



Article

“Platformization of News”, Authorship, and Unverified Content: Perceptions around Local Media

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Abstract: In recent years, the growing importance of platforms for producing, sharing, and consuming news has been evident. However, several challenges associated with this growth have emerged, such as those linked with disinformation and news authorship. In this article, which uses part of the data from a more extensive study of local media in the central region of Portugal, we present the results from three focus groups with editors, journalists, and local media consumers. Through this information, we try to understand their perceptions about how platforms change news work and distribution, affecting journalists and the public. The focus groups results showed that although local media professionals consider it essential to be present on distribution platforms, they are concerned about the inability of audiences to distinguish the content created by local media from others that circulate online. We believe the results presented are significant to reflect on changes made by platforms to journalism and to think in terms of new strategies of media literacy concerning how and what ways platforms are involved in news distribution infrastructures.

Keywords: platforms; local media; authorship; audiences; news



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1. Introduction

Among the various transformations that have taken place in recent years, the growth of digital platforms for publishing and distributing content (van Dijck et al. 2018) and the empowerment of former audiences (Rosen 2012; Anderson et al. 2014) can perhaps be highlighted as the ones which most affected news media. The truth is that in an era dominated by digital platforms and news applications, the media faces many challenges, mainly because they are no longer the only ones to control the ecosystem of news production and distribution (Cardoso et al. 2016a). In this context, for news outlets, these digital platforms of we can include, between others, Facebook, Google, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, “become powerhouses of news distribution and production”, a “key for the success of news stories, and “the most effective way to cultivate new audiences” (Nechushtai 2018, p. 1049).

Therefore, distribution has gained particular importance “as the owners of networks and content aggregators increasingly assert themselves as key players in negotiating power and ability to influence consumer and browsing behavior” (Cardoso et al. 2016b, pp. 25–26). This negotiation becomes particularly challenging in the case of local media since, as Anne Schulz says, “local and regional news media are under immense financial pressure as audience attention, and advertising budgets increasingly flow to big platforms and other competitors” (Schulz 2021, pp. 42–43).

This work explores the relationship between local media and digital platforms for publishing and distributing content, considering the audiences’ role in this context. Thus, the goal is to understand how these digital platforms can affect the perception of audiences concerning the authorship of news content and well as question the role that audiences can have when consuming news through these platforms in putting pressure on the media, causing them to disclose unverified content.

Regarding research methods, we opted for the case study strategy (Yin 1989) since it is a more adapted tool for the reality we intend to study, the one from local media. We then conducted three focus groups with directors and editors, journalists, and local media consumers to understand how the relation with platforms can affect distribution, circulation of contents, and identification of news authors.

The focus groups were carried out as part of the project Re/media.Lab in which we try “to diagnosis the current situation of local/regional media, promoting experimental tools and strategies to strengthen their business model, increasing their innovation degree, and improving their connection with the public” (Morais et al. 2020).

The focus group results showed that although local media professionals consider it essential to be present on digital platforms, such as Facebook or Google, for publishing and distributing content, they are concerned about the inability of audiences to distinguish the content created by newspapers from others circulating on the platforms. On the other hand, we also verified that the media feel compelled to disclose content that needs more significant verification because they were pressured by competition, but above all, audiences.

The article is divided into three parts. We start with a brief literature review, focusing on the contextualization of the Portuguese reality and considering the platformization of news and its impact on the local media. Next, we present the methodological strategies adopted for the three focus groups, which are part of a broader project, the Re/media.Lab, where local media in the central region of Portugal were studied. Finally, some of the results obtained with the focus groups are presented and discussed, namely, those that allow us to investigate the impact of platforms on the perception of news authorship.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Reality of Local Media in Portugal*

We started this literature review by portraying the Portuguese media’s reality and highlighting, in particular, the panorama of the local media. According to the publication, “Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: Portugal”, “despite a slight recovery compared to 2020, the general situation of the Portuguese media is still relatively difficult, with the small advertising market not being enough to support all operators in the market. The inversion that has taken place in recent years with the growth of digital does not ensure the economic rebalancing of this sector” (Cádima et al. 2022, p. 6). The report warns about the concentration of news media in just four major groups but also expresses concern about the lack of transparency concerning the management and ownership of these media groups. Considering data from the previous report, the authors highlight that “(...) the media viability risk indicator is still high, with the media sector having close to no growth compared to last year, as the sector is still recovering from the COVID-19 crisis. Media companies do not always have fully transparent information about their management structure and the issue of ownership, despite the regulator’s efforts and the creation of the Transparency Platform” (Cádima et al. 2022, p. 8).

In a global analysis of the Portuguese media landscape, the report also stresses a need to “(...) strengthen the protection for journalists, especially from an economic point of view” (Cádima et al. 2022, p. 10). In terms of the viability of local media, the scenario is not very different, with the authors of the report considering that “The indicator Access to Media for Local and Regional Communities and community media scores medium risk (50%), the same score as last year’s report” (Cádima et al. 2022, pp. 16–17). In a more detailed analysis, we can also see that there are problems at various levels, starting with a matter of local framework since “the community media is not foreseen in Portugal’s legal framework, although local media tend to be seen as proximity or community-based media. Some media initiatives are classified as community media, but, in fact, their independence, as well as one of the local media, is at risk, mainly due to financial and economic difficulties” (Cádima et al. 2022, pp. 16–17). In addition to the legal problem

and the economic and sustainability difficulties, there is a lack of data that allows knowing and understanding the true importance of these media among the populations. “Another risk arises from the fact that the audience and the actual impact on communities of these local media are not known or described. The danger of concentration of ownership and the diminishing value and sustainability of local media, despite several policy measures and State subsidies for local and regional media (nationally distributed), should be seen with concern” (Cádima et al. 2022, pp. 16–17).

In the particular case of local media, the focus of this study, it is also important to remember that economic difficulties have contributed to the extinction of several newsrooms, making the news deserts in Portugal a reality (Abernathy 2018; Abernathy 2020, 2022; Jerónimo et al. 2022b). In Portugal, the authors consider news deserts a “portuguese municipality without local news”. Radio stations without local news and doctrinal newspapers without local news were not considered. Print and digital publications not registered with the ERC are also excluded. Municipalities with only one specialized communication outlet were also included as deserts” (Jerónimo et al. 2022b, p. 18). Therefore, according to the “News Deserts Europe 2022: Portugal Report”, “more than half of the Portuguese municipalities are news deserts or are on the verge of becoming so. Out of the 308 existing municipalities, 166 (53.9%) are news deserts or semi-deserts or at risk of becoming one. These are municipalities in a red flag situation regarding news coverage” (Jerónimo et al. 2022b, p. 20). The authors emphasize that “out of these 78 municipalities, 54 (17.5%) are in a total news desert, which means that they don’t have any media outlets producing news about these territories, and 24 (7.8%) are in semi-desert status, that is, they only have less frequent or not satisfactory news coverage. It should also be noted that 88 (28.6%) are at risk of entering into the status of news desert, as they have only one media outlet with regular news coverage” (Jerónimo et al. 2022b, p. 20). Finally, the report also allows us to verify that “the North, Center and Alentejo regions concentrate over 80% of news deserts and semi-deserts in Portugal” (Jerónimo et al. 2022b, p. 20).

At this moment, when we are trying to portray the reality of the local media in Portugal, it is also important to highlight that the local media has received increasing attention from the academy, having grown, in recent years, the number of investigations that seek to characterize professionals and their working conditions (Jerónimo et al. 2022a; Morais et al. 2020), but it is also important to study the challenges introduced by digital (Jerónimo et al. 2022c; Jenkins and Jerónimo 2021; Carvalheiro et al. 2021; Campos and Jerónimo 2019) and the sustainability of the local media business itself (Morais et al. 2020; Jerónimo and Correia 2020; Ramos and Correia 2020; Quintanilha et al. 2019; Cardoso et al. 2017), without forgetting the studies and the analyses that focus on the growth of misinformation in these media (Jerónimo and Esparza 2022; Correia et al. 2019). Even when we consider the studies that seek to analyze the state of journalism in a more general way, more and more emphasis has also been given to local media professionals and their problems in particular moments, such as the one that occurred during the pandemic (Newman et al. 2022; Cardoso et al. 2021; Camponez et al. 2020).

These investigations show that during the pandemic local news sites have seen significant increases in their consumption (Cardoso et al. 2021, p. 11). This change was assumed to be decisive for maintaining the operation of these media, many of which had a very fragile economic situation that tended to get worse during the pandemic. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that Portugal continues to be the second country—just behind Finland (69%)—where people trust the news the most (61%) and, in particular, the regional and local press (67%) (Cardoso et al. 2022; Newman et al. 2022), which reinforces the idea that during the pandemic, consumers sought credible information about a problem with global impact from the journalistic projects closest to them. On the other hand, these reports do not fail to warn of the degradation of working conditions, with the growing emptying of newsrooms and the overload on the remaining professionals during the pandemic (Cardoso et al. 2021; Camponez et al. 2020). Finally, the reports underline the challenges faced by the media in terms of their relationship with social networks, “controlled by

Meta platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook Messenger) and Google (Youtube)” (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 36), and increasingly used for informative consumption. It is precisely this dimension that we explore in the next point.

2.2. The Importance of Digital Platforms for Local Media: Between Opportunities and Challenges

We ended the previous point by highlighting the importance that digital platforms for publishing and distributing content have gained as a source of news. In this second part of the theoretical review, we will deepen the relationship between the media and these platforms, trying to understand the potential effects of this dependence. In recent years we have witnessed the growth of digital platforms while the media have lost readers and listeners on their websites. It is in this context that “it has been suggested that these platforms, including (but not limited to) Facebook, Google, Apple, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, could potentially help rehabilitate journalism by allocating funds, providing journalists and editors with sophisticated tools and capabilities, highlighting and promoting quality news content, and directing audiences to news they are likely to find relevant” (Nechushtai 2018, p. 2).

However, while digital platforms have made it easier for people to access news content, they have also led to concerns about the quality and diversity of available news and the potential for spreading disinformation. The so-called platformization of news has been studied (van Dijck et al. 2018; Shearer and Matsu 2018; Hase et al. 2022; Zaid et al. 2022), but many questions remain unanswered regarding the impact these platforms can have on news outlet work. For some authors, “a vision of mutually beneficial collaboration between financially distressed news organizations and successful digital platforms, for which the dissemination of news is at best a secondary activity, should not overlook some sources of inevitable tension” (Nechushtai 2018, p. 1044).

Digital platforms, such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or TikTok, have played an increasing role in the distribution and consumption of news content. However, with the rise of social media and search engines, traditional news outlets face competition from these digital giants, who have become gatekeepers to the flow of information. This aspect is particularly important if we think that “interest in news fell, in Portugal, by 17.5 percentage points between 2021 and 2022”. Although “the general drop in interest in the news may be related to the excessive dual-thematization of the news agenda around the themes of the pandemic and the 2022 legislative elections” (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 10), we cannot forget that digital platforms have become one of the primary sources of news.

A study by the Pew Research Center found that 62% of U.S. adults get news from social media and that these platforms are an increasingly important source of news for younger adults (Shearer and Matsu 2018). This value has been growing in recent years, as shown by the annual report of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Digital News Report). For example, TikTok has become the fastest growing network in 2022, reaching 40% of 18–24 years, with 15% using the platform for news. Telegram has also grown significantly in some markets, providing a flexible alternative to WhatsApp (Newman et al. 2022). According to the Digital News Report Portugal 2022, produced by OberCom–Observatório da Comunicação, “91.2% of the Portuguese use some Meta platform in general, and 66.2% do it to get information. The Portuguese mostly use messaging apps (79.4%) for various purposes, and about a third (33.5%) use these platforms to get information through news” (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 36). Access to platforms for news consumption has increased, but it is also important to highlight that “(...) roughly 1/4 of Facebook users consider that there is too much news content in their feeds, originating from news brands” (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 37). In this context, it is important to highlight the idea presented in the “Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era” report, where the authors stressed that “in the digital environment, news consumption in Portugal is rarely made directly from news agencies, which causes the possibility of algorithmic influence and disinformation”. The data also show that “78% of the access to online news in Portugal occurs indirectly:

news aggregator (5%), search engine (28%), social media (24%), email (8%), or mobile alerts (13%) (Obercom 2021; Reuters 2021)" (Cádima et al. 2022, p. 19).

Thus, it is easy to understand how platformization has been influencing consumption. Social media algorithms prioritize content likely to generate engagement, such as likes, shares, and comments. As a result, news content that is sensational or divisive is more likely to be promoted, while more nuanced or in-depth reporting may be overlooked. This strategy has raised concerns about the quality and diversity of news available to consumers and the potential for spreading disinformation or hate speech.

Media management and business models are equally important parts of the issue. Many traditional news outlets have seen a decline in advertising revenue because of the shift to digital ads, dominated by big tech companies such as Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Apple, Meta (Facebook), and Microsoft. These changes have led to cutbacks in newsroom staff and a reduction in investigative and public interest reporting.

On the other hand, there have been calls for the regulation of technology platforms to address these issues. In 2019, the European Union passed the Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market¹, which includes provisions to ensure that news publishers are fairly compensated for using their content through online platforms. There have been proposals for similar legislation in the United States, such as the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act².

Thus, we can conclude, "(...) this year's data [2022] confirm how the various shocks of the last few years, including the Coronavirus pandemic, have further accelerated structural shifts towards a more digital, mobile, and platform-dominated media environment, with further implications for the business models and formats of journalism" (Newman et al. 2022, p. 10). Nevertheless, in studying the role and impact of platforms, it is also necessary to consider those that have been other, more recent trends in the media ecosystem, namely, the importance that local media have been gaining.

The development of studies about local journalism shows that the topic has aroused more interest in recent years. At production and distribution levels, they have become dominated by the digital process. Newsroom structures and cultures are trying to reflect a digital-first mindset and changing audience preferences (Jenkins and Jerónimo 2021). On the other hand, local media are struggling with daily dynamics such as responding to audience demands and trying to survive the financial pressure and monopolization of the big platforms (Schulz 2021). These challenges were evident in the first years of internet integration in local newsrooms (Jerónimo 2015) and in the process of adopting social media (García-de-Torres et al. 2015). Recent studies point to the full integration of the internet into local journalists' routines as well as social media and mobile (Jerónimo et al. 2022c), mainly used for newsgathering and getting in touch with sources. Employing social media to engage with the community is not always a reality in local newsrooms. The same happens when recognizing or even incorporating content produced by citizens.

Although aware of the digital potential, the lack of human and material resources has hampered the work of local media. The platforms, which appear as an opportunity, are also spaces where new challenges emerge, such as difficulties with verifying content or the growing speed at which fake news circulates.

It is important to remember that, according to some studies, "'source blindness', which is defined as a state whereby individuals fail to consider source information when processing news content" (Pearson 2020, p. 3) has grown. The author of the study, who evaluated the influence of aspects such as "information context collapse" and the "volume of content" on "source blindness", concluded that "due to social media design features, users fail to connect source information to related content. While users are aware content has a source, those high in source blindness, are unlikely to recall source information or use the source to make content evaluations" (Pearson 2020, p. 3).

This difficulty in identifying sources is particularly worrying in the case of local media, not only because it jeopardizes the work of these professionals but also because the lack of human resources in these media prevents verification work that becomes fundamental.

In this context, it is essential to remember that the most recent data from the Digital News Report reveal "(...) that 7 out of 10 Portuguese are concerned about what is real or false on the Internet", but at the same time, the percentage of those "who have a neutral position regarding concerns about the legitimacy of online content" has grown (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 20). If it is true that "(...) the Portuguese who trust the most in the news tend to be more concerned with falsehoods" (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 20), the feeling that it is not necessary to verify the legitimacy of the contents increases the importance of media literacy. Some of the most recent reports emphasize that "civil society is increasingly active in what concerns the presence of media literacy in non-formal education". However, they also alert us to the lack of further initiatives since "(...) despite the existence of training programs on media education and digital citizenship for teachers, media literacy is only presented in a limited range in the education curriculum, in possible relation to other areas, such as the work on journalistic texts and narratives" (Cádima et al. 2022, pp. 16–17).

The data from the report "How It Started, How it is Going: Media Literacy Index 2022" by the European Policies Initiative (EuPI) and the Open Society Institute–Foundation Sofia (OSI–Sofia), which featured for the first time 41 European countries, confirms this idea. According to the document, "the countries in Northern and Western Europe have higher resilience potential to fake news with better education, free media and higher trust between people. The countries in Southeast and Eastern Europe are generally most vulnerable to the negative effects of fake news and post-truth, with controlled media, deficiencies in education and lower trust in society" (Lessenski 2022, p. 2). The index, where Portugal occupies the fourteenth position, highlights the fact that "education remains an essential component in addressing the "fake news" problems with targeted media literacy training as for youth and adults alike", while also recommending that "the education and awareness raising remain long-term solutions, regulatory measures are necessary too in the short-term to address the erosion of democracy and geo-political challenges too" (Lessenski 2022, p. 2).

Eurobarometer data on media and news consumption habits also reveal that "10% of respondents think that, in that past seven days, they have 'very often' been exposed to disinformation and fake news; 18% reply that this happened 'often' in the past seven days and 33% reply that this happened 'sometimes'" (European Parliament 2022, p. 38). Among respondents "a majority feel confident they can recognize disinformation: 12% feel 'very confident' and 52% 'somewhat confident'" (European Parliament 2022, p. 38). In addition to differences between countries, "there are also differences between socio-demographic groups: seven in ten male respondents feel confident they can recognize disinformation and fake news; among female respondents, less than six in ten feel confident" (European Parliament 2022, p. 38). Finally, we also found that "confidence in distinguishing between real news and fake news decreases with age and increases with the level of education. Among respondents still in education, 16% replied feeling 'very confident' and 55% 'somewhat confident' in recognizing disinformation and fake news. Similarly, among 15-24 year-olds, 68% feel confident they can recognize disinformation, compared to 59% for 55+ year-olds" (European Parliament 2022, p. 39).

The data reveal, on the one hand, that the level of education influences the ability to identify disinformation and is, therefore, a relevant aspect to take into account in this article, but also that it is essential to stop considering the need for media literacy only for younger audiences, as it has been demonstrated by several studies that there is a need for "media and digital literacy education among adults and the elderly, including educating the educators" (Lessenski 2022, p. 15).

3. Materials and Methods

Before presenting the methodological procedures adopted, it is essential to remember that the focus groups carried out follow the surveys already done within the scope of the Re/media.Lab, the Regional Media Lab & Incubator project, mentioned earlier (Morais et al. 2020). The questionnaires applied to 42 local media in the central region of Portugal, namely, 25 newspapers and 17 radio stations, allowed to characterize the

professionals and their working conditions (n = 91), the business models (n = 107), and the sustainability of the journalistic projects (n = 107) (Morais et al. 2020). However, despite the relevance of the data obtained, which allowed us to better understand the reality of local media newsrooms, it would be necessary to deepen the information collected beyond a quantitative dimension. We then choose, within the project, focus groups as a data collection tool, since “focus groups are especially useful as a complement to other methods of data collection for providing in-depth information in a relatively short period of time” (Gundumogula 2020, p. 299). Therefore, we understand that as a qualitative technique, this could help us to deepen our knowledge about newsrooms, but above all, to listen to other equally essential voices in an analysis of the transformations within the local media ecosystem. The option for focus groups also resulted from the fact that they “are completely different from the other methods, in which the data can be collected individually, because they promote interaction among participants with spontaneity” (Gundumogula 2020, p. 301).

The use of focus groups thus made it possible to listen to those responsible for the media studied and considering their role in managing the media. It also allowed us to collect opinions and perceptions of media audiences (Morais et al. 2020), whereas they are “carefully planned series of discussions, designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Krueger and Casey 2000, p. 5).

In this article, we present the results of the three focus groups carried out, taking as a starting point the book report published within the Regional Media Lab & Incubator project (Morais et al. 2020). We conducted three focus groups with different elements: a first focus group, which had five elements, including journalists, directors, and subdirectors from different local media; a second focus group, also with five elements, including media directors, editors and journalists; and a third focus group with elements of the public, which brought together six readers and listeners of local media from the central region of Portugal (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution, roles, and local media of participants by focus group.

Focus Group 1		Focus Group 2		Focus Group 3	
Focus Group with Local Media Professionals (Roles)	Local Media	Focus Group with Local Media Professionals (Roles)	Local Media	Focus Group with Local Media Consumers (Profession)	Local Media
Journalist	Press	Director	Press/Radio/Web TV	Sociologist	Press
Journalist/Chief Editor	Press	Journalist	Radio	Cameraperson	Press/Radio
Director	Radio/Press	Director	Press	Entrepreneur	Press/Radio
Subdirector	Press	Chief Editor	Press	Retired	Press/Radio
Journalist	Radio	Chief Editor	Press	Radio host/Musician	Press/Radio
				Higher Education student	Press/Radio

Source: authors’ own elaboration.

Considering that “selecting participants for focus groups is a very important and crucial task in order to make it a representative sample” (Gundumogula 2020, p. 300), in composing the focus groups, we try to ensure the participation of journalists, directors, editors, and local media consumers (newspapers and radios) from all regions under study within the project’s scope, as mentioned earlier (Morais et al. 2020). Therefore, the formation of groups was done based on discriminating factors (Gundumogula 2020, p. 300), such as the role in the local media in the two first focus groups, and local media consumption in the last one. Regarding the characteristics of the different elements that make up the groups, we are facing homogeneous groups in the first phase, that is, groups of only professionals and only consumers, but heterogeneous in their internal structure with the view that professionals assume different roles, whether in the press or on the radio, and that consumers are also different from a professional point of view and also in terms of sex and age (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution and characteristics of participants by focus group.

Focus Group 1			Focus Group 2			Focus Group 2		
Focus Group with Local Media Professionals	Sex	Age	Focus Group with Local Media Professionals	Sex	Age	Focus Group with Local Media Consumers	Sex	Age
Journalist	Female	25	Director	Male	59	Sociologist	Female	42
Journalist/Chief Editor	Male	42	Journalist	Male	50	Cameraperson	Male	29
Director	Male	46	Director	Male	40	Entrepreneur	Male	28
Subdirector	Male	51	Chief Editor	Female	41	Retired	Male	62
Journalist	Female	46	Chief Editor	Male	56	Radio host/Musician	Male	37
						Higher Education student	Female	20

Source: authors’ own elaboration.

The data in the table also show that men dominate among the professionals who participated in the focus groups. This trend is in line with other studies that alert us to gender inequalities in journalism (Jerónimo et al. 2022a), but men are also dominant among local media consumers. As we mentioned, there was an effort to form balanced groups, also in terms of gender. However, when this was impossible, the participation of elements from different regions was privileged. As for the age of the participants, the age range for media professionals ranges from 25 to 51 years old, while for readers and listeners, the range varies from 20 to 62.

In organizing the three planned focus groups, we also ensure, whenever possible, the most significant representation in geographic terms (Figure 1). As we can see in the figure, we have, between professionals and local media consumers, representatives from all of the eight Portuguese subregions (NUTS III) of the center of the country.



Figure 1. Subregions where representatives of both the media and the public come from.

It is also important to emphasize that the option to carry out three focus groups and the decision that each group had at least five elements was not random. On the contrary, this decision respected the indications of the different authors, who consider, on the one hand, that it is not desirable to carry out just one focus group about a theme since this option may jeopardize the legitimacy of the study. On the other hand, the ideal number of participants per group is between five and eight (Morgan 1997; Suter 2004). It is also

important to emphasize that in the two focus groups with professionals, we find journalists, editors, and directors, since in small media, professionals often assume all these functions, given the small number of elements that make up the newsrooms.

As we have already mentioned, focus groups differ from other techniques mainly due to the wealth of information to which they provide access (Gundumogula 2020). Thus, right after the focus groups, we checked the recordings and notes from the researchers who participated in the sessions. The next moment, the recordings were listened to and transcribed, constituting a fundamental basis for the analysis and interpretation of the data. Thus, the corpus of analysis results from the complete transcription of the interventions of the different participants in the focus groups, inserting the analysis in the qualitative and not quantitative framework, as is the case in many situations. Considering that it is possible to adopt different strategies and approaches for the analysis of focus groups, in this study, we opted for a method that follows the line of ethnographic studies, and that considers, for data interpretation, the very words of the participants in the focus groups (Krueger 1994). This decision results from the fact that we consider that “qualitative research methods do not only collect the data but also help researchers to understand the processes behind observed results by considering the thoughts, feelings and expressions of the participants” (Gundumogula 2020, p. 299). It is a question of effectively giving the possibility of expression to the participants rather than proceeding with data codification, as happens in thematic content analyses. This approach also results from the need to interpret and compare the different opinions and perceptions of the participants. Therefore, the presentation of data assumes an expository and descriptive dimension. In the exposition, the name of the participants in the focus groups will not be revealed, just their function and the type of medium in which they work.

The next point presents the most relevant data, highlighting the shared opinions concerning the theme we address in this article, which involves issues of authorship and sharing news on social media. It is essential to point out that the focus groups addressed various issues related to local journalism. However, we focus here on those aspects that allow us to respond to the question that guided the investigation: can digital platforms for publishing and distributing content (Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, etc.) affect the perception of audiences concerning the authorship of news content? How does the dependency of the news industry on digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter pose a challenge to news organizations in terms of identification of news authors, namely, from local media?

Based on these questions, we hypothesize that the amount of content made available on digital platforms, with characteristics that, at least from a formal point of view, are similar to many news outlets, have contributed to an increasing difficulty in identifying news content on the part of readers, especially considering the lack of media and digital literacy of the Portuguese population. Considering the challenges that local news organizations are already facing, namely, the lack of human resources, we try to understand to what extent this platformization of news can, while allowing the media to cultivate new audiences, raise problems related to the authorship and identification and, ultimately, with the propagation of false news.

4. Results and Discussion

When presenting the results, we chose to divide the opinions of the participants according to the focus groups in which they participated, trying at the same time to group a set of ideas according to the purpose of the article, which was mainly to understand whether digital platforms can affect the perception of audiences concerning the authorship of news content.

4.1. New Technologies, the Potential of Digital and the Lack of Media Literacy

We begin the presentation highlighting some aspects that stood out in the first focus group with media professionals, remembering that not only journalists but also directors

of local media were part of this group. For one person responsible for the local press who participated in the study, the new communication and information technologies allowed for more speed and connection with the news sources, which contributed to an increase in the production of news. The journalist also defended that those technologies allowed for an increase in the number of online readers and a closer relationship with the audiences themselves.

However, despite all of the potential, this journalist does not fail to highlight the negative side associated with technology, particularly with digital platforms, which “pass through fake news, lies and content that spread much more easily”. The false content that circulates on digital social media is one of the dimensions that most concern the journalists participating in the focus group. “The lack of rigor combined with the lack of verification of facts” the editorial manager also warns, since it appears that “many contents are published without being verified” (Morais et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, the professional from this local radio station also points out that false content cannot be dissociated from the lack of literacy on the part of audiences, namely, concerning the ability to distinguish trustworthy news from fake news. The journalist also considers that “(...) there is no literacy on the part of consumers on the Internet. Many cannot distinguish what is true and what is a lie. For them, everything is true because it is there. They do not even discuss it. Moreover, if we say that the news is fake, that it happened differently, they will say: “no, no, I saw it on the internet”” (Morais et al. 2020).

The lack of literacy by the public is also seen as a problem by other journalists. For one of them, this gap is joined by another, which is related to the possibility of information reaching audiences that are not interested in the issues but who share them, giving them a new context that can adulterate the meaning and facts presented by journalists. The journalist warns that “news we publish may reach someone other than our target audience. Furthermore, if the person receiving the news is not interested, does not know the source, or does not know the media and the journalist, they can very well make a negative comment and spread it around, which becomes a snowball” (Morais et al. 2020).

In another dimension, but still discussing digital platforms’ role in sharing news, journalists point out that the speed at which information circulates on social networking sites sometimes makes their verification work difficult. This difficulty arises associated with the platforms themselves. The different professionals consider that platforms have responsibilities in this process, but they do not assume them. In certain situations, even after the contents are flagged as fake by journalists, the platforms allow them to continue to circulate.

In this context, journalists consider fact-checking fundamental, especially considering the different problems related to misinformation that mark contemporary societies. Professionals also highlight the pressure to publish news, which is responsible for many mistakes, in addition to the speed of information circulation.

4.2. The Pressure to Publish and the Ability to Recognize Misinformation

We also try to understand, together with local media professionals, how they perceive the whole issue around immediacy and the pressure to publish. For one of the journalists from the local press, speed can never overrule the verification of information, and therefore, “if in doubt, do not publish it. It is better to miss the train”. For another one of the participants, “the accuracy has to be above the speed of the news; otherwise, it is not news, we are deceiving the listeners, the readers, the viewers”. The journalist alerts us of another phenomenon that has increased this pressure on the publication: press releases. He believes they contribute significantly to “a kind of fast-food journalism” as they promote “a copy-paste (...) of what was sent in the press releases” (Morais et al. 2020).

Although all professionals agree that they cannot submit to publication without verification, some alert immediacy is a way of survival since the ecosystem is now dominated by those who publish faster. The journalist believes it is only necessary to find a balance between rigor and speed in publishing information. For that professional from the local press,

one way to find that balance is to keep updating the news, starting with less information and adding as it becomes available, always guaranteeing its confirmation. The journalist also recalls that sometimes, when media outlets compete against each other, they inevitably make mistakes.

However, some consider that the issue of speed is closely linked to the public's demand. For another journalist, "people want immediacy, and when something happens, they are not concerned with knowing the most reliable source; people want to know right away" (Morais et al. 2020). The professional considers that confirmation remains in the background since the media are afraid that they will lose readers or listeners who find this information in other media by not publishing. This behavior on the part of the public is corroborated by the different participants in the focus group, who draw attention to concrete situations, namely, on social media: "Frequently, journalists, waiting to confirm something, are even insulted, on social media, for not reporting some news" (Morais et al. 2020). One of the professionals gives the example of a situation in which the newspaper decided to publish something without news value due to a wave of indignation on social media. The professional, therefore, alerts us of the importance of confirmation and verification, practices that are highlighted by all participants, especially considering growing public involvement. Another one of the journalists defends media outlets, stating that part of the problem is that the public thinks everything must be in the media: "People think everything is news, especially in the local. People think we must put everything in the newspaper. There are private issues that become public, and others that do not". The weekly journalist considers that, in this context, there is no concern on the part of the public regarding the selection criteria. In some situations, the public wants to report the events. It is also essential to note some difficulties in separating journalism from advertising. "We often feel this confusion by the audiences. People say and swear: "I read it in your newspaper" and "I am not talking about the internet", "I read it in the newspaper, you put that in the news". "We say it is not information, and the citizen will pick up the newspaper to prove it and then show an ad" (Morais et al. 2020).

4.3. Changes in Journalistic Processes and News Consumption Habits

In the second focus group with journalists, directors, and editors of local media, we also identified some of main local media challenges, including, in the words of the participants, immediacy and the need to produce content more quickly and, in the case of the radio, first for the website and only then for radio broadcasting. For these professionals, the routines of journalists are transformed, registering changes right away in the search and selection of information. However, those responsible for local media also speak of a change in consumption habits, not only in terms of media but also concerning the time dedicated to each media, with an increase towards time-phased consumption on demand. The journalist also recalls that although digital platforms have augmented views of the content produced, advertisers continue to favor traditional media, posing several challenges to advertising revenue. For another of the journalists from local radio, one could even speak of a change in access to sources since journalists are often contacted. That is, the initiative comes from the sources, contrary to previous events. The journalist is now contacted through social media by sources he is unaware of; there has been a "democratization" of this process. However, the director of a local newspaper draws attention to the danger of accessing much of the information circulating on social media. According to him, much of that information is often not confirmed, opening doors to misinformation simply because the journalist could have done their job better, leaving their desk and going to confirm the facts. Journalists agree that it is necessary to reinforce the process of confirming the information that arrives, namely, through social media, remembering that the media can even have access to exclusive information. However, they must confirm and wait to publish it (Morais et al. 2020).

4.4. *The Problem of Verifying the Origin of Content*

The different participants in the focus group consider that it is essential that journalists do not limit themselves to desk work. They must take advantage of the potential of digital platforms to establish contacts and obtain information. Nevertheless, they must go out into the street to confirm this information. In this context, the participants in this second group address a subject also highlighted in the first focus group, which is related to the fact that “people have more and more access to information and know less and less”. The journalist considers that sharing of content has increased without its origin being verified. Thus, those responsible for local media emphasize the importance of differentiating social media consumers and media readers and listeners. “Consumers of social media, who are not newspaper readers or radio listeners, put everything in the same basket and believe everything is information made by the journalists” (Morais et al. 2020). The professionals’ defense, therefore, is that there is a lack of media literacy, but also general knowledge, and considers that it is not easy on the part of the public to identify the authors of the content, often mixing content produced by citizens with content produced by journalists.

4.5. *The New Role of Journalists and the Platforms’ Accountability*

In the last of the focus groups, this time with members of the public, the participants highlighted the importance of investing in public education. Several defended their view that the media also have a responsibility in this process of public formation. In this context, they also believe there is room to implement new models and formulas to approach new themes in innovative ways. However, the concern that we identified in the focus groups with professionals is also present among readers and listeners, who agree that it is necessary to bet, more effectively, on the work of separation between what matters and what does not, between what is fake or just promotional content. Thus, public members highlight the importance of carrying out this examination and do not give the idea that anyone can be a journalist. “(...) There is a lot of filtering work to debug what matters. Nevertheless, there are other associated problems. For example, a ghost hangs over journalists, resulting from the idea that all citizens start filming everything and putting it on a blog, ending the journalist’s profession because we are all amateur reporters” (Morais et al. 2020). Some members acknowledge that they follow certain issues through sources other than the media, noting that many blogs or pages sometimes have more solid structures than the local media. In this sense, the participants argue that journalists currently have new responsibilities. “The journalist will have to act almost like a judge. Realize: “okay, it is important, but is it credible?” This is what I also want to pass on to readers, who, in turn, are already producing content. We need some content filtering” (Morais et al. 2020).

To finish this presentation of the results, we emphasize that the ideas presented by media professionals are confirmed by the members of the public who participated in the focus groups. This convergence of opinions and perceptions concerning the local media situation deserves to be highlighted, as it reveals that a common path can be traced in the search for solutions to some of the main problems that affect the sector. In particular, considering the question that guided us in this study, which involved understanding how the relation with platforms can affect distribution, circulation of contents, and identification of news authors, we also noted a convergence of ideas about the role of platforms and the need for a greater separation between different types of content. Everyone argues that it is necessary to invest more in media literacy, remembering that it is also essential that platforms act more effectively in the fight against disinformation.

5. Conclusions

The realization of focus groups within the scope of the Re/media.Lab project allows for the collection of opinions from local media professionals and public members, which would entitle a deeper understanding of the reality of the challenges that arise in these media’s present and future. One of the issues that drew our attention during the analysis of responses was related to the role of digital platforms in news distribution and the growing

difficulties in identifying the authorship of content shared on social media. We decided to extract this issue from a broader set of data (Morais et al. 2020) and address it in more detail in this article.

The data presented in the previous point, which are part of a book on “*Journalism in the central region of Portugal*”, were produced within the scope of the Re/media.Lab project Regional Media Lab & Incubator. Ref. (Morais et al. 2020) synthesizes the main perceptions concerning some of the most relevant local journalism transformations. The data allow us to conclude that all professionals, as well as the public, are aware of the changes introduced in the news ecosystem regarding production, distribution, and consumption. The potential that new technologies have brought to journalists is evident in the fast and easy contact with news sources, allowing access to much more information today. Professionals also highlighted the growing difficulty in selecting and verifying much of the information circulating in the digital environment and reaching newsrooms. In this context, they also alerted us to the problem of disinformation, emphasizing the importance of fact-checking. They also stated that having a presence on digital platforms for publishing and distributing content is fundamental. However, these digital platforms, such as Facebook or Google, must be reconciled with accountability for their actions concerning content identified as fake but which continues to circulate. Among the main concerns demonstrated by the professionals is the issue of authorship of the contents, which was precisely the issue that we focused on in this study. Professionals revealed difficulties in explaining to audiences that only some contents that appear on social media are news and the differences between news and advertising or branded content. The perception of readers and listeners of local media accompanied this concern by professionals. They defended the need to affirm the journalist’s role as the only one capable of assuming the function of verification, keeping audiences away from falsified or adulterated content.

In the literature review, we talked about the difficulty in connecting source information to related content, which the responses of journalists, readers, and listeners of local media help corroborate. We also refer to the first steps that have already been taken towards regulating the platforms’ activity, which media professionals’ responses indicate as decisive. Greater accountability of platforms is seen as fundamental in combating the lack of information and in the process of literacy for social media. At the beginning of the article, we mentioned that the objective was to understand how platforms can affect the perception of audiences concerning the authorship of news content. We question if digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, etc.) can affect the perception of audiences concerning the authorship of news content.

Nevertheless, we are also interested in understanding how the dependency of the news industry on digital platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, poses a challenge to news organizations in terms of identifying news authors, namely, from local media. After analyzing the participant’s responses in the focus groups, we can conclude that the platforms affect the audience’s perception of authorship. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the news authors more clearly. Another one of the questions that guided this work was related to the role that the audiences themselves could have, putting pressure on the media and contributing to a publication without verification. Journalists assumed that this pressure was real and that mistakes are made because the content is published without being correctly verified. We can conclude that the market and competitive logic that dominates the media ecosystem has contributed to the increase in unverified publications, putting journalistic authority itself into question. Therefore, we confirm the hypothesis that we put forward regarding the increasing difficulty in identifying the contents by the public. It is also essential to invest more and more into media literacy, starting with the local media themselves, to combat these difficulties in identifying the authorship of news content and the spread of disinformation. On the other hand, if, as we verified in the literature review, “in distinguishing between real news and fake news confidence decreases with age and increases with the level of education,” it is fundamental that the commitment to media literacy initiatives considers other publics beyond the young.

Finally, we must notice that with such high levels of exposure to disinformation, as we identified in the literature review, the percentage of respondents who feel confident in identifying this content is high. However, the focus groups allowed us to go beyond the numbers and survey responses and capture the actual perception of the issues. Thus, once again, we highlight the importance of media literacy to assess this ability to identify content, ensuring that such a high level of confidence in the news is not affected by a false sense of disinformation detection.

We finish the article with the idea that it is necessary to continue studying local media. Above all, it is necessary to analyze how these media have used social media and how they look at the potential of digital platforms for publishing and distributing content. The lack of resources in many of the local newsrooms and the lack of knowledge can constitute an obstacle in the use of the resources of the platforms. However, we should not place the burden of the issue only on the side of the media. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate what has been done by digital platforms, what responsibilities have been assumed, and what they need to continue to do so that issues of authorship and difficulty in identifying sources do not continue to be a problem that undermines journalistic credibility. In a moment as challenging as the one we are going through, namely, in terms of disinformation, efforts are up to everyone. There is no point in the media doing their part if there is no legislation to regulate the platforms' activity.

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Notes

¹ Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/790/oj>.

² Available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/673>.

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