

DOSSIER

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS ON JOURNALISTIC AUTONOMY IN DEVELOPING NATIONS:

a systematic literature review from Scopus database



JONATHAN JACOB PAUL LATUPEIRISSA¹

Universitas Pendidikan Nasional, Denpasar – Bali – Indonesia
ORCID: 0000-0002-4575-4434

IRHAM ARDIANSYAH²

Universitas Pendidikan Nasional, Denpasar – Bali – Indonesia
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ABSTRACT – Social media profoundly challenges journalistic autonomy in developing nations, reshaping traditional roles and raising ethical dilemmas. Digital platforms introduce pressures from commercialization, audience metrics, and the need to balance engagement with accuracy and credibility. Journalists are compelled to adopt strategies like creating multiple digital identities and supporting alternative media to maintain integrity. This research, based on a systematic review of 22 articles from the Scopus database, was conducted, focusing on the intersection of social media, journalism, and autonomy from 2015 to 2025. These findings highlight the critical need to understand how these adaptive measures foster independence and recommend further study into long-term ethical impacts, media literacy, and the role of alternative media in sustaining journalistic integrity amidst the transformative influence of social media in these regions.

Keywords: Developing nations. Journalism. Journalistic autonomy. Social media.

1 Universitas Pendidikan Nasional – Indonesia. E-mail: jonathanlatupeirissa@undiknas.ac.id

2 Universitas Pendidikan Nasional – Indonesia. E-mail: irhaammm1@gmail.com

O IMPACTO DAS PLATAFORMAS DE MÍDIA SOCIAL NA AUTONOMIA JORNALÍSTICA EM NAÇÕES EM DESENVOLVIMENTO: uma revisão sistemática da literatura a partir da base de dados Scopus

RESUMO – As redes sociais desafiam profundamente a autonomia jornalística nos países em desenvolvimento, remodelando os papéis tradicionais e levantando dilemas éticos. As plataformas digitais introduzem pressões da comercialização, métricas de audiência e a necessidade de equilibrar o envolvimento com a precisão e credibilidade. Os jornalistas são obrigados a adotar estratégias como a criação de múltiplas identidades digitais e o apoio a meios de comunicação alternativos para manter a integridade. Esta pesquisa, baseada numa revisão sistemática de 22 artigos da base de dados Scopus, foi realizada com foco na interseção entre redes sociais, jornalismo e autonomia de 2015 a 2025. Essas descobertas destacam a necessidade crítica de compreender como essas medidas adaptativas promovem a independência e recomendam mais estudos sobre os impactos éticos de longo prazo, a alfabetização midiática e o papel da mídia alternativa na manutenção da integridade jornalística em meio à influência transformadora das redes sociais nessas regiões.

Palavras-chave: Autonomia jornalística. Mídia social. Nações em desenvolvimento. Jornalismo.

EL IMPACTO DE LAS PLATAFORMAS DE LOS MEDIOS SOCIALES EN LA AUTONOMÍA PERIODÍSTICA EN LOS PAÍSES EN DESARROLLO: una revisión bibliográfica sistemática a partir de la base de datos Scopus

RESUMEN – Las redes sociales suponen un profundo desafío para la autonomía periodística en los países en desarrollo, ya que están transformando los roles tradicionales y planteando dilemas éticos. Las plataformas digitales introducen presiones derivadas de la comercialización, las métricas de audiencia y la necesidad de equilibrar el compromiso con la precisión y la credibilidad. Los periodistas se ven obligados a adoptar estrategias como la creación de múltiples identidades digitales y el apoyo a medios alternativos para mantener su integridad. Esta investigación, basada en una revisión sistemática de 22 artículos de la base de datos Scopus, se centró en la intersección entre las redes sociales, el periodismo y la autonomía entre 2015 y 2025. Estos hallazgos ponen de relieve la necesidad crítica de comprender cómo estas medidas de adaptación fomentan la independencia y recomiendan seguir estudiando los impactos éticos a largo plazo, la alfabetización mediática y el papel de los medios alternativos en el mantenimiento de la integridad periodística en medio de la influencia transformadora de las redes sociales en estas regiones.

Palabras clave: Autonomía periodística. Medios sociales. Países en desarrollo. Periodismo.

1 Introduction

Social media significantly impacts journalistic autonomy in developing nations, blurring personal and professional identities. Journalists must adopt multifaceted roles and navigate ethical boundaries due to increasing audience engagement metrics (Cañedo et al., 2024; Mellado & Hermida, 2022; Srikanth et al., 2024). For instance, in Nigeria, journalists face a precarious balance between

maintaining professional integrity and catering to both government influences and public demand for sensational content, which often undermines their independence (Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2020). The rise of digital platforms has transformed how news is produced and consumed, with metrics increasingly informing editorial decisions, thereby challenging journalism's ethical standards (Stringer, 2020; Tenor, 2024). In this context, journalists may find themselves endorsing commodifiable content to meet audience needs, further complicating their role within the media landscape (Dollah & Tandoc Jr., 2022; Mellado & Hermida, 2022). Ultimately, this interplay creates a dynamic in which traditional journalistic values are increasingly compromised, necessitating a reevaluation of how autonomy is preserved and reinforced amid digital pressures and societal expectations (Mellado & Hermida, 2022; Molyneux & Nelson, 2024).

The rise of social media has transformed journalism into "social media journalism", blurring lines between traditional reporting and user-generated content amid influences from social media influencers (Cheng & Chew, 2024; Latupeirissa & Cistadewi, 2025). Journalists increasingly find themselves navigating a landscape where conventional values such as objectivity and truthfulness often clash with the sensationalized, engagement-driven content prevalent on social platforms (Rydenfelt et al., 2024). In this context, lifestyle journalists have been noted to redefine boundaries to maintain credibility amid the influence of digital influencers, highlighting ongoing tensions within journalistic standards (Cheng & Chew, 2024). Furthermore, the personalization of news content, driven by audience metrics, has led journalists to adjust their practices in ways that sometimes contradict core journalistic ethics (Cañedo et al., 2024). As journalists explore their identities and the nature of their audience on social media, the communal and participatory aspects of news creation challenge traditional norms, leading to a reconfiguration of what constitutes credible reporting in the digital age (Mellado & Hermida, 2022; Tenor, 2024).

Social media platforms have reshaped news production, dissemination, and consumption by connecting journalists and audiences. This shift fosters participatory journalism, with audience engagement central to content creation and distribution (Cañedo et al., 2024; Rydenfelt et al., 2024). Journalists now navigate a landscape where traditional gatekeeping roles are diminished,

leading to a more fluid exchange of information and ideas between media professionals and the public (Stringer, 2020). The dynamics of social media compel journalists to adapt their practices in response to audience preferences for immediacy and virality, often leading to ethical dilemmas as they strive to maintain editorial integrity while also meeting the demands of an ever-connected audience (Cheng & Chew, 2024; Latupeirissa et al., 2024; Rito Lima et al., 2023). For instance, the commodification of news through metrics-driven approaches raises questions about the authenticity of journalistic content as it becomes tailored to enhance engagement rather than inform (Mažeikienė et al., 2021; Tenor, 2024). As a result, the growing reliance on social media not only alters how news is crafted but also challenges the foundational principles of journalism, impacting both the perceived credibility of news sources and journalists' autonomy in their reporting (Ruggiero et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2024).

Digitalization has transformed journalism, enhancing autonomy while posing challenges. Social media enables instant information access and audience interaction, fostering participatory journalism (Cañedo et al., 2024). However, this shift raises dilemmas regarding journalistic integrity and professional standards, as journalists navigate conflicts between metrics-driven engagement and traditional values of accuracy and impartiality (Stringer, 2020; Tenor, 2024). Furthermore, the personalization of news, which targets specific audience segments, has empowered journalists to tailor their reporting while raising concerns about the commodification of information (Mellado & Hermida, 2022). This creates a double-edged sword; while journalists may experience greater freedom in content creation, they also face pressures to produce engaging, click-driven material, which can dilute the quality of news (Dollah & Tandoc Jr, 2022; Tandoc & Vos, 2016). The digital era requires reevaluating journalistic roles and ethics to balance autonomy against commercial interests and audience expectations (Stringer, 2020).

While social media offers journalists unprecedented tools for gathering information, engaging with audiences, and disseminating news, these affordances come with potential drawbacks. On one hand, social media can empower journalists by providing direct access to sources, facilitating real-time reporting, and circumventing traditional gatekeepers. The interactive nature of these platforms can also foster stronger community and collaboration between journalists and their audiences. However, the pressure to generate traffic and

engagement can lead to a focus on sensationalism and clickbait, potentially compromising journalistic integrity. Furthermore, the spread of misinformation and the rise of echo chambers on social media can undermine public trust in journalism and erode the credibility of news organizations. The algorithmic curation of content also raises concerns about filter bubbles and the potential for biased or manipulated news feeds. These challenges necessitate a critical examination of the evolving role of journalists in the digital age and the ethical considerations that arise from the use of social media in news production and consumption.

The study on journalistic autonomy in developing nations is essential because digital technologies, particularly social media, have significantly transformed news-gathering, production, and dissemination. While these advancements offer journalists unprecedented access to information and audience engagement, they also introduce complex ethical dilemmas. Journalists must balance the demands of metrics-driven content with the traditional values of accuracy, objectivity, and credibility. This research is crucial for understanding the nuanced impact of digital tools on journalistic autonomy and the reconfiguration of professional norms in these nations, where social media's influence is particularly transformative.

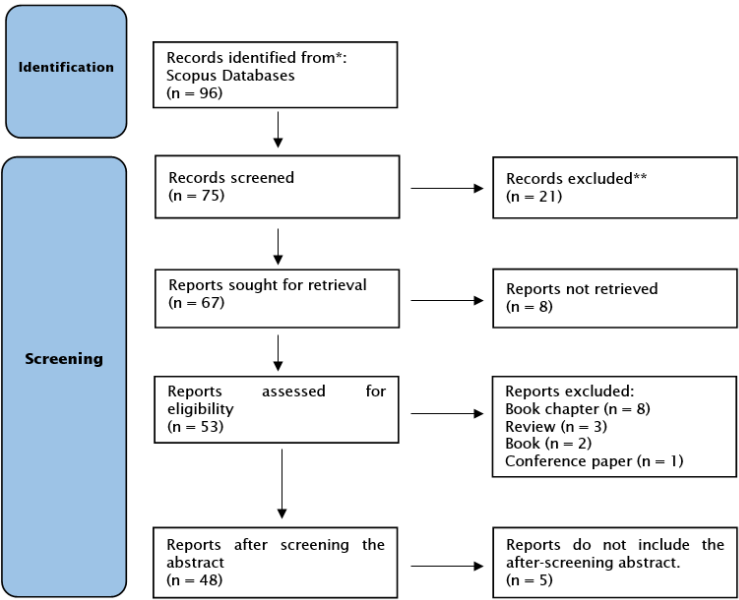
2 Methodology

This research utilizes a comprehensive mixed-methods design, integrating a Systematic Literature Review with bibliometric analysis to thoroughly investigate its central research objectives. The SLR follows the PRISMA guidelines, ensuring a transparent, reproducible, and methodical process for identifying, screening, and appraising relevant studies, thereby reducing bias and improving reporting standards (Page et al., 2021a; Page et al., 2021b). Bibliometric analysis with VOSviewer quantitatively evaluates scholarly publications, visualizing networks and mapping connections (keywords, authors, countries) to provide a synthesized overview and quantitative mapping of academic discourse. This study employed a systematic literature review using the Scopus database to identify relevant articles on the impact of social media platforms on journalistic autonomy in developing nations. The initial search query, combining the keywords “social”, “media”, “journalism”, and “autonomy”, yielded a preliminary set of 96 documents. This dataset

was then refined through several filtering stages: first, articles were limited to the 10 years 2015 to 2025, reducing the count to 75 documents. Next, the scope was narrowed by restricting the subject area to “Social Sciences”, resulting in 67 documents. Further refinement was applied by selecting only “article” as the document type, reducing the total to 53 articles. Following this, a thorough abstract review was conducted, resulting in the selection of 48 articles deemed relevant to the study’s focus. Finally, after a comprehensive full-text review and with a specific emphasis on studies conducted in or focused on developing nations, a final corpus of 22 articles was selected for in-depth analysis. This systematic approach, adhering to established guidelines, ensured a rigorous and transparent process for identifying the most pertinent literature for this research.

Figure 1

PRISMA flowchart of identification and selected studies



Bibliographic coupling maps research fields by identifying shared references between documents, revealing thematic connections, influential works, and emerging research fronts (Neff & Pickard, 2023).

To analyze the academic literature using VOSviewer, a detailed process for bibliographic coupling by country was employed. This involved first creating a map based on bibliographic data extracted from a Scopus database file. The analysis type was then specified as “bibliographic coupling”, with “countries” selected as the unit of analysis. Initially, a default threshold requiring at least five documents per country resulted in only 10 countries meeting the criteria. To achieve a broader, more comprehensive analysis, the minimum threshold was set at three documents per country, thereby expanding the dataset to include 31 countries. This meticulous approach enabled the quantitative evaluation of scholarly publications and the visualization of bibliometric networks, providing insights into country collaborations and the geographical distribution of research, as depicted in figure 2 and further discussed in the methodology section.

The bibliometric analysis of scholarly contributions by country, as depicted in the image, compellingly illustrates the geographical distribution and impact of research within the field, based on the number of documents, citations, and total link strength. The United States stands out as a dominant force, leading with 12 documents, an impressive 363 citations, and the highest total link strength of 426. This data not only signifies prolific output but also underscores its profound influence and strong interconnection within the research network. The United Kingdom is a significant contributor with seven documents and 50 citations, further reinforcing its scholarly presence with a total link strength of 278. Remarkably, Singapore, despite contributing only three documents, demonstrates an exceptionally high impact per publication, amassing 251 citations and achieving a robust total link strength of 187. This highlights its significant qualitative contribution despite a smaller quantitative output. Other notable contributors include Norway and Australia, each with four documents and moderate citation counts, while countries such as Canada, Sweden, and the Russian Federation show smaller but still relevant participation. The data highlight a diverse yet Western-dominated scholarly discourse, with notable contributions from Asia and South America. This geographical distribution contextualizes influential research on social media's impact on journalistic autonomy in developing nations.

Table 1

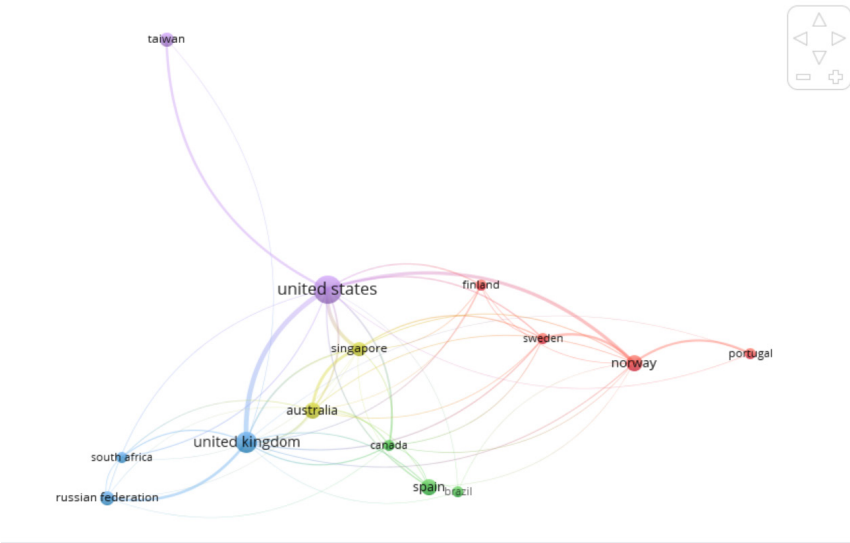
Bibliographic coupling by country

Country	Document	Citation	Total link strength
United States	12	363	426
United Kingdom	7	50	278
Singapore	3	251	187
Norway	4	54	165
Australia	4	43	125
Sweden	2	22	81
Russian Federation	3	18	56
Canada	2	42	48
Taiwan	3	0	41
Portugal	2	5	34
Finland	2	44	28
South Africa	2	11	25
Spain	4	15	24
Brazil	2	20	4

The visualization illustrates the collaboration network among countries involved in academic research, with node size representing publication volume and line thickness indicating the strength of collaborative ties. The United States emerges as the central hub, not only because of its high volume of publications but also because of its extensive collaborative links with countries such as the United Kingdom, Singapore, Australia, and Taiwan. The United Kingdom is another key player, displaying strong interconnections with countries such as South Africa, Canada, and Russia. European countries like Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Portugal also show regional collaboration clusters, forming a distinct network. Interestingly, countries like Singapore and Canada bridge multiple international networks, reflecting their active engagement in cross-border academic efforts. This map reinforces the data from the previous table, robustly illustrating how global partnerships, particularly those anchored by dominant contributors such as the U.S. and U.K., are pivotal in shaping scholarly discourse on journalistic autonomy and the impact of social media, especially as it pertains to developing nations.

Figure 2

Network visualization of country collaborations in academic publications



Source: Scopus database (2015-2025), visualized using VOSviewer.

3 Result and discussion

Keyword co-occurrence analysis evaluates scholarly literature by mapping central themes, interconnections, and emerging trends through quantifying how often keywords appear together, revealing the field’s intellectual structure (Essien, 2025). Examining keyword clusters helps researchers delineate sub-fields and identify interdisciplinary connections within social media misinformation research (Wang et al., 2025). To analyze the academic literature using VOSviewer for keyword co-occurrence, a specific workflow was followed, starting with the creation of a map from bibliographic data extracted from a Scopus database file. For this analysis, the type was set to “co-occurrence” and the “unit of analysis” was “all keywords”. Initially, a default threshold requiring at least five documents per keyword was applied, resulting

in only three keywords out of 299 meeting this criterion. To broaden the scope of the analysis and gain more comprehensive insights, the minimum threshold was adjusted to three documents per keyword, thereby expanding the selection to 13 keywords. Following this, two non-thematic keywords, “interview” and “Bourdieu”, were removed to ensure the final set of keywords was focused on thematic relevance for deeper analysis of the conceptual landscape. This methodical approach facilitated the visualization of intricate research themes and their interconnections within the domain.

Table 2

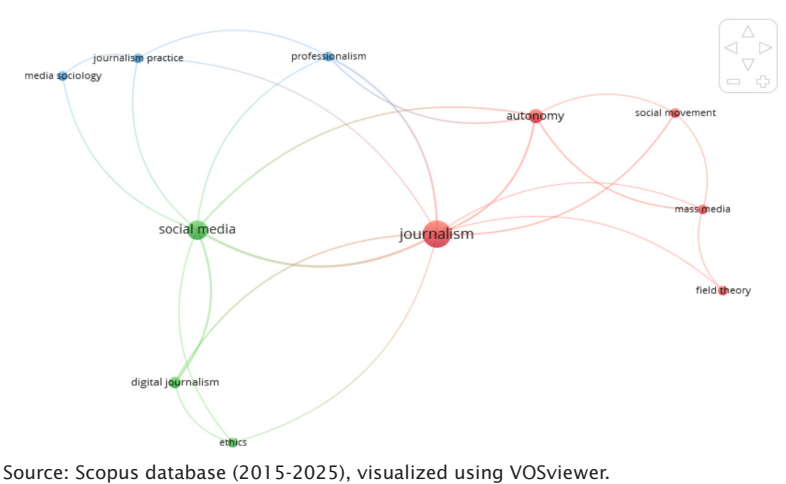
Contributing keywords based on the number of occurrences and total link strength

Keyword	Occurrences	Total link strength
Journalism	23	23
Social media	12	14
Autonomy	6	10
Professionalism	3	7
Digital journalism	4	6
Mass media	3	6
Field theory	3	5
Social movement	3	5
Journalism practice	3	4
Ethics	3	3
Media sociology	3	2

The bibliometric analysis table presented provides robust empirical evidence of the prevailing research landscape, highlighting key thematic concentrations within the academic literature. The keyword “journalism” unequivocally dominates the analysis with the highest frequency of occurrence and the strongest total link strength, firmly establishing its central role as the overarching subject and most interconnected topic. This centrality is closely followed by “social media” (12 occurrences, link strength 14) and “autonomy” (six occurrences, link strength 10), underscoring the critical scholarly focus on the interplay between digital platforms and journalistic independence. The significant connectivity of terms

such as “professionalism”, “digital journalism”, and “mass media” further emphasizes the ongoing academic discourse surrounding the transformative impacts of the digital age on journalistic practice. Conversely, “media sociology”, though selected, exhibits the lowest link strength, suggesting its more specialized or emerging position within the broader keyword network. Collectively, this table effectively illustrates the conceptual structure of contemporary journalism research, particularly its profound engagement with digitalization, evolving professional values, the pervasive influence of social media, and the critical exploration of theoretical perspectives, reinforcing the study’s focus on journalistic autonomy in the digital era.

Figure 3
Network visualization of authors’ keywords in clusters



This VOSviewer-generated network visualization depicts keyword co-occurrences, delineating the research landscape. Nodes represent keywords (size by frequency), with edges signifying co-occurrence strength. The color clusters group related research themes. The central keyword “journalism”, prominently displayed in red and positioned as the largest node, unequivocally serves as the foundational subject, with robust connections to critical concepts such as “autonomy”, “social media”, “professionalism”, and “field theory”.

This centrality directly validates the study’s overarching focus. The surrounding thematic clusters further enrich this understanding: the green cluster, centered on “social media” and encompassing “digital journalism” and “ethics”, powerfully illustrates the pervasive digital transformation and its associated ethical dilemmas. Concurrently, the blue cluster, linking “journalism practice”, “media sociology”, and “professionalism”, articulates the sociological and professional frameworks shaping contemporary journalistic norms. The red cluster, connecting terms like “autonomy”, “social movement”, and “mass media”, decisively emphasizes the crucial interplay between journalistic independence and broader societal dynamics. This visualization maps the conceptual structure of journalism research, substantiating digitalization’s influence, evolving professional values, and journalistic autonomy, thus reinforcing the study’s core arguments.

Table 3

Cluster, keywords, and theme summary

Cluster	Keywords	Themes to be discussed
Red	Autonomy, field theory, journalism, mass media, social movement.	Social movements, media logic, and professional boundaries.
Green	Digital journalism, ethics, social media.	Ethical challenges in the age of social media journalism.
Blue	Journalism practice, media sociology, professionalism.	Navigating shifting norms and expectations in the digital age.

Table 3 presents a meticulous categorization of keywords derived from a bibliometric analysis, effectively grouping 11 items into three distinct thematic clusters. Red cluster, comprising “autonomy”, “field theory”, “journalism”, “mass media”, and “social movement”, powerfully delineates the foundational theoretical and societal dimensions underpinning journalistic practice under the theme “social movements, media logic, and professional boundaries”. This grouping decisively highlights the core inquiry into journalistic independence and its engagement with broader socio-political contexts, particularly as influenced by social movements and institutional structures.

Green cluster, with “digital journalism”, “ethics”, and “social media”, critically illuminates the profound and often challenging impact of the evolving digital media landscape, focusing on “ethical challenges in the age of social media journalism”. It reveals the emergence of new ethical frontiers and dilemmas specific to online environments, underscoring the constant negotiation of journalistic integrity in the age of social media. Blue cluster, featuring “journalism practice”, “media sociology”, and “professionalism”, unpacks the adaptive nature of journalistic professionalism under the theme “navigating shifting norms and expectations in the digital age”.

It explores how contemporary practices are shaped by sociological factors, influencing the very definition of professional standards and roles in a rapidly changing media environment. These clusters form a robust analytical framework that organizes journalism and media studies research and shapes the subsequent results and discussion analysis. Each will serve as a sub-topic to explore thematic interrelations and bibliometric insights, reinforcing the study’s arguments on journalistic autonomy in the digital era.

3.1 Social movements, media logic, and professional boundaries

The interaction between social movements, media logic, and professional boundaries in journalism is a critical area of exploration, especially in developing nations where the socio-political context significantly shapes these dynamics. In Rwanda, a study highlights how journalists perceive themselves amid negative discourse shaped by external and internal pressures. A seven-month ethnographic study of Rwandan newsrooms indicates that journalists often navigate the challenging landscape created by authoritarian governance, which undermines their professional autonomy and negatively influences their identities (Moon, 2021). This study shows that negative self-conception among journalists correlates with their constrained ability to report on government actions, thereby affecting their engagement with social movements (Moon, 2021).

The media environment in post-2014 Crimea serves as an example of how state control can reshape journalistic practices and the reporting of social movements. Media fields in such contexts are subject to a ‘multi-scalar architecture’ where local and national

narratives intersect, significantly limiting journalists' independence as observers of social movements. Agents in this field frequently adapt their reporting strategies according to the prevailing political climate to safeguard their positions (Zeveleva, 2019). The situation highlights the contrast between the autonomy expected in journalistic practice and the oppressive structures often present in developing nations, where social movements challenge entrenched power dynamics.

Struggle for editorial autonomy is evident in research on the Romanian media system conducted by Boacă, where challenges such as political interference and reliance on advertising revenue compromise journalism's inherent ability to serve as a watchdog for social movements (Prettel & Cabrera, 2017). Such conflicts underscore the professional risks of asserting journalistic integrity in framing social issues, reflecting a broader narrative of struggle in developing nations where the media often assumes a subordinate role. Furthermore, the landscape of Nigerian journalism reflects similar constraints, as socio-cultural and economic factors heavily influence investigative journalism. The high ownership of media by individuals with political interests creates an environment where journalists face severe limitations in their watchdog role, undermining their ability to effectively engage with social movements (Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2020). At the same time, the blurring of content creation and distribution responsibilities prompts veteran journalists to clarify their practices in response to the rise of digital influencers, who often occupy spaces traditionally reserved for professional journalists (Cheng & Chew, 2024). This situation forces many journalists in these contexts to engage in self-censorship and to compromise on key issues driving societal discourse (Zeveleva, 2020). The intersection of media logic and social movements reveals a complex interplay of interests, where journalistic integrity is often at stake in the pursuit of truth and accountability.

Beyond these immediate challenges, audience engagement and metrics also play a vital role in shaping media logic. In developing regions, the intersection of audience expectations and journalistic practices can reconfigure media boundaries, pushing journalists to align their practices with audience-driven narratives while navigating the ethics of such adaptations (Ferrucci & Alaimo, 2020). This dual pressure of audience-seeking behavior and state surveillance can critically undermine the professional boundaries that journalists strive to uphold. As news outlets in developing nations vie for

audience attention in an increasingly competitive digital landscape, the reliance on analytics may lead to an emphasis on sensationalism over substantive content (Spyridou et al., 2023). This drive for engagement complicates journalism's mission, pushing reporters to cater to audience preferences that may not align with the ethical obligations of journalistic practice. The outcome of these competitive dynamics creates a complex tapestry in which media logic interacts with the evolving landscape of social movements and professional boundaries, crafting a narrative of negotiation, adaptation, and, often, compromise within journalism in developing nations.

A comprehensive view of the ongoing evolution of social movements and their portrayal in the media can be gleaned from Stringer's study, which shows that increasing audience engagement metrics often hinder journalists' ability to maintain editorial autonomy. The pressures of virality in journalism frequently compromise the richness and complexity of social movements, distilling them into consumable formats that may oversimplify profound societal issues (Stringer, 2020). This challenge is further exacerbated by the rise of digital influencers at the expense of professional journalists, effectively reshaping the landscape in which social movements are articulated and gain visibility.

The dynamic between social movements and journalism in developing countries is laden with challenges, often resulting in a muted press struggling against authoritarianism, economic constraints, and societal violence. The image of journalists grappling with identity amid such constraints reveals not merely a professional dilemma but a reflection of broader societal struggles that impede progress in addressing key social issues. Comprehensive studies across various developing contexts demonstrate a consistent pattern of interaction where media logic distorts public discourse and professional boundaries, reinforcing the complexities of journalistic engagement with social movements.

In summary, the analysis of "social movements, media logic, and professional boundaries" offers a profound insight into the complex challenges journalists in developing nations face when striving for autonomy. It highlights how authoritarian governance, political interference, and reliance on advertising revenue significantly undermine journalists' professional independence and influence their identity, as seen in Rwanda and Romania. The study further illustrates that in contexts like post-2014 Crimea, state control shapes media

practices and reporting on social movements through a 'multi-scalar architecture' that limits journalistic independence, compelling agents to adapt their reporting to safeguard their positions. Moreover, the landscape of Nigerian journalism reveals how politically interested media ownership creates severe limitations on journalists' watchdog role, leading to self-censorship and compromise on critical societal issues. This situation is compounded by the evolving media logic, where audience engagement metrics and the pressure for virality can distort public discourse by prioritizing sensationalism over substantive content, thereby compromising the richness and complexity of social movements. The interplay between traditional journalists and rising digital influencers further reconfigures professional boundaries, compelling journalists to redefine their practices. Ultimately, this comprehensive view underscores a persistent pattern of negotiation, adaptation, and often compromise within journalism in developing nations, where the pursuit of truth and accountability is frequently at odds with external pressures and evolving media dynamics.

3.2 Ethical challenges in the age of social media journalism

The ethical challenges faced by journalists in developing nations have escalated significantly with the rise of social media as a primary conduit for news dissemination. One of the predominant issues arises from the increased use of social media platforms, where professionalism is often undermined by pressures to engage audiences immediately and drive content virality. Journalists encounter ethical dilemmas as they navigate the complexities of audience metrics and the need for rapid news reporting. The fusion of journalism and advertising in digital contexts poses additional ethical challenges. Ruggiero et al. (2024) highlight the blurred lines emerging between editorial content and advertisements, particularly in regions sensitive to political and economic influences. This phenomenon raises critical questions about the integrity of news as journalistic entities seek to maintain revenue streams without compromising their autonomy (Ruggiero et al., 2024).

This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Cheng and Chew (2024), who highlight that lifestyle journalists invoke the core tenets of journalism to maintain their credibility while simultaneously facing criticism for not adhering to these standards under social media

pressure. The imperative for immediacy can conflict with the ethical obligation to verify information before publication, leading many journalists to adopt shortcuts that compromise journalistic integrity. The dynamic raises questions about authority and authenticity in media consumption; younger audiences may gravitate toward influencers rather than trained journalists, further complicating the field of journalism (Vis & Picone, 2024). This trend is evident in various developing nations, where media practitioners wrestle with questions of autonomy and audience metrics in the face of digital pressures.

The push towards an “online-first” model, as observed in international discussions on crime reporting, exemplifies this struggle; it reflects how the fast-paced demands of social media can compromise ethical standards as journalists prioritize expedience over substantive reporting (Prettel & Cabrera, 2017). Both governmental interference and the need for financial sustainability compel journalists to sacrifice their ethical standards occasionally. The shift towards metrics-driven journalism adds another layer of complexity regarding ethical standards. Munnik’s study elucidates how audience metrics can influence editorial decisions, potentially affecting journalistic credibility. The reliance on audience engagement metrics may promote sensationalism over in-depth reporting and factual accuracy, especially in developing nations where the political climate and media freedoms can be more uncertain (Munnik, 2018).

Research by Onyenankeya and Salawu shows that investigative journalism faces numerous barriers, including self-censorship under political and social pressure. Their study indicates that these journalists often grapple with ethical quandaries under the weight of both physical and economic threats, diminishing their reporting autonomy and ethical coverage of sensitive issues (Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2020). The crisis of ethical journalism is further exacerbated by the reality of working in environments saturated with disinformation, particularly underscored during the covid-19 pandemic. Research conducted on journalists in Greece and Cyprus demonstrated an over-reliance on political sources, with many journalists admitting to selectively choosing authoritative voices over independent verification processes, thereby compromising objectivity and journalistic standards (Spyridou et al., 2023). The trend not only signals a deviation from traditional journalistic ethics but also highlights the difficulties in navigating professional boundaries when competing narratives proliferate on social media platforms.

Journalists must protect their credibility while contending with a landscape where audience engagement metrics often dictate the nature and quality of content. The influence of social media leads to the emergence of hybrid forms of journalism that challenge conventional ethical boundaries. For instance, the digital self-construction of journalists participating in social media discourse complicates their roles within the media ecosystem (Cañedo et al., 2024). Cañedo et al. identify three distinct types of digital personas that journalists adopt, navigating between self-presentation and professional norms. The complex interplay of these identities often blurs ethical boundaries in journalism, as journalists may face dilemmas in maintaining professional detachment while engaging with community issues online. The ideal of journalistic independence is increasingly challenged by the need to be relatable to digital audiences, raising questions about authenticity and the obligation to provide unbiased information. A further aspect of this discussion is the impact of audience metrics on journalistic practices. As digital tools become more integrated into newsrooms, the temptation to prioritize content that generates higher engagement may lead journalists away from their traditional ethical commitments, jeopardizing their roles as informed stewards of public knowledge (Tenor, 2024).

The reliance on metrics can lead to a focus on sensationalism, creating an ethical crisis in which the pursuit of clicks and views overshadows a commitment to rigorous fact-checking and responsible reporting. Ultimately, the confluence of social media, audience dynamics, and authoritarian governance creates a complex environment for journalists in developing nations, forcing them to navigate ethical dilemmas constantly. As they strive to maintain their professionalism amid these pressures, the need for robust ethical guidelines and support systems becomes increasingly crucial. This evolving landscape necessitates new frameworks that address the unique challenges of the digital age, enabling journalists to uphold their ethical responsibilities while adapting to the changing terrain of media consumption (Rydenfelt et al., 2024). The convergence of social media and journalism in developing nations has precipitated a range of ethical dilemmas, forcing journalists to navigate a precarious balancing act between engagement and rigor. Ethical practices are continuously tested in environments where self-censorship, state control, economic pressures, and disinformation proliferate. As these challenges unfold, they necessitate a robust discourse within the

field to reestablish journalism's core functions and ensure ethical standards are upheld in line with the evolving digital landscape.

In summary, the ethical challenges confronting journalists in developing nations are significantly amplified by the pervasive influence of social media platforms, transforming the landscape of news dissemination and journalistic practice. Journalists are constantly navigating a precarious balance between the imperative to engage audiences immediately, content virality, and the core tenets of journalistic ethics. This dynamic is further complicated by the blurring of lines between editorial content and advertising, especially in politically and economically sensitive regions, raising critical questions about the integrity and autonomy of news organizations.

The "online-first" model, driven by the rapid pace of social media, often forces journalists to prioritize speed over thorough verification, leading to compromises in journalistic integrity and the potential for reduced ethical standards. Moreover, the shift towards metrics-driven journalism, where audience engagement dictates editorial decisions, can promote sensationalism over in-depth reporting and accuracy, particularly in environments with uncertain media freedoms. This challenge is exacerbated by politically interested media ownership and governmental interference, compelling journalists to self-censor and make ethical sacrifices, as observed in Nigeria. The rise of digital influencers also reconfigures professional boundaries, compelling traditional journalists to defend their credibility and adapt their practices. Ultimately, this complex interplay of social media pressures, audience dynamics, and external influences creates an environment where journalists struggle to uphold their ethical responsibilities and maintain professional autonomy, necessitating robust ethical guidelines and support systems to navigate these evolving challenges.

3.3 Navigating shifting norms and expectations in the digital age

In exploring the results and comparisons of navigating shifting norms and expectations in the digital age, particularly in developing nations, it is essential to consider how technological advancements and the social media revolution are transforming journalistic practices, influencing audience engagement, and reshaping the

relationship between journalists and their sources. This phenomenon is recognized across diverse cultural contexts, reflecting a landscape in which traditional media faces significant challenges and undergoes transformation. For example, in Nigeria, investigative journalism faces substantial obstacles due to socio-cultural pressures and inadequate protection for journalists. The intertwining ownership of media by politically exposed individuals further restricts the press's watchdog role, thereby reshaping its responsibilities and output in response to digital pressures (Onyenakeya & Salawu, 2020).

The dynamics observed in Romania underscore the complexities of media independence in a fluctuating digital landscape. The Romanian media system grapples with significant political interference and a pressing reliance on advertising revenue, both of which often diminish editorial autonomy. This situation is emblematic of the broader issues facing media in developing regions, where external factors complicate the pursuit of ethical journalism. Consequently, journalists are compelled to navigate their work within these constraining frameworks while attempting to maintain content that is relevant and society-serving in the face of digital advancements (Rito Lima et al., 2023).

Additionally, the study of moral panics, as evident in Koumouris and Blaustein's (2022) research on the portrayal of 'African gangs' in Australia, reveals how traditional media narratives can significantly shape societal perceptions and public discourse. With news consumers increasingly turning to social media for information, journalists must navigate a more complex media environment where narratives are challenged and reshaped in real-time by public feedback and counter-narratives. This complexity demands a responsiveness that can conflict with traditional journalistic norms emphasizing objectivity and neutrality.

In examining the implications of digitalization for journalism, case studies illustrate a global trend in which media consumers increasingly engage with non-journalistic figures, or influencers, for content. This behavior suggests a significant departure from reliance on professional journalistic practices, raising concerns about the erosion of traditional media's authoritative role in the face of rising digital influencers (Cheng & Chew, 2024). Young media users' inclination to prefer non-journalistic mediators signals a broader cultural shift that reflects an eventual resistance to conventional journalistic curation, paired with a desire for autonomy in selecting information sources. The result is a challenging environment for established media, which

must adapt to survive and engage effectively with evolving audience expectations (Vis & Picone, 2024).

The challenges posed by surveillance capitalism, as articulated by Salzmänn et al. (2021), further illustrate the complexities mobile journalists face in the digital age. The interwoven nature of data collection in modern journalistic practice can undermine ethical considerations, particularly in environments where privacy and user autonomy are paramount. In developing countries, where media freedoms may already be constrained, the intrusion of surveillance mechanisms presents both ethical dilemmas and opportunities to rethink the journalistic mission in the face of technological advancements (Salzmänn et al., 2021).

The norms surrounding journalistic practice and authority are dramatically reshaped in a digital context. Sources of information are often contested, raising questions about the reliability of narratives produced under the current conditions of media saturation. Media narratives must be scrutinized, as they can perpetuate certain hegemonic discourses that, in the case of migration narratives discussed by Scott, complicate public understanding and empathy toward vital social issues. This highlights the importance of fostering a media landscape that does not merely reflect dominant discourses but also enhances understanding through diverse representations (Scott, 2024). In light of these findings, it becomes evident that journalists in developing nations must continually navigate their roles, adjusting to a digital environment characterized by fluid boundaries, while simultaneously understanding the impact of their work on public perception and societal norms.

The discourse surrounding nuclear issues in Lithuania, investigated by Mažeikienė et al. (2021), showcases how multifaceted power relations and institutional dynamics can influence media narratives, complicating the nature of journalistic practice in developing contexts. The authors employ a Bourdieusian field theory to articulate these interactions, indicating that the field of journalism is intricately connected to various social domains, including politics and cultural production. This framing underlines the importance of understanding the broader social and political contexts that inform journalistic practices. The increasing integration of social media as an essential news source emphasizes another critical shift.

Journalists routinely use platforms such as Twitter to gauge public sentiment and determine newsworthiness, fundamentally

altering how news is produced and distributed (Ruffio & Hubé, 2022). In contexts like the French and German newsrooms, both standardization and diversification occur under “web-first” pressures, highlighting an industry-wide transformation in journalistic practices influenced by audience metrics and real-time updates (Ruffio & Hubé, 2022). This adaptability, however, is not uniquely beneficial; it also poses ethical dilemmas where journalistic integrity may conflict with commercial interests and audience-driven content selection.

In summary, navigating the digital age presents profound challenges to journalistic autonomy in developing nations, where dynamic technological and socio-political shifts confront traditional media structures. Journalists face significant obstacles from politically motivated media ownership and governmental interference, compelling them to self-censor and compromise ethical standards, particularly in investigative reporting in contexts such as Nigeria and Romania. The pervasive influence of social media revolutionizes journalistic practices. Yet, it also erodes traditional media’s authoritative role as consumers increasingly turn to non-journalistic influencers, demanding immediacy and virality over in-depth verification.

This shift, coupled with an “online-first” model and the pressures of surveillance capitalism, creates ethical dilemmas in which the pursuit of audience engagement and commercial interests can override journalistic integrity, accuracy, and impartiality. Consequently, journalists must continually adapt to fluid digital boundaries, critically examining how media narratives, influenced by power relations, shape public perception and risk perpetuating hegemonic discourses rather than fostering understanding of complex social issues. This intricate interplay underscores a persistent struggle for journalistic independence and credibility in environments where external pressures and evolving media dynamics frequently compel a redefinition of their professional responsibilities.

4 Conclusion

The study concludes that journalistic autonomy in developing nations is significantly challenged by the pervasive influence of social media platforms, leading to a complex interplay of socio-political, economic, and cultural factors that reshape traditional media structures and professional norms. The research highlighted

how authoritarian governance, political interference, and economic constraints, particularly reliance on advertising revenue and politically interested media ownership, compel journalists towards self-censorship and ethical compromises, as evidenced in contexts like Rwanda, Romania, and Nigeria. Furthermore, the “online-first” model, coupled with the pressure for immediacy and virality, often prioritizes audience engagement metrics over rigorous fact-checking and in-depth reporting, thus eroding journalistic integrity and public trust.

The rise of digital influencers also reconfigures professional boundaries, prompting traditional journalists to adapt their practices while navigating a landscape saturated with misinformation and biased narratives. The continuous adaptation required to meet evolving audience expectations, along with the challenges posed by surveillance capitalism, further complicate the journalistic mission, necessitating a critical reevaluation of ethical principles and the maintenance of impartiality.

For future research, it is recommended that studies explore specific strategies and training programs that can empower journalists in developing nations to uphold ethical standards and maintain autonomy amidst digital pressures, while also investigating the long-term impacts of metrics-driven journalism on the quality and diversity of news content. Additionally, comparative studies examining the efficacy of different regulatory frameworks and support systems for protecting journalistic independence across varied socio-political contexts in the Global South provide invaluable insights for fostering a more robust and ethical media landscape.

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JONATHAN JACOB PAUL LATUPEIRISSA.

PhD Candidate, Lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universitas Pendidikan Nasional. Supervisor of this research and co-author of the article. Collaboration on this article: designing the research framework; supervising the research process; contributing to data analysis; discussing the results; and reviewing and revising the manuscript. E-mail: jonathanlatupeirissa@undiknas.ac.id

IRHAM ARDIANSYAH. Student at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universitas Pendidikan Nasional. Second author of this article. Collaboration on this article: conducting literature review; collecting and analyzing data; drafting the initial manuscript; and revising the text under the supervision of the primary author. E-mail:irhaammml@gmail.com

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