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Online Journalism: Current Trends and Challenges

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/68086>

Abstract

In the past 25 years, the journalistic sphere has gone through radical changes and transformations, progressively adapting to the contemporary global trends in news-making. Traditional understanding of journalism as a profession has changed significantly, mostly due to the fact that digital media environment has brought new opportunities but also challenges related to the journalistic practice. The text aims to offer a theoretical reflection on the issue of online journalism. At the same time, the chapter discusses specific forms of Internet-delivered journalistic production and professional requirements placed on journalists who specialise in online news-making, taking into consideration the current development tendencies of digital communication forms. The authors work with a basic assumption that many aspects related to form and content of online news need to be discussed in the light of much needed terminological and paradigmatic revisions related to both the general theory of journalism and our practical understanding of journalism as a continual, creative and highly professional, publicly performed activity.

Keywords: innovation in journalism, journalism, mobile applications, mobile journalism, news websites, online journalism, social media

1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that the ‘traditional’ press and online journalism have coexisted for more than two decades. This time period has been marked by publishers’ scepticism towards the digital media and pessimist visions of the newspapers’ future significantly. The predictions by many media professionals claiming that ‘the digital turn’ would result in decreasing readership of the press, or even in ‘total extinction’ of the print newspapers, have appeared repeatedly. It is therefore no surprise that publishers have been forced to take various steps leading to preservation of their then-existing readership bases. However, the current situation does not suggest that the state of matters will change radically in the near future. On

the contrary, it is rather reasonable to expect (at least in terms of Slovak media market and Central European region) further decrease in sales of daily newspapers. Paradoxically, some print newspapers and magazines published in the United States and in the countries of Asia and North Africa are—slowly but steadily—increasing their circulation. Despite this development online news portals will most probably strengthen their contemporary market position of highly profitable information sources. Development of journalism in the sphere of social media and digital applications will, undoubtedly, expand further as well.

In the recent years, online journalism has entered and occupied places where Internet users spend a lot of their free time, e.g. social networks. Online media have also made their mark within development of various dimensions of alternative news dissemination and so-called citizen journalism [1]. Reacting to the current situation in the field of professional news production and distribution, Gant notes that the century which preceded the emergence of the Internet—a period dominated by large news organisations, increasingly controlled by profit-oriented corporations—appears to have supported an artificial distinction between journalists and everyone else: 'In a sense, we are returning to where we started. The institutional press no longer possesses the exclusive means of reaching the public. Anyone can disseminate information to the rest of the world' [2]. The emergence of specialised production practices and new tools for disseminating journalistic information indicates that the publishing houses' and editorial offices' primal distrust of the Internet, so typical for the second half of the 1990s, has slowly vanished, mostly due to the quick technological improvements and possibilities offered by the online environment. The Internet has become a good partner but also a strong competitor of the 'traditional' media. It is currently securing its position of an extremely popular communication means bound to young and middle-aged generations of media audiences. It also functions as a particularly important tool for improving education, as a space for conducting a wide spectrum of work, business and marketing activities. The traditional media are very well aware that they cannot ignore these aspects. Reacting to the trends in digital communication, the conventional ways of producing journalistic content are trying to use the Internet's many advantages for their own benefit.

Ongoing transformations of the journalistic profession are obvious also in the case of emerging digital actors who identify themselves as journalists even though they often lack the 'standard' professional training and institutional background completely. Eldridge sees this new kind of news producers as those who, through pursuing journalistic work, 'have irritated and blurred the traditional boundaries of the journalistic field'. However, it has to be acknowledged that this type of digital journalists may, despite their occasionally controversial public image, directly or indirectly cooperate with the mainstream media (e.g. renowned daily newspapers may use and thoroughly investigate materials published by *WikiLeaks*) [3]. According to Gant, they often work 'at the leading edge of innovative journalism' and take full advantage of 'an expanse of digital approaches to share news and information online' ([2], p. 34). Knight and Cook also point out that the individual journalist has become much more visible and the traditional media landscape is fragmented, and that is why the voice of the individual becomes clearer in a social media landscape. Journalists—those working inside media organisations as well as those operating 'outside' the mainstream media industry—are able to establish direct contact with audiences, and they also have more options as to where to search for (and publish) their news stories [4].

Even though there is no generally accepted consensus that would explain how exactly the Internet has changed the ways we produce, disseminate and access news, scholars focusing on journalism and professional journalists agree that we are witnessing many shifts in the field of professional production of news and information. The speed of these ongoing transformation processes is, however, the reason why journalistic practices, along with the theory of journalism, are hardly able to cope with them. Regardless of whether the newspapers are available in 'traditional' or online forms, the factor deciding on efficiency of their public impact and acceptance is bound to attracting and holding the recipients' attention [5]. On the other hand, the attention media audiences pay to specific content projects itself into economic imperatives related to the press and thus create a secondary media market (advertising market). According to Mendelová, the media market may be perceived as a business sector consisting of two different fields—a consumer segment (where products are offered to customers) and an advertising market (where advertisers buy advertising space in order to publicly present their goods) [6].

The situation print journalism finds itself in is a result of several factors and circumstances. As we have mentioned above, the recipients are able to access increasing amounts of information. Moreover, the Internet, television and even radio spread news much faster than the traditional press. Using new information technologies (such as smart phones, tablets or 'intelligent', i.e. Internet-connected televisions) has become a common part of the everyday reality, especially for young and middle-aged people. Decreasing circulation of the press proves that, generally speaking, people read the newspapers much less than in the past. However, they spend more time working and playing with the computers. Another fact worth mentioning is that the need for information related to reading newspapers has changed significantly as well (for further information, see Ref. [5]). Few recipients actually pay attention to political or economic life of the society; the readers are interested in tabloid journalism instead, preferring entertainment over information values. Roubal discusses the 'society of experience' and states that 'a world of unlimited opportunities is a world that also provides unlimited resources in terms of experiences and entertainment' [7].

During the last decade, the Internet has become widely available in terms of both access and prices. While in 2007 only 55% of households in the European Union were equipped by Internet connection, 81% of EU households could access the Internet in 2014. Widespread and financially available broadband Internet connection (the most common form of accessing the Internet in EU, in 2014 used by 78% of households) has become one of the pillars of the information society or rather the knowledge society. The highest proportion (96%) of households with Internet access was recorded in Luxemburg and the Netherlands; nine out of ten households could access the Internet also in Denmark, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The lowest proportion of households with Internet access among EU member states, 57%, was in Bulgaria [8].

The topics we aim to discuss in the following parts of the chapter refer to contemporary trends in online journalism, its products and practices. Russell notes that these practices 'give new relevance to long-standing questions at the heart of what used to be called journalistic profession: How is truth defined and by whom? Which forms of practices of journalism yield

the most credible product? How do consumers measure value among, on the one hand, elite media institutions, with their gatekeepers, resources, and professional codes and training, and, on the other, the bloggers and wiki-ists and emailers, with their editorial independence, collaborative structures, and merit-based popularity?’ [9]. The problems Russell positions as crucial only confirm that the current questions of journalism and online journalism are hard to address and answer thoroughly. Nevertheless, we offer our view on the issues by taking into account the most recent developments in the given field of media production.

2. The sphere of online journalism and its development

The term ‘online journalism’ means publishing journalistic content and news stories—in all their sorts—on the Internet. *Oxford Dictionary of Journalism* by Harcup specifies that ‘online journalism’ includes various kinds of news that are disseminated via websites, social media, RSS channels, e-mails, newsletters and other forms of online communication. Online journalism, being in sharp contrast with the more traditional ways of journalistic information dissemination related to the press, allows the producers to present news in a non-linear way; the recipients are able to choose when and how they want to receive the news [10]. Russell favours the term ‘networked journalism’ and observes that it is ‘about more than journalists using a digitally equipped public as a kind of new hyper-source. It is also about a shift in the balance of power between news providers and news consumers. Digital publishing tools and powerful mobile devices are matched by cultural developments such as increased scepticism towards traditional sources of journalistic authority’ ([9], p. 2).

The electronic or rather digital form of publishing and offering journalistic products through the Internet thus can be seen as a basic attribute which allows us to distinguish between ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ journalism. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the creative principles of journalism, which result in specific activities of processing and shaping information in order to create journalistic products, are—very much like in the case of ‘traditional’ journalism—associated with employment of strictly determined procedures (for more information, see Ref. [5]). The overall framework of creative activities related to products of online journalism as well as its final forms is, however, different from the ‘traditional’ outcomes of journalistic work, often to a great extent.

Closely associated with dynamic commercial expansion of the Internet, the very beginnings of online journalism can be dated back to the first half of the 1990s. The most essential steps towards emergence of a new and highly important communication form were taken by the National Science Foundation Network (NSFNET) in 1991. Following this development, the US Congress pushed a legal act declaring the free worldwide use of this emerging network. With regard to Central Europe, Slovak Republic’s strategic geographic location helped spread the Internet in the Central European region. The Slovak elite daily newspaper *SME* started to publish journalistic contents on the Web introduced by the Slovak Academy of Sciences (via project ‘Logos’) in 1994. Its own domain www.sme.sk was established in 1996, functioning as a pioneer and ground-breaking venture—the newspaper ‘entered’ the online environment

among the first ones in Central Europe. The daily's editorial office later partnered with Slovak magazine *CD Tip*, and together they offered CD-ROMs providing monthly archives of digital data and texts published online. In 1999, the page was transformed into a fully functioning news portal with daily updates. *SME*'s expanded online activity was quickly followed by similar measures taken by its closest competitors, dailies *Pravda* and *Hospodárske noviny*.

The most visible aspects of this form of journalism include websites of the 'traditional' media (e.g. www.nytimes.com, www.sme.sk, www.rtvsk.sk) but also media existing exclusively on the Internet (often called 'e-zines'). Online journalism uses various multimedia and interactive elements containing texts, photographs, videos, hyperlinks and users' comments that are often simultaneously published on social networks in order to be exposed to for larger groups of target audiences. Czech publicist and sociologist Bednář determines the following features of Internet journalism: real-time access, interactivity, instant comparison with competition, interconnection of information through hypertext and blending formats [11].

It is quite obvious that each new medium has, at least to a certain extent, adopted and modified previously existing genres in order to expand its own possibilities of processing and disseminating information. Understandably, genres of online journalism are based on genre typology used in the press. On the other hand, the presence of audio-visual content and other graphic, multimedia and interactive aspects on the Internet functions as a framework for creation and establishment of specific genres which are typical for the online environment (e.g. online interview, online discussion or online reportage). Considering the changes in genres of journalism in relation to the Internet and its quick emergence, Osvaldová states that the freedom of publishing on the Web is one of the basic attributes of this medium. However, preservation of the essential rules of 'journalistic writing' seems to be beneficial, at least for now—for the authors and the recipients alike [12]. The Internet's influence on journalistic content, its types and its formats is much smaller than its ability to provide yet unseen types of information access. However, the current practice suggests that online contents published in textual, audible or audio-visual forms are similarly presented in the 'traditional' media as well. Online journalism is no exception to this general rule—many journalistic texts published on the Internet are also available and, in the exact same form, in the press.

Online publishing's influence on content is a significant factor of Internet journalists' work and thus determines activities of the online news media as such. Besides taking into account its own topics and formal specifics, online journalism also complies with economic imperatives, as it is possible to rather precisely define the target audiences and thus present advertisements quite effectively. Another economic strength of the online journalism is related to minimising costs of printing and distribution. However, as noted by van der Wurff, costs associated with creation of any new product (a newspaper, a magazine, a television show, etc.) are still considerably high [13]. Production of a new piece designed to be published on the Internet is as expensive as if it was to be published in the press.

Once again it is necessary to stress out that the Internet has brought a significant breakthrough in terms of accessing information. It would be hardly deniable that the users are now able to choose from a plethora of information from all spheres of social life, including public institutions, state authorities and government, business entities, etc. As of the news media, their

key objective is to select events of the social reality and process them into the form of media contents, to give them certain added value. The journalistic practice has shown clearly that media has been rather reluctant to take into account the ongoing transformation processes of the online environment. One of the reasons causing this quite low primal trust towards the Internet is the fact that media organisations have had a lot of trouble finding optimal business models able to provide additional profit from Internet content (advertising revenues, premium services, etc.). Paradoxically, unspecified prejudices of the 'traditional' media towards the Internet have played their part as well.

Considering the influence of the Internet on the press, i.e. on those media that process information and publish news in textual forms predominantly, it is, on the one hand, visible in the sphere of reception activities related to accessing information; on the other hand, the Web also significantly determines the ways today's journalists and editorial staffs do their work. Media convergence and economic issues of the press, mostly those associated with circulation and advertising revenues, lead to 'rationalisation' of specific creative activities. Such 'rationalisation' inevitably leads to reduction of costs in the area of human resources and therefore to merging various (previously clearly distinguishable) professions involved in the editorial activities. Allan summarises the issue very thoroughly: 'While managers talk of "reorganisation," "downsizing," "layoffs," "cutbacks," "concessions" and the like (while striving to avoid the word "bankruptcy"), news and editorial posts are being "concentrated," with remaining staffs members compelled to "multi-task" as they adopt greater "flexibility" with regard to their salary and working conditions. "Converged" content is being "repacked," a polite way of saying that its quantity—and, too often, quality—is shrinking as "efficiencies" are imposed' [14].

Traditional and time-tested routines in the journalistic practice are thus, under the influence of 'multimedialisation', becoming weaker, which leads to blurring the boundaries between two once strictly separate platforms—the editorial office of a newspaper and the editorial office of an online news portal. After all, the notable changes are visible in terms of the journalistic profession itself; nowadays it is not enough to be a highly skilled writer; one must also be able to effectively work with the Internet, 'smart' devices, video cameras, editing software, etc. Moreover, it is necessary to admit that the academic discourse is just at the beginning of conceptualisation of journalism in the new contexts related to digital technology and its use. Heinrich offers a thorough reflection on the issue: 'A multi-platform structure of journalism is evolving in which boundaries between the traditional media outlets of print, radio and television are blurring. Print, audio and video are increasingly merging online as the lines between formerly distinct media platforms are becoming indistinct. Network technologies have triggered processes of convergence impacting the management of cross-platform news flow processes in day-to-day news production. Journalistic outlets in Western societies are affected by these developments and acquire new notions of journalistic practice as well as reconfigured perception of our journalistic cultures' [15]. Similarly, Czech journalist Čuřík discusses this matter in terms of profession of 'a multimedia journalist' and other changes in the traditional journalistic routines. Maybe the most significant positive features of the Internet in relation to the press are inevitable creation of new ways of distributing content to the readers, new forms of this content's processing and the use of hypertext [16].

Compared to media such as radio or television, the press is far less demanding in terms of the use of digital technologies; the Web was, after all, primarily created in order to record and transfer textual information. Moreover, computers are not the only devices providing Internet access. The Internet is also available via television screens, tablets and mobile phones. The most significant positive attributes of the Internet in the context of its 'relationship' with the press are the possibility of updating information in real-time and standard publication of audio-visual materials but also providing access to digital archives and interactivity (the readers' reactions may be received through e-mails or in the form of discussion contributions placed below the published materials).

3. News available everywhere: emerging trends in mobile journalism

'Mobile journalism' is a specific type of journalistic production where news in various forms (text, audio-visual recording and the like) are disseminated through the Internet and displayed on screens of portable devices, mostly mobile phones and tablets. Increasing importance of mobile journalism is associated with development of the mobile Web and innovative products offered by global telecommunication operators. According to Westlund, publishing news through mobile phones involves various ways of distributing journalistic content—from alerts sent through SMS and MMS, through web portals of the news media, to specialised mobile applications [17].

The emergence of mobile journalism is related to development and the wide public use of the mobile Internet and wireless network connection, respectively. Data by Eurostat show that in 2012, 36% of EU residents aged 16–74 were able to access the mobile Internet, while 2 years later, it was already 51%. The most frequently used Internet-connected portable communication devices include mobile phones or rather smart phones, laptops of all sizes and tablets. In 2014, the mobile Web was most used in the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark) and in the United Kingdom—by approximately 75% of residents aged 16–74. In contrast, in the Balkan countries (Bulgaria, Romania) and Italy, only 28% of residents were able to access the Internet outside their homes or workplaces in 2014 [8].

Reacting to the new trends in mobile publishing, Murár states that there are significant differences between designing a 'traditional' and a mobile Web—these result from technological specifications of mobile devices and take into account the ways of using portable means of communication. The decisive criterion here is simplicity, in terms of data visualisation, navigation and the content itself. The visual processing of the mobile Web is predominantly determined by displays of portable devices which are significantly smaller than desktop monitors and laptop screens of the standard size of 15.4 inches. The mobile Web also demands special forms of navigation as the readers are not able to use computer hardware such as mice. Another notable change brought by the mobile Web is the utter end of 'paper folding' that is so typical for the daily press [18]. We are nowadays unable to unambiguously identify the 'priority' Web content, since it is impossible to predict whether the users will read the news via desktops, notebooks, mobile phones or tablets. Moreover, it is also hard to estimate what type of document orientation ('landscape' or 'portrait') a specific user of a mobile device prefers.

The most typical feature of the mobile Web is the possibility of using mobile applications. These are specific parts of software designed to comply with operation and the use of mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets. A mobile application is typically downloaded and installed by a device's user. Mobile applications of newspapers and news portals are, in terms of typology, called 'mobile Web apps'. Their content is—in sharp contrast with the traditional press—multimedia and often also interactive; besides, the readers may filter the news in accordance with their own preferences. Access to the newest information is therefore instant and continual.

We point out in our previous work [5] that general trends in mobile publishing (and the very existence of digital applications designed to browse and read online newspapers via smart phones, tablets and similar devices) are linked to two basic issues that must be addressed by the content providers (media producers):

1. The first issue is associated with selection of textual and audio-visual information. These pieces of news are meant to be published online, and thus their effective organisation in the communication space is required; in other words, they have to be positioned appropriately on the displays used by the readers (e.g. computer screens, displays of smart phones or tablets). This 'information design' is basically a set of functional editing possibilities that reshape and process information used to create compact journalistic products.
2. The second issue is to create special kinds of applications that will correspond with the technical features and limitations of communication devices used to mediate the journalistic content. Focusing on interactivity and comfort of the readers (users) should be one of the publishers' priorities. In this case, we take into account mainly technological design of communication devices; it is necessary to make sure they are available to a wide spectrum of users, even to those coping with various kinds of impairment [5].

In accordance with the two categories stated above, we define the 'information design' as a general approach to content arrangement and presentation of information; its aim is to always communicate particular ideas and information clearly and effectively. Originally developed to improve the usefulness and visual attractiveness of print books and manuals, it is now just as likely to be found in the processes of production of online news published on websites [19]. The main objective of the information design—effective communication—is achieved through focusing on the information's recipient thoroughly. The given arguments suggest that information design is mostly bound to the communication content that can be processed by using questions starting with 'who', 'what' and 'how'. 'Designing information' is a process of effective presentation of visual, audio or audio-visual components in compact, integrated ways. This process minds the clear differences between using graphic elements to arrange the texts and choosing appropriate visual components (e.g. photographs) that complete the textual information (for more information, see Refs. [5, 20]).

It is obvious that the use of mobile phones has influenced the editorial practice and journalistic work significantly. In relation to this matter, Harcup observes that a mobile phone is a journalist's work tool of high importance, just as a pen and later a portable computer used

to be important in the case of previous generations of journalists. The journalistic practice employs mobile phones in relation to many everyday activities, mostly to search for information sources, record interviews and videos, create photographs as well as edit and send them. Of course, the effective use of mobile devices in the journalistic production requires new media competences: mainly the ability to seek and verify information online; editing skills associated with processing photographs, recorded sounds and videos; knowledge of online social networks and their functions and, last but not least, experience with web copywriting ([10], p. 180). However, these trends are influencing not only journalistic production but also distribution and reception of news content as well. As shown by the last year's issue of European Communication Monitor, the most comprehensive research in the field worldwide, several significant changes in contemporary communication activities related to mobile devices are occurring. The research results are based on responses by 2710 communication professionals from 43 different European countries. Apart from other essential topics associated with public information dissemination, the research report also presents a set of information and data on 'perceived importance for addressing stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences today and in 3 years', i.e. a comparison of the current importance of modes of audience address and its perspectives or rather changes in the near future [21]. Even though face-to-face communication is currently identified as the most important with 77.6% and its importance will slightly increase to 77.9% in 2019, there are other categories to consider as progressively influential. These include online communication via websites, e-mail, intranets (now 76.9 and 82.9% in 2019), social media and social networks (76.2% in 2016, 88.9% in 3 years). However, the most significant shift in the importance of communication channels and instruments is related to category of mobile communication (phone/tablet apps, mobile websites)—from today's slightly above-average value 63.7% to the leading value of 91.2% in 2019. It is also necessary to consider the fact that the category 'press and media relations with print newspapers/magazines' is quickly losing its traditionally prominent position in the sphere of public communication (from 64.1% in 2016 to much lower value of 30.2% in 2019) ([21], p. 61). Such predictions state clearly that media professionals and organisations aiming to engage in public communication need to reconsider their current production practices and the ways they address their target audiences. It seems that some of the previously most important modes of audience address may become less effective or even unsuitable for dissemination of certain types of journalistic products towards certain segments of media audiences.

The trends of increasing amount of mobile phone users and the portable devices' general popularity have led newsrooms and editorial staffs towards developing their own mobile applications. The emergence and widespread use of 'intelligent' mobile phones have also influenced the current forms of 'citizen journalism'. As the mobile devices are equipped by modern operating systems (e.g. Windows, Android, iOS), recording technologies and Internet-connected applications, their users are capable of creating photographs and audio-visual contents of high quality that may be later used by media professionals smoothly and easily. People witnessing various kinds of events regularly send photographs and videos straight to newsrooms and news agencies, facilitating much quicker information dissemination. The reports by 'eye witnesses' thus may provide almost complete news material, which helps the journalists to make the news cheaper.

The initial emergence of content created by amateur, Internet-based journalists (i.e. user-generated content) is occasionally associated with the events of 9/11 in New York, USA, but more often in the context of publishing information about 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and devastating series of tsunami that resulted in killing 230,000–280,000 people across 14 coastal countries. The British elite newspaper *The Guardian* first acknowledged the meaning of mobile communication as a way of obtaining information in 2002, by starting its service *Mobile Alerts* designed to inform interested readers via short text messages (SMS) related to breaking news from politics or sports. In November 2005, website of the elite British newspaper *Daily Telegraph* started to offer a project involving audio recordings of the most important daily events (prepared and read by professional journalists), becoming the first news portal to do so in the United Kingdom. The content was provided for free and its length was between 25 and 30 min. The data could be downloaded and listened to via computers, iPods or MP3 players. To expand its mobile and online services, a year later (in 2006), the renowned British news portal associated with the daily newspaper *The Guardian* decided to develop a project of publishing analyses and commentaries related to recent news and events on their website. The aim was to offer the readers as wide spectrums of opinions as possible. More than 100 commentators and experts from all fields of social life were involved. Moreover, www.theguardian.com started to offer a service named *GuardianWitness* in April 2013, providing its users with a space for publishing their own audio-visual content related to eye-witnessing experience. Another example of publishing user-generated media content is the platform *YouTube Direct* operated by the streaming giant www.youtube.com. This service allows professional editorial offices to browse, obtain and—after receiving owners' agreements—also publish user-generated videos and other audio-visual materials. The users are no more perceived as ordinary recipients; many of them are turning into reporters or photographers instead.

Slovak media have explored possibilities of mobile journalism and user-generated content thoroughly as well. A mobile application of the Slovak daily *SME* started to function in 2011. Other popular elements of mobile journalism are the citizen journalism platforms *Som reportér* [I Am a Reporter] developed by the nationwide commercial television channel *TV Markíza* and *Tip od vás* [A Tip from You] operated by the most read Slovak tabloid, the daily newspaper *Nový čas*. However, while news applications for mobile phones and tablets are not so special and innovative anymore, other publishing segments (e.g. academic and scholarly publishing) seem to implement such innovations quite rarely. However, the renowned academic journal from the field of media studies titled *Communication Today* seems to be an exception, the journal published by the University of SS. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, more specifically by the Faculty of Mass Media Communication, is the first Central European academic periodical that publishes its issues also via mobile applications for iOS and Android. The journal's editor-in-chief Martin Solík explains: 'We are the first scientific journal in Slovakia or Czech Republic to publish digitally, via 'tablets' as such. The first day of being available on the App Store brought exactly 30 downloads. Our expectations had been, in fact, quite modest, as we were aware that as an academic journal, we attracted a much narrower target group than any lifestyle magazine' [22]. The application is nowadays used by more than 1500 unique readers and remains the only one of its kind, at least in terms of Central European scientific periodicals.

4. Social media as news sources

Development of online social networks was marked by technological advancements and employment of Web 2.0 in 2004. This new dynamic type of providing Web content allowed the users to create their own products and thus became very attractive also in relation to business activities. At present, a wide spectrum of social networks is available. These media 'unite' their users on basis of different communication platforms. As a general rule, we may talk about 'universal' social networks without any specific thematic (content) orientation that provide communication among individual users: *Facebook*, *Google+*, *Twitter*, *Instagram* or Slovak *Pokec* [*Small Talk*] may be categorised here. However, there are also various specialised social media that integrate users in accordance with their common interests and hobbies. For example, *LinkedIn* offers communication activities related to professional growth, human resources and doing business.

According to Velšić's research report, in 2012 the Slovak Institute for Public Affairs conducted a research regarding the use of social networks, related communication activities and levels of digital literacy their users reach. The research sample consisted of 1135 respondents. The highest percentage of social network users was in the group of people aged 14–24 (more than 90% of the surveyed respondents). For comparison, only 45% of respondents aged 45–54 and not more than 8% of seniors used online social media. Of course, geographic and socio-economic differences between Slovak regions played a certain role there—a lot more users of social networks lived in cities and towns than in villages and rural areas. In terms of economic activity, Slovak social media users were predominantly students (90%) but also employed people (75%), businessmen and women on maternity leave [23]. A more up-to-date statistics claims that in October 2014, *Facebook* was used by 2.2 million Slovaks, of which 1.16 million were women; moreover, 2/3 of all users were younger than 35 years old. Social media such as *Facebook* and *Instagram* were identified as a very essential part of younger generations' social life and cultural activities (almost 100% of young people used their own social media accounts) [24].

Research data originating in other EU countries clearly show that the situation there is similar to Slovakia. Spending time on social networks is one of the most frequent online activities. According to Eurostat, 46% of EU residents aged 16–74 use the Internet in order to visit social networks, mostly *Facebook* or *Twitter*. Social networks are used by at least six out of ten people in Denmark, Sweden, Hungary, Luxemburg, the United Kingdom, Island and Norway; data from the Netherlands suggest that in this country, social networks are also used widely (by 59% of Dutch respondents) [8].

Trying to understand the ways Internet users search for news and information while on social networks, Hermida states that audience behaviour varies from platform to platform, particularly between the two more important networks for news—*Facebook* and *Twitter*. On *Facebook*, he explains, news exposure and consumption are more of a by-product of spending time on the service. The incidental news exposure on *Facebook* contrasts with more purposeful news-seeking on *Twitter*. *Instagram*, *Tumblr* and *Snapchat* tend to attract younger users than *Facebook* or *Twitter*, although *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Twitter* are the most important online sources for

news overall [25]. Newman, Fletcher, Levy and Nielsen interpret results of the recent study commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism that aims to better understand how the news is being consumed in a range of countries (26 countries all over the world):

1. Across the entire sample, more than half of respondents (51%) say they use social media as a source of news each week. Around one in ten (12%) says it is their main source. *Facebook* is by far the most important network for finding, reading, watching and sharing news.
2. Social media are significantly more important for women (who are also less likely to go directly to a news website or app) and for the young people. More than a quarter of people aged 18–24 (28%) say social media are their main source of news—more than television (24%) for the first time.
3. Although publishers and technology platforms are pushing online news video hard for commercial reasons, the research data provide evidence that most consumers are still resistant. More than 3/4 of the respondents (78%) say they still mostly rely on text. When pressed, the main reasons people give for not using more video are that they find reading news quicker and more convenient (41%) and the annoyance of pre-roll advertisements (35%) [26].

Besides offering personal profiles of individual users, social networks also include accounts operated by commercial subjects and public institutions, firms and associations, e.g. universities. Even in the sector of education, it is crucial to employ appropriate forms of marketing communication in order to ‘stay in touch’ with the target audiences (see, e.g. Ref. [27]). Naturally, the ‘traditional’ media outlets—the press, radio stations or television channels—are no exceptions, either. The daily newspaper *SME* established its official account on *Facebook* in 2008 to provide hypertext references to the most interesting topics published on www.sme.sk and in the press version. As the communication via social media is highly interactive, the users are able to evaluate shared contributions through ‘likes’ and disseminate them further by ‘sharing’ and thus adding the content to their personal profiles. *SME*’s account on *Facebook* is watched by almost 110,000 users [28]. For comparison, the account of the daily newspaper *Pravda* is ‘liked’ by approximately 44,000 users [29].

The fact that social media may be defined as tools for interaction between journalists and recipients was also confirmed by research findings. Murár claims that research data gathered from 20 professional journalists show an interesting shift in the preferred forms of feedback. The ‘traditional’ forms of feedback (e.g. letters, phone calls) have been replaced by SMS, e-mails and reactions received through *Facebook* or *Twitter*. The social media also positively influence the overall quality of the published content as it is closely watched by the public and media producers are very well aware of that. The tendency mostly leads towards further development of journalistic reporting style and thus aims to better meet the readers’ expectations and preferences, e.g. by creation of attractive headlines, shorter sentences, interesting subheads, etc. [30]. However, it is still very important to offer added value of the published news in relation to the reader—this added value decides whether a specific contribution will be discussed further or not. After all, *The Guardian*’s digital chief Aron Pilhofer says: ‘I feel

very strongly that digital journalism needs to be a conversation with readers. This is one, if not the most important area of emphasis that traditional newsrooms are actually ignoring. You see site after site killing comments and moving away from community—that's a monumental mistake. Any site that moves away from comments is a plus for sites like ours. Readers need and deserve a voice. They should be a core part of your journalism' [31].

The virtual environment created by online social media is also special because of the ways it encourages people to 'join in', to participate in various activities bound to the social network. Albinsson and Perera see this issue from the perspective of consumer activism: 'The virtual world has undeniably revolutionised consumer activism. Not only is there a vast amount of information at the tip of one's fingers, there is also the capacity to send out mass e-mails, share videos and sign petitions with the click of a button. Thus, with the advent of template e-mails and the 'share' or 'forward' buttons, consumer action has become much less costly in terms of resources, including time, money, and thought' [32]. These facts must be acknowledged by companies selling their products through social networks but also by those who financially rely on additional dissemination of their contents thanks to massive 'sharing'. Follrichová observes that online advertisers, knowing what pages are visited by their target audiences most often and thus able to obtain geographical 'coordinates' of their customers, may address the customers in more individualised and accurate ways. However, this kind of information is often gathered not by the content producers but rather by commercial IT companies [33].

Newman discusses the emerging trends in news dissemination through social networks by mentioning various new features and elements employed by the world's most successful social networks. In 2015, the author mentions, *Snapchat Discover* led the charge in January by inviting publishers to create 'native' and mobile experiences on their platform. *Facebook* was quick to follow with *Instant Articles* designed to create a faster experience and promised publishers greater reach along with up to 100% of advertising revenues. Furthermore, the relaunched *Apple News* also required media companies to publish content directly into their platform. However, *Twitter Moments* is mostly about creating native experiences but interestingly involves reverse publishing that content within news sites to attract more people to *Twitter* [34]. As Newman remarks, for publishers, these moves raise huge dilemmas—if more consumption moves to platforms like *Facebook*, *Twitter* or *Snapchat*, it will be 'harder to build direct relationships with users and monetise content' ([34], p. 4). But, on the other hand, if they do nothing, it will be almost impossible to engage mainstream audiences who are spending more time with these platforms.

These new ventures are only a few examples of how the social networks compete to attract other media producers, advertisers and, most importantly, media audiences deciding whether to look for news and opinions related to the current affairs predominantly on *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Snapchat* or other popular social networks. It is beyond any doubts that the online media and Internet-connected communication forms are transforming the traditional patterns of journalistic production bound to the press and information offered by radio or television. The evolution of media and technologies they use is taking a huge part in the emergence of new forms of arranging and disseminating the media content. Considering today's communication tendencies, it is no surprise that many users of the online social networks are able to 'keep up' with the latest information regarding domestic and foreign affairs without buying one issue of a newspaper or visiting a single online news portal.

5. On innovation in journalism

Innovation is nowadays perceived as one of the most crucial tools for social and economic development of the society. Implementation of specific innovations is anchored in many strategic documents, national and international alike (see, e.g. Ref. [35]). Innovations in terms of journalism are related, on the one hand, to the use of the Internet in the processes of creating, distributing and searching for the journalistic content; on the other hand, innovation activities also involve organisational measures associated with journalistic work, management of human resources and new business models implemented by publishing houses and editors. Heinrich points out that these innovations ‘not only alter journalistic practice as such, but challenge journalism to incorporate cross-platform networks in various stages of the process of news production’ ([15], p. 2). A multiplatform structure of journalism is evolving. Pavlik reminds that journalism and the media as such are surrounded by many changes and shifts in media logic determined by technological advancements and economic uncertainty on a global scale. Innovation, according to the author, is the key factor influencing ‘vitality’ of the media, and it builds upon four basic principles:

1. Research and development
2. Freedom of expression
3. Objective and impartial news-making
4. Complying with ethical codes and normative frameworks [36]

As of innovations in terms of journalism, it seems that the shifts are manifesting themselves predominantly within the sector of online journalism, especially mobile applications (e.g. the use of interactive design elements and the responsive Web, thanks to which the content easily adjusts itself to the device that is used to access information). Online news portals are following these trends as well, for instance, by adapting their structure and composition to the technological means of communication in order to wholly use their advantages and make the content easier to access. Arrangement of texts in the online issues is very different in comparison with the traditional press but also with ‘newspapers’ designed to mobile phones and tablets. Nielsen’s long-term research on the issues related to reading web pages claims that the processes of reception on the Internet significantly differ from those bound to reading the press. The results of the author’s ‘eye-tracking’ study involving 232 individual users suggest that an ‘F-shaped’ strategy is employed here:

- Users start to ‘scan’ the page through horizontal eye movements, generally at the top.
- They focus on the middle part of the content.
- At last they move their eyes vertically, top to bottom.

According to Nielsen, the users of the Web tend to ‘scan’ information (79%) instead of reading them (16%), focusing on the first and last letters in the individual words [37].

Implementation of strategic innovation in journalism has encountered serious problems as well, since business activities bound to journalism often aim to achieve rather short-term objectives. Even today's print newspapers (and the print media in general) place emphasis on meeting deadlines (these are based on predetermined production cycles) and fulfilling strategic plans related to advertising sales. It means that many innovation activities are only short-lived. On the other hand, some innovative production procedures have resulted in many shifts and changes in editorial practices. These include optimisation of work, new publication strategies associated with the Internet and mobile devices ('mobile first'), content creation that corresponds with demands of the used media or employment of *Snapchat* in terms of journalistic work. As Eldridge summarises, it does not matter whether we are discussing journalistic bloggers on 'J-blogs', journalists' use of social media, interactive live blogs or the work of more activist-oriented interloper media such as *WikiLeaks*; the work of new digital journalists is increasingly commonplace and very visible ([3], p. 45).

Quandt and Singer suggest that 'journalism in the future is both distinct from other forms of digital content and integrated with those forms to a far greater extent than in either the past or the present'. The authors also remind that the mainstream news organisations 'still wield enormous power through both the collective capabilities of their staffs and their own economic heft within their communities—professional and commercial power that individuals simply do not possess and, as individuals, will not possess in the foreseeable future' [38].

6. Conclusion

Focusing on journalism and its place in the globalised society of the twenty-first century, we have to conclude that the processes of making news and publishing opinions on public affairs are transforming radically. McNair notes that the dominant model of journalism of the twentieth century, which used to be embodied by the professional journalists producing objective and reliable information, is currently fragmented due to the influence of new media and technologies [39]. Despite many pessimistic visions proposed by other authors, McNair does not worry about the future of journalism itself: 'Journalism will not die out in this environment, because it is so needed on so many social, political and cultural levels. Journalism has a future. It will evolve, as it has evolved already, from the antique styles of the early newsbooks to the gloss and sheen of the modern prime time news bulletin... But how will it change and will the change be for the better, or for the worse?' ([39], p. 21). However, other forms of journalism, e.g. those related to the so-called citizen journalism, have changed as well. It seems that almost anyone who is able to access the Internet is also free to publish and share their opinions and may thus provide a certain (critical) alternative to the dominant mainstream media. Many Internet users belonging to younger and middle-aged generations have adopted the products of citizen journalism as their key and regular information sources.

We are witnessing the evolution of new media outlets; these development tendencies are manifesting themselves across all spheres of the industrial segment of journalism, on a global scale. Worldwide economic indicators associated with the press market—most of all newspaper

circulation and advertising sales—suggest that the crisis scenarios, according to which the traditional press will cease to exist completely, are most likely exaggerated. However, we have to accept the fact that the dominant position of newspapers as the most prominent information sources is gone forever. Along with analysing the technical and technological shifts in news-making, it is also necessary to constantly reconsider the readers' preferences. While the traditional press is still popular with the middle-aged and older generations of media recipients, the young people seem to abandon the long-existing means of mass communication in favour of small screens of their mobile phones or tablets; almost all of them watch or follow digital information sources and accounts of the mainstream (and often also alternative or citizen) media producers available via social networks. Online communication's importance is growing significantly. This development tendency will only intensify in the near future—the previously mentioned research data by European Communication Monitor 2016 predicting future development of communication trends claim mobile communication is to become the most important form of audience address in 2019, closely followed by social media and social networks, online communication via websites, e-mail, intranets and press and media relations with online newspapers/magazines ([21], p. 61). Sociocultural factors, rituals and habits of the readers are also of high importance. We may state that the key to economic success and popularity—regardless of which kind of media or distribution channels we are talking about—always lies in understanding the audiences and their behavioural patterns, expectations and needs.

The need for creating and implementing innovations and innovative processes is one of the most essential perspectives bound to today's journalistic production. The issue of universal design of communication devices is being discussed very often; it is true that journalistic products should be disseminated via user-friendly platforms and interfaces so that all people, including those suffering from serious physical or mental impairments, would be able to access them easily. Contemporary journalism needs to implement innovations very quickly; online versions of the press and mobile applications have to closely watch all emerging trends in digital communication in order to maintain their competitiveness. It seems that social media are one of the most important communication spaces of today. Their future development will—most likely—determine new forms and variations of journalism, whether those bound to trained professionals or those created and disseminated by other types of producers (e.g. citizen journalists and the like). As noted by Pravdová, the first places in the script—regardless of how and where the journalistic contents are published—seem to be reserved for topics which are more entertaining or shocking for the readers, i.e. those which contain more tabloid than serious traits. The authors seldom have the ambition to offer traditional journalistic 'bonuses' (clarification of causes, consequences, relations and connections); instead, they tend to base the production and interpretation framework of the acquired information on specific types of information-entertainment hybrids. That is why the academic discourse on the related topics has been rather critical and sometimes even unable to address the ongoing changes objectively [40]. According to Eldridge, the emphasis on novelty and revolution 'lent itself to descriptive writing, and technological shifts and radical change were discussed from this 'novelty' perspective'. The author perceives this focus as misleading and insufficient for assessing the impact on journalism and journalism studies that accompanied 'the digital turn' ([3], p. 46).

Today's practices employed by Slovak newsrooms and editorial teams suggest that the ever-growing portfolio of online activities is very demanding in terms of human resources—'multimedia journalists' and highly media literate professionals are needed urgently. However, the current economic situation of the newspaper publishers does not favour the traditional press, and many skilled journalists abandon their hard-won editorial positions to succeed in different and more financially interesting professions (e.g. they become PR managers, spokesmen or even politicians). Editorial offices therefore strive to find an optimal set of economic and personal interconnections between their print and online redactions, mostly with regard to publishing houses' priorities and economic imperatives. Since this transformation is continual and may take long years, only the future will show whether their current solutions are adequate and prospective or not.

Acknowledgements

This chapter was elaborated within the research project supported by the Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Academy of Sciences (VEGA) No. 1/0611/16 titled 'Multi-platform Concepts of Journalism in the Context of Development of Digital Technologies in Media Environment in the Slovak Republic'.

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