process of media development are also justified.

Problems and challenges of journalism: qualitative research

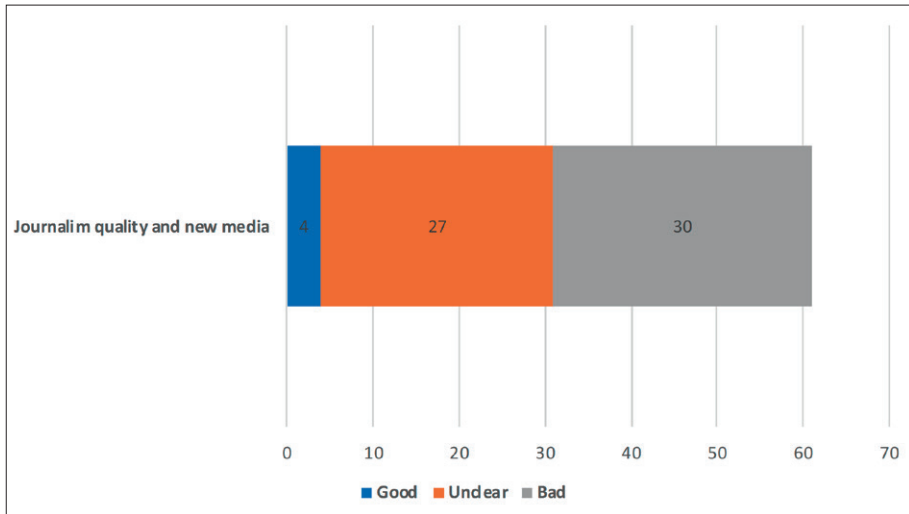
In order to analyze the contemporary problems and challenges of journalism in the new media in relation to the quality of media information, the method of qualitative expert interview collected by the questionnaire method was used. Sixty-one people (30 men and 31 women) participated in the qualitative expert survey. In order to ensure a diversity of perspectives, the experts invited to the survey were divided into five categories relating to the professional and media area they are or have been involved with in the past: media scholars (12 people), media scholars with journalistic experience (10 people), traditional media journalists (14 people), new media journalists (16 people), and public relations specialists (9 people). The survey was conducted in November-December 2022. In their responses, participants specified, among other things, what role they think objectivity plays in the quality of media information and how they understand, define and describe it. The research material obtained was compiled and systematized through appropriate coding of the responses, allowing the statements of individual experts to be compared, and linking—defined during the coding—the categories to each other and looking for connections between them.

News quality in the new media

In a qualitative study, experts were asked for their opinion on the impact of new media technologies on information and journalism. The role of new media and new communication channels in modern journalism is noticeable and important. The emergence and development of phenomena such as, among others, the new architecture of the Web 2.0, which has influenced

the paradigm shift in media and journalism – social media, multimedia and interactivity of content or artificial intelligence, measurably affect both journalism and media information itself. Therefore, an important question is to what extent the changes initiated by the development of the Internet, new or “new, new” (Levinson, 2013) media affect the quality of media information. Experts’ opinions on the impact of new media on the quality of news are divided. Three prominent approaches are drawn in the answers given. The first presents the view that the new media have had a good effect on the quality of information. However, this is an unpopular claim, expressed by only four experts. The second group (27 people) of responses treated new media ambiguously. Survey participants point to both the good and bad sides of the development of new media technologies in recent years. The largest number of survey participants (30 people) expressed the opinion that new media are bad for the quality of media information.

Figure 1. How has the new media affected the quality of media information?



Source: compilation based on own research.

Responses indicating the positive impact of new media focus primarily on the new opportunities afforded by modern technologies. Journalist 3 draws

attention to the new media technologies present in the work of a journalist. He says that very positive examples are evident, stressing that “the ease of searching for information and materials on search engines can enhance the quality of a text through the wealth of materials gathered. It used to be necessary, for example, to leaf through yearbooks of old newspapers, but now they are often available, as are useful book publications in digital libraries.” According to Journalist 17, the positive impact of new media on the quality of media information is primarily due to the fact that much more information is now being created:

I think the new media have had a good impact on information. It seems to me that by the fact that now everyone has access not only to receive information, but also to create – this is very important – it has caused one thing: if in the 1980s 20 pieces of information were created in an hour (let’s assume), of which 5 were valuable, now 200 pieces of information are created in an hour, of which 50 are valuable. In percentage terms, the development of new media has had a bad effect on the development of journalism; there is more worthless information. But at the same time, the valuable, qualitative stuff in between is much more than it used to be. (Journalist 17)

A large group of participants (27 people) in the survey believe that it is impossible to unequivocally assess the impact of new media on the quality of information. The development of new technologies has introduced a lot of good changes in the functioning of the editorial office, the work of the journalist, the acquisition of information, the creation of content and diversifying it with multimedia elements. At the same time, they note the negative aspects and phenomena associated with the development of new media technologies. Media Scholar 5 sees a threat primarily in the possibility of publishing information by any user of the Internet:

The development of new media has enabled the rapid transmission of information and its wide access, but at the same time – it has made information as a genre of journalism shallow, for example, by the fact that the provider of information (because probably not the author) can be almost any cell phone user. (Media Scholar 5)

Also, Media Scholar 12 highlights negative but also positive aspects regarding the development of new media:

On the one hand, negatively: time pressure, faster circulation of information, thus less time for checking, rapid spread of false information, displacement of journalism by pseudo-journalism; on the other hand, positively: possible media activity independent of decision-makers balancing the influence of traditional media, possibilities for bottom-up verification of media messages. (Media Scholar 12)

Journalists also note, despite the many negative sides of the new media, the positive phenomena of new media formats present in the Internet space. Journalist 29 points to podcasts as an example of a new kind of qualitative content on the Internet, whose ease of reaching people around the world is incomparably greater than qualitative articles in a newspaper. He points out, however, that one of the apparent dangers of the new media with regard to the quality of information is the “dormancy of the audience,” who get dozens of pieces of information every day and finds it difficult to separate the qualitative ones from the shallow ones. He argues, however, that despite this, “the negative phenomena do not derail the possibility of using (as is already happening) the new media to develop quality journalism” (Journalist 29).

Nearly half of the survey participants (30 people) said that the new media have had and continue to have a negative impact on the quality of media information. The main arguments cited are the speed of the information provided, which is not sufficiently verified, the focus on titles and headlines that often mislead the viewer, the shift to a video content model (especially short forms) and the shift away from reading information. Experts are also critical of the fact that current information can be transmitted and created by anyone. Media Scholar 6 bluntly states that new media has affected the quality of information “disastrously, mainly because of the misunderstood belief that anyone can be a journalist.” A similar opinion is held by Media Scholar 22, who states that

disastrously affected the quality is the confusion of the texts of professional journalists or even pre-prepared for the profession with the texts of people who write/appear in the new media for various personal reasons; in many cases they are better than average journalists, but it is difficult to come across them in the flood of texts; the reader/viewer is condemned to the method of trial and error. (Media Scholar 22)

The statements also include examples of contemporary phenomena such as information bubbles, confirmation bias, and fake news.

Media Scholar 13 believes that

the emergence of new media has negatively affected the quality of media information ... Social media has created a world of disinformation in which lies and rumors spread with unprecedented speed. And, as we have been able to observe for a long time, the fight against fake news is an uneven one, which does not mean that it should not be fought. News messages are getting shorter and shallower. Charged with emotion, often aggressive and vulgar. Traditional media, in order to keep up and not fall completely out of circulation, have adapted their offerings to this general trend. So, we observe the pursuit of sensationalism, entertainment, scandal or gossip. The terror of clickbaits means that we are dealing with artificially pumped up sensationalism, titles and headlines that exaggerate or hypocritical content. In addition, social media and its algorithms reinforce information bubbles and social, political and ideological polarization. Emotional content and tribal battles dominate. In the battle for audiences, quality journalism is losing. (Media Scholar 13)

Media scholars point out that the development of new media has negatively affected not only journalists but also the recipients of information. More and more often, information is received “on the go,” thus the focus and completeness of the reception of the content that reaches us also decreases.

Also, in the group of journalists, almost half of the participants (14 people) described the impact of new media on the quality of information as bad. In addition to the development of new phenomena on the Internet, journalists point to negative changes in the journalistic profession itself and the organization of editorial work. As Journalist 15 notes, new media technologies have affected the quality of information

dramatically. I say this from the perspective of a person who created and for more than two decades co-founded one of Poland’s leading horizontal portals. The competition to race for the highest possible viewership, the turning of journalists into mediaworkers, the mixing of advertising interests with social interests and the belief that the Internet will take anything, plus the popularity of social media, meant that quality, ethics and workshop no longer mattered. (Journalist 15)

Journalist 26 highlights the role of social media in the process of lowering the quality of media information. By his own admission, even journalists

themselves and professional, large media outlets are beginning to have problems using social media:

I'm not a hurra-optimist or a big enthusiast of what new media brings to journalism. As I observe Twitter of 2015 and the current one, these are two different worlds. Today it is a toxic world that I don't want to participate in. It used to be the basis for gathering information, sharing knowledge and exchanging opinions. New media have also degenerated. I would say that they have changed us, made us independent, allowed us to break out of the lampshade of large portals and newspapers, but on the other hand they have made it so that anyone can be a journalist, so no one is that journalist. Since everything can be information – because anyone can publish something – nothing is information. Even the biggest media don't know how to use it anymore. (Journalist 26)

The assessment of the impact of new media on the quality of information is not unequivocal, although the survey participants' statements show distance and caution in identifying the positives. Undoubtedly, the new media provide many new opportunities, which the survey participants pointed out, but one should not forget about the disturbing phenomena and limitations mentioned in the responses. However, one view in particular is clear in the responses: the quality of information has been affected by the new media, as Media Scholar 15 put it, "in one word: significantly."

Contemporary challenges of journalism

The purpose of the qualitative interviews conducted was not only to diagnose the contemporary approaches of the survey participants to the impact of new media on the quality of news and journalism, but also to identify trends and challenges for the coming years. The challenges of journalism identified by the survey participants largely correlate with contemporary media issues, especially those that relate to changes in journalism due to the development of new media. The experts' analysis of contemporary trends and their extrapolation into the future made it possible to identify a list of the most prominent challenges that journalists may face soon.

The most frequently identified (23 statements) challenge for the coming years by experts is fake news, which, according to survey participants' responses, will increase in number and intensity. The problem of fake news is

very complex and involves the emergence of new mechanisms of disinformation, such as deep fake and social media trolling. The challenge for journalists in this area will be, first of all, to be accurate and reliable in verifying information, but also to continue to build awareness in audiences, who often accept false information in new media. Journalist 29 says the problem with fake news will get worse and is a medium's biggest challenges for the coming years:

The importance of fake news, deep fakes, fake accounts, and impersonation is growing and will likely continue to grow. With journalists becoming less vigilant and relying only on social media messages for information, this could lead to disaster. This is already happening, but I fear it will become more frequent. (Journalist 29)

The second most frequently indicated (17 people) challenge about journalism and media information is the observed development of AI and algorithms. The problems indicated concern both generative AI and the creation of increasingly sophisticated algorithms that take on the role of gatekeeper, so to speak, and decide what information reaches specific Internet users. Experts note a growing problem with the generation of content by artificial intelligence, whether textual, graphic or video. Journalist 17 sees the development of artificial intelligence as by far the biggest challenge for journalism in the next years:

Artificial intelligence first and foremost. 10 years ago, artificial intelligence would not have been able to create a journalistic message for two reasons: first, it was too weak, and second, no one needed this type of simple journalistic message. Today AI is better, but it still won't create a good, elaborate journalistic text, but more and more people need such material. (Journalist 17)

At the same time, experts note that a major challenge in this area is the systemic regulation of technology companies, whose algorithms have a strong influence on the quality of the content presented.

The third most frequently identified trend (12 statements) is the deepening of the processes of tabloidization of content, clickbait, tailoring information to low audience expectations and creating coverage journalism at the expense of quality journalism. Experts see a huge challenge in taking any measures to reverse this trend. Social media (using them appropriately but responsibly in journalism; using but not succumbing to all their trends), political

and business influences, and funding for quality content are also cited as further problems journalists will face. Experts point out that editorial quality journalism will face financial difficulties. They note that there is already a shortage of budgets for long-form investigative journalism or reporting. Thus, funding for quality content may be diverted from the public. Media Scholar 13 believes this could change the entire media market:

Media quality will face primarily economic difficulties. They will be looking for an audience that is willing to pay for good content. We will have elite media with valuable information and in-depth analysis, and mass media with sensationalism and entertainment. (Media Scholar 13)

Experts also note a decline in trust in journalists, a crisis of objectivity, information bubbles (largely driven by algorithms and social media) and information overload as contemporary challenges. Survey participants also noted a trend in the gradual “decline” of traditional media. They point to attempts to keep, for example, newspapers on the market, which often feature more quality and in-depth material, as a challenge:

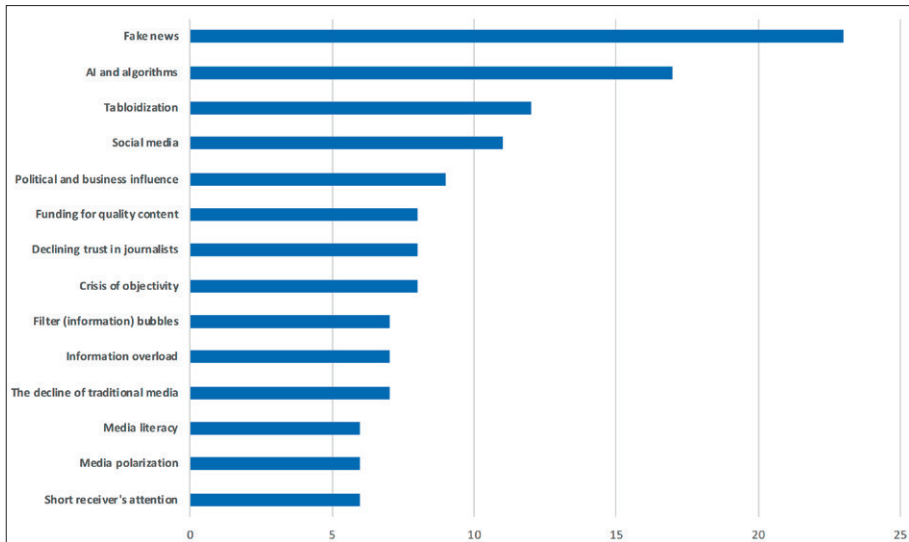
I see one biggest challenge: how to maintain quality journalism. You have to keep the places that remind you of quality at all costs. You have to save the “paper.” Newspapers can have low circulation if they are highly elitist, with the highest quality journalism. (Journalist 2)

The survey also identified (by 6 people) media education (taking steps to educate audiences on responsible use of media content; building digital competence and knowledge of how media works), media polarization or the dominance of economic aspects as trends and challenges. Experts also point to the audience’s increasingly short attention span. Finding a way to keep viewers, readers or listeners (especially those representing younger generations) with longer forms in the media will be a significant challenge for journalists in the coming years. A list of the most important trends and challenges concerning journalism and media information is presented in Figure 2.

Participants in the survey also pointed to the introduction of new technologies (e.g., VR) into journalism, downsizing of editorial staff, confirmation bias, the downgrading of the journalism profession, the increasing pace of work, low audience expectations, hate speech, declining motivation to be

a journalist, and corporatism (target-driven, KPI-driven, etc.) as other trends and challenges.

Figure 2. Challenges of journalism in the future



Source: compilation based on own research.

The trends identified by the experts in the study are part of the contemporary analysis of journalism and confirm the noted challenges to journalism around the world. According to research by the University of Oxford and the Reuters Institute, the dominant challenges in modern journalism are the development of algorithms and artificial intelligence, which measurably also causes the appearance of fake news in the media space (Newman, 2024). Loss of trust in the media, information overload (and thus loss of interest due to information fatigue), problems with funding quality content, social media or short attention spans of audiences are also challenges identified in contemporary studies (Newman, 2023). In addition, predictions published by the US-based Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University indicate that problems with disinformation, artificial intelligence or the changing way audiences receive content online will be a significant challenge for journalists in the years to come (*Predictions...*, 2024). Artificial intelligence and its impact on the media is also one of the main trends and challenges identified in the

study *Media trends and predictions 2024*. Analysts point out the growing challenges of—on the one hand—the intensive exploration of the possibilities of using AI-based tools, but—on the other hand—the problems and challenges of verifying AI-generated content or copyright violations (Behar & McCarthy, 2023).

Summary

Research indicates that technological changes and the emergence of new forms of communication, such as the Internet, social media, mobile applications, and Web 2.0 tools, etc., have significantly changed journalism and the ways in which media information quality is defined. At the same time, the research shows the difficulty of simply dichotomizing whether new media have a positive or negative impact on media information quality. In the qualitative survey conducted, although the dominant view (30 responses) defines negatively the impact of new media on the quality of information and journalism, a large proportion of responses (27) identified as ambiguous indicate both positive and negative aspects of new media. The survey unequivocally indicates that the technological development observed in recent years is causing a progressive revolution in journalism involving the content and form of journalistic materials, the style of work and even the definition of the journalist's profession, which, as experts point out in the qualitative survey, is evolving toward "media working," i.e. the blending of the fields of journalism, PR, marketing, new media and the increasingly visible becoming more of a reproducer of information than a creator of information. At the same time, the study points to an important paradigm shift for journalism in communication, which is now based on the many-to-many model (Bruns, 2008), in which the audience has a completely new role. Of course, the theses about the media revolution and the changing media world are in themselves nothing revelatory; they have been operating in the discussion of the media for at least a dozen years. However, it is important to note in this discussion the increasingly critical attitude toward new forms of journalism and information. Phenomena that were initially considered by many as an opportunity (e.g. citizen journalism, speed of information and constant access to it, multimedia and interactivity of the message) today are increasingly treated as threats to quality above all.

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