No. 54 (3/2026)

perspektywy kultury

perspectives on culture

Czasopismo naukowe
Instytutu Kulturoznawstwa i Dziennikarstwa
Uniwersytetu Ignatianum w Krakowie

Contemporary Media Management: A Multidimensional Approach to Social, Political, and Technological Contexts

Czasopismo naukowe Instytutu Kulturoznawstwa i Dziennikarstwa Uniwersytetu Ignatianum w Krakowie
Academic Journal of the Institute of Cultural Studies and Journalism, Ignatianum University in Cracow

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Skład i opracowanie techniczne / DTP: Jacek Zaryczny

ISSN (print): 2081-1446 e-ISSN 2719-8014

Deklaracja / Declaration: wersja papierowa czasopisma jest wersją pierwotną /
The original version of this journal is the print version
Nakład / Print run: 25 egz. / copies

Artykuły zostały sprawdzone systemem antyplagiatowym iThenticate.
The articles have been checked for plagiarism with iThenticate software.

Adres redakcji / Publisher Address
ul. Kopernika 26, 31-501 Kraków
e-mail: perspektywykultury@ignatianum.edu.pl
tel. 12 39 99 525

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https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.01

Editorial

We have titled this special issue of *Perspectives on Culture* "Contemporary Media Management: A Multidimensional Approach to Social, Political, and Technological Contexts." It stems from a strong conviction that there is a need to continue scholarly reflection on the nature and dynamics of management processes within the media sector.

In this publication, media are perceived both as market actors and as cultural and social institutions. This multilayered approach makes the volume inherently interdisciplinary. The contributing authors employ a variety of approaches, analytical perspectives, and methodological tools developed across different research disciplines, united by a common denominator: media management.

For clarity, it is important to explain the rationale for adopting this perspective. Since the 1980s, researchers in the field have increasingly identified with specific areas of inquiry within which various aspects of media functioning are analyzed, including communication and media studies, management, economics, and cultural studies. As a result, media management has emerged as an interdisciplinary field of research that combines achievements from various domains and scientific disciplines. For this reason, the editors felt the need to create a space that, on the one hand, demonstrates the diversity of possible research approaches and, on the other, reflects the dynamic dialogue and resonance between theoretical reflection and the everyday practice of media organizations. Identifying and understanding the nature of this relationship has become one of the key challenges facing researchers today. While theories of management and communication provide conceptual frameworks and methodological tools for analyzing media processes, the rapid transformations affecting every aspect of media operations mean that practice often outpaces theory. New technological solutions and market developments emerge faster than researchers can identify, describe, and interpret them.

Suggested citation: Jupowicz-Ginalska, A. & Świerczyńska-Głownia, W. (2026). Editorial. *Perspectives on Culture*, 3(54), pp. 5–8. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.01

This issue of *Perspectives on Culture* thus servs as a platform for discussion and the exchange of ideas on the role of research and theoretical concepts in addressing practical challenges and the dynamic realities of the media market. The collected articles demonstrate that understanding media organizations and their operations requires a multidimensional perspective that takes into account diverse research approaches and areas of inquiry.

The contributions gathered in this issue explore media management through metascientific contexts, media management processes, business models and technological innovations, the political dimensions of media management, and the management of social media.

The first section comprise four articles. In the opening one, *Media Management in Communication Studies: Status and Challenges*, the author analyses the position of media management within the discipline of communication and media studies in the context of higher education. She argues that the development of media management in Poland is constrained mainly by the lack of a coherent conceptual framework, limited knowledge mobility, shortages of academic staff, and a disconnect between research and teaching. The second text, *Ethics of Management in the Media—Necessity, Assumptions, and Consequences*, addresses the issue of ethics in media management, presenting it as a key element of both theoretical reflection and editorial practice. The authors identify certain directions in the evolution of media ethics and assess its importance for the ever-changing quality of social communication. The article *Scholarly Output on Media Management in Poland: An Evaluation* evaluates Polish research on media management by mapping its themes, research methods, and keywords through secondary data analysis and qualitative content analysis. The final article in this section, *Media Management Education through the Eyes of University Students*, seeks to determine how students understand media management, evaluate current educational provision, and identify the competencies and teaching methods they consider essential for professional preparation in the contemporary media environment. The authors highlight students' preference for experiential learning, close cooperation with industry practitioners, and regular engagement with real-world media organizations.

The second section, titled *Media Management Processes, Business Models and Technological Innovations*, comprises seven articles. The opening article, *Determinants of the Media Product Management Process from the Perspective of Technological Innovation*, identifies and conceptually synthesizes the key technological conditions that shape the processes of creating and managing media products within media companies. Based on a critical interpretation of dominant theoretical frameworks and empirical findings, it systematizes the technological dimensions of media product management and outlines directions for further research on their impact on editorial strategies, system architecture, and monetization models. The second article, *News Media (R)*

evolution in Poland 2016–2025: New Mainstream of (BIG AI) Ecosystems, addresses the impact of artificial intelligence on the media market. The author argues that the highly competitive Polish media environment is evolving from traditional broadcasting and social media toward an AI-driven ecosystem dominated by Big AI. This transformation is accompanied by the declining importance of social media, its increasing fragmentation, and growing integration within the largest AI ecosystems. The resulting loss of strategic autonomy poses existential challenges for news publishers.

In *News Platformization in a Distorted Media Market: The Case of Hungary,* the authors examine how independent Hungarian online media cope with the dual pressures of platformization and a politically and economically distorted media market. Using the Hungarian case, they demonstrate that platformization is strongly shaped by national political and market conditions, leading not only to alternative distribution ecosystems but also to diversified and adaptive business models designed to preserve both profitability and editorial independence. The fourth article, *Monetization Models and the Structural Role of Advertising Networks in the Podcast Ecosystem: A Systemic Evaluation with Reference to the Polish Media System*, traces the evolution of the podcast market, discusses its principal monetization models, and indicates possible future development paths. The fifth contribution, *The Development of Media Management in Central Asia,* presents a comparative study of media management development in five Central Asian countries. It shows that similarities and differences across the region are shaped less by formal market liberalization than by the interactions between the state, market mechanisms, and institutional legacies. The sixth article, *The Newest Slovak Television and Radio: A Management Without Brand Recognition*, analyzes the brand management strategy of the Slovak public broadcaster STVR. It demonstrates that introducing a new name while retaining previous visual identity has a detrimental effect on the broadcaster's reputation. *Ethics and Media Management in Romanian Journalism*, examines changes in ethical orientations and professional values of Romanian journalists by comparing data from the second and third waves of the *Worlds of Journalism* study, with particular attention to newsroom hierarchies. The final article here, Managing Media in Prison: the Case of Prison Radio, focuses on governance and editorial control of prison radio across diverse regulatory environments, with a special focus on a closed-circuit prison radio station located in one of Poland's largest prisons.

The third section comprises two studies. The first, *The Challenge of the Small Market in a Political Society: Media Management in North Macedonia*, analyses North Macedonia's media system from the perspectives of media system theory, media economics, and media management. The author argues that the country is characterized by a hybrid media market in which traditional media remain influential but financially vulnerable, while online

media are gaining influence in a weakly regulated environment. The second article, *Media Ownership Transparency in Romania: Modes of Control in a Hybrid Media Environment*, analyses media ownership structures, transparency risks, and regulatory challenges in Romania within the Euromedia Ownership Monitor (EurOMo 2025) project. The study is situated in the context of the European Democracy Action Plan, the European Media Freedom Act, and European Union's anti-money laundering directives.

The fourth section offers two texts. The first, *Municipal Social Media Governance: Organizational Anchoring, Competency Profiles, and Artificial Intelligence Capability,* discusses social media management in municipalities, focusing on organizational embedding, operational capacity, formalization, measurement maturity, crisis response practices, and readiness to adopt AI-based tools. The second article, *Social Media in Scholarly Communication According to Early Career Researchers in the Humanities, Theology, and the Arts*, explores the use of social media in selected aspects of scholarly communication, such as the sharing of ideas, professional networking, and enhancing academic visibility and reputation.

The volume concludes with a "Varia" section featuring the article *Media Governance, Sustainable Development, and Public Policy in the Media Sector: The Environmental Impact of Radio and Television.* The article discuses the 2024 French report *General Policy Framework for the Ecodesign of Digital Services*, focusing on the environmental impact of audiovisual services.

We regard this publication as another contribution to the ongoing discussion on the emergence of media management as a subdiscipline within communication and media studies. The articles collected in this volume demonstrate that the functioning of media can be examined from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Rather than competing with one another, these approaches are complementary, together providing a framework for describing and explaining phenomena occurring both within media organizations and across the broader media market.

We warmly invite scholars to continue this debate. We hope that this issue will serve as a valuable reference point for future research, contributing to an increasingly refined research map of media management as a subdiscipline situated at the intersection of theory and practice, and therefore particularly well suited to understanding and shaping the future of media.

We hope you find this issue both engaging and thought-provoking, and we invite you to join the discussion.

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perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.02

Ethics of Management in the Media—Necessity, Assumptions, and Consequences

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the issue of ethics in media management, presenting it as a crucial element of both theoretical reflection and editorial practice. In the context of technological change and economic pressures, ethical principles become an essential point of reference for decisions made by broadcasters, editorial teams, and the media community as a whole. The authors analyze selected areas in which contemporary developments—including advances in artificial intelligence and the spread of disinformation—are reshaping the understanding of responsible media management. The article seeks to identify the directions in which media ethics is evolving and to assess its significance for the quality of social communication in a rapidly changing media environment.

KEYWORDS: public relations, ethics, media

STRESZCZENIE

Etyka zarządzania w mediach – konieczność, założenia i konsekwencje

W niniejszym artykule poruszono kwestię etyki w zarządzaniu mediami, przedstawiając ją jako kluczowy element zarówno refleksji teoretycznej, jak i praktyki redakcyjnej. W kontekście presji technologicznej i napięć gospodarczych zasady etyczne stają się istotnym punktem odniesienia dla decyzji podejmowanych przez nadawców, zespoły redakcyjne oraz całą społeczność medialną. Autorzy analizują wybrane obszary, w których współczesne przemiany – w tym rozwój technologiczny, taki jak postępy w dziedzinie sztucznej inteligencji i rozprzestrzenianie się dezinformacji – zmieniają rozumienie odpowiedzialnego zarządzania. Artykuł ma na celu zidentyfikowanie kierunków, w których ewoluuje

Suggested citation: Soczyński, S. & Tworzydło, D. (2026). Ethics of Management in the Media—Necessity, Assumptions, and Consequences. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 9–19. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.02
Submitted: 04.10.2025 Accepted: 08.01.2026

etyka mediów, oraz ocenę jej znaczenia dla nieustannie zmieniającej się jakości komunikacji społecznej.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: public relations, etyka, media

Introduction

Contemporary media are among the most powerful forces shaping public opinion and social life. They provide a space in which information, ideas, and values are exchanged and, at the same time, a setting where both the ideals of freedom and truth and the dangers of manipulation, disinformation, and the commercialization of human attention become apparent. The diversity of ethical issues in the media cannot be reduced to a simple catalogue of individual professional dilemmas or normative transgressions. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic and internally contradictory field of tension between universal ethical values, institutional interests, and changing technological and cultural conditions, all of which together shape communication practices in the contemporary public sphere.

The above observation indicates that one aspect of media ethics is the ethics of media management. It is a fundamental area of both theoretical and practical reflection, as it concerns the principles that guide the actions of broadcasters, editors, and the wider media environment under conditions of growing technological and economic pressure.[1] The aim of this article is to draw attention to this relatively unexplored research area, both in Polish and international literature, with particular emphasis on recent technological developments that have significantly transformed the media landscape.

Ethics of media management is a field of normative reflection devoted to managerial processes in media organizations and their influence on the form and content of media messages. It includes the analysis of managerial decisions that determine the creation, selection, and distribution of content, viewed from the perspective of responsibility for their individual and social consequences. In this sense, it examines the tensions between economic imperatives and the obligations arising from the media's public role, emphasizing the importance of reliability, editorial autonomy, and the integrity of decision-making processes. At the same time, it reveals the relationships between organizational structures, institutional interests, and the nature of media communication, thereby providing a basis for the critical evaluation of managerial practices and their public justification.

1 Although Denis McQuail, in *Theory of Mass Communication*, rightly distinguishes between "media management" and "media administration," for the purposes of this article we use the former term to refer to all management processes within and of the media.

Since the 1980s, there have been growing calls in Western Europe for greater ethical reflection in sensitive areas of social life, including the media. The starting point for scholarly reflection on media ethics was the assumption that the media are not a neutral technical tool but a space for human activity which, by its very nature, has moral implications. In this sense, media ethics—and, by extension, the ethics of media management, one of its integral aspects (Drożdż, 2013, p. 12)—should be viewed not only as a theoretical ideal but also as a prerequisite for the credibility and responsibility of the media as an institution of public trust.

The very concept of media management ethics, which is the focus of this text, appears in the literature as multidimensional and difficult to define unambiguously, combining organizational ethics, leadership ethics, and media ethics (Bivins, 2009; Croteau & Hoynes, 2014; Küng, 2008; Dietl & Gasparski, 2002; Kuraszko, 2014; Wolny-Zmorzyński, 2006). This undoubtedly reflects the specific nature of the media.[2] Together, these perspectives constitute three normative orders that intertwine, sometimes reinforcing one another and sometimes creating tension between them. Media management ethics is therefore not limited to declarations of values or compliance with formal standards, bbergut rather describes an approach to responsible decision-making in situations where the logic of institutions (goals, structures, procedures), the logic of leadership (power, influence, authority, and responsibility), and the logic of public communication (truth, reliability, pluralism, and the public interest) operate simultaneously. It therefore focuses on how media managers should resolve ethical dilemmas in practice, especially when economic, political, technological, or reputational pressures mean that there is no single "obvious" answer and decisions require the simultaneous consideration of principles, consequences, and responsibilities towards various stakeholder groups. In addition, it must respond to ongoing changes and the new moral challenges that arise with them. The literature offers a number of models of ethical media management that are helpful in this regard, including the humanistic model (Nierenberg, 2015), the personalistic model (Soczyński, 2019), and the model of the "sacred" triad (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016), which seeks to explain global media ethics. Two of these models are of particular relevance to the issues discussed in this article. The model proposed by Tsetsura & Valentini (2016) focuses on value as a core element in explaining ethical behavior. It identifies three main types of values—personal, professional and environmental—which act as driving forces in media

2 The specificity of the media is a complex and multidimensional issue relating both to the media market itself, as first discussed by Robert Picard (1989, p. 17), and to the structure and culture of media organizations (Nierenberg, 2011, p. 39), as well as to the diversity of professional specialties operating within them (Koźmiński & Piotrowski, Eds., 1997, pp. 363–369).

ethics and ethical media relations. The model suggests that, at the normative level, the ideal decision-making process in media ethics resembles an isosceles triangle, in which all three sets of values are equally important. However, the authors acknowledge that this balance may vary across different countries and contexts. Soczyński's model (2019), in turn, presents a media enterprise as an organization that is free yet morally obligated, whose primary point of reference is the human person and whose main task is to act in a responsible, professional, and socially engaged manner. We draw attention to these two models because of their universal character and their emphasis on broadly recognized values such as human dignity. This is important because, as many authors point out, values form the basis for the development of individual attitudes that shape decision-making behavior (Fritzsche, 1995).

Due to the dynamically changing socio-technological context, the models discussed are subject to continuous re-evaluation, which has become particularly intensive in recent years. As a result, they require systematic revision and adaptation to new operating conditions while preserving their universal axiological foundations. This is particularly important at a time when the media are undergoing a qualitative transformation that affects the very logic of communication, media economics, and editorial practice. These changes often generate tensions between quality journalism and media management. Their origins lie in the systemic pressures arising from these transformations, which reveal ethical conflicts that expose the tension between journalistic standards and institutional logic. The task of media management ethics is to seek solutions that minimize harm while maintaining the media's legitimacy as an institution of public communication.

The Dominance of Social Media in Everyday Communication

The first key area of recent change is the dominance of social media, which has fundamentally transformed the media landscape. These platforms have become the primary channels for communication and access to information. In 2025, more than 75% of Poles used social media, and the average user was active on six platforms each month (Report Digital Poland *Social Media w Polsce 2025*). The *Social Media 2025* report indicates that although Facebook and YouTube continue to have the largest reach among social media platforms (accounting for 30% of total internet user time), the importance of other platforms and more niche communication channels is growing rapidly (Report Gemius & Akademia Leona Koźmińskiego *Social Media 2025*).

A 2025 study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that social media have overtaken television as the primary source of news for users in the United States, confirming a broader global shift in the role and

significance of news media.[3] The influence of traditional media has been declining for years, and this trend has now accelerated.

This change means that the media have ceased to function as a single institution and have instead become an ecosystem in which the boundary between broadcaster and audience has become increasingly blurred. Social media users are not only consumers but also co-creators of the information that appears in their feeds: they share, comment on, reinterpret, and contextualize content. In this platform-based environment, editors have lost full control over how their messages will ultimately be interpreted. At the same time, however, they remain responsible for the content that appears on their platforms. This gives rise to a new ethical problem: the media are responsible not only for the quality of the original publication but also for the "resilience" of the message to platform mechanisms such as abbreviation, polarization, and memification. Media managers, recognizing that platforms are not a neutral channels but environments with their own morality, should strive to create content that minimizes the risk of manipulative use without compromising the standards of truth and pluralism.

With the development of social media, we are also seeing the accelerating marginalization of traditional media, particularly television and the press as the primary sources of information. This shift reflects not only a change in where audiences consume content but also in how they understand information. On digital platforms, news is often intertwined with entertainment and increasingly perceived as entertainment. It is also becoming more closely linked to identity and more likely to evoke strong emotions. Media managers are therefore faced with the dilemma of whether to compete for audience attention by adopting the same logic. Which business model should they adopt to attract audiences? This dilemma is ethical insofar as it concerns the very definition of success: should the success of a medium be measured by the number of views and the resulting profit, or by the quality of the public debate to which it contributes? In practice, economic success often requires adapting to the logic of platforms, whereas serving the public interest may requires resisting it.

The Decline of Television and the Triumph of Streaming Platforms

Another important development, alongside the rise of social media and its assumption previously associated with traditional media, is the growing dominance of OTT platforms over cable and traditional television. Streaming has

3 Social media overtakes TV as main source of news in US, analysis finds. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/jun/17/social-media-overtakes-tv-as-main-source-of-news-in-us-analysis-finds?utm_source=chatgpt.com

become the dominant mode of video consumption. In the streaming model, viewers create their own schedules, while algorithms recommend content and this co-determine what people watch, in what order, and within what interpretative framework. As a result, responsibility for content distribution is increasingly shared. Particularly in the context of algorithms designed to maximize viewership, there is a risk that attractive content will take precedence over reliable journalism. This shift moves the focus from editorial ethics towards the ethics of distribution architecture. As media outlets become integrated into recommendation systems, responsible management requires the ethical description, tagging, segmentation, and promotion of content, as these processes are as important to ethical accountability as the content itself. Responsible media management therefore means ensuring that decisions regarding content distribution serve not only to maximize reach and viewership but also uphold reliability, transparency, and the media's social responsibility.

New Narrative Formats and Modern Business Models

Further evidence of the ongoing changes of the media landscape is the growing dominance of short-form video . Platforms such as TikTok, Reels, and Shorts have increased the time users spend watching video content, reshaping traditional narrative models. Their growing popularity, driven by quick editing and emotionally engaging narration, further complicates ethical dilemmas. The very nature of short-form content, often devoid of context, increases the risk of manipulation. By adopting this format and shortening content, media managers risk distorting meaning or creating a fragmented picture of reality which, although formally accurate, may be misinformation. In the era of deepfakes and generative AI, the ability to produce convincing synthetic content is developing faster than the capacity to verify it. Journalists themselves recognize the risks associated with AI development, pointing out that these technologies represent not only an opportunity but also a significant increase in the risk of misinformation, particularly due to the difficulty of detecting false content and deepfakes (Peña-Alonso, Peña-Fernández, & Meso-Ayerdi, 2025, p. 133). Moreover, the constant pressure to be the first to publish—even when information has not been verified—increases the risk of disseminating false material and, consequently, damaging a media outlet's reputation. Hence, the role of media management as a safeguard becomes increasingly important through robust verification procedures, competent editorial teams, investments in manipulation-detection tools, and crisis management through responsible communication and transparency with the audience.

AI Revolution and the Advent of "AI-Native" Editorial Offices

Undoubtedly, an important phenomenon beginning to dominate the media landscape is the growing importance and rapid development of AI tools. Between 2023 and 2025, AI-based technologies increasingly assumed the role of content creators, replacing tasks previously performed by employees in media companies and even editorial offices, where AI is used not only for content distribution but also for generating text and video materials, significantly contributing to the automation of editorial work. Research suggests that 2026 may be a turning point for editorial work. As 60–70% of costs incurred by traditional media are related to human resources, the AI-native model is becoming increasingly realistic. The future may therefore belong to media organizations based largely on artificial intelligence, reducing the cost of human involvement to 20–30% (LettsGroup, 2025, August 20). The traditional division between creation and distribution will also change, as artificial intelligence will enable the dynamic assembly of content from modular components (text blocks, images, video clips, and audio segments) that can be recombined for different audiences and platforms simultaneously. In social media, AI technologies will have also become part of the creation of materials such as graphics and video (AboutMarketing, 2025, December 10). Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the content itself will be automatically adapted to different platforms—from long-form web articles to short social media videos—without human intervention. Its structure, length, and complexity will also be adjusted based on audience feedback and engagement patterns in real time. These changes appear inevitable, and it is only a matter of time before they permanently reshape the media landscape which currently operates in a reality far removed from its foundations. The automation of journalism and content production is no longer a discussion about the future—it is happening before our very eyes. Since around 2020, we have witnessed the rise in so-called *automated journalism* (journalism generated by algorithms), in which AI programs produce short news items, data summaries, and informational content, accelerating the publication process and reducing costs Modern technologies are used for writing, editing, transcription, translation, fact-checking, and even generating multimedia content (Banafi, 2024).

AI has opened up the possibility of building media organizations in which the previously dominant human labor cost can be significantly reduced. From a business perspective, this is undoubtedly an attractive prospect for managers, allowing them not only to reduce costs but also to accelerate production and increase its scale. From the perspective of the media's social roles and functions, however, this raises a number of ethical management dilemmas. Research shows that despite its growing application in newsrooms and its impact on content creation, artificial intelligence requires proper management to prevent

ethical problems (Yuan, Shi, & Li, 2024, pp. 112–117). Since AI-generated content can be highly convincing yet contain errors or overgeneralizations, the first question concerns the quality of message in terms of its truthfulness and credibility. The risk lies not only in hallucinatory tendencies of current AI models, but also in the fact that AI produces a synthetic representation of reality. As a result, recipients cannot be certain whether the information presented to them has been verified or is merely a generated response that may be detached from reality.

In the context of generated content, a second fundamental problem concerns responsibility, or more specifically, the question of who bears responsibility for content produced by generative AI. From an ethical point of view, only a human being can be the subject of responsibility. As automation in the media increases and the role of humans declines, the responsibility of those leading and managing this process requires reconsideration. Closely related to this is the issue of transparency in the use of AI by editorial offices. The ongoing transformation of the media landscape, ass social media are taking over the role of traditional ones, and the increasing use of AI raise questions about disinformation, content authenticity, and trust. For this reason, increasing attention is being paid to the ethics and transparency of algorithms (LettsGroup, 2025, August 20). Issues such as transparency, factual accuracy, source attribution, and the reliability of AI-generated content have sparked debate among media professionals and academics (Zhaxylykbayeva, Burkitbayeva, Zhakhyp, Kabylgazina, & Ashirbekova, 2025, p. 105). From the perspective of ethical management, this may become a strategic issue determining trust in a given media outlet. Therefore, ethics is becoming part of a broader discussion in the context of the use of artificial intelligence in the media (Noain Sánchez, 2022, pp. 105–121). Awareness of these issues is an important element of developing and implementing ethical frameworks in the media, which are still determining the appropriate scope of AI use. Rules and standards in this area are still evolving, and the whole process remains in its infancy, much like the technologies themselves.

In the context of these ongoing changes, another key ethical issue is undoubtedly disinformation, which has become a part of political, economic, and social struggles. There amount of disinformation circulating in the media is growing, and media organizations often face the dilemma of whether to report false information in order to expose it, at the risk of amplifying it, or to ignore it, thereby allowing unverified narratives to circulate. Ethical management therefore requires strategic decisions about when and how to respond, how to avoid repeating falsehoods, how to provide appropriate context, and, ultimately, how to strengthen audience's media literacy.

Conclusions

With this in mind, the coming years will provide a testing ground for developing ethical frameworks for media operating in this new reality. Moreover, media outlets that fail to base their activities on sound ethical principles may be displaced by technologies better suited to the changing environment. The media have become a continuous testing ground for data generation, enabling platforms and editorial offices to analyze user behavior and adapt content in real time. The shift towards social media, the creator economy, and video content is no longer merely a prospect—it is a reality. Traditional media are steadily losing their significance and are therefore forced to seek solutions that will enable them to survive. And these solutions are right next door, in a new reality that demands immediate change. Pioneers are gaining millions of users and page views, building their infrastructures, and may soon become key players in the media market. An example from the Polish media market is the Kanał Zero project, developed by Krzysztof Stanowski and his team, which has demonstrated in a relatively short time the potential to expand from YouTube into traditional broadcasting. It was the first YouTube channel in Poland to obtain a satellite broadcasting license from the National Broadcasting Council (*Kanał zero TV z koncesją satelitarną*).

Against this background, the role of leadership becomes particularly important. Interest in media ethics has traditionally focused on journalists and their individual consciences. In the new reality, however, ethics is increasingly a matter for leaders who define organizational goals, policies, resource allocation, relationships with platforms, and technology strategies. If they wish to act ethically, their decisions cannot be based solely on the survival of the institutions they manage. Such an approach would mean failing to fulfil the functions the media are expected to perform in society. This is, of course, not easy. It is necessary to establish a hierarchy of priorities when responding to the often conflicting expectations of stakeholders. Without such a hierarchy, decisions become arbitrary and susceptible to the influence of the most powerful actors, thereby undermining their ethical character.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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Scholarly Output on Media Management in Poland: An Evaluation

ABSTRACT

Media management combines general management theory with the specific features of the industry. It is a complex process that relies on economic, cultural, and social values. Researchers face challenges in understanding the field and in proposing theories useful to practitioners. This article evaluates the Polish scholarly output on media management by mapping topics, research methods, and keywords using secondary data analysis and qualitative content analysis. A total of 186 citable articles from nine scientific journals published between 2018 and 2025 were collected according to the following criteria: language and digital accessibility. These publications constituted 12% of all articles published in these journals during the specified period. Among the most common topics in media management are strategic management, media product management, the media landscape, the media industry, and audience management. The least common topics are media, the labour market, and leadership. The analysis also identified topics that were entirely absent, such as M&A, diversity, inclusivity, gender theories, organisational culture, and international media management. The scholarly output was assessed as diverse and rich, although several important topics for future research were identified. Across all analysed articles, qualitative research dominates, including content analysis, case studies, discourse analysis, and desk research. It was also established that the selection of keywords is somewhat random, too general, too specific, or overly journalistic in character. The authors of this article strongly recommend creating a keyword catalogue.

KEYWORDS: media management, scholarly output, topics, keywords, evaluation

Suggested citation: Teler, A. & Wojtukiewicz, A. (2026). Scholarly Output on Media Management in Poland: An Evaluation. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 21–45. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.03

Submitted: 04.10.2025 Accepted: 07.05.2026

STRESZCZENIE

Ewaluacja dorobku naukowego w obszarze zarządzania mediami w Polsce

Kluczowym zadaniem zarządzania mediami jest łączenie ogólnej teorii zarządzania ze specyfiką branży medialnej. Zarządzanie nią jest złożonym procesem, gdyż opiera się na wartościach ekonomicznych, kulturowych i społecznych. Oprócz wyzwań praktycznych, zarządzanie mediami stanowi również poważne wyzwanie dla badaczy, którzy próbują zrozumieć tę rzeczywistość i zaproponować teorie przydatne dla praktyków. Proponowany artykuł ocenia polski dorobek naukowy w zakresie zarządzania mediami poprzez mapowanie tematów, metod badawczych i słów kluczowych (przy użyciu następujących metod: analiza danych zastanych i jakościowa analiza treści). W latach 2018–2025 zebrano łącznie 186 cytowalnych artykułów naukowych z dziewięciu czasopism naukowych, według kryteriów: językowego i dostępności cyfrowej. Ustalono, że publikacje te stanowiły 12% wszystkich artykułów opublikowanych w badanych czasopismach we wskazanym okresie. Do najczęstszych tematów w ramach zarządzania mediami należą zarządzanie strategiczne i strategia, zarządzanie produktem medialnym, krajobraz medialny, branża medialna i zarządzanie publicznością. Najmniej popularne tematy to rynek pracy w mediach i przywództwo. Zupełnie nieobecne tematy to: fuzje i przejęcia, teorie różnorodności, inkluzywności, teorie płci, kultura organizacyjna lub międzynarodowe zarządzanie mediami. Dorobek naukowy oceniono jako różnorodny i bogaty tematycznie, choć wskazano tematy ważne do podjęcia. We wszystkich analizowanych artykułach dominują badania jakościowe, w tym analiza treści, studia przypadków, analiza dyskursu i badania źródłowe. Stwierdzono również, że dobór słów kluczy jest nieco przypadkowy, zbyt ogólny, zbyt szczegółowy lub zbyt publicystyczny. Autorki niniejszego artykułu postulują stworzenie katalogu słów kluczy.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: zarządzanie mediami, dorobek naukowy, tematy, słowa klucze, ewaluacja

Introduction

The media market is distinctive due to the unique characteristics of its products (Picard, 2005; Jupowicz-Ginalska, 2010), audiences (Napoli, 2003; 2011), and distribution mechanisms (Anderson, 2006). Its simultaneous reliance on economic, cultural, and social values makes its management particularly complex. A key task of media management is to combine general management theory with the specific characteristics of the media industry. However, media management as a subdiscipline remains loosely defined and conceptually fragmented. It still lacks an established set of theories or methods and instead draws on media studies, media economics, and communication research, which together help capture the specificity of content, distribution, and consumption (Küng,

2007, p. 25; Rohn & Evans, 2020; Brown, 2016). The ambiguity of media management is evident even in how the industry is defined: in the American tradition, the term "media industry" includes sectors such as video games or theme parks (e.g. Disney World), whereas the European definition is narrower. The scope of the media industry is further complicated by the inclusion of advertising, PR, marketing, and the performing arts (Küng, 2007, pp. 33–34). Similar difficulties arise when defining a media enterprise, which may operate under various ownership models and at different market levels. In addition, "management" itself covers multiple managerial tiers and dimensions of performance (Albarran, 2013; Albarran & Moellinger, 2017). At the same time, the media perform cultural, social, and political functions, thereby broadening the scope and implications of managerial decision-making (Mierzejewska, 2011, pp. 10–11). Media management is distinctive because of several characteristics of the media sector. Media companies rely on intangible assets such as reputation, creativity, and intellectual property rights. Media products combine informational, entertainment, and cultural functions, while audience reactions are highly uncertain (Mierzejewska, 2011). For digital products, near-zero marginal and distribution costs enable rapid scaling, reinforce network effects, and foster the dominance of the largest players. Moreover, the industry operates on a global scale, reaching audiences, advertisers, and content creators across multiple markets, thereby increasing development opportunities and competitive risks (Rohn & Evans, 2020). Media management must address not only economic aspects but also social, cultural, and public-value considerations, which further distinguish the sector from many others (Mierzejewska, 2011). Employment structures are highly diverse, with numerous creative and production roles. This diversity fosters tensions between profitability and content quality and increases the complexity of leadership (Rohn & Evans, 2020).

While media management research has historically drawn on theories and methods borrowed from related disciplines, particularly media studies, this reliance reflects the field's interdisciplinary origins rather than its current stage of development. Although such a multi-directional approach is valuable in the early phases of a field, the continued absence of a more focused and coherent set of theories and methodological frameworks may limit cumulative knowledge building. Given the maturity of media management as a field of study, there is a growing need to consolidate its theoretical and methodological foundations to ensure greater consistency across studies and strengthen its analytical and practical relevance.

Media management differs from media economics in its scope of interest: the former focuses on internal processes and firm-level decisions, while the latter analyses market and industry structures. However, the two fields are closely interconnected, and their interdependence supports the development of both (Rohn & Evans, 2020). Today, the media sector faces pressure from rapid technological progress and competition from GAFAM giants (Google/

Alphabet, Amazon, Facebook/Meta, Apple, Microsoft), which capture audience attention and redefine distribution channels. Legacy media must adapt to technological convergence and hypercompetition, while researchers search for new paradigms for strategy analysis (Murschetz et al., 2020). With the emergence of new product categories and rising competition for audience attention, research on business models, innovation, and organisational adaptation is gaining importance (Küng, 2007). In the future, media management will need to provide knowledge that supports sectoral transformation and develop tools that integrate management theory with communication studies to create new interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives (Rohn & Evans, 2020; Brown, 2016).

Beyond its practical complexities, media management is a unique, diverse, and inherently complex field that poses significant analytical challenges for researchers, making it difficult to formulate a clear, concise definition and requiring the development of theoretical frameworks that meaningfully reflect this complexity and remain useful to practitioners.

A Scoping Literature Review of Scientific Output in Media Management and Media Economics

A scoping literature review makes it possible to "map a body of literature with relevance to time, location (e.g. country or context), source (e.g. peer-reviewed or grey literature), and origin (e.g. healthcare discipline or academic field)" (Peters et al., 2015, p. 142). This type of review is particularly useful for demonstrating an existing research tradition. The review for this article was conducted in scientific databases with the support of Elicit. Abstracts were collected to map previous work on scientific output. The most common methods were identified, but individual studies were not assessed. Data were collected digitally, in accordance with established accessibility criteria.

One of the first comprehensive syntheses of media management research was conducted by Bożena Mierzejewska and Ann C. Hollifield (2006). They examined more than ten years of selected academic publications and identified six core theoretical approaches: strategic management, structural theories, transnational media management, organisational culture theories, technology/innovation/creativity, and leadership research. The development of transnational media management research from 1974 to 2009 was examined by Mania Strube (2010), who analysed 62 publications using a propositional inventory. The study identified seven core topics: firm-level management, market entry strategies, corporate strategies, internationalisation processes, leadership/organisation, functional management, and cross-border cooperation. This longitudinal analysis documented a shift from operational to strategic and cultural considerations. A meta-analytic approach was pioneered by George Sylvie and Amy Schmitz Weiss

(2012), who systematically reviewed innovations in media management studies (1983–2008). They examined the use of sociotechnical systems theory in newsroom research and found that it was referenced only indirectly, suggesting limited integration into media management scholarship. In 2013, expert interviews with 50 researchers were conducted to evaluate publications, identify research gaps, and reveal fragmented research, and call for greater integration (Wirtz et al., 2013). Major changes in media management research were analysed by Bożena Mierzejewska and Dan Shaver (2014), who emphasised how technology and changing consumer habits have affected traditional research methods and documented an evolution from economic descriptions to complex digital frameworks. A comprehensive evaluation of media management and economics research was carried out by Alan B. Albarran (2014), who examined its historical development and future directions. This analysis showed an evolution from basic economic analysis to more sophisticated management frameworks addressing digital transformation. The methodological characteristics of media management and economics articles published in leading journals from 2004 to 2016 were analysed by Michel Dupagne (2018). His study showed that most research in this field is quantitative, relies on secondary data, uses non-probabilistic sampling, and employs regression models. The analysis also revealed temporal shifts from survey-based research (2010–2015) to secondary data analysis (2014–2019), indicating increasing methodological sophistication. This assessment was updated by Mierzejewska (2018), who identified major advances since 2006 and established research priorities that emphasise digital transformation and stakeholder-oriented approaches. Open innovation in media research was systematically reviewed by Nina Klaß (2020), who analysed 54 relevant articles and identified six key practices: cooperation, mergers and acquisitions, crowdsourcing, co-creation, collaboration, and spin-outs. The most salient media-specific condition was cultural uniqueness. Innovation in journalism research was systematically reviewed by José-Alberto García-Avilés (2021), whose study covered 302 peer-reviewed publications from 2000 to 2020. The review found a predominant focus on diffusion theory, management, organisational culture, professional profiles, and business models and showed exponential growth in innovation-related publications after 2010, accompanied by increasing methodological diversity.

The review presented here is not exhaustive; however, it provides a foundation for further analyses of scholarly output on media management in Poland and highlights a long-standing research tradition in this area. The body of literature examined not only reflects developments and trends within the media industry but also offers insights into the evolving research interests and priorities of scholars in this field. At the same time, the review demonstrates that questions about the definition of media management remain part of an ongoing international scholarly debate. By situating Polish research within this broader context, the study contributes to the continuing effort to conceptualise

media management and to identify the specific role and contribution of Polish scholarship within this global discussion.

Research Design and Research Process

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this article is twofold: (1) to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the potential and necessity of establishing media management as a distinct subdiscipline within the broader discipline of social communication and media studies in Poland, and (2) to assess the current state of scholarly output on media management in Poland.

The objective of the study is to identify the most common topics (thematic mapping), determine the most frequently used research methods, and examine the keywords employed in selected scientific journals in Poland within the study period.

Accordingly, the research question is: What are the topics, methods, and keywords in the Polish scholarly output on media management?

Methods

To achieve the research objective, two methods were selected: secondary data analysis and qualitative content (text) analysis with an open coding frame, focused on thematic syntheses and keyword assessment.

Secondary data analysis is a research approach that can be used across different fields. It uses existing data and various methods to answer new research questions (Polit & Beck, 2021). Barney G. Glaser (1963) was among the first to highlight the benefits of reanalysing data. As Kelly et al. emphasize, "Secondary data analysis is an accessible, feasible, and cost-effective means of conducting high-level research that is accessible to experienced and novice researchers" (2024).

The application of content analysis as a quantitative tool depends on the importance of frequency or the statistical nature of the research question. Conversely, qualitative content analysis is also relevant, as Margrit Schreier notes, when one "systematically describes the meaning of qualitative material (...) by assigning successive parts of the material to the categories of a coding frame" (2012, p. 1). Qualitative analysis focuses on meaning and context. It explores themes, patterns, and categories in the material, rather than statistical frequency (Schreier, 2012, pp. 7–8). Eventually, in accordance with the principles of grounded theory, the collection of research material has the potential to contribute to the formulation of hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006).

Research Material

A review of nine scholarly journals specializing in social communication and media studies was conducted. These journals are included on the Polish Ministerial List of Ranked Journals[1] and have been published since at least 2018.[2] Among the nine journals selected for the collection of research material (see Table 1), none has a higher point value than the others on the Polish Ministerial List of Ranked Journals. Table 1 presents detailed information about the selected journals.

Table 1. List of journals included in the research with specifications

Title of Journal (Full and Shortened)	**Year of Establishment**	**Publication Frequency**	**(e-)ISSN**
Zeszyty Prasoznawcze // Media Research Issues	1960	Quarterly	0555-0025
Studia Medioznawcze // Media Studies	2000	Quarterly	1641-0920
Media – Kultura – Komunikowanie Społeczne // Media – Culture – Social Communication	2005	Annual (quarterly since 2021)	1734-3801
Kultura Media Teologia // Culture–Media–Theology	2010	Quarterly	2081-8971
Media i Społeczeństwo. Medioznawstwo – komunikologia – semiologia – socjologia mediów – media a pedagogika [Media i Społeczeństwo] // Media and Society	2011	Semi-annual (annual until 2018)	2083-5701
Oblicza Komunikacji // Faces of Communication	since 2011	Annual	2083-5345
Zarządzanie Mediami // Media Management	2013	Quarterly	2354-0214
Media – Biznes – Kultura. Dziennikarstwo i komunikacja społeczna [Media Biznes Kultura] // Media Business Culture	2016	Semi-annual	2451-1986
Com.press	2018	Semi-annual	2545-2320

Source: Author's own elaboration.[3]

The journals and published scholarly articles were deliberately selected based on the criterion of linguistic accessibility for Polish readers, researchers, and

1 Selected journals were included on the List of Scored Journals of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MNiSW/MEiN). Beginning in 2019, scholarly journals have been awarded points according to a scale of 20/40/70/100/140/200. The nine selected journals are generally in similar point ranges (20/40), but *Zeszyty Prasoznawcze*, *Kultura Media Teologia*, *Media Biznes Kultura*, and *Media i Społeczeństwo* received 70 points only in 2023.

2 The youngest journal, *Com.press*, meets the accepted criteria and was founded in 2018.

3 Polish-language journal titles have been retained in this article.

media professionals (i.e., publication in Polish). This means that Mediatization Studies (ISSN 2451-1188), Social Communication (ISSN 2450-7563), and the Central European Journal of Communication (ISSN 1899-5101), although well known in the field, were not included in the study.

Research Process

During the research process, a total of 1,531 citable scholarly articles in Polish were collected from nine journals for the study period 2018–2025. Of these, 186 (12%) were articles on media management. The distribution of articles by journal is shown in Table 2.

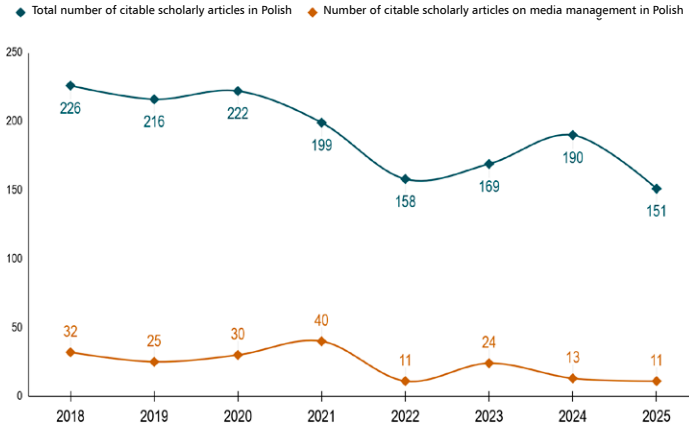
Table 2. Numerical summary of all citable scholarly articles and citable scholarly articles on media management in Polish in the period 2018–2025

Journal	**Total number of citable scholarly articles in Polish (2018–2025)**	**Number of citable scholarly articles on media management in Polish (2018–2025)**
Zeszyty Prasoznawcze	198	33
Studia Medioznawcze	174	21
Media Kultura Komunikowanie Społeczne	128	9
Kultura Media Teologia	244	21
Media i Społeczeństwo	314	17
Oblicza Komunikacji	55	0
Zarządzanie Mediami	134	58
Media Biznes Kultura	193	17
Com.press	91	10

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The distribution of articles by year is shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Numerical summary of all citable scholarly articles and citable scholarly articles on media management in Polish in the period 2018–2025



Source: Author's own elaboration.

The research material thus consists of 186 articles. These articles were assigned to one of two categories: soft-related to or hard-related to media management. Articles that explicitly addressed media management were classified as hard--related, for example:

The role of emotions in the management of a media organisation: the example of RMF FM radio (Stach, 2018),

FAST channels as a component of the Polish media market (Nowak, 2025).

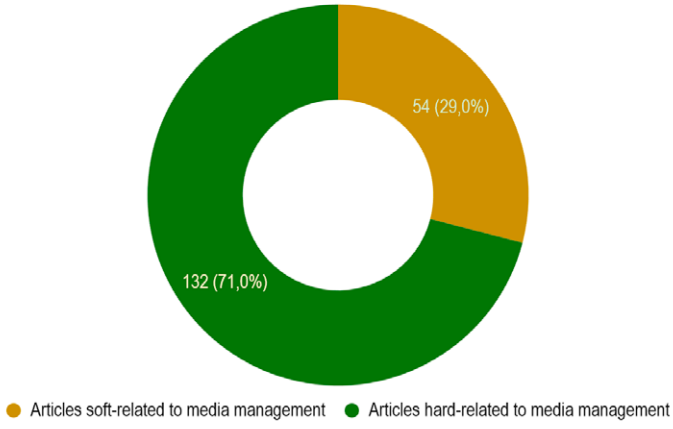
Articles classified as soft-related were those in which another subdiscipline played a parallel or leading role within the same article, for example:

The Podcast, i.e., from the Audial Transmission towards its Audiovisual Renditions. A Media Linguistic Perspective (Kalisz, 2024),

Personalisation of Religious Messaging and User Profiling in the Digital World. A Perspective of Applied Theology (Siepert, 2025).

The percentages of soft- and hard-related articles in the research material are illustrated in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1. Percentage and numerical distribution of soft-related and hard-related articles in the research material



Source: Author's own elaboration.

However, this classification did not affect the subsequent research process. As part of the qualitative content analysis, publications were coded according to previously adopted codes based on the title, abstract, and keywords; in ambiguous cases, the full text of the publication was consulted. Concurrently, new codes were created based on data that did not fit into the pre-existing codes. The catalogue of codes and subcodes is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Catalogue of codes with subcodes within the research material

Predefined codes (*a priori*)	**Emergent codes (*a posteriori*)**	**Example subcodes (*a posteriori*)**
audience management		viewership; consumption patterns; user profiling
economic aspects in media management		business models; ad revenue; paid content
labour market and employment in the media		media volunteering
leadership and work organisation		
media ethics		corporate responsibility; ethical standards; media management axiology
media marketing		content promotion; media performance

media organisation management		digital media organisation; media organisation identity; organisational decentralisation
media personnel, human resources management		job specifics, well-being, quality of work in the media
media product/good management		
media strategy or strategic management		competitive advantage
management of international/ global media organisations		
mergers and acquisitions		
new technologies, innovation, creativity		innovation; digital transformation; technological convergence
organisational culture		
structural approach (ownership structure and the structure of the organisation itself)		newsroom management; editorial policy; media conglomerate owners
	crisis management	crisis communication
	history of media management	history of press management; history of weekly newspaper management; history of management in the press
	media content and programming management	radio programme management; thematic channels; content management
	media distribution management	streaming platforms; modes of television broadcasting; modes of distribution; distribution
	media industry	games market; creative industry; broadcasting industry
	media landscape	public media; commercial media; regulators
	media law	audiovisual media services; press law
	media management	electronic media management; social media management; radio management
	media production management	media format; media production; film production
	media regulation	self-regulation of the information market, Adam Smith's invisible hand

	self-management (e.g. specific areas)	relationship management; risk management; information management
	quality management	quality; quality audit

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Discussion and Recommendation

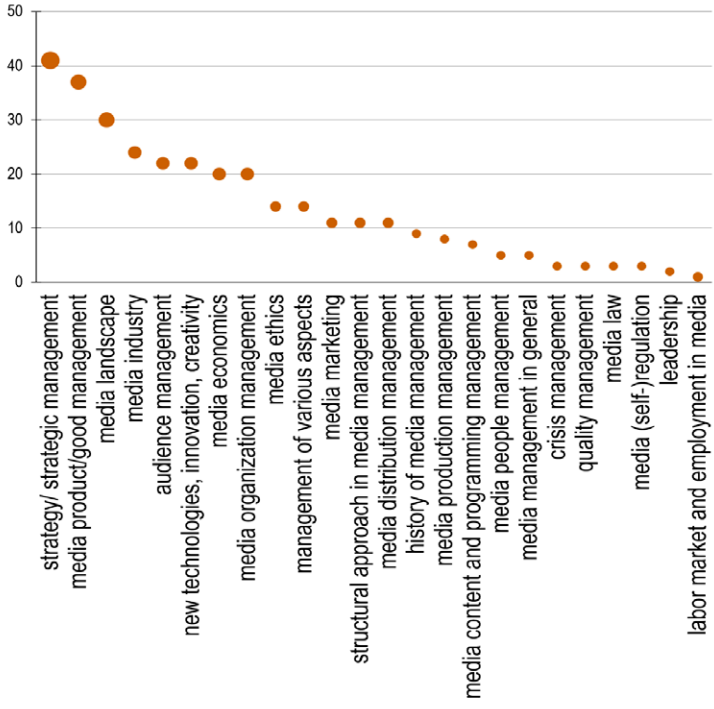
An analysis of Polish articles published between 2018 and 2025 in nine selected journals shows that media management issues are addressed in a multidimensional way, although they rarely refer directly to classical categories of management science. Instead, the studies are situated at the intersection of media studies, communication studies, political science, and cultural studies, which shapes both the scope of the problems analysed and the dominant research strategies. This is understandable, given that the specificity of media management is largely determined by the uniqueness of the media industry (Lavine & Wackman, 1988; Ferguson, 1997, 2005; Faustino, 2015).

Polish scholarly output on media management exhibits thematic diversity and multiple topics within a single publication; only occasionally is an article devoted to a single topic. Chart 2 shows the thematic distribution, highlighting the most and least frequently addressed topics.

A key topic is media strategy, understood primarily as narrative, communication, and programming strategy. Authors focus on how messages are constructed, topics selected, events framed, storytelling employed, and issues made visible in the public sphere (Kułaga, 2021). Strategy is often shaped by political, market, or crisis-related pressures, which is particularly evident in the case of public media (Woźniak, 2020; Zaborowska, 2024) and opinion-forming news programs (Wełna & Woźniak, 2021). Another frequently recurring topic is the media product, present in many texts in *Media i Społeczeństwo* (Dziukiewicz, 2018; Bałdys & Piątek, 2019; Woźniak, 2020), *Com.press* (Kantorski, 2018; Dopierała & Ossowski, 2018; Wigienka, 2021; Trojanowska, 2023), and *Media Biznes Kultura* (Kępa-Mętrak, 2021; Durmaj, 2022). Media products are not treated solely as the result of editorial work, but as instruments for implementing organisational, market, or political strategies, carriers of ideology, and tools for building relationships with audiences. Analyses in this area often address visual and narrative aspects, audience segmentation, and content multiplatforming (Jupowicz-Ginalska, 2018; Dąbrowska-Cendrowska, 2019; 2020; Kowalik, 2024). The media landscape is another frequent topic. It is examined in relation to public media (Jędrzejewski, 2019; Szot, 2022; Nierenberg & Bujak, 2025), commercial and community media (Klimkiewicz & Wilk, 2018), broadcasters, the third sector, regulators, advertisers, and

agencies such as press and news agencies (Piasecka-Strzelec, 2020), as well as legacy media (Goban-Klas, 2025), digital and online media, and broader notions such as the media system (Głuszek-Szafraniec, 2019; Durmaj, 2022; Sajna-Kunowsky, 2022) and media ecosystem (Wolska-Zogata, 2018). The media industry appears as another important area, discussed in relation to the sector as a whole (Nowak, 2025), the press market (Mikosz, 2018; Nowosad et al., 2020), the television market (Szostak, 2021; Kuchta & Mętel, 2023), the games market (Bajew, 2023), the film and audiovisual industries (Błaszczok, 2024), and the broadcasting, publishing, and printing sectors (Cetera, 2021). Audience management is also a recurring topic, usually linked to strategy and the media product. Audiences are primarily treated as objects of educational, persuasive, or manipulative influence rather than as partners in a market relationship. Examples can be found in analyses of educational and social media (Dziukiewicz, 2018) and in studies on the reinforcement of stereotypes in entertainment television (Kułaga, 2021). Economic issues feature prominently and include financial questions and business models (e.g., subscription, advertising revenue) (Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek, 2020), paywalls and paid content (Szynol, 2019; Walkowiak, 2019; Leśniczak, 2025), as well as the stock market (Bąk, 2021), media economisation (Chyliński, 2020), and press financing (Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek, 2023). New technologies, innovation, and creativity, including the use of artificial intelligence, form a distinct and growing research strand (Kowalik, 2024; Chlebowski, 2024). These studies show that technology influences not only media content but also decision-making structures and newsroom work models. Innovations are linked with strategy, media products, work organisation, and established theories (Teler, 2021), although normative and ethical perspectives tend to dominate over economic and managerial ones. Creativity is examined in the context of myths (Golonka, 2019) or as a key component of the (over)production of talent in media formats such as talent shows (Kasprowski, 2020). Media organisations and their management have been examined in studies of digital media organisations (Cyrek, 2020; Maguś, 2021), media organisation identity (Milczarczyk, 2019), and organisational decentralisation (Hendzel, 2018). Ethics is another frequently discussed topic, especially in relation to public media, the pandemic, armed conflicts, and digital technologies (Maliszewski, 2019; Woźniak, 2020; Barańska & Szot, 2021; Soczyński, 2021; Miller, 2022; Chlebowski, 2022; Teler, 2023; Chomik, 2025). In these publications, ethics serves as an interpretative framework for assessing editorial decisions and communication strategies, often constraining the influence of market and political pressures. Historical perspectives and analyses of the evolution of the press and media (Jabłonowski, 2018; Gałęzowski, 2018; Czopek, 2019; Plášková, 2020; Walkowiak, 2019) show that media have long operated under political, economic, and ideological pressures. This approach highlights continuity in problems related to media autonomy, ownership structures, and relations with the environment.

Chart 2. Numerical representation of topics present in the research material



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Despite the breadth of analyses, issues related to work organisation, leadership, and human resource management are rarely addressed and appear only in fragmentary form (Kononiuk, 2023; Kożdoń-Dębecka, 2025; Nierenberg & Bogdanov, 2023). Quantitative methods and market data analyses are used only sporadically, limiting the potential for developing generalizable managerial conclusions.

The research material also contains contextual elements that are difficult to classify as independent themes, as they primarily form the background to the issues discussed. Political conditions in different countries shape media systems and, for example, the functioning of public media. A significant portion of the articles reflects on the impact of the political context on media management (Zaborowska, 2024; Wełna & Woźniak, 2021; Durmaj, 2022). Media are portrayed as actors in political disputes, controlling information flows and shaping narratives and public opinion. Editorial strategies, topic selection, and the presentation of political actors often have a normative and symbolic rather than a managerial character. Moreover, during the period under study, the world faced the global COVID-19 pandemic, which formed part of

the contextual background for the analyses. The pandemic was an important catalyst for research into media management. Publications from 2020–2022 focus on newsroom reorganisation, adaptation of content and communication processes, and crisis management (Miller, 2022; Wróblewska-Jachna, 2022). Media organisations demonstrated considerable operational flexibility; however, responses were primarily ad hoc, and long-term managerial strategies were rarely developed. The analysis also shows that some subjects are underrepresented or largely absent. These gaps are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Representation of topics in the research material by scale

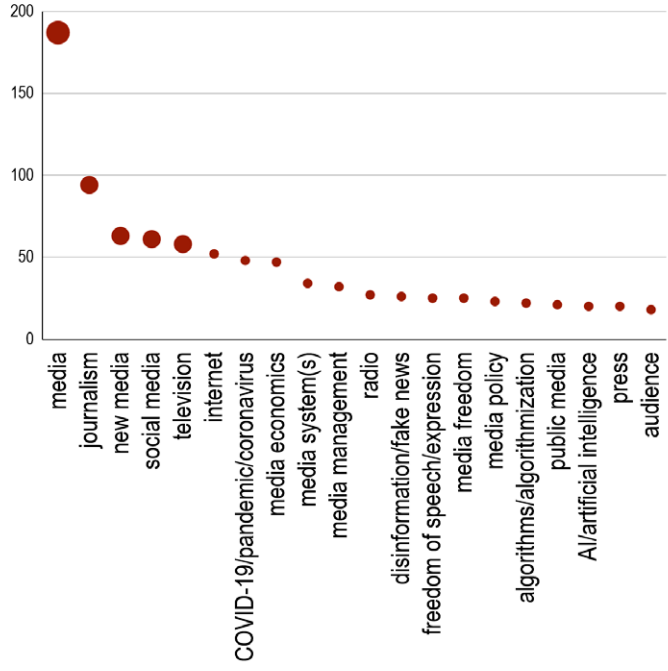
No presence	Minimal presence	Modest presence
Mergers and acquisitions	Employment and media labour force	History of media management
Diversity, inclusivity, and gender theories	Leadership and entrepreneurship theories	Media production management
Organisational culture	Media personnel management	Media content and programming management
Contingency and efficiency theories	Media management in general	
Transnational media management	Crisis management	
Knowledge management and information and decision-making processes	Quality management	
Analysis of the competitive environment	Media law	
Value chain management	Media (self-)regulation	
Talent management		
Analysis of the effectiveness of specific solutions		
Controlling		
Analysis of managerial competence (no research on managers) and employee competence		
Assessment of the actual state of management in a given organisation/sector		
Stakeholder analysis		

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Across all analysed journals, qualitative research dominates, including content analysis, case studies, discourse analysis, and desk research. Systemic comparisons and empirical studies conducted under crisis conditions (the pandemic) are also employed, although interpretative approaches still prevail. Quantitative methods, big data analyses, and financial research occur only marginally, reinforcing the cultural and interpretative character of reflections on media management.

The vast majority of scholarly articles include keywords (often in both Polish and English). Chart 3 shows the most common ones.

Chart 3. Numerical representation of the top 20 keywords in the research material



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Constructing a set of keywords is not necessarily easy. The goal of preparing keywords is to improve searchability in databases: the better the keywords, the easier it is to find the article. Authors of scholarly articles do not always indicate precisely what an article is about. Sometimes, the keywords are too general (e.g., "media") or too specific. Most often, there is no indication in the keywords that the article concerns media management. Keywords are sometimes

overly journalistic and thus lose their usefulness. At this point, the authors of this article propose creating a catalogue of keywords aligned with the codes and subcodes developed in the research process. The development of such a catalogue would necessitate a gradual process, followed by its dissemination for widespread use. This need is substantiated by the research undertaken and is further supported by a comparable catalogue, namely the JEL Classification Codes (by the Journal of Economic Literature).[4] The code classification was first published in 1963 (with subsequent updates) and has since become well known among economists.

Research Limitations

The research material was collected over a limited period of time. The selection of journals was purposive, related to the discipline of social communication sciences and media, and focused on publications in the Polish languge. The digital accessibility criterion was applied, but publication gaps were found in *Oblicza Komunikacji*, *Com.press*, and *Kultura Media Teologia*. Polish researchers are keen to publish in English and actively seek high-scoring journals, although these are not always closely related to media studies—for example, journals such as *Prace Językoznawcze*, *Perspektywy Kultury*, *Przegląd Wschodnioeuropejski*, and *Res Rhetorica,* which were not included in this study. Moreover, monographs and doctoral or master's theses were not included in the research.

The study relied on numerical measurements and the formulation of qualitative conclusions to assess the scale and specificity of publication activity and to observe thematic evolution. Applying this method for analysing articles published in other languages would be advantageous in two respects. First, it would facilitate a comparative analysis of linguistic influences. Second, it would make it easier to recognise transnational differences. It is hoped that this research will be further developed in the future, with its use expanded to include more detailed contextual analyses.

Main Findings

A thorough evaluation of the scholarly output published in Polish journals in social communication and media studies, according to the adopted criteria, indicates that:

4 See also, JEL Classification System / EconLit Subject Descriptors, at https://www.aeaweb.org/econlit/jelCodes.php.

1. It is evident that the scholarly output under discussion is both substantial and diverse.
2. The authors apply a media management framework while simultaneously drawing on other areas of research or alternative theoretical frameworks for media management research.
3. In addition to preferred topics, some areas remain underrepresented (at this stage, it is impossible to determine the reasons for this phenomenon).
4. The scholarly output on media management can be divided into two categories—soft-related and hard-related to (according to the previously accepted distinction)—which may indicate the semi-universal character of media management.
5. Several common research methods are used. The analysis also shows a lack of field research and studies based on large datasets, while qualitative methods are used extensively.
6. It is evident that the process of creating keyword sets is not yet fully structured, highlighting the necessity for a relevant catalogue.

The recommendations formulated in this study have broad applicability. At the individual level, these principles can be applied to the author's decision-making process. For example, they can be used to address identified research gaps, apply underused research methodologies, or employ suitable keywords. At the editorial level, these recommendations can help editors organise issues into thematic sections. For journals focused on media management, media economics, or the media business (such as *Zarządzanie Mediami* or *Media Biznes Kultura*), separate sections for hard-related and soft-related articles (e.g., *varia*) could be introduced. For journals with a broader thematic scope, it is possible to propose introducing a section devoted strictly to media management (hard-related articles).

Consequently, the adopted research objective has been fulfilled. It is hoped that the research, conclusions, and postulates presented in this article will contribute to the ongoing scientific discussion and stimulate further consideration of the potential and necessity of establishing media management as a distinct subdiscipline within the broader domain of social communication and media studies.

Summary

The analyses reveal a coherent picture of media management in Polish scholarly output from 2018 to 2025. Media management is treated primarily as strategic management, audience management, management of media products and content, and ethics, rather than as a classical organisational and managerial process. The main areas of reflection are the media product and strategy, often

considered within political, social, or crisis-related contexts. Political, crisis, and technological conditions significantly influence editorial decisions and media strategies, underscoring the role of media as actors in ideological disputes and as instruments of narrative control. By contrast, areas such as leadership and work organisation remain under-researched, indicating a substantial gap in the literature. The growing importance of technological innovation, particularly artificial intelligence, also underscores the need for research into the impact of technology on newsroom management and communication models.

Taking into account the diversity of subject areas in social communication and media studies (e.g., political communication, marketing communication, media history, media education), media management, according to the adopted criteria of language and digital accessibility, accounts for 12% of all scholarly articles in the period studied. The varied nature and complexity of media management pose a challenge to defining the field as a distinct subdiscipline within the broader domain of communication and media studies.

In conclusion, Polish scholarly output on media management in 2018–2025 presents media management primarily as a symbolic, social, and normative process, focused on strategy, meanings, audience relations, and responses to political or crisis-related pressure. Overall, the findings indicate a need for stronger integration of media studies with management sciences, including the development of economic and organisational research, in order to better understand the functioning of contemporary media as institutions operating under market and technological conditions. The findings also suggest the need to establish a publicly available classification system (i.e., a catalogue) for media management keywords.

There is a continuing need for research into media management and for the further development and expansion of the topics addressed. The authors hope that this article will contribute to further research in this challenging area.

AI tools and scope of use
Data collection and sorting: Formula Bot, ChatGPT, Gemini
Support in literature review: Elicit
Support in translation: DeepL, ChatGPT, Gemini
Proofreading (with author's final decisions): Formula Bot

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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Media Management Education Through the Eyes of University Students

ABSTRACT

Media management (MM) is an interdisciplinary and dynamically evolving field that lacks a unified definition, clearly defined research boundaries, and a coherent educational model. While existing scholarship has largely focused on establishing media management as a research subdiscipline, issues related to its teaching and learning remain underexplored. This article addresses this gap by examining media management education from the perspective of university students. The study aims to identify how students conceptualise media management, how they assess current educational provision, and what competencies and teaching formats they consider essential for professional preparation in the contemporary media environment. The analysis is based on qualitative data collected through focus group interviews with 24 students from four Polish public universities offering courses related to media management. Thematic analysis of the focus group material reveals a persistent gap between theory-oriented curricula and students' expectations of practice-based, applied learning. Participants emphasise the need for stronger integration of theoretical knowledge with practical skills, including project-based learning, case studies, data analysis, and the use of digital and analytical tools. The findings highlight students' preference for experiential learning, close cooperation with industry practitioners, and regular exposure to real-world media organisations.

KEYWORDS: media management, media management education, higher education, students, focus groups

Suggested citation: Wróblewska, K. & Żuchniewicz, M. (2026). Media Management Education Through the Eyes of University Students. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 47–64. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.04

Submitted: 11.12.2025 Accepted: 06.05.2026

STRESZCZENIE

Edukacja w zakresie zarządzania mediami oczami studentów

Zarządzanie mediami (ZM) jest interdyscyplinarnym i dynamicznie rozwijającym się obszarem badawczym, który nadal pozbawiony jest jednolitej definicji, wyraźnie wyznaczonych granic badawczych oraz spójnego modelu kształcenia. Podczas gdy dotychczasowe badania koncentrowały się przede wszystkim na umiejscowieniu ZM jako subdyscypliny naukowej, zagadnienia związane z jego dydaktyką i procesami uczenia się pozostają w znacznym stopniu niezbadane. Artykuł ten odpowiada na tę lukę, analizując edukację w zakresie zarządzania mediami z perspektywy studentów uniwersyteckich. Celem badania jest identyfikacja sposobów, w jakie studenci konceptualizują zarządzanie mediami, oceniają aktualną ofertę dydaktyczną oraz określają kompetencje i formy kształcenia uznawane przez nich za kluczowe dla przygotowania zawodowego w warunkach współczesnego środowiska medialnego. Analiza opiera się na danych jakościowych pozyskanych w ramach wywiadów fokusowych przeprowadzonych z udziałem 24 studentów czterech polskich uczelni publicznych oferujących zajęcia z zakresu ZM. Analiza tematyczna materiału empirycznego ujawnia utrzymującą się lukę pomiędzy programami studiów zdominowanymi przez treści teoretyczne a oczekiwaniami studentów dotyczącymi kształcenia opartego na praktyce i zastosowaniach. Respondenci podkreślają potrzebę silniejszej integracji wiedzy teoretycznej z umiejętnościami praktycznymi, obejmującymi m.in. nauczanie projektowe, analizę studiów przypadków, pracę z danymi oraz wykorzystanie narzędzi cyfrowych i analitycznych. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują na preferencję studentów wobec uczenia się przez doświadczenie, ścisłej współpracy z praktykami branżowymi oraz regularnego kontaktu z rzeczywistymi organizacjami medialnymi.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Zarządzanie Mediami, Edukacja w zakresie Zarządzania Mediami, szkolnictwo wyższe, studenci, wywiady fokusowe

Introduction

Media management (hereafter MM) constitutes an interdisciplinary field of research and remains a field in the process of continuous development. This is evidenced by both the lack of a single, widely accepted definition and the absence of clearly defined and coherent research boundaries (Küng, 2010). MM draws on the contributions of numerous academic disciplines, including economics and finance, political science and public administration, management and quality sciences, law, communication and media studies, and international relations (Albarran, Chan-Olmsted & Wirth, 2006; Kreft, 2015). As Küng (2007) emphasises, media management should be situated at the intersection of general management theories and the specific conditions under which

media organisations operate. Consequently, MM emerges as a dynamic field, open to a plurality of research perspectives and methodological approaches.

The concept of "media management" can be interpreted in two ways: as the management of media and as management within media organisations (Nierenberg, 2013). The first perspective refers to the governance of media at various levels of management. It includes, among other things, legal regulations, market mechanisms, and the public or commercial use of media, thereby treating media as the "field relating to social, political, and economic phenomena" (p. 157). The second perspective focuses on decision-making processes within media organisations and corresponds to the definition of "the management of a media enterprise operating in a specific environment" (p. 157). This perspective is analysed from functional, processual, and structural viewpoints. Effective management within the media sector extends beyond day-to-day operations; it involves the strategic direction of media offerings—including decisions about what content is provided, how it is delivered, and to whom. This in turn shapes the overall communication landscape. Given the significance of these decisions, media management should be carried out by individuals possessing appropriate competencies and professional education (Donaj, 2019; Malmelin, Virta & Kuismin, 2022).

Media education requires a systemic transformation that integrates professional training with a critical perspective on media financial structures and their social responsibility (Förster & Rohn, 2015). Zhang and Li (2021), in their study titled *Case-based Teaching Research of Media Management Course,* demonstrate that case-based teaching methods can substantially enhance students' academic outcomes. They also emphasise the importance of assigning tasks with a moderate level of difficulty, as problems that are either too simple or overly complex may lead to frustration. Activities of an appropriate level of difficulty tend to be more engaging and satisfying, as a sense of achievement emerges from the problem-solving process itself. Furthermore, involving students in group projects focused on analysing the operations and management of media organisations requires extensive data collection. In this context, books, newspapers, academic journals, and relevant online sources—including official websites of media companies and industry platforms—serve as essential and valuable resources, particularly for obtaining information and current industry data.

The importance of education in this area was already emphasised by Hoag and Brickley (2001) as well as by Förster and Rohn (2015), who argued that the development of media management professionals requires a coherent understanding of what MM is, how it should be taught, which areas of competence it encompasses, and how students can be effectively prepared for work in this interdisciplinary field. Meanwhile, both the literature review and the conducted empirical study—including focus group interviews with students at Polish universities—reveal a clear gap in media management education.

Existing research in this field has primarily focused on establishing media management as a research subdiscipline, while largely marginalising educational and didactic issues. The lack of a unified approach to teaching media management can be interpreted within the broader context of research on entrepreneurship education, which has long faced analogous challenges related to conceptualisation. As noted by Cunningham and Lischerson (1991), Gartner (1990), and Mwasalwiba (2010), entrepreneurship education is marked by significant conceptual fragmentation, lacking both a standardised definition and a consensus on its primary learning objectives or disciplinary scope. Similar challenges are evident in the field of media entrepreneurship, where, according to Ferrier (2013), the ambiguity of theoretical frameworks stems, among other factors, from the dynamic transformation of the media sector and the diverse motivations of actors involved in educational processes.

In light of the above, this study aims to determine how media management and its pedagogy are conceptualised in contemporary academic discourse.

One of the most recent and comprehensive definitions of MM has been proposed by Santas, Inobemhe, and Asemahm in *Media Management. Principles and Strategies* (2024). The authors define media management as an "aspect of management that focuses on identifying and describing the strategic and operational phenomena and problems in the administration of media organisations" (2024, p. 16). From a practical perspective, MM is understood as a process initiated through strategic planning, within which media organisations formulate communication objectives and develop comprehensive media strategies. This process includes identifying target audiences, analysing their media consumption habits, and selecting communication channels that enable effective outreach to these audiences (Santas, Inobemhe & Asemahm, 2024, p. 17).

Media management, as defined here, encompasses a broad spectrum of professional roles, ranging from media planners, public relations specialists, and digital marketing experts to content managers and creative directors. Consequently, education in this field should focus on developing practical competencies, particularly skills related to identifying target groups, analysing audience preferences and habits, and selecting effective communication channels. Curricula should therefore emphasise the practical dimension of media management. The focus group study conducted with students from Polish universities sought to determine whether the teaching of MM reflects these assumptions.

Methodology

The methodological foundation of this paper is embedded in the broader research project titled *Media Management: An Educational Approach. Mapping and Identifying the Needs of the Academic Community in Poland,* conducted at

the University of Warsaw in cooperation with four public universities offering courses related to media management: the University of Warsaw, Jagiellonian University, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, and Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of media management education, the project employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, enabling methodological triangulation across three research components: (1) quantitative and qualitative desk research analysing curricula, syllabi, and publicly available educational materials; (2) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with university authorities and academic staff specialising in media management; and (3) focus group interviews (FGIs) with students, designed to explore their perceptions, expectations, and educational needs. While all three components collectively form the broader project, this paper focuses exclusively on the analysis of student focus groups, which constitutes an independent and thematically coherent dataset for examining MM education from the students' perspective.

The FGIs aimed to capture how students conceptualise MM, how they evaluate its integration into university curricula, and what expectations they hold regarding their professional preparation in this field. A total of four focus groups were conducted across the participating universities, involving 24 students (seven from the University of Warsaw, six from Jagiellonian University, six from John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, and five from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin). Participants were recruited through open calls distributed within the participating academic units, and participation was voluntary. Each session lasted up to 120 minutes and followed a semi-structured scenario that encouraged reflection on students' familiarity with MM, their experiences with coursework, perceived gaps in educational offerings, and their views on the field's relevance to the contemporary media landscape.

The study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Warsaw. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the academic use of the data collected. Informed consent was obtained from every student. All focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently fully anonymised to ensure confidentiality, with personal identifiers and context-specific details removed or modified in accordance with ethical guidelines.

The primary aim of this study is to investigate how university students understand MM as an academic and professional field and how they evaluate the current state of MM education within their institutions. By analysing student focus groups, this paper aims to identify key expectations, perceived gaps in existing curricula, and areas in which educational offerings may require development or restructuring. An additional objective is to capture students' reflections on the relevance of MM competencies in the contemporary media

landscape, thereby contributing to a broader discussion of the future direction of MM education in Poland.

Despite the value of the findings presented, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is exploratory and based on a purposive sample restricted to four public universities offering media management-related courses; as such, the insights cannot be generalised to all higher education institutions in Poland. Second, the qualitative character of focus group interviews—although well suited to capturing in-depth perspectives—may be influenced by group dynamics, including the presence of more dominant participants or conformity pressures. Third, the analysis is confined to the student perspective, which, while essential, represents only a small part of the broader educational ecosystem. Finally, the findings reflect the state of MM education during the specific period in which the research was conducted and may evolve alongside institutional, technological, or labour market developments.

Analysis

Perceptions of the current state of MM education in Poland

An analysis of the focus group material revealed that students' perceptions of the current state of MM education range from appreciation for selected course components to a broader sense of structural and methodological inconsistency. While many students identified isolated examples of well-designed, engaging classes, their overall assessment suggests that the educational offer remains fragmented, uneven in quality, and insufficiently aligned with the realities of contemporary media work.

Several statements showed that students recognise the value of certain classes, typically those involving applied tasks, authentic cases, or simulations of real-life scenarios. One participant noted that even traditional lecture-based courses may offer meaningful takeaways: "At the beginning, I think that theory would be useful for introducing the topic and gaining a general understanding of it. Only then should exercises and discussion follow." Another highlighted the usefulness of assignments that required students to adopt a consumer's perspective, stating that such exercises "trained my mind to look at things from different perspectives and to help clients." Similarly, courses integrating research components were described as intellectually stimulating. However, students simultaneously pointed to a disconnect between academic studies and real-world situations: "Research is great and useful, but theoretical books that describe schematic approaches to media management seem not very credible, because we are all aware that every case is completely different and cannot simply be copied."

At the same time, students frequently underscored that these positive experiences represent exceptions rather than the norm. Many described their programmes as dominated by theoretical content, delivered without sufficient connection to industry practice. One participant described the lack of opportunities to test their professional readiness: "Of course, theory is also necessary, but I do not see the point in having all classes be theoretical. I definitely value more those classes that are practical and allow us to test ourselves and assess whether we are more suited to crisis communication or perhaps to marketing, and whether we have the psychological resilience, for example, to handle crises." In another example, a student reflected on three years of study and concluded that practical learning remained marginal: "In my opinion, after three years of study we already have a great deal of theoretical knowledge, and now we need to work more on practice (...) it would be great if there were more practice-oriented classes."

Some students emphasised that even when classes adopted an applied format, the tasks did not always reflect real organisational dynamics. Exercises such as creating fictional social media accounts or constructing hypothetical crisis scenarios were seen as valuable entry points, yet still lacked the complexity of real organisational environments: "We created fake accounts on Instagram or other social media platforms and simply learned how to run those accounts; for example, each week we were given a crisis scenario and had to present how we would handle it."

Finally, expectations formed before attending a course often contrast with students' actual experience. As one student summarised: "When I found out that we would have a course called 'Image Creation,' I was very pleased, thinking that we might learn some tools for example, how to create a virtual persona, especially since there is currently a major boom in influencers and influencers need specialists who can help them build their image. I expected the course to be conducted from that perspective. However, I was very surprised when I attended the classes, because they were carried out in such a way that the instructor first showed us a presentation, which of course contained texts, for instance, personality types according to XYZ or QR codes to scan to complete some kind of self-assessment quiz." Such remarks highlight a recurring mismatch between course titles, anticipated learning outcomes, and the eventual structure of the classes.

Overall, students perceive the current state of MM education as characterised by isolated examples of good practice within a broader structure dominated by theoretical content, limited opportunities for skill development, and inconsistencies in teaching approaches.

The gap between theory and practice

Across all focus groups, students consistently pointed to a pronounced gap between theoretical instruction and practical skill development in MM

education. Although students recognise the importance of theoretical knowledge, they emphasise that it is not sufficient on its own to understand how media organisations operate in practice or how managerial decisions are actually implemented. Participants repeatedly pointed out that education should be more closely connected to real professional contexts. As one student noted, it should focus on "how everything actually works in the media," allowing them to better understand real processes and respond to practical challenges.

Importantly, students do not question the role of theory itself. Rather, they stress that it should be more effectively combined with practice: "Theory should not be abandoned either, but there should be a clear and strong emphasis on the practical aspect." In their view, theoretical knowledge becomes valuable only when it is directly linked to concrete examples and tasks reflecting real working conditions. In the absence of such integration, theoretical knowledge remains abstract and difficult to translate into action.

The collected material also reveals a mismatch between students' expectations and their actual learning experience. Even when theoretical models were introduced, participants reported having limited opportunities to practice implementing them in ways that would reflect real project cycles. As one participant explained, they often know what the final outcome should look like, but lack the skills needed to achieve it step by step: "We had an idea of what such an advertisement should look like, but we had never learned how to actually create it and carry it through to completion in a way that would make it effective."

Although practical assignments are generally evaluated positively, they are often described as too simplified or insufficiently discussed. Students point out that projects are rarely analysed in depth, and feedback is limited, which reduces their learning value: "There was never enough time to evaluate them in depth (...) it was brief and very superficial." As a result, practical elements are often treated as additional components rather than integral parts of the learning process.

Students also stressed how hands-on work significantly increased their engagement and understanding. Activities that simulated real managerial processes—especially those involving decision-making, budgeting, or data analysis—were described as particularly valuable. One participant articulated this clearly: "For me, a workshop-oriented approach is very important... I understand management-related topics much better—how to apply models or strategies—when I can see them within a project example... when I analyse indicators... the workshop format is the most important for me, because that is where I understand the most." Experiential learning not only enhances comprehension but also cultivates the analytical competencies essential for professional practice.

Ultimately, the theory-practice gap identified by students reflects not a rejection of theoretical knowledge, but a call for curricula that more effectively combine conceptual and applied dimensions. Their observations highlight

the importance of situating theoretical frameworks within concrete, professionally relevant tasks, suggesting that stronger integration between the two domains is central to improving learning outcomes and preparing graduates for the complexities of contemporary MM.

Preferred teaching methods and learning formats

Students articulated a clear and consistent vision of the teaching methods and learning formats they consider most effective in MM education. Their expectations are strongly oriented toward practice, interaction, and active involvement in the learning process. In their view, the most valuable classes are those that allow them not only to acquire knowledge, but also to apply it in situations that resemble real professional contexts.

A recurring theme in students' statements is the importance of learning by doing, particularly through project-based work. Participants emphasised that projects are most effective when they reflect the actual stages of media processes and require decision-making similar to that found in real organisations. As one student noted, working on a project made it possible to better understand how campaigns are created and managed: "We learned from our own mistakes (...) and through this project we were able to understand how such a campaign roughly functions, how it is created, and which key points need to be checked off." This suggests that students value tasks that go beyond isolated exercises and instead mirror real organisational dynamics.

Students also expressed strong support for case-based teaching, stating that analysing real-world scenarios provides much-needed context for understanding managerial challenges. As one participant explained, "There would be a great deal of interest in classes that focus simply on studying real-life cases." Another student similarly underscored the value of collaborative problem-solving, noting that group work fosters both analytical and interpersonal skills: "Group work (...) creates opportunities for developing critical thinking (...) and for better understanding other people's points of view."

In addition to structured project and case-based activities, students stressed the importance of learning environments that promote dialogue, personalised feedback, and active participation. Smaller groups were perceived as particularly conducive to meaningful discussion. As one participant argued: "The group cannot be too large (...) the more people there are in a group, the less opportunity each individual has to make their voice heard, so it is important that groups are not overly numerous." This indicates that students value discussion-based learning rather than large-scale instruction.

Another theme emerging from the focus groups concerns the need to differentiate students based on their initial competencies and professional experience.

One participant highlighted the limitations of generic assessments and proposed more systematic approaches: "A much simpler solution would be to distribute some kind of Google form at the beginning (of the course), where we could write down what skills we already have (...), perhaps also initial tasks that would show the instructor the group's level, so that the level in the master's program would be more balanced and people would not get bored during classes."

Students also emphasised the importance of contact with practitioners, particularly in the form of workshop-based sessions. As one participant noted, this form of engagement is most effective when external guests provide practical, hands-on guidance rather than general lectures: "It would be good to have one main instructor, with guests (...) conducting sessions in a workshop-based format—more practice-oriented and engaging." Such insights reveal that students see practitioner involvement as a key bridge between academic content and contemporary industry practice.

Moreover, many participants expressed a strong desire for regular visits to media organisations and the opportunity to observe professionals in real work environments. One student described these experiences as crucial for forming realistic expectations and making informed career decisions: "Going out to organisations would be very helpful (...) as it helps create a clear picture of what working there actually looks like." Authentic exposure to industry settings is perceived not merely as an enhancement but as a core element of effective MM education.

Overall, students' expectations point to a clear preference for teaching methods that combine practical experience, collaboration, and active problem-solving. Rather than passive participation, they expect educational formats that reflect the complexity of the media environment and support the development of competencies relevant to future professional work.

Expectations regarding gained competencies and professional preparation

Students' statements clearly indicate that they expect an education that genuinely prepares them for professional work. They emphasise the importance of developing practical competencies that enable independent action in real professional situations and confident engagement with media organisations. In their view, theory should play a supportive rather than a dominant role—it becomes valuable only when it is directly linked to application. As one participant noted, "it should be more practical than theoretical education (...) not necessarily learning only theory, but practice—how everything actually works in the media." At the same time, students emphasised that theory should not be abandoned, but consistently integrated with practical exercises: "There definitely needs to be a strong emphasis on the practical aspect."

Expectations regarding the practical dimension of education primarily include project-based work, learning by doing, and case-based analysis. Students pointed out that "studying these examples is valuable because different people often come up with ideas that are not obvious but are very effective." Students also clearly prefer teamwork, which fosters critical thinking, understanding others' perspectives, and the ability to function within organisational structures.

Another important area concerned the development of analytical and business competencies. Students clearly indicated the need for stronger preparation in working with data, performance indicators, and budgets, as well as a basic understanding of economic mechanisms. As one participant noted, "I would like to have more classes related to economics and mathematics, because media always involve money, (...) numbers, and we have to work with them." At the same time, students pointed out that the most valuable learning situations are those in which they can independently analyse data and draw conclusions.

An important expectation also concerns the acquisition of technological and tool-based competencies, covering both the use of office software and more advanced tools for project management, content creation, and data analysis: "I was missing skills like handling Excel and various Office programs in the context of marketing." Particular emphasis was placed on the practical use of artificial intelligence, perceived not as a threat but as a resource: "learning how to work in a way where artificial intelligence cooperates with us rather than replaces us."

Interpersonal competencies, such as communication, teamwork, coping with stress, and decision-making under pressure, were also identified as important elements of professional preparation. Some participants emphasised that media management is emotionally and situationally demanding work, and that university studies only marginally prepare students for these challenges.

Students' reflections also clearly reveal a need for a strong orientation toward the labour market, including knowledge of professional roles, organisational structures, and real processes operating in the media. Many emphasised that direct exposure to the professional environment is crucial for making informed career decisions. Consequently, opportunities for contact with practitioners and experience working under real-world conditions were rated particularly highly. There was also a strong demand for classes conducted outside the university, within actual media institutions: "going out to organisations would be very helpful (...) to see what this work is really about in a real professional environment, not only in an academic one." Students stressed that regular visits to newsrooms, television stations, radio broadcasters, or media agencies allow them to "see the profession from the inside" and gain insight into their own professional aptitudes.

Overall, students clearly expect degree programs not only to transmit knowledge but also to develop a set of competencies that enable a smooth transition

into the labour market, informed career decision-making, and an understanding of the real mechanisms that shape the functioning of contemporary media.

The profile of instructors and external experts

The profiles of instructors and the nature of invited external experts are among the key factors influencing the quality of MM education. Participants consistently distinguish between courses conducted by academics with predominantly theoretical backgrounds and those led by practitioners actively working in the media or marketing industries. In most cases, it is the latter that are perceived as more engaging, credible, and useful from the perspective of future professional work.

Students emphasise that practitioners do not limit themselves to presenting theoretical concepts, but illustrate them with examples drawn directly from their own professional experience. As one participant noted, such classes provide not only knowledge, but also practical guidance on how to operate in the media environment, "the instructor gave us really good tips on how to communicate with journalists and what to do so that they actually want to use the message that is important to us. (...) She gave us very constructive criticism about what we should change if we truly want to reach the media." This type of feedback was perceived as particularly valuable, as it could be immediately applied in practice. Another student pointed out: "these are people who actually do what they teach (...) I personally feel respect for such an instructor, knowing that they really understand what they are doing."

At the same time, courses taught by individuals without professional experience were often perceived as less engaging and detached from the realities of media work. According to students, such classes frequently focused on the transmission of theoretical knowledge or repeated content already covered elsewhere, which led to a sense of redundancy and limited their practical usefulness: "There was so much theory that there was no time left to really go deeper into management and into specific industries."

Courses that involved external experts or included elements of direct contact with the industry, such as study visits, were particularly valued. Meetings with practitioners representing different sectors of the media market (including large organisations, cultural institutions, or independent creators) allowed students to better understand the diversity of professional roles and working models. As one participant explained, such experiences make it possible to observe how theoretical knowledge translates into actual practice: "We were drawn into participating in a medical conference (...), we could see what organising a conference looks like on site (...), we were told what to expect (...), it was really great! I probably wouldn't have paid attention to ads on staircases or in elevators, or to the fact

that an advertisement can be a Wi-Fi password named after a drug, which makes people remember it. It was shown in practice, and I learned a lot from that visit."

Students also emphasised that direct exposure to professional environments plays an important role in shaping their career decisions. While university courses provide a range of competencies, it is only through contact with real organisations that students are able to assess where they see themselves in the future and what type of work suits them best. As one participant noted: "going out to organisations would be very helpful, because in practice we learn many skills during our studies, but when it comes to finding a job, we start wondering where we would fit, what we would like, what we would do, where we would perform well, and what such work actually looks like." At the same time, respondents pointed out that such forms of engagement are still relatively rare and are treated as an addition rather than a regular component of study programmes. In their view, contact with the industry should be more systematic and embedded in the curriculum. Some students explicitly suggested that such activities should take place on a regular basis: "it would be necessary to go out every week (...) to see what this work is really about."

Overall, the findings indicate that students expect a teaching model that goes beyond the transmission of knowledge and is more strongly oriented toward practice. The role of instructors and external experts is therefore not limited to providing information but includes facilitating the development of practical competencies and supporting students in their transition to the labour market.

Discussion

The results of this study point to a coherent and recurrent narrative in how students at Polish higher education institutions perceive education in media management. This narrative is centred on the tension between a predominantly theory-driven educational model and expectations of teaching that is more strongly oriented toward practice and the development of practical skills. While theoretical content is not questioned as such, its current dominance and fragmented character are perceived as problematic, particularly in the context of preparing students for work in contemporary media organisations.

Students consistently point out that theoretical knowledge, when detached from practice, becomes difficult to apply and loses its relevance in a dynamically changing media environment. In their view, theory gains value mainly when it is embedded in practical activities, such as case-based analysis, project-based learning, or decision-making simulations. The students' views are fully consistent with what Hoag, Brickley, and Cawley observed in their research: "students want relevance, current information, and hands-on experience" (as cited in Förster & Rohn, 2015, p. 370).

The collected material also indicates that students clearly prefer workshop-based formats, which allow them to test theoretical assumptions in practice and better understand how media processes function in real organisational settings. The results obtained in this study are consistent with broader findings in education research, which highlight the gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical application (Eraut, 2004; Billett & Choy, 2011; Gosling, 2021). As shown in previous studies, knowledge becomes meaningful primarily through its use in practice and reflection on experience. In this context, Kolb's experiential learning model (1984) provides a useful framework, as it emphasises the importance of learning through action and reflection.

Students' preferences regarding teaching methods, such as project-based learning, workshops, case-based analysis, and small-group work, further reinforce this analysis. They can also be interpreted in the context of research on active and experiential learning, which indicates that a deeper understanding of a subject emerges when learners are required to solve problems and make decisions (Prince, 2004; Zhang & Ramli, 2025). Respondents stress that learning is most effective when it reflects real professional processes, including decision-making, teamwork, collaborative tasks, and operating under conditions of uncertainty. Tasks that allow learning from mistakes and provide in-depth feedback are particularly valued. At the same time, participants note that feedback is often insufficient or superficial, revealing a significant didactic gap. The absence of systematic reflection and analysis of decision-making processes means that even practice-oriented classes lose a substantial part of their educational potential.

Another important finding concerns the range of competencies that students expect to develop during their studies. In addition to creative and communication skills, respondents clearly emphasise the need to cultivate analytical, economic, and technological competencies. These include, among others, working with budgets, analysing data and using basic tools that support decision-making processes in media organisations (e.g., spreadsheets). A strong emphasis on analytical, technological, and economic competencies can be explained by labour market expectations, in which graduates are increasingly required to combine domain-specific knowledge with the ability to use data in a practical and informed manner (Ghodoosi et al., 2023; Amish, 2024). The identified deficit in this area suggests a mismatch between existing curricula and the actual expectations of the labour market. Students are aware that media management is strongly data-driven and economically grounded, which is not always sufficiently reflected in educational programmes.

The study also highlights the importance of instructor profiles. Courses taught by practitioners are consistently evaluated as more credible, engaging, and useful, mainly because they are based on real professional experience and provide up-to-date knowledge about the media market. This observation is in

line with research on vocational education, which indicates that contact with industry practitioners increases both the credibility and practical relevance of teaching (Popli & Singh, 2024; Selamat, 2025). At the same time, students do not reject academic teaching itself, but rather point to the need for stronger integration between theoretical knowledge and professional practice. This suggests that the key challenge is not choosing between theory and practice, but combining them more coherently.

Finally, students strongly emphasise the need for regular contact with the professional environment. Study visits, off-campus classes, and cooperation with industry partners are perceived as particularly valuable, as they allow students to better understand the realities of media work and make more informed career decisions. The expectation of closer links with industry indicates the growing importance of education focused on future employer expectations, which in turn increases the likelihood of employment and supports smoother transitions from the academic environment to the labour market (Ferns et al., 2016; Mabungela et al., 2024; Vlachopoulos & Tsitiridou, 2026). Although such initiatives do exist, they are still relatively rare and not systematically embedded in study programmes.

To sum up, improving the quality of media management education requires a shift from a predominantly theory-oriented model toward a more integrated, competency-based approach. Such an approach should combine theoretical knowledge with practical application, while also taking into account the growing importance of analytical and technological skills. This would not only address students' expectations, but also better reflect the realities of the contemporary media market.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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Determinants of the Media Product Management Process from the Perspective of Technological Innovation

ABSTRACT

In contemporary media ecosystems, the media product is increasingly shaped by a constellation of interdependent technological and infrastructural determinants that transform its form, internal logic, and managerial practices within media organizations. Technological processes—rather than content itself or classical media logics—now constitute the primary determinants of the media product. As a result, its definition has shifted towards an understanding of the product as an integrated configuration of content, functions, metadata, and user experience. Market success is thus conditioned by technological architecture, data quality, and organizational efficiency, which collectively determine content visibility and underpin revenue stability. The aim of this article is to identify and synthetically conceptualize the key technological determinants that shape the processes of creating and managing media products in media enterprises. The analysis is grounded in a critical interpretation of dominant theoretical frameworks and empirical findings in the scholarly literature, enabling the identification of key trends and their positioning within the broader context of ongoing technological transformations. The focus is placed not on the evolution of genres or formats, but on the functional and managerial logic of the media product within an environment characterized by deep technological restructuring. From a historical perspective, the article traces the transition from monolithic, single-channel offerings to modular, multi-platform product architectures, highlighting the increasing importance of platformization, content aggregation, and metadata systems as structural factors determining visibility and demand. The discussion further explores the implications of datafication, transformations in CMS architectures, and the rise of personalization and recommendation mechanisms as key tools for structuring product-portfolio management. The inductive reasoning employed in the analysis makes it possible to identify trends that either already dominate the market or are likely to become dominant in the near future: (1) the increasing strategic importance of data and metadata management across the entire value chain; (2) the emergence of AI as an operational environment for content production, distribution, and optimization; (3) the redefinition of audience relations, including

Suggested citation: Świerczyńska-Głownia, W. (2026). Determinants of the Media Product Management Process from the Perspective of Technological Innovation. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 65–78. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.05
Submitted: 17.10.2025 Accepted: 21.02.2026

a renewed emphasis on subscription-based and direct-to-consumer models; and; (4) the potential resurgence of integrated content implementations in contexts where quality control and user experience constitute key competitive differentiators. The article contributes to the systematization of technological determinants in media product management and outlines directions for further research concerning their implications for editorial strategies, system architectures, and monetization models.

KEYWORDS: media product, media market transformation, media management, technological innovation

STRESZCZENIE

Determinanty procesu zarzadzania produktem medialnym w perspektywie innowacji technologicznych/ produktowych

Współczesny produkt medialny jest w coraz większym stopniu kształtowany przez zestaw współdziałających determinant technologiczno-infrastrukturalnych, które zmieniają zarówno formę i logikę produktu, jak i sposoby zarządzania nim w organizacjach medialnych. Obecnie to właśnie procesy technologiczne – a nie sama treść czy klasyczne logiki medialne – stały się kluczowymi determinantami produktu medialnego, przesuwając jego definicję w stronę postrzegania go jako układu treści, funkcji, metadanych i doświadczenia użytkownika, gdzie sukces rynkowy warunkowany jest przez architekturę technologiczną, jakość danych i sprawność organizacyjną, które razem wyznaczają widoczność treści i decydują o stabilności przychodów. Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja i syntetyczny opis kluczowych technologicznych determinant kształtujących proces tworzenia i zarządzania produktami medialnymi w przedsiębiorstwach medialnych. Przedstawiona analiza została zbudowana na podstawie interpretacji dominujących ujęć teoretycznych i wyników badań prezentowanych w literaturze przedmiotu, co pozwoliło na wyodrębnienie kluczowych tendencji i ich osadzenie w szerszym kontekście przemian technologicznych. Analiza ogniskuje się nie na ewolucji gatunków i formatów, lecz na funkcjonalno-zarządczej logice produktu w środowisku głębokiej transformacji technologicznej. W ujęciu historycznym szkicowane są przejścia od monolitycznych ofert jednokanałowych do modularnych i wieloplatformowych rozwiązań, z naciskiem na rolę platformizacji, agregatorów treści i metadanych jako elementu warunkującego widoczność i popyt. Omówione zostały konsekwencje datafikacji, zmian w architekturach CMS oraz personalizacji i rekomendacji jako mechanizmów porządkujących zarządzanie portfelem produktów. Zastosowane wnioskowanie indukcyjne pozwoliło na wyodrębnienie trendów, które bądź już dominują na rynku, bądź w najbliższej przyszłości zdominują praktyki rynkowe: (1) rosnące znaczenie zarządzania danymi i metadanymi w całym łańcuchu wartości, (2) AI-jako środowisko dla produkcji, dystrybucji i optymalizacji treści, (3) redefinicję relacji z odbiorcą (powrót do modeli subskrypcyjnych

i bezpośrednich więzi), oraz (4) możliwy renesans zintegrowanych implementacji treści tam, gdzie kontrola jakości i doświadczenia użytkownika staje się strategicznym wyróżnikiem. Artykuł stanowi krok ku systematyzacji determinant technologicznych w zarządzaniu produktem medialnym i wskazuje kierunki dalszych badań nad ich wpływem na strategie redakcyjne, architektury systemowe oraz modele monetyzacji.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: produkt medialny, transformacja rynku mediów, zarządzanie mediami, innowacja

Introduction

Over the past decades, the media market has undergone significant transformations, compelling media organizations to implement changes across virtually all areas of their operations, including the design and delivery of media products. Although the drivers of this transformation are heterogeneous, they all—directly or indirectly—pertain to technological innovation and its impact, shaping both the behavior of market actors and the rules governing the media industry. While scholarship on the technological transformation of the media market is already well established, it should be emphasized that the study of technological media innovations constitutes a relatively new field of research (Ibrus, 2024, p. 43). This field is characterised by interdisciplinarity, integrating concepts from innovation economics, media economics, and the broader fields of media and cultural studies. The present contribution situates itself within this body of research.

The analysis proceeds from the premise that changes in media products stem from technological determinants that influence value-creation logics, product architectures, and market relationships among producers, platforms, and audiences. Here, *determinants* are understood in functional terms as key systemic factors that, taken together, structure both the form and internal logic of the contemporary media product and the practical modalities of product management within media organisations. The objective is to articulate a theoretical framework that synthesises existing perspectives and reconstructs the trajectories of change—from monolithic, single-channel offerings, through phases of convergence and platformization, to the integration of technological infrastructures enabling the production and distribution of content. In this sense, the study identifies salient patterns and inflexion points in trends and innovations that are reorienting media products toward modular, multiplatform configurations and management models that are increasingly data- and technology-driven, while reinforcing direct relationships with audiences.

The section that follows systematises the conceptual frameworks that structure the analysis and enable the derivation of implications for media product

management. The discussion is anchored in the traditions of media economics, wherein products are conceived as elements of a portfolio governed by the logics of scale, scope, and diversification. Historically, the field has witnessed a shift from monolithic offerings (a single title or channel) to multiplatform portfolios and transnational competition, necessitating changes in planning practices and the allocation of product-related resources. This perspective provides the basis for distinguishing between single-channel products and multi-channel configurations and for analysing cross-media market entry decisions. A second framework is the theory of product platforms and modularity, according to which products are assembled from subsystems and interfaces into standardised architectures that enable the rapid generation of variants and cost reduction. In the media industries, this has translated into the replacement of "monolithic" solutions with modular ones and, subsequently, into the strategic planning of product families organised around shared components. In the present account, modularity functions as a mediating variable linking technological determinants to the flexibility of product portfolio development. Equally salient are the processes of platformization and the associated phenomenon of datafication. From this perspective, media products operate within ecosystems in which metadata (describing content) and user data (describing consumption) condition the availability, personalisation, and monetisation of content. The standardisation of metadata by aggregators reconfigures the logic of value creation: not only the content itself, but also the description and structure of metadata associated with that content, determine visibility and distributional effectiveness. This framework clarifies why contemporary product management necessarily encompasses data stewardship and content taxonomy governance. In the technological dimension, the analysis highlights the evolution of CMS architectures: from monolithic systems, through headless solutions, to AI-enhanced tools that support planning, content selection, personalisation, moderation, and format optimisation. Particular attention is given to the emerging tendency toward a "return" to full-stack solutions, in which control over user experience and quality becomes a strategic differentiator. This development is interpreted as a rational response to dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of distribution through content aggregator channels and to the growing importance of quality in subscription-based business models.

The broader discussion adopts an innovation-oriented perspective. As highlighted in the literature (Mroczko, 2014, p. 175), the concept of innovation is interpreted relatively broadly by scholars in the field, and there is no single, universally accepted definition. Moreover, since the emergence of innovation studies in the second half of the twentieth century, the meaning of the term has evolved from relatively simple explanations to multidimensional frameworks that closely mirror business practice. Given the aims of this study, it is therefore appropriate to elaborate on the notion of *product innovation*. As

Richard A. Gershon notes (2013, p. 302 ff.), the term refers to a complex process encompassing the introduction of new products and services to the market, as well as the improvement of existing ones. This process has become one of the defining trends in the contemporary media landscape. In the present discussion, which focuses on the evolution of media products, the article adopts the position articulated by J. Sixto-García and X. López-García (2025, p. 67), who argue that media innovation should be understood as an interconnected, interdependent process spanning both media technologies and media practices. From this perspective, media innovation constitutes an interdisciplinary field, and its dynamics explain the transition from monomedia products to multiplatform, data-driven, and AI-assisted configurations. This conceptual framework is applied here to interpret trajectories of change and to identify critical turning points, such as the emergence of streaming platforms and the widespread adoption of recommendation systems.

For the purposes of this discussion, a literature review was conducted covering the years 2005–2025, using the Web of Science and Scopus databases. The primary search terms were "media product" and "product management." A relevance-based selection process—conducted through an analysis of keywords and abstracts—allowed for the identification of publications that constituted the corpus for qualitative analysis. The review of the available scholarship indicates that the nature of the media product is conceptualized, within the scope of this study, through at least four main paradigmatic lenses: (1) media economics and media management, (2) media theory and intermediality (the ontology of the media product), (3) platformization and datafication (the product as data and metadata), and (4) innovation and organizational studies (the role of product management and system architectures). Within the tradition of media economics and media management, representative works include, among others, those by A.A. Reca (2006), R.G. Picard (2005; 2011), C. Royal, A. Bright et al. (2020), B.W. Wirtz (2020), A.B. Albarran (2010; 2024), and G. Doyle (2013; 2024). From an ontological perspective, recent contributions of particular significance include those by L. Elleström (2021), E. Timplalexi (2023), and S. Pitoňáková (2023). In the domain of platformization and datafication, representative examples include studies by M. Medina, A. Sánchez-Tabernero, and A. Arrese (2016), T. Hess (2005), and D. Nieborg, T. Poell, and M. Deuze (2019).

Finally, research aligned with the paradigm of innovation and product management encompasses works such as those by S. Pérez-Seijo and A. Silva-Rodríguez (2024), F. Harbers, S. Banjac, and S.A. Eldridge (2024), R. Alibakhshi and C.S. Srivastava (2020), A. Breiter and A. Hepp (2018), P. Ballon (2014), A.H. Krumsvik, S. Milan, N.N. Bhroin, and T. Storsul (2019), as well as M. Villi and R.G. Picard (2019).

Determinants of Media Product Transformation

From a historical perspective, it is important to note that media enterprises traditionally concentrated on producing a single product: newspaper publishers typically published one newspaper title, and radio broadcasters operated a single transmission channel. The expansion of available media products occurred primarily through the replication of the original product—for instance, a publisher would acquire or establish a newsroom in a different city, while a radio company would launch an additional channel (Picard, 2005, p. 1). Each segment of the media industry—press, followed by the radio, and later television—constituted an integral and relatively self-contained market. The first major trend that, although not technological in itself, nevertheless enabled various forms of diffusion—including technological diffusion—across previously separate media markets was the transformation of market structures and organizational models at the end of the twentieth century. This process, accompanied by the international expansion of media corporations into emerging markets, led to a rapid increase in the number of media outlets operating within national markets. Consequently, audiences gained access to a broader array of press titles, radio stations, television channels, and other products generated by media organizations. Whereas media enterprises had traditionally sought to create products appealing to broad audiences (i.e., mass media), the emergence of a more competitive market environment forced them to make substantial efforts to differentiate their products. As a result, media organizations increasingly focused on expanding their portfolios through the development of niche media products that, on the one hand, were more likely to endure in highly competitive environments and, on the other, strengthened organizational competitiveness by fragmenting the product portfolio and thereby broadening the target audience base. A defining feature of these early differentiated media products was their monolithic nature: they were conceived, developed, and produced as single, self-contained units.

The fundamental change that influenced the transformation of media products was the digital revolution. As a consequence of this revolution, newly available technological solutions introduced significant challenges for media organizations in both the production and distribution of media products. Market changes—particularly industry consolidation and the process of convergence—prompted media companies to intensify, on an unprecedented scale, the expansion of their product portfolios in order to gain a competitive advantage through economies of scale and scope. A key distinguishing feature of this expansion, compared with earlier forms of diversification, was its exogenous character relative to media firms' core activities. Media enterprises expanded their primary product operations by developing cross-media portfolios, thereby extending their offerings into other media sectors. These new

products differed fundamentally from those previously offered, compelling organisations to revise their operational philosophy regarding content provision and to expand and develop their creative resources. Media products no longer possessed a monolithic character; instead, they evolved toward interactive forms. Consequently, media strategies shifted away from producing single products intended for distribution within a specific media sector and organizational context, toward designing products for multiplatform dissemination. Furthermore, as boundaries between media sectors blurred and global multimedia conglomerates grew in influence, media markets became increasingly shaped by multidimensional competition—manifested in simultaneous rivalry across multiple media industries as well as across multiple national markets. As a result, media companies seeking to build or maintain a competitive advantage were required to deliver products tailored to the needs of transnational audiences. Media products thus had to meet the expectations of recipients from diverse national (and at times cultural) backgrounds by appealing to universal values and accommodating broadly shared preferences. In this context, it is important to note that these transformations also altered how target groups are identified and defined. The technological revolution enabled a departure from audience segmentation based on traditional demographic variables (such as age or location) and encouraged an orientation toward audience attitudes and media consumption patterns. Thus, media products—previously designed for the press, radio, or television, and targeting users defined by demographic characteristics—were reconceptualized as multimedia products distributed across multiple platforms and intended for audiences differentiated according to individual preferences.

Another determinant of the shape and form of media products was the development of media platforms. Within the broader context of media product evolution, two elements are particularly relevant: content creation and content distribution. In this regard, it is instructive to refer to the work of T. Hess (as cited in Picard, 2005, p. 119), who argues that product platforms support the planning and implementation of complex products and production concepts, and that their operational logic is fundamentally modular. They may be compared to a construction set that enables the creation of a diversified offering by combining modular products assembled according to a defined product architecture. Within this framework, Marc H. Meyer and Alvin P. Lehnerd (1997, p. 210) define a product platform as "a set of subsystems and interfaces forming a common structure from which a stream of derivative products can be efficiently developed and produced." The adoption of multifunctional modules in media products has been enabled by innovative technological solutions that unify product architectures. Although such practices raised concerns regarding the artistic and original qualities of media products, the benefits of increased production efficiency and reduced production costs strongly incentivized

media organizations to adopt modular approaches. As a result, monolithic approaches were successfully replaced by modular architectures, in which platform-based concepts foreground similarities among products and processes while rejecting the assumption that a company's products and technologies are independent elements (Świerczyńska-Głownia, 2025, p. 150).

Within the present analysis, the impact of technological transformation on content distribution must also be emphasized. In the era of analogue media, distribution occurred through traditional carriers such as radio receivers, television sets, or printed newspapers. Digitization fundamentally altered these practices, shifting media consumption from a push to a pull model. Although this observation is well documented in the literature, what is particularly noteworthy in this context is the role of new actors. The emergence and consolidation of streaming platforms and the subsequent aggregation of streaming services constitute yet another catalyst for change. While it is widely acknowledged that content aggregators have reshaped market structures (Kreft, 2016), it is equally important to underline that their operational logic has had significant implications for media products themselves. In essence, aggregators transform (and increasingly homogenize) the format of media content supplied by individual providers. This occurs through metadata standardisation (Świerczyńska-Głownia, 2023, p. 206), which enables, among other things, personalized content recommendations and, most importantly, automated searches for content that matches user profiles. As a result, in the age of content aggregation, it is not the content itself but its metadata that constitutes the core element of a media product and determines its market success. Metadata shapes the processes of sorting, organizing, and presenting content within aggregators, which in turn influence the user experience by offering standardised access to diverse content. In light of the above, it is essential to address the notion of "datafication" (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 3). As Andreas Hepp and Andreas Breiter (2018, p. 387) argue, a defining feature of deep mediatization is the continuous collection, storage, and aggregation of increasing quantities of user data, particularly in the media domain, to facilitate the targeted distribution of both media products and advertising. The foundation of this process lies in the "digital traces" that users generate during their activities in digital environments.

The development of platforms that enable multichannel distribution also introduced a new paradigm in content management practices. As media organisations underwent digital transformation, the number of channels, platforms, and devices through which content providers could reach audiences expanded continuously, accompanied by increasing diversification and fragmentation. Consequently, user interactions with digital media became increasingly fluid and variable (3 Reasons...). Traditional monolithic CMS systems—which integrated the frontend (the user-facing component) and the backend (the content-management layer) into a single environment, thereby tightly coupling content

management with content presentation—became insufficient (Stasiak, 2024). Owing to their operational logic, monolithic CMS systems offered limited flexibility; even minor interface modifications or the introduction of new features often required system-wide changes, while the possibilities for technological integration and personalisation remained constrained. As a result, monolithic systems proved time-consuming to modify and slowed innovation, ultimately acting as a barrier to development in a platform-driven media ecosystem.

This situation contributed to the rise of the Headless CMS model—an architecture in which the frontend ("head," the layer visible to users) is fully decoupled from the backend ("body," where content resides) (Headless...). Such an architecture enabled the use of any tools for designing user interfaces, independently of backend operations. A Headless CMS operates as an autonomous content management system, delivering content via an API to multiple platforms, including websites, mobile applications, IoT devices, and even chatbots (Bratslavsky, 2024). This facilitated multichannel content distribution by enabling seamless delivery across websites, mobile environments, and social media platforms while ensuring a consistent user experience across devices. Furthermore, headless architectures improved performance, reduced page-load times, and supported rapid updates and real-time content changes. They also enabled advanced models of content structuring and modelling, which are crucial for managing large volumes of content.

Given these advantages, the increasing interest of media companies in the Headless CMS concept appeared entirely justified. However, practice demonstrated that the model did not withstand the test of time. Several factors contributed to this shift, the most significant of which was the rapid development of artificial intelligence environments and tools. Early AI applications included automated content scheduling, simple algorithmic recommendations, and basic data analysis—capabilities that already improved operational efficiency and enhanced understanding of audience preferences. Today, advanced AI tools are fundamentally reshaping the operational foundations of media organizations, particularly in the areas of personalisation, content selection, and moderation (Kniazhina & Davis, 2024). In the domain of personalized content delivery, AI systems analyze user data and behavioral patterns to provide content tailored to individual preferences, thereby helping media companies strengthen audience engagement. AI enables more personalized user experiences, contributing to higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty. Moreover, AI tools optimize content for different platforms and devices used for content consumption. By evaluating user behavior and preferences, AI systems can recommend optimal formats, lengths, and styles for content distributed across social media, mobile platforms, and television (Chazen, 2024). This allows media companies to expand audience reach and increase engagement. In practical terms, AI frees organizational resources by automating tasks previously performed by editorial

teams, while simultaneously reshaping user expectations and placing greater emphasis on quality as a core differentiator.

Another factor contributing to the decline in Headless CMS adoption was growing dissatisfaction among content providers with the functionality and effectiveness of aggregators in generating visibility and traffic. Initially, many media companies viewed cooperation with distribution platforms as an opportunity to reach broader audiences; however, over time, it became evident that aggregator-based models relegated them to the role of content suppliers with limited control over recommendation algorithms and platform-level content prioritization. While this process is complex and multidimensional, it is presented here in a simplified form to preserve conceptual clarity.

In response, media companies began seeking solutions that would restore control over the entire content creation and delivery chain while enabling them to rebuild direct relationships with audiences, hence the renewed shift toward subscription-based financing models (Doyle, 2024).

In the age of artificial intelligence, media enterprises increasingly prioritize direct relationships with audiences, in which both content quality and the user experience serve as strategic competitive differentiators. As a result, product management has become a critically important organizational capability. This trend has contributed to a return to monolithicor "full-stack"—implementations that integrate all elements of content management into cohesive, organization-controlled systems.

Conclusions

In summary, as demonstrated in this study, the ongoing technological transformation of the media market entails fundamental changes in both the nature of media products and the ways they are managed. The digitalization of the market, processes of convergence and platformization, and the subsequent development of artificial intelligence tools and environments have led media products to evolve from compact, integrated artistic creations closely tied to a specific broadcaster, toward content whose defining components are metadata. Metadata not only enables the creation and modularization of content through recommendation systems, but also shapes its visibility and accessibility to users. In parallel with these developments, the management of media products has also undergone a significant transformation. The analysis presented here allows us to anticipate the key tendencies that will dominate media operations in the near future. Above all, market success will depend on the ability to manage diverse types and sets of data effectively. This capability may foster both the re-emergence of monolithic content-organization models and the expansion of editorial environments supported by AI-driven tools. Inductive reasoning

applied in the study reveals four major trends expected to shape future market practices among media organizations.

First, there is a growing importance of data and metadata management across the entire content value chain—from conceptual design and production processes to distribution and monetisation. Data are emerging as a critical asset that determines visibility, personalisation, and content effectiveness, while serving as the foundation for building competitive advantage. For media organizations, this implies the need to develop analytical capabilities, integrate disparate data repositories, and implement tools that support real-time data processing.

Second, the role of artificial intelligence is becoming firmly established as an infrastructural layer for content production, distribution, and optimisation. AI is no longer merely a supporting tool but has become a critical component—the technological core enabling the automation of editorial processes, content recommendations, dynamic resource allocation, and the prediction of audience behaviors. This points to an ongoing "algorithmization" of content management, which may ultimately give rise to new editorial workflows and redefine the role of content creators.

Third, in response to intensifying platform competition, the relationship between media organisations and audiences is being redefined. Subscription-based models and direct, long-term relationships are gaining strategic importance. The audience is no longer a passive, anonymous consumer but an active participant in a relationship grounded in trust, predictability, and reciprocal value. The return to subscription-based models signals a shift from mass distribution toward personalized experiences and the design of service ecosystems centered on loyalty and recurring engagement.

Fourth, the growing importance of content quality and user experience suggests the emergence of a renaissance of integrated content implementations, especially in market segments where control over the entire process—from production to delivery—becomes a key competitive differentiator. This may lead to a departure from highly atomized distribution models and a return to more cohesive, monolithic content management structures that offer stability, predictability, and superior user experience. This trend may coexist with the accelerated development of AI-driven editorial environments, resulting in hybrid content management models that combine human creativity, process automation, and the quality control characteristic of integrated systems.

This article does not exhaust the complexity of the topic; rather, it constitutes a step toward a deeper exploration of the technological transformation of media products and proposes avenues for further research. It also represents an effort to systematize technological determinants in media product management and to indicate directions in which their influence on editorial strategies, system architectures, and monetisation models is likely to become increasingly significant.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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News Media (R)evolution in Poland 2016–2025: New Mainstream of (Big) AI Ecosystems

ABSTRACT

The highly competitive media environment in Poland is characterized by an evolution from so-called traditional broadcast media and social media toward the mainstream of AI ecosystems (within "AI media"), dominated by Big AI. In Poland, the shift in audience attention from broadcast media to broadly defined online media is accompanied by an erosion of the importance of social media and its fragmentation, as well as by integration driven by the largest AI ecosystems, which have recently been leveraging AI-generated summaries and other news-related functionalities. The loss of strategic autonomy within these ecosystems poses existential challenges for news media publishers, compounded by a crisis in their market relevance (defined by negative CAGR results), declining trust in news media and journalists, increasing news avoidance, and decreasing traffic to their websites and applications.

KEYWORDS: media capture, media management, AI, media capture, media ecosystem, mainstream media

STRESZCZENIE

(R)ewolucja mediów informacyjnych w Polsce 2016–2025. Nowy mainstream ekosystemów (Big) AI

Wysoko konkurencyjne środowisko mediów w Polsce charakteryzuje się ewolucją od tzw. tradycyjnych mediów nadawczych i mediów społecznościowych jako mainstreamu ku mainstreamowi ekosystemów AI (w ramach „mediów AI"), zdominowanemu przez Big AI. Przepływowi zainteresowania odbiorców z mediów nadawczych do szeroko pojętych mediów on-line towarzyszy w Polsce erozja znaczenia i fragmentacja social mediów oraz integracja przez największe „ekosystemy AI" wykorzystujące ostatnio podsumowania AI i inne funkcje związane z wiadomościami. Utrata w tych ekosystemach strategicznej samodzielności stawia przed wydawcami mediów informacyjnych egzystencjalne wyzwania pogłębiane przez kryzys ich rynkowego znaczenia (definiowany ujemnymi wynikami CAGR), spadek zaufania do news media i dziennikarzy

Suggested citation: Kreft, J. (2026). News Media (R)evolution in Poland 2016–2025: New Mainstream of (Big AI) Ecosystems. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 79–91. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.06
Submitted: 29.10.2025 Accepted: 13.01.2026

oraz unikanie informacji i zmniejszenie ruchu na ich stronach internetowych (i w ich aplikacjach).

SŁOWA KLUCZE: przechwycenie mediów, zarządzanie mediami, sztuczna inteligencja, ekosystem mediów, media mainstreamowe

Introduction

The publication focuses on changes in news consumption and distribution as well as on the advertising market. The aim of the analysis presented is to provide a theoretical synthesis of these changes, taking into account the complexity of technological and market processes and, to a lesser extent, social ones. The concept of "media capture" (e.g., Nechushtai, 2018) is adopted as the analytical lens.

The publication adopts the following assumptions (including terminological ones):

1. the term "ecosystem" (Birch & Bronson, 2022) is replacing the term "platform."—This applies primarily to Big Tech companies, which are not only, or even primarily, digital platforms but heterogeneous ecosystems consisting of users, assemblages of technical devices, platforms, developers, payment systems, etc., as well as legal agreements, rights, claims, standards, and so on.
2. AI is not a technological term in this ecosystem but a "set of technological arrangements and socio-technical practices as well as an ideology" (Raley & Rhee 2023, pp. 188–189).
3. AI media—a term emphasizing the convergence of media and AI, and the role of media as part of the emerging AI ecosystem, with platformization, data, algorithm—based automation, machine learning, deep learning, personalization, and chatbots (Feher, 2024).
4. Mainstream—"mainstream media are large, institutionalized news organizations characterized by professional journalism, wide reach, and adherence to dominant norms of news production" (Holt et al., 2019).

This theoretical study adopts a method of theoretical synthesis, in which the literature review process is not an end in itself but rather a source material from which an updated theoretical framework is developed (e.g., Pound & Campbell, 2015). This involves the iterative mapping of concepts onto current AI-driven phenomena and the identification of areas in which existing theories and practices fall short or require extension. Emphasis is placed on theoretical depth and a diversity of perspectives. The method is also complemented by secondary analysis (desk research). The study also draws on authoritative industry sources that may not yet be fully reflected in the academic literature, including research conducted by PwC and the Reuters Institute (2015–2025).

Evolution of the main sources of information in Poland

With the growing access of Polish households to the internet (95.9% in 2024 compared with 68% ten years earlier; GUS, 2025), it became the main source of information (77% in 2025), including social media, which for the first time equaled television in this respect (both reaching 54%) (Newman, 2025). The press was a source of news for 10% of respondents in 2025 (down from 25% in 2015). This was a lower level than TikTok (11%) and similar to podcasts (9%) (Table 1).

In 2025, 7% of users in Poland used AI chatbots as a source of news, one of the highest rates in Europe (alongside Switzerland). This new access channel and source of information complements and gradually displaces previously dominant online channels, especially non-AI-supported search engines, which in 2017 were the main (62%) news gatekeeper in Poland—the highest level among all markets studied by the Reuters Institute in 2017.

Table 1. Main sources of news in Poland, 2016–2025

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Online (overall)	82	87	86	86	87	84	80	77	72	77
TV	80	78	77	76	75	70	59	56	54	54
Social media (overall)	58	58	59	60	66	59	55	50	48	54
Facebook	50	53	54	61	65	55	49	48	42	40
YouTube	31	32	37	39	36	35	33	30	31	32
Messenger	-	10	13	22	24	25	21	19	15	13
Instagram	-	-	-	9	12	13	12	12	12	12
TikTok	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	11	10	11
Press	32	27	27	25	24	17	13	11	10	10
Chatbots	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7

Source: compiled on the basis of Reuters Institute reports from 2016–2025.

Since 2017, as in other markets, a larger share of users has preferred content selected by algorithms (search engines, social media, and aggregators) rather than by editors (direct notifications, emails, mobile alerts, etc.). This effect has been particularly visible among users who primarily accessed news via smartphones and among younger users (Newman et al., 2017).

Younger people (up to 24 years of age) are also the least inclined to visit news websites and news apps (Reuters, 2025). This is confirmed, among other evidence, by qualitative research conducted among first- to third-year journalism

students, which shows that around 20% of them do not use news portals such as Onet, WP, or Interia at all and are unfamiliar with how they operate, considering them irrelevant to meetings their information needs (Kreft et al., 2026).

Between 2016 and 2025, television in Poland lost a large proportion of viewers who had treated it as their main source of news (a decline from 80% to 54%). For comparison, this trend is evident in many markets, for example, in the United States (from 69% to 50%), Germany (from 82% to 61%), the United Kingdom (from 79% to 48%), France (from 85% to 61%), and Japan (from 69% to 50%). There are also substantial differences between age groups: in Poland, television is treated as the main source of information by 50% of people aged 55 and over, but by only 20% of those aged 18–24 (Reuters, 2025).

At the same time, fragmentation in the television market is deepening. In 2024, only six television programs exceeded three million viewers, compared with 49 programs a year earlier. Viewing time remained stable, but audiences were increasingly dispersed across formats and platforms. Radio, meanwhile, remains at a stable, low level as a source of news—for example, 6% according to CBOS (2024)—which does not mean that it lacks reach: approximately 19 million people (over 60% of the population) listen to the radio daily (Kantar, 2024).

In many countries (e.g., the United States, Brazil, Australia, and Sweden), the decline in social media's importance as a news source began after 2016. In Poland, however, the turning point proved to be the pandemic, which first propelled social media to historic peaks as a source of information (in 2020), and after the pandemic, interest fell back to the level recorded a decade earlier. This evolution nevertheless has its established leaders (Facebook, which still maintains a dominant position) as well as new challengers (Instagram and TikTok).

For the press as a source of information in Poland, the pandemic also proved to be a turning point. Interest in the press declined over the five year period from 2016 to 2021, i.e. up to the pandemic period, from 47% to 27%. This crisis primarily affected free newspapers (for commuters) (Reuters Institute, 2021). Newspapers and magazines have been struggling with declining circulation and advertising revenues, which have led to job cuts and social unrest.

The complex dynamics of media consumption in Poland are illustrated by patterns of news consumption in 2022, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. YouGov research commissioned by the Reuters Institute and conducted in several countries one month after the outbreak of the war, shows that in Poland, interest in news increased by 7 percentage points compared with the pre-war level, returning to the level recorded in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Attention focused primarily on online information sources (websites, non-mainstream sites, and social media) (40%), while television attracted the attention of 38% respondents in Poland. By comparison, online sources attracted the attention of 24% of respondents in Germany, while television accounted for 46%. Specialist websites attracted the attention of 9% of

Poles (the same as social media) and 4% of Germans (compared with 6% for social media). The study showed that the war was followed closely ("extremely" + "very") by 49% of Germans and 25% of Poles. At the same time, as many as 25% of Poles and 5% of Germans were not interested in the war at all. Thus, such an important event led to a concentration of attention on different media in the two countries: in Poland, mainly online sources; in Germany, television.

The coexistence of the "new" and the "old," both in Poland and in other countries, is illustrated by a relatively small group of influencers who began or continue their professional careers in traditional media and build their position as opinion leaders by using the possibilities of direct interaction with users on social media platforms and by drawing on news produced by traditional media (Kahn, 2025). Overall, however, no more than 24% of news audiences in Poland pay attention to influencers (Reuters Institute, 2025).

Erosion of trust in news media

From 2015 to 2025, public trust in news media in Poland declined by 17 percentage points, according to the annual *Digital News Report* prepared by the Reuters Institute (2024) (table 2).

Table 2. Trust in news media

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Poland	55	53	48	48	45	48	42	42	39	47

Source: Reuters Institute Reports (2015–2025).

Compared with other European countries, Poland's average level of trust in the media is relatively low, and trust is evenly distributed across generations (Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z) (see also Brosius et al., 2022). In this context, attention should also be paid to the broader trend—present in many countries—of declining trust in news (Newman et al., 2025), as well as to the general phenomenon of distrust toward both old and new media (Suiter & Fletcher, 2020, p. 41). This is accompanied by a belief, dominant among supporters of populism and expressed in folk stories, that "everything is biased" (Miro, 2025).

This already complex picture is further shaped by the polarization of news audiences. Poland has the highest proportion (54%) among the 46 countries analyzed by the Reuters Institute of people who believe that news organizations are politically divided (Newman et al., 2025). Moreover, in trust surveys, the profession of journalist ranked last among all professions in Poland (PAR, 2023).

Avoidance of the news media

An important factor influencing the dynamics of change in the Polish information market is news avoidance. In 2025, 43% of users in Poland declared frequent or occasional avoidance of news (one of the highest rates among the markets studied), alongside a significant decline in trust in news (from 56% to 47% over the decade 2015–2025) (Reuters Institute Reports, 2015, 2025).

Poles are also becoming less interested in news: in 2025, 43% frequently or occasionally avoided news. This is higher than the average (39%) for all countries studied by the Reuters Institute, 4 percentage points higher than a year earlier, and as much as 21 percentage points higher than in 2017. The reasons are complex: an excess of negative content—war, crises, and dramatic events—which is emotionally overwhelming; information overload—"too much news"—leading to a sense of saturation; and low credibility or lack of trust in the media, as a significant proportion of society does not believe that the media are objective. Only one-fifth of Poles believe that the media are free from pressure (PAP, 2022). A significant proportion of younger and less educated people report avoiding news because it can be difficult to follow or understand, suggesting that news media could do much more to simplify language and better explain or contextualize complex stories (Reuters, 2022).

Only for comparison, news avoidance was also observed in reporting on the war in Ukraine and is also present in neighboring Germany as well (an increase from 29% to 36%; in Poland, from 41% to 47%). This trend is accompanied by a declining—but still high compared with other markets—level of ad-blocker use (IAB, Polska).

Crisis of journalistic hegemony

The erosion of trust in the media, polarization, and information avoidance are part of a broader crisis of social and cultural consensus, involving a rupture in the relationship between the professionalism and responsibility of journalists——"hegemons"—and their media, and the attribution of meaning to news and its distribution (Nerone, 2013).

In the years following the systemic transformation initiated in Poland in 1989, the logic of journalistic hegemony meant that news media held the power to decide which facts and ideas would be presented, while their owners gained this "power without responsibility" by demanding that the public believe they had granted autonomy and independence to their journalistic employees. This allowed journalists to claim autonomy both from the state and from their own employers (Nerone, 2013).

This hegemony is eroding. Journalism in the broadly defined West is losing its dominance over news media and the information environment, as well

as its power in the public sphere. The model of journalism and its traditional institutions (publishers, newsrooms), built on the information monopoly of daily newspapers and television stations, is crumbling. "Journalism was the primary, authoritative source of information about the world; professional journalists held a monopoly on producing information and defining what counted as news, in accordance with a professional ideology that included, for example, objectivity and professionalism" (Deuze, 2005).

Under pressure from technological innovation, journalism and its institutions have lost their significance as gatekeepers, and their authority has also eroded (Nerone, 2013). Media platformization (Nieborg et al., 2025) and the development of AI platforms and AI media are accelerating this erosion. The growing share of chatbots in the creation of news content (8% in 2025, with a projected 12% in 2026) and the fact that bots account for more than 51% of global internet traffic (Imperva, 2024) are further manifestations of this trend.

> Expectations toward journalism have not yet disappeared, but media users have realized that existing news organizations are unable to meet them and doubt whether they should do so at all (Nerone, 2012). Users have noticed an overrepresentation of hegemonic rhetoric, or even falsehood, when journalists and media organizations claim to speak on their behalf, in defense of democracy, and so on. They noticed an overrepresentation of hegemonic rhetoric -a way of speaking about journalism, its values, and its practice as natural, obvious, and universal, even though in reality these are historically shaped and tied to a specific configuration of power (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2009). The hegemonic rhetoric that dominates the discourse about journalism concerns journalistic objectivity and the belief that the current model of journalism is the 'best of all possible ones.' Examples of such rhetoric include claims that 'a journalist should be neutral and objective' and that 'professional media are a guarantor of democracy' (even though these claims are contested in academic research, e.g., Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023). Media users perceive the falsity of this rhetoric when journalists and media organizations also claim to speak on their behalf, etc. The decline in trust in professional news media is a key manifestation of the crisis of journalism's hegemony, more important than the decline in employment in professional media (Nerone, 2013; Kreft, 2025).

Evolution of media finances—the crisis of the press, TV, and traditional advertising

To identify changes in the media market based on achieved and projected financial results (including individual segments), the CAGR indicator is used, as in PricewaterhouseCoopers' annual forecasts. The entire Polish entertainment and media (E&M) market is expected to grow at an average annual rate of 3.9%

in 2024–2028 (PwC, 2025). The fastest-growing segments of the E&M market remain online advertising, video games, and OTT (over-the-top) services.

On average over the entire period, the CAGR for the Polish E&M market was 3.54%, with higher growth rates in the initial period (2016–2021, approximately 4–6%) than in the latter part of the analyzed period. Growth rates varied significantly across segments. The highest average (19%) was recorded for VOD and streaming. Above-average growth was also recorded for digital advertising (8.6%) and the video games segment (8.0%). Below-average CAGR was observed for cinemas (box office) (3.2%) and radio (2.0%). Despite the importance of television, traditional advertising experienced a decline in real revenues (–1.4%), and the steepest decline affected the press (print + digital) (–6.6%) (PwC, 2025).

These results correspond with the evolution of news sources: declining interest in television and the press was accompanied by weaker financial performance in these segments. A further deepening of these trends is visible in forecasts for 2025–2029, particularly the growing importance of digital platforms. The downward trend in real revenues (after accounting for projected inflation) applies to newspapers and magazines (PwC, 2025), as well as to television market revenues and television advertising. Overall, Poland is expected to remain a regional leader in Central and Eastern Europe, but also the slowest-growing market in the region, with total television revenue projected to grow at a CAGR of 1.4% in 2024–2028.

Discussion: regulated mainstream—"ecosystem and media capture"

In these complex relations between traditional media and platforms, a dependency crystallizes that can be described as asymmetric interdependence. As users and advertisers migrate to AI platforms imposing their own logic of market value creation and tools for managing attention and financial flows, traditional media organizations occupy a dependent position. Metaphorically speaking, the former news mainstream has been regulated according to rules over which it has had—and continues to have—very limited influence.

During the analyzed period, publishers' dependence on (AI) platforms evolved from hegemonic to subordinate. The theoretical context of this process has so far been captured in isolated but mutually reinforcing studies. AI platforms initially appeared as "parasitic" and later "symbiotic" (Nechushtai, 2018, p. 1052), before imposing a multidimensional dependence on news media (Sebbah et al., 2020).

The theoretical lens through which this process can be examined is "media capture" (Nechushtai, 2018). Originally, in media management theory, this referred to "infrastructure capture" through the provision of tools for news

production, audience analytics, and marketing analysis (Poell et al., 2018). In later formulations, it also encompassed the structural weakening of news as an institution (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021) and cognitive capture, whereby journalists accept the logic of platforms, including valuing journalistic content by the number of views and equating the importance of topics with their popularity. From the perspective of AI platforms, media capture means coming to occupy a central position in the information ecosystem (Papaevangelou, 2024).

Existential challenges of GenAI

This enforced coopetition (i.e., cooperation among competitors) appears to be entering a new, mature stage of "media vassalization." While display and native advertising remain the main—but declining—sources of publishers' revenues, and most organisations rely on three to four revenue streams, most newsrooms are undergoing major or minor changes triggered by GenAI (Reuters, 2025). Most publishers under this pressure now intend to invest more effort in building relationships with AI platforms, including OpenAI (Reuters, 2025). This strategy of cooperating with a competitor ("frenemy") is confronted with an existential challenge: search disruption, i.e., declining referral traffic from Facebook and Instagram, and the development of AI that "blocks traffic" across most content websites. In other words, within the ecosystem imposed on news media, a mechanism of intensified dependence is emerging.

In light of these changes, publishers need to seek new business models, develop hybrid solutions, and explore new channels (e.g., Bluesky, LinkedIn, etc.) (López-Cepeda et al., 2025). This challenge is all the more urgent given that only 14% of Polish respondents are willing to pay for online news content—below the average (17%) for the 47 countries studied by the Reuters Institute. Poles are more willing to subscribe than the French (11%) and the British (8%), although in both countries there are systems supporting local print media (Reuters Institute, 2024).

Conclusion

The analysis of media in Poland in 2016–2025, encompassing two major events (the pandemic and the war in Ukraine), reveals a picture of dynamic change. The entire media ecosystem has been captured, to varying degrees, by AI platforms. Media capture affects not only media infrastructure but also radically limits the strategic room for maneuver in development. The practical manifestation of this capture is a sharp decline in the importance of certain media as sources of news (the press, fragmented television), turbulence in social media, and the emergence of

new sources (chatbots) belonging to AI platforms—the new hegemon of the "AI ecosystem." All of this occurs amid an erosion of interest in news and user trust. A practical and symbolic manifestation of these changes is the shift identified in 2017 toward the dominance of algorithmic content selection over editorial choice.

The new "AI media" ecosystem has owners—BIG AI companies (Van der Vlist et al., 2024)—and none of them originate from traditional media organisations, which further illustrates the radical nature of the changes. While the global AI market is experiencing rapid growth and a handful of new media–technology companies—the "Big AI Houses" (Crawford, 2021)—serve as ecosystem hegemons, traditional information hegemons are losing strategic control over their own development, over information content and its modes of distribution, and even over the narrative of their own future.

The dynamic changes in Polish media are part of a broader evolutionary cycle. When a new medium emerges, other media undergo a hegemonic phase, while older media attempt to adapt to survive (Scolari, 2013). At the same time, they are subject to dynamics of simulation throughout their life cycle—simulating or being simulated—and, as in non-Euclidean geometry, the evolution of each medium does not proceed along a separate track but remains in constant interaction with the evolution of other media (Scolari, 2013).

According to Scolari, new media do not lead to the complete disappearance of so-called old media, but rather change their function within the media ecosystem. For example, the press becomes more niche and/or digital. In the Polish context, in the life cycle of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, one of the leaders of the Polish news press, its circulation declined from about 159,000 copies in 2016 to 27,000 in 2025—roughly a fivefold decrease—but its business model has shifted toward digital subscriptions (e.g., Czuma, 2020).

In 2013, Scolari wrote that it is not difficult to imagine a network of relationships connecting all media, resembling a three-dimensional network rather than a Darwinian tree in media evolution (Scolari, 2013). Such a network is the system of AI platforms, held together by data collected for better user targeting for market purposes, for shaping user experience, and for training GenAI, which in the new "AI media" ecosystem (Feher, 2024), plays the role of the Holy Grail of progress, driven by missionary AI organisations (Kreft, 2023).

Explanations of terms

OTT – delivery of content directly to the audiences via the internet, bypassing traditional cable or satellite operators.

CAGR – compound annual growth rate; in the media and advertising industry, it refers to the average annual growth rate of a given value (e.g., revenues, the number of users, or market value).

VOD – a media service that allows users to watch video content (films, series, television programs) at any time of their choosing, without the need to follow a fixed television schedule.

BIG AI – a term referring to Large AI Models and, among other things, the use of Big Data analysis by technology companies (so-called Big Tech).

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / *perspectives* on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.07

News Platformisation in a Distorted Media Market: The Case of Hungary

ABSTRACT

This study examines how independent Hungarian online news media navigate the dual pressures of platformisation and a politically and economically distorted media market. While digital platforms have globally reshaped news production, distribution, and monetisation, in Hungary these dynamics are intensified by strong state influence over media ownership and the allocation of advertising revenues, which systematically disadvantages independent outlets. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the study combines an analysis of publicly available financial data from four leading Hungarian news portals with semi-structured interviews conducted with journalists, editors, and media managers. The findings reveal that independent outlets operate under markedly heterogeneous business models, ranging from advertising-based approaches to hybrid strategies that integrate subscriptions, reader donations, grants, events, and merchandising. The results suggest that declining access to advertising revenues—due to both politically selective state allocation and the growing dominance of global digital platforms—has driven the diversification of revenue models. At the same time, platform dependency remains a central structural constraint, prompting a shift from reach-oriented to engagement- and brand-focused strategies, alongside increased investment in proprietary distribution channels. The Hungarian case demonstrates that platformisation is deeply shaped by national political and market conditions, giving rise not only to an alternative distribution ecosystem but also to diverse and adaptive business models aimed at sustaining economic viability and editorial independence.

KEYWORDS: platformisation, news media, distorted market, Hungary

Suggested citation: Glózer, R. & Szabó-Gödri, R. (2026). News Platformisation in a Distorted Media Market: The Case of Hungary. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 93–109. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.07
Submitted: 01.12.2025 Accepted: 14.02.2026

STRESZCZENIE

Platformizacja mediów na zaburzonym rynku medialnym. Przypadek Węgier

W niniejszym badaniu przeanalizowano, w jaki sposób niezależne węgierskie serwisy informacyjne radzą sobie z podwójną presją wynikającą z platformizacji i polityczno-ekonomicznych zniekształceń rynku mediów. Podczas gdy platformy cyfrowe na całym świecie zmieniły sposób tworzenia, dystrybucji i monetyzacji wiadomości, na Węgrzech dynamika ta jest spotęgowana przez silny wpływ państwa na strukturę własnościową mediów i podział przychodów z reklam, co systematycznie stawia niezależne serwisy w niekorzystnej sytuacji. Badanie łączy analizę publicznie dostępnych danych finansowych z czterech wiodących węgierskich portali informacyjnych z częściowo ustrukturyzowanymi wywiadami przeprowadzonymi z dziennikarzami, redaktorami i menedżerami mediów. Wyniki pokazują, że niezależne media działają na podstawie zróżnicowanych modeli biznesowych, od podejść opartych na reklamach po strategie hybrydowe, które łączą subskrypcje, darowizny od czytelników, dotacje, wydarzenia i sprzedaż gadżetów. Wyniki sugerują, że malejący dostęp do przychodów z reklam, spowodowany zarówno selektywnym przydzielaniem środków przez państwo, jak i rosnącą dominacją globalnych platform cyfrowych, doprowadził do dywersyfikacji modeli przychodów. Jednocześnie zależność od platform pozostaje głównym ograniczeniem strukturalnym, skłaniającym do przejścia od strategii zorientowanych na zasięg do strategii skupionych na zaangażowaniu i marce, a także do zwiększonych inwestycji we własne kanały dystrybucji. Przypadek Węgier pokazuje, że platformizacja jest głęboko ukształtowana przez krajowe uwarunkowania polityczne i rynkowe.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: platformizacja, media newsowe, Węgry, zaburzony rynek mediów

Introduction

In discussions of press freedom and media pluralism, the state of the Hungarian news media is frequently interpreted through the lens of the country's political system, commonly described as an illiberal democracy, a hybrid regime, or a competitive authoritarian system (Griffen, 2020; Bleyer-Simon, Polyák, & Urbán, 2025). The conditions that undermine media pluralism and press freedom also profoundly shape the business models and market strategies of Hungarian news media, particularly those of independent outlets. Newsrooms operate within a structurally distorted media market in which political power relations significantly influence media ownership structures and the allocation of advertising revenues, systematically favouring outlets controlled by the state or owned by actors closely aligned with the governing party. These distortions

of market competition substantially constrain the economic sustainability and strategic autonomy of independent news organisations (see Baker, 2012).

Beyond these domestic structural constraints, the global process of platformisation in news production, distribution, and consumption further affects the Hungarian news media landscape. Platform logics increasingly shape newsroom business models and operational practices, influencing how news is accessed, distributed, and monetised, while intensifying dependence on a small number of dominant digital intermediaries.

Against this backdrop, this article examines the role of digital platforms in the strategic practices of leading Hungarian news outlets, with a focus on their functions in news distribution, audience traffic generation, and news brand building. Drawing on interviews with social media managers, editors-in-chief, and marketing managers at selected Hungarian news organisations, and complemented by an analysis of publicly available financial data for the examined companies, the study provides insights into platform-oriented content distribution strategies, experiences of platform exposure and dependency, and the approaches adopted to mitigate these dependencies within a media system that occupies a distinct yet structurally disadvantaged position in Central and Eastern Europe.

News Platformisation

In platform studies, a growing body of scholarship has examined the platformisation of news as a specific manifestation of the broader societal and economic trend of platformisation (van Dijck et al., 2018; Nieborg & Poell, 2019; Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023). In this literature, platformisation is generally understood as the increasing structural importance and influence of digital platforms in shaping how communication, information access, and cultural production, including journalism, are organised. Platforms have become central infrastructures across multiple sectors, reshaping not only the distribution of news but also its production, monetisation, governance, and measurement, as well as the imaginaries surrounding public communication (van Dijck et al., 2018; Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023).

Among digital platforms, social media occupy a particularly prominent position in the circulation of news, representing some of the most widely used gateways to online information (Newman, Arguedas, Robertson, Nielsen, & Fletcher, 2025). Scholars suggest that the rise of social media platforms has led to profound structural changes in journalism, reshaping not only the technological conditions of news production but also its economic, organisational, and editorial dimensions (Bell & Owen, 2017; Napoli, 2018; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018).

Research shows that platformisation unfolds unevenly across national contexts. Nielsen and Fletcher (2023) demonstrate that countries with similar levels

of social media use differ significantly in the extent to which news consumption is platformised, as well as in audiences' reliance on direct access via news websites and applications. These variations are partly explained by path-dependent factors, particularly the historically strong position of national newspaper markets, which is associated with lower levels of platformisation. Accordingly, platformisation should be understood as a global process that takes diverse national forms, highlighting the need for further country-specific research (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023).

Early accounts describe how news publishers initially welcomed social media platforms for their unprecedented reach, advanced audience analytics, and perceived neutrality as distribution intermediaries, while largely underestimating the long-term implications of platform dependence (Bell & Owen, 2017; Napoli, 2018). Over time, however, platform logics increasingly shaped editorial and distribution practices, positioning platforms as de facto editors through algorithmic governance and engagement-based incentives (Bell & Owen, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018; Napoli, 2018, Nieborg & Poell, 2019). Growing disillusionment followed as publishers recognised the loss of infrastructural control and the asymmetric power of platforms, prompting more cautious and diversified strategies aimed at rebuilding direct relationships with audiences (Bell, 2018).

A central analytical consequence of platformisation is platform dependency, which captures the extent to which news media organisations rely on digital platforms and their opaque algorithmic systems for audience reach and traffic generation (Nieborg & Poell, 2019; Meese & Hurcombe, 2020). The relationship between platforms and news organisations is widely understood as asymmetrical, exposing publishers to structural risks related to visibility, monetisation, and control. In response, news organisations have diversified both distribution channels and revenue models by introducing paywalls, subscriptions, newsletters, events, and ancillary products to mitigate dependency and compensate for declining advertising revenues. Consequently, social media are increasingly used not as primary distribution channels but for traffic generation, brand building, and audience engagement, particularly among younger users. While these dynamics are well documented in Western contexts, less attention has been paid to how platform dependency unfolds in politically distorted media markets in Central and Eastern Europe.

State of the Hungarian News Media

The development of the Hungarian news media system has shared several characteristics with other post-socialist countries in the region, including the instrumentalisation of the media by political elites, frequent state intervention in the media market, and high levels of political polarisation and clientelism

(Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012; Hallin & Mancini, 2012). Between 1996 and 2010, albeit following different trajectories, the phenomenon of "party colonisation of the media" emerged across Central and Eastern Europe, referring to political parties' efforts to gain control over media institutions. According to Péter Bajomi-Lázár, this can be understood as "a strategy aimed at extracting from the media resources such as airtime, frequencies, positions and money, and channelling them to party loyalists in order to reward them for various services" (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013, p. 76). This direct targeting of regulatory authorities and public service broadcasters by political parties should be distinguished from the concept of "political parallelism," which is understood as "the extent to which the media reflect distinct political orientations in their news and current affairs reporting, and sometimes also in entertainment content" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 28).

In Hungary, this form of multi-party influence over the media developed between 1996 and 2010, coming to an end with the return of Fidesz to power under Viktor Orbán in the 2010 parliamentary elections. The government led by Orbán secured a parliamentary supermajority and subsequently amended the media law. Through these reforms, the governing party gained comprehensive control over the restructured media system. Whereas in the preceding period the influence of competing political parties over the media had mutually limited their respective power and maintained a relatively diverse and balanced media environment, this unilateral control led to a severe distortion of the media system (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013).

As a result, the development trajectory of the Hungarian media system and public sphere diverged from that of other countries in the region. Today, Hungarian news outlets face particularly fundamental challenges shaped by the media policy environment that has emerged during the fifteen years of Fidesz rule. Griffen (2020) summarises the four principal elements of the "Orbán model," which aim to manipulate media market mechanisms to consolidate power while preserving plausible deniability. According to Griffen, the main components of this model are:

> 1. state capture of the media through the forcible closure or effective government takeover of once-independent media; 2. manipulation of the media market through the abuse of state resources and regulatory power; 3. delegitimisation and exclusion of independent journalists; and 4. preservation of the illusion of media freedom" (Griffen, 2020, p. 58).

The Hungarian media landscape includes both public and private outlets and is characterised by a high degree of political parallelism (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2025). Large segments of the Hungarian media are directly or indirectly controlled by the governing party, with many market actors, including privately

owned and formally independent outlets, operating under substantial political influence. State advertising, including expenditure by state-owned and government-aligned companies, is disproportionately high and is systematically used to reward politically allied media outlets (Bátorffy & Urbán, 2020; Horváth, Kovács, Polyák, & Urbán, 2024). Public service media operate under government control and are frequently instrumentalised to target critics of the government and the ruling party. Community and local media are similarly subject to government influence and pressure, further constraining pluralism at the subnational level (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2025). Media audiences are highly polarised: a substantial proportion of users consumes news in accordance with their political preferences (Polyák et al., 2022).

Media pluralism and press freedom in Hungary are widely assessed as being under severe pressure, with multiple reports pointing to democratic backsliding and a highly distorted media environment. The Media Pluralism Monitor 2025 classifies all key dimensions of the media system as posing medium-high to very high risks, highlighting strong market concentration, declining revenues, limited access to public subsidies, and increasing uncertainty surrounding foreign funding, while also noting the government's effective influence over formally independent regulatory bodies (Bleyer-Konrad et al., 2025).

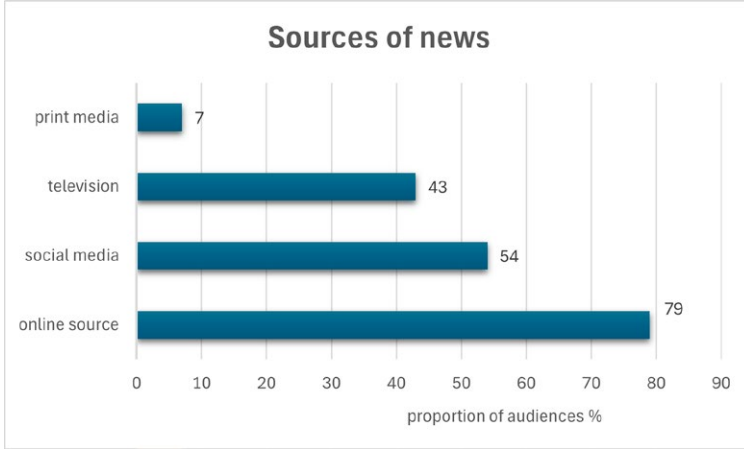
Social Media and News Consumption in Hungary

While the state of journalism and news media globally is perceived as undergoing "an accelerating shift towards consumption via social media and video platforms," which is further "diminishing the influence of institutional journalism" (Newman et al., 2025), the extent and dynamics of news platformisation are significantly shaped by audience media-use patterns.

Internet penetration in Hungary stands at 92%, while only 8% of the population aged 18 and over are willing to pay for online news. Overall trust in news media and journalism is among the lowest in Europe (22%) and has continued to decline. The proportion of respondents who consider public service media to be trustworthy is 23%, representing a significant decrease from 30% in the previous year (Newman et al., 2025). Data indicate that social media use in Hungary is nearly universal among internet users aged 16 and above, with particularly high uptake among younger audiences, including more than half of those aged 18–49 using TikTok (NMHH, 2025). However, the role of these platforms in news consumption varies significantly: Facebook clearly dominates as the primary gateway to news, with YouTube also playing a notable role, while platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger—despite their widespread use—are far less central to news access, and the use of X remains marginal (Newman et al., 2025).

According to the most recent Digital News Report, more than three-quarters of Hungarian audiences' access news through online sources, while fewer than one in ten rely on print newspapers to stay informed (Newman et al. 2025).

Figure 1. News sources among Hungarian audiences.



Source of the data: Newman et al., 2025.

The latest report of the National Media and Infocommunications Authority indicates that, among the five online news sources most frequently used by respondents, Facebook (50%) and YouTube (32%) were the most commonly cited, followed by the news websites: index.hu (23%), telex.hu (21 %), and 24.hu (19%). Instagram was also mentioned by 19% of respondents as a regular news source. Regarding online news portals, the majority reported consulting index.hu, telex.hu, and 24.hu at least weekly (NMHH, 2025). Based on the proportion of audiences who read them weekly, the most popular online news outlets are telex.hu 28%, index.hu 27%, 24.hu 24%, 444.hu 23%, hvg.hu 19%, rtl.hu 19%, and origo.hu 18% (Newman et al., 2025).

In the print media market, the leading company is Mediaworks Hungary Zrt., owned by the government-aligned Közép-Európai Sajtó és Média Alapítvány (KESMA), which reported net revenues exceeding approximately EUR 145 million in 2024. The second-largest annual revenues were generated by Ringier Hungary Kft. and Blikk Kft., owned by the same company, with a combined revenue of approximately EUR 19.3 million. Third place was held by Central Médiacsoport Zrt., with revenues of EUR 36.5 million and a growth rate of 3,2% (NMHH 2025).

The Hungarian advertising market totalled EUR 980 million (0.47% of GDP) in 2024. Within this market, global platforms account for nearly two-thirds (65%) of online advertising revenues, of which social media platforms represent 28%.

Among the largest advertisers, commercial companies rank first (27.5%), followed by distributors of medicinal products (27.5%), while the third-largest advertiser is the Hungarian state (15.2%). This has a significant distorting effect on the market due to the exclusive allocation of state advertising to state-controlled or government-friendly media outlets (NMHH, 2025). Therefore, independent media outlets have developed new financing models. The most common forms include paid content (e.g., paywalls), subscriptions, event organisation, donation-based funding, merchandising, and the provision of exclusive content, such as frontline reporting and political analysis podcasts.

In this context, Newman et al. (2025) observe that "in countries where press freedom is under threat, alternative ecosystems also offer opportunities, at their best, to bring fresh perspectives and challenge repressive governments." The present study examines whether this proposition holds in the Hungarian context.

Research and Method

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. It combines semi-structured interviews with an analysis of the financial data of the examined media companies. However, it should be noted that the research engages with commercially sensitive information; therefore, data collection was limited to publicly available sources, and interviewees provided general responses to preserve the confidentiality of business-related information.

For this analysis, four of the most widely read independent news outlets were selected in order to identify the challenges they face in operating within a deeply distorted media market, shaped both by the political and economic influence of the state and by the pressures associated with the increasing platformisation of news distribution.

To provide an objective account of these challenges, the study draws on a review of publicly available financial data[1] of the selected media organisations. In particular, the annual financial statements of the respective publishing companies were examined, offering insight into the structure and development of newsroom revenues and expenditures.

To gain insight into journalists' and editors' perspectives, we conducted four semi-structured interviews with individuals employed by the selected Hungarian news media outlets, including journalists, editors-in-chief, marketing managers, and social media managers responsible for social media and platform strategy. The interviews were conducted between 11 and 21 December 2025, with three conducted in person and one in writing. All interviewees were

1 https://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/oldal/kezdolap

anonymised, and only general descriptions of their organisations are provided to protect confidentiality.

Discussion

The four most widely read online news outlets included in the study—defined as those read on a weekly basis by the largest proportion of respondents—are telex.hu (28%), Index.hu (27%), 24.hu (24%), and 444.hu (23%) (Newman et al., 2025). Details of the news outlets included in the study are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Comparative organisational profiles of the news outlets under study (authors' own compilation)



The publishing companies behind the examined media outlets also differ in size and organisational structure. While some publishers own multiple titles or media portfolios, others operate a single newsroom, resulting in significant variation in the revenue and expenditure profiles of the outlets under study. Based on company records and annual financial statements, it can be observed that the examined Hungarian media companies rely on multiple sources of revenue. However, the most notable differences lie in the composition of these revenue streams, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Revenue structure of the four Hungarian news portals, 2023–2024

Year	Staff	Net sales revenue		Grants and subsidies		Net profit		Additional revenue sources	
		HUF million	EUR million	HUF million	EUR million	HUF million	EUR million	HUF million	EUR million
telex.hu									
2023	94	786	2.02	101	0.26	16	0.04	Reader revenue 504	Reader revenue 1.29
2024	112	1100	2.82	140	0.36	19	0.05	Reader revenue 521; 1% tax donation 580	Reader revenue 1.33; 1% tax donation 1.48
444.hu									
2023	62	802	2.06	150	0.38	-50	-0.13	Reader revenue 42	Reader revenue 0.11
2024	70	1100	2.82	173	0.44	125	0.32 n	Reader revenue: 35	Reader revenue: 0.09
Centrál Médiacsoport (24.hu)									
2023	406	6300 (total revenue 14 000)	16 (total revenue 35.9)	0	0	2300	5.9	0	0
2024	406	6300 (total revenue 14200)		0	0	2500	6.41	0	0
index.hu									
2023	81	1800	4.62	0	0	12	0.031	Intl. funding 29, other funding 2	Intl. funding 0.07; other funding 0.005.
2024	89	1900	4.9	0	0	10	0.03	Other funding 1.7	Other funding 0.004

Source of data: Hungarian Ministry of Justice[2] (authors' own compilation).

2 https://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/oldal/kezdolap

It is worth noting that two of the four news portals (telex.hu and 444.hu) operate online shops where they sell branded merchandise, thereby further diversifying their revenue streams. Among the publishers examined, Centrál Médiacsoport and the publisher of Index primarily rely on advertising revenues. The position of Centrál Médiacsoport is considerably more complex than the other publishers, as it not only operates 24.hu. Its portfolio comprises a further 18 online outlets, 14 print magazines, and more than 20 special issues, collectively reaching nearly 6 million consumers monthly.[3] The media products within this portfolio operate predominantly on advertising-based revenue models and do not make use of grant funding. It is also important to note that, in the case of Index.hu Zrt., a significant share of advertising revenues is not realised within this company but is recognised within the sales system of Indamedia.

The patterns identified in the financial analysis are further corroborated by the interviews conducted for this study. These findings indicate that independent online news outlets in Hungary operate according to markedly heterogeneous business models. While some organisations rely predominantly on advertising revenues, others employ hybrid arrangements that combine multiple income streams. Consequently, distinct monetisation strategies and content production practices emerge, shaped not only by the broader political and economic environment but also by the size, profile, and institutional background of each outlet.

Among the editorial offices included in the sample, even the online news portal owned by the largest independent media holding company has recently undergone a fundamental transformation of its business model. Previously operating within a purely advertising-based revenue structure, the outlet shifted towards a hybrid model incorporating reader contributions, subscriptions, and paywalls. According to interviewees, this shift was driven by the distorted nature of the Hungarian advertising market and the increasing extraction of advertising revenues by global digital platforms. In the current media environment, state or government-linked advertising is largely confined to outlets that are either state-owned or politically aligned, resulting in the allocation of advertising expenditure along political and personal networks rather than market principles. As one interviewee emphasised:

> We do not receive any state advertising, nor do we factor it into our business model. For more than a decade, the advertising market in Hungary has been severely distorted, with advertising revenues being redirected toward pro-government media outlets (Social media manager).

In addition to the politically selective allocation of advertising resources, independent outlets face mounting pressure from global technology companies whose platforms increasingly capture advertising revenues, thereby exacerbating

3 https://sales.centralmediacsoport.hu

the financial vulnerability of news organisations. Simultaneously, the proliferation of new digital platforms has further fragmented an already polarised and saturated media market. As one editor-in-chief observed:

> We operate in a media environment where global actors control at least 60% of online advertising revenues—a share that continues to grow year by year—while the remaining 40% must be divided among all other actors. This is particularly challenging given the constant emergence of new, small competitors that also vie for attention and revenue (Editor-in-Chief).

Declining advertising revenues have also had a direct influence on content production strategies. The same editor-in-chief reported a substantial decline in audience reach:

> The average reach of the newspaper has dropped dramatically. In 2020, we reached around one million unique users per day; today, that number is at most 600,000. This decline made it clear that we needed a new strategy to survive.

In response, the outlet introduced monthly and annual subscription schemes providing subscribers with access to additional articles, podcasts, newsletters, and discounts. Furthermore, it developed an application targeting highly committed readers, which interviewees identified as playing a central role in sustaining traffic and fostering audience loyalty.

By contrast, other outlets adopted diversified and risk-sharing business models from the outset. One journalist-owned news portal combines reader donations, market-based advertising revenues, and grant funding. An additional income stream derives from the Hungarian "1% personal income tax" scheme,[4] which has generated substantial revenues in recent years. This outlet operates without a paywall and does not offer exclusive paid content; instead, it relies on freely accessible newsletters and a proprietary application. As the social media manager explained:

> All of these tools help us address as many readers' needs as possible and deepen reader commitment.

Hungary's first online newspaper, by contrast, has continued to operate under a traditional advertising-based model since its founding. Its strategy prioritises high page views, large numbers of unique users, and traffic maximisation, which is reflected in the volume of content produced. According to the outlet's own statements, it receives little or no revenue from state advertising contracts

4 Hungarian taxpayers have been entitled to designate 1% of their personal income tax to associations, foundations, and public benefit foundations.

yet sustains its operations without reader revenues or paid content. Content production within this model is characterised by large-scale news output designed to maximise the visibility of advertising inventory. Notably, the outlet does not operate a newsletter, which its representatives attribute to the specific characteristics of Hungarian news consumption.

Interviews with the deputy editor-in-chief of another independent public affairs outlet revealed that the introduction of a subscription model was motivated not only by revenue considerations but also by a desire to safeguard editorial independence. Subscription income, according to this interviewee, reduces reliance on state, governmental, or advertiser expectations. At the same time, the transition in the business model did not fundamentally alter editorial routines:

> Our editorial meetings are not about what readers want us to produce, but about reporting on daily events, public affairs, and the news (Deputy editor-in-chief).

Nevertheless, subscription-based models introduce structural constraints. The size of the editorial staff and the scope of journalistic activity are closely tied to subscription revenues, while expansion and technological development frequently depend on access to external grants:

> Subscriptions determine how much work we can take on and how many people we can employ. It is common for one person to perform multiple roles. Expansion is only possible if we receive grant funding (Deputy editor-in-chief).

Across all interviewed outlets, maintaining a presence on multiple platforms is a shared objective aimed at enhancing visibility, expanding audience reach, and strengthening brand identity. Facebook has historically served as the primary driver of traffic, while X remains marginal in Hungary due to its limited and specialised user base; other platforms play a more supplementary role. However, interviewees reported a significant decline in Facebook's traffic-generating capacity due to algorithmic changes, prompting a shift from reach-oriented strategies to those focused on engagement and brand building. Despite this, Facebook remains the most influential platform, particularly among older users, while Instagram and TikTok are primarily used to reach younger audiences and support brand building. YouTube offers opportunities for long-form content but also entails renewed risks of platform dependency.

Another recurring feature is the limited separation between journalism and social media management, with journalists often directly involved in content distribution and guided by audience metrics. Social media platforms also function as tools for news gathering and agenda-setting, with Facebook operating as a quasi-public communication space and, increasingly, as a pre-filter in the news production process.

At the same time, substantial differences persist between outlets, reflecting variations in financial resources, staffing levels, and editorial capacity. As one interviewee noted:

> Ideally, we would tailor content to each platform, but we simply lack the capacity. Our social media team consists of two full-time employees and one intern, who handle all related tasks (Deputy editor-in-chief).

While some outlets adopt a pragmatic, performance-driven approach to platform use, others conceptualise platforms as distinct communicative spaces conducive to community building. Overall, the operation of independent online news media in Hungary is shaped by the combined pressures of a structurally distorted advertising market and ongoing processes of platformisation. Politically selective state advertising, the growing extraction of revenues by global digital platforms, and audience polarisation constrain both economic sustainability and strategic autonomy. In response, outlets increasingly adopt diversified, hybrid business models—particularly subscription- and reader-based approaches—which serve not only economic purposes but also help safeguard editorial independence.

At the same time, platformisation follows a distinct trajectory in Hungary. While social media—especially Facebook—remain central to news consumption, their declining effectiveness as traffic drivers has prompted a shift from reach-oriented to engagement- and brand-focused strategies, alongside investments in proprietary channels. These findings highlight that platform dependency in Hungary is not only technological or economic but also a politically mediated structural constraint.

Conclusion

Our study has shown that, in Hungary, the effects of platformisation are inseparable from the political and economic structure of the media system. Independent news organisations operate under dual constraints: global platform dependency and a domestically distorted advertising market shaped by state influence. Under these conditions, the emergence of hybrid business models reflects both adaptation and necessity. Diversified revenue strategies (including subscriptions, reader contributions, and alternative income sources) enable outlets to compensate, at least in part, for restricted access to advertising markets while reinforcing editorial independence. At the same time, the shift towards engagement-oriented strategies and proprietary distribution channels illustrates ongoing efforts to mitigate platform dependency. The Hungarian case thus demonstrates that platformisation is not a uniform global process but is deeply conditioned by national political and market environments. Rather

than simply producing an "alternative ecosystem" of news distribution, it gives rise to context-specific, adaptive configurations of media sustainability.

Limitation and Future Research

This study has several limitations, including the small number of news websites analysed and its exclusive reliance on interviews. The relatively small number of interviews further limits the explanatory power of our conclusions. The generalisability of our findings is also constrained by the fact that all interviewed journalists work for independent news portals, as we were unable to access staff from outlets within the government-supervised media conglomerate (KESMA). A more comprehensive understanding of the diverse strategies employed by Hungarian online news media would require an examination of the operational and social media practices of outlets benefiting from substantial state advertising. Future research mapping the business models and operational strategies of these media could provide deeper insights into the dynamics of the Hungarian online news landscape.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.08

Monetisation Models and the Structural Role of Advertising Networks in the Podcast Ecosystem: A Systems Analysis with of the Polish Media System

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present the evolution of the podcast market and discuss the main monetisation models—from traditional advertising and sponsorship, through subscriptions and listener patronage, to branded content. Particular attention is paid to the role of major distribution platforms (such as Spotify, Apple Podcasts and YouTube) in shaping the podcast ecosystem as well as to the development of advertising networks and programmatic audio technologies that enable the automation of advertising purchases and precise audience targeting. The article presents current data on podcast listenership and revenues and identifies the main barriers and challenges to monetisation in Poland and globally, including audience measurement issues, market fragmentation and the limitations of small language markets. Finally, it outlines future directions for the development of the podcast market—by identifying potential trends and changes that may shape podcast business models in the coming years.

KEYWORDS: podcast, media economics, monetisation models in new media, affiliate networks, brand content

STRESZCZENIE

Modele monetyzacji i strukturalna rola sieci reklamowych w ekosystemie podcastów: ocena systemowa w odniesieniu do polskiego systemu medialnego

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie ewolucji rynku podcastów oraz omówienie głównych modeli monetyzacji – od tradycyjnej reklamy i sponsoringu, poprzez subskrypcje i wsparcie słuchaczy, aż po treści markowe. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono roli dużych platform dystrybucyjnych (takich jak Spotify, Apple Podcasts i YouTube) w kształtowaniu ekosystemu podcastów

Suggested citation: Kinal, J. & Nagy, H. (2026). Monetisation Models and the Structural Role of Advertising Networks in the Podcast Ecosystem: A Systems Analysis with of the Polish Media System. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 111–136. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.08
Submitted: 15.11.2025 Accepted: 05.03.2026

oraz rozwojowi sieci reklamowych i technologii programmatic audio, które umożliwiają automatyzację zakupu reklam i precyzyjne kierowanie reklam do odbiorców. W artykule przedstawione zostaną aktualne dane dotyczące słuchalności i przychodów z podcastów oraz zidentyfikowane zostaną bariery i wyzwania związane z monetyzacją zarówno w Polsce, jak i na świecie (np. problemy z pomiarem oglądalności, fragmentacja rynku i ograniczenia małych rynków językowych). Podsumowując, podjęta zostanie próba wskazania przyszłych kierunków rozwoju rynku podcastów – potencjalnych trendów i zmian, które mogą kształtować modele biznesowe podcastów w nadchodzących latach.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: podcast, ekonomia mediów, modele monetyzacji w nowych mediach, sieci afiliacyjne, treści markowe

Introduction

Over the past two decades, podcasts have evolved from being a niche format to an important part of the global media market. The popularity of on-demand audio is growing both globally and in Poland—in 2024, the number of podcast listeners worldwide reached approximately 547 million (an increase of 8% year on year), and forecasts predict 652 million by 2027 (Eurozet & Publicis Groupe, 2025). In Poland, podcast listenership is also growing rapidly—in just four years, the weekly podcast audience has almost doubled (from 4.4 million in 2020 to 8.4 million in 2024), while almost 11 million Poles listen to podcasts every month (Eurozet & Publicis Groupe, 2025). The growing number of listeners naturally attracts the attention of creators and advertisers, making the monetisation of podcast content an increasingly important issue.

The official beginning of podcasting is often dated to 2004, when the first RSS feeds with audio files appeared and the term "podcast" (combining the words iPod and broadcast) gained popularity. In the early years, the development of podcasts was organic—content was created mainly by enthusiasts, and the programmes were amateur in nature and made available free of charge. Monetisation was virtually non-existent or limited to voluntary donations from listeners. As recently as 2013, podcasts were still seen as a niche format, "unattractive to advertisers," and many creators were hobbyists (Bergman, 2017, pp. 161–170). The turning point came in 2014, when the launch of the serialised crime podcast *Serial* was a huge success—with more than 40 million downloads of the first season—drawing new audiences into the world of podcasts and attracting the attention of the mainstream media (Bergman, 2017, pp. 191–199). The success of Serial is sometimes described as the moment when podcasts entered the mainstream—many people discovered podcasts for the first time and became convinced of this form of content consumption (Bergman, 2017, pp. 199–204). After 2014, there was an explosion in the number of

new podcasts and genres, as well as a professionalisation of production. Specialised studios were established (e.g., Gimlet Media, founded in 2014), and traditional media organisations (newspapers, radio stations) began investing in the production of their own podcasts. The number of podcasts available globally exceeded several million—according to 2023 data, there were already over 3.1 million active podcast titles worldwide (Nielsen, 2023, pp. 249–257). The audience also grew: in the United States, the percentage of adults listening to podcasts rose from about 12% in 2010 to 41% in 2016, and then to over 55% in 2023 (Edison Research, 2023, pp. 394–402). Globally, there was a boom between 2018 and 2022—in just five years, the number of listeners in many countries increased by several dozen per cent (Nielsen, 2023, pp. 253–262). As a result, podcasts have become a mass audio medium, comparable to radio or music streaming services in terms of audience engagement.

Literature Review

The development of podcasting as a media format has been widely discussed in both the academic literature and industry reports, particularly in the context of digital media transformation and platformisation processes. Early studies conceptualised podcasts primarily as an extension of blogging and amateur broadcasting practices, emphasising their decentralised and participatory nature. As Bergman (2017) notes, early podcast production was largely driven by enthusiasts, with minimal commercial involvement and limited potential for advertising.

The rapid growth of podcast audiences after 2014, often associated with the success of the podcast *Serial*, marked a turning point in the perception of podcasts as a viable mass medium. Subsequent research has highlighted the increasing professionalisation of podcast production and the emergence of structured business models. Industry analyses indicate a significant expansion in both the number of available podcasts and the scale of podcast listenership, positioning podcasts alongside traditional audio media such as radio (Nielsen, 2023; Edison Research, 2023).

A substantial body of literature has focused on podcast monetisation, identifying advertising as the dominant revenue model. Studies consistently demonstrate the effectiveness of podcast advertising, particularly in the form of host-read endorsements, which are perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional advertising formats (Jones, 2025; Meyers, 2024). At the same time, research highlights the growing importance of dynamic ad insertion technologies and programmatic audio systems, which enable more precise audience targeting and increase the attractiveness of podcasts to large-scale advertisers (IAB & PwC, 2023).

In parallel, alternative monetisation models have also been examined, including subscription-based access, listener patronage, and branded content. Subscription models, supported by platforms such as Apple Podcasts and Spotify, reflect broader trends towards direct-to-consumer media strategies. Patronage models, often implemented through crowdfunding platforms, have been analysed as mechanisms for supporting the sustainability of independent creators and niche content production. Branded content, in turn, has been discussed within the framework of content marketing and native advertising, emphasising the integration of commercial messages into editorial content.

Another important strand of research concerns the role of digital platforms in shaping the podcast ecosystem. Scholars and industry analysts point to increasing platform concentration and the growing influence of major technology companies such as Spotify, Apple, and YouTube. These platforms not only facilitate distribution but also actively shape monetisation strategies by introducing proprietary advertising systems, subscription mechanisms, and data-driven targeting solutions. This process is often interpreted within the broader framework of platformisation, which reconfigures power relations among creators, intermediaries, and audiences.

From a systems perspective, podcasting can be understood as a complex media ecosystem composed of multiple interdependent actors, including content creators, distribution platforms, advertising networks, and audiences. Systems thinking provides a useful analytical framework for examining these relationships, as it enables the integration of technological, economic, and institutional dimensions of media development (Hester & Adams, 2014; Williams, 2008).

Despite the growing body of literature on podcasting, several research gaps remain. First, existing studies often focus on individual aspects of the podcast market, such as advertising effectiveness or platform strategies, without providing an integrated, system-level analysis. Second, there is a noticeable imbalance between research on mature markets (particularly the United States) and studies addressing smaller language markets such as Poland. Finally, limited attention has been paid to the interaction between monetisation models, advertising technologies, and platform dynamics as interconnected elements of a broader media ecosystem.

This article addresses these gaps by adopting a systems approach to podcast monetisation that integrates perspectives on business models, platformisation, and advertising infrastructures, with particular emphasis on the Polish media context in relation to global trends.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a systems analysis of the podcast ecosystem. The research approach integrates literature review,

secondary data analysis, and conceptual modelling, allowing for a comprehensive examination of podcast monetisation as a multidimensional socio-economic phenomenon.

The primary method employed in this study is a structured literature review encompassing both academic publications and industry reports. Academic sources provide the theoretical grounding for understanding media ecosystems, platformisation processes, and monetisation strategies, while industry reports offer up-to-date empirical data on podcast audiences, advertising revenues, and market trends. Key sources include reports published by organisations such as Nielsen, Edison Research, IAB, and Eurozet & Publicis Groupe, as well as analytical materials produced by industry platforms and research institutions.

In addition to the literature review, the study incorporates secondary data analysis. Quantitative data on audience size, market growth, and advertising performance are used to contextualise the development of podcast monetisation models. These data are not subjected to statistical analysis but are interpreted descriptively to support the identification of structural trends and patterns within the podcast market.

The analytical framework is based on a systems perspective, which conceptualises podcasting as an interconnected ecosystem composed of multiple actors, including content creators, distribution platforms, advertising networks, and audiences. This approach enables the identification of relationships among technological infrastructures, economic mechanisms, and institutional dynamics that shape monetisation processes. Systems analysis is particularly well suited to examining complex media environments characterised by rapid technological change and multilevel interactions (Hester & Adams, 2014).

The research process involved three main stages. First, relevant literature and industry reports were identified and selected based on their relevance to podcast monetisation, platform dynamics, and advertising technologies. Second, the collected materials were analysed to identify key themes related to monetisation models, platform roles, and advertising infrastructures. Third, these themes were integrated into a coherent analytical framework, enabling the identification of patterns and interdependencies within the podcast ecosystem.

It is important to note that the study has certain limitations. The reliance on secondary data means that the analysis depends on the availability and quality of existing reports, which may differ in methodology and scope. Furthermore, the rapidly evolving nature of the podcast market may limit the long-term validity of some findings. Finally, the study focuses primarily on qualitative interpretation rather than quantitative modelling, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings.

Despite these limitations, the adopted methodological approach provides a robust basis for understanding the structural dynamics of podcast monetisation and enables the formulation of theoretically grounded and empirically informed conclusions.

Podcast Monetisation Models

Podcast monetisation has evolved alongside the maturation of the podcast market. In the early stages, the dominant model was free access to content, possibly supported by voluntary donations from listeners, dominated. As audiences grew and demand for podcast advertising emerged, a variety of business models began to take shape. Currently, several principal models to monetise podcasts can be identified.

The main forms of content monetisation are advertising and sponsorship. Advertising is the oldest and still dominant model of podcast monetisation worldwide. It involves incorporating marketing messages into podcast content—these can be traditional advertising blocks (e.g., 15–60 second audio spots inserted before, during or after an episode) or sponsored messages read by the host (so-called host-read ads). From the very beginning of podcasts, the latter format has been particularly popular—programme hosts personally recommending a sponsor's product or service—which gave the advertisements a more authentic and engaging character. As the market grew, advertising expenditure for podcasts increased. In the United States—the largest market—podcast advertising revenues grew at a triple-digit rate in the early 2010s, exceeding $1 billion per year in 2021 and reaching approximately $1.8 billion in 2022 (Meyers, 2024, pp. 42–50). Despite the more difficult macroeconomic conditions in 2023, this market continued to grow, reaching £1.9 billion (+5% y/y) (Meyers, 2024, pp. 41–44). Importantly, this growth rate exceeded that of most other digital advertising channels, making podcasts the fastest growing segment of audio advertising. The outlook for the coming years remains optimistic, with double-digit growth expected to return and exceed £2 billion per year as early as 2024 (Meyers, 2024, pp. 49–55). Globally, the value of the podcast advertising market is more difficult to estimate, but according to some analyses, it will be in the range of $3–4 billion in 2024 (Jones, 2025, pp. 283–292). Although these amounts still represent less than 1% of digital advertising expenditure (Jones, 2025, pp. 285–288), the share of podcasts is growing steadily as their consumption increases. Importantly, podcast advertising attracts advertisers from a variety of industries—from finance, entertainment and media to FMCG brands—and the format is known for its high effectiveness in building relationships with audiences. The specificity of podcast advertising lies in the high engagement of listeners and the resulting trust in the messages. Research shows that podcast listeners are much more tolerant of advertising than, for example, video service users: as many as 88% of regular listeners agree with the statement that "listening to a certain number of adverts is a fair price to pay for free content" (Edison Research, 2023, pp. 15–23). Over 40% of listeners say they have purchased a product or service after hearing an advertisement in a podcast (Edison Research, 2023, pp. 13–17). In Poland, acceptance of promotional content

is also high—72% of Polish listeners have encountered advertising in a podcast, and half of them say that it does not discourage them from continuing to listen (Eurozet & Publicis, 2025b, pp. 95–103). The most trusted forms are episode or programme sponsorship (acceptance reaches 74% of respondents) and product placement in conversation (73%), while typical advertising blocks during the programme (62%) or entire company broadcasts created by brands (48%) are slightly less trusted—which shows that the more "organic" and unobtrusive the advertising, the better the reception (Eurozet & Publicis, 2025b, pp. 95–100). As a result, podcasts are perceived by marketers as a medium conducive to building brand awareness and credibility. For example, contact with a brand advertising in a podcast makes 30% of listeners trust it more, and 26% consider it more attractive (Eurozet & Publicis, 2025b, pp. 101–109). Such performance indicators attract more advertisers to podcasts, even despite certain challenges (e.g., Publicis, 2025b, pp. 101–109). Such performance indicators attract more advertisers to podcasts, even despite certain challenges (e.g., limited measurability of reach compared to visual media). It is worth noting that the advertising model in podcasts has undergone a technological transformation. Initially, advertisements were permanently "baked-in" to the audio file—recorded together with the content and unchanged for every listener. Nowadays, dynamic ad insertion (DAI) has become the standard, i.e. the automatic insertion of adverts when an episode is downloaded or streamed, which enables rotation and targeting of messages. According to an IAB report, over 90% of advertising revenue in podcasts is now generated through dynamically served ads, replacing the old fixed integrations (IAB, 2023, pp. 1–4). This means that most listeners may receive different advertisements in the same episode—tailored, for example, to their location, listening time or demographic profile—and archived episodes may also contain current advertisements (instead of outdated messages from years ago). This flexibility has significantly increased the appeal of podcasts to larger-scale advertisers who expect to reach their target groups precisely and be able to optimise their campaigns quickly. Sponsorship is a special case of advertising—it involves linking a brand to an entire podcast or a specific episode. The sponsor often receives exposure in the form of a dedicated segment ("this episode was created in collaboration with..."), and their message is sometimes conveyed in the form of a conversation or interview instead of a typical commercial. Sponsorship is sometimes perceived as a milder form of advertising that integrates with the content—as can be seen in the aforementioned acceptance rates (the most popular form of advertising among listeners). For creators, this means the possibility of obtaining significant, stable funding (often the sponsor pays for a series of episodes or for industry exclusivity for a given podcast). For example, a popular Polish technology podcast could be sponsored by an IT brand, which would thereby build its image as an expert. The effectiveness of advertising in podcasts translates into specific

market indicators. According to Nielsen research, advertising campaigns in this medium can increase brand awareness by an average of 13 percentage points—a result that surpasses many traditional channels (Nielsen, 2023, pp. 265–273). In addition, as many as 88% of listeners declare that they have taken some action under the influence of an advertisement in a podcast (e.g., visiting the sponsor's website), which places podcasts above other media in terms of audience activation (Jones, 2025, pp. 293–302). Such data cement the dominant position of the advertising model in the podcast ecosystem.

The second important monetisation model is the subscription model, which involves offering listeners paid access to premium content. Unlike the advertising model (in which content is provided free of charge and costs are covered by advertisers), here subscribers pay the creator or platform directly for additional benefits—e.g., exclusive episodes, early access, ad-free listening or behind-the-scenes material. A major milestone was the launch of Apple Podcasts Subscriptions in 2021, which enabled podcasters to create paid channels within the Apple ecosystem. Similarly, Spotify introduced a subscription option on its platform (for creators using Spotify for Podcasters, formerly Anchor). Independent platforms and applications supporting paid audio content (e.g., Supercast, Glow.fm) have also emerged, although the podcast subscription ecosystem is fragmented. The subscription model depends on the existence of a loyal fan base willing to pay regularly for their favourite content. On a global scale, there is growing evidence that listeners are increasingly willing to support such content. According to available estimates, at the beginning of 2025, over 9.8 million Apple Podcasts users had paid for at least one podcast subscription, representing a 31% year-on-year increase (SQ Magazine, 2025, "Monetisation Trends" section). There are already over 500,000 paid programmes (i.e. podcasts offering premium subscriptions) on the Apple platform, ranging from small niche shows to large media productions (SQ Magazine, 2025, pp. 196–204). The average subscription price is around £3–5 per month, with Apple taking a 30% commission in the first year (15% in subsequent years) (SQ Magazine, 2025, pp. 197–205). Spotify also sought to attract creators—in its early years, it waived commissions, allowing them to retain almost 100% of their revenue to encourage the creation of premium content.

The advantages of subscriptions include independence from advertising and the ability to offer more specialised content targeted at an engaged community. Creators gain a stable source of income, which makes it easier to plan and invest in the development of their podcast. For the audience, the advantage is often the lack of advertising and the feeling of directly supporting their favourite creators (which builds a stronger bond). Subscriptions work especially well for educational, news or exclusive content, where there is a willingness to pay for valuable information. In Western markets, entire audio subscription platforms have even been created, such as Wondery+ (offering exclusive

documentary series) and the Luminary network. In Poland, the subscription model is still in its infancy, due to the shorter history of podcasts and a lower willingness to pay for digital content. Nevertheless, the first signs of change are emerging: TOK FM Klub—paid access to the archive and additional podcasts from Radio TOK FM—has gained several thousand subscribers, which shows that a certain group of listeners is willing to pay for convenience and unique audio content. In addition, the Empik Go platform (a subscription service with audiobooks) also includes original podcasts available exclusively to subscribers—this is an example of bundling, where podcasts are part of a broader package of premium content. A few independent creators in Poland are experimenting with their own subscriptions through services such as Patronite (see below) or by selling access to additional episodes on international platforms. Overall, however, the dominant model on the Polish market in 2025 remains free access financed by advertising, with the paid model still establishing its position. It should be emphasised that the subscription model is not easy to implement—it requires the creator to build a strong brand and community. Fragmentation can also be a problem: users would have to subscribe to many different creators separately, which can be inconvenient. Platforms are trying to remedy this by introducing, for example, channel bundles (Apple has introduced a podcast bundling feature that allows to combine several paid shows into one package for a single fee) (SQ Magazine, 2025, pp. 201–204). Despite these challenges, the direct-to-consumer trend is growing—increasingly, media outlets and creators are treating podcasts as another pillar of their subscription strategy, analogous to paywalls in the press or VOD platforms in video. Global podcast subscription revenues are projected to reach approximately $1.2 billion in 2025, which is still a smaller share of the pie than advertising, but is growing rapidly (SQ Magazine, 2025, pp. 199–203).

A model similar to subscriptions, although based on a slightly different philosophy, is listener patronage. In this approach, listeners voluntarily support their favourite podcast financially, most often through crowdfunding platforms (e.g., Patreon globally or Patronite in Poland). In return, they may receive additional benefits—but this does not necessarily involve a traditional paywall. Often, all main content remains free, and patrons support the creator out of a desire to appreciate their work and ensure the continued production of the podcast. Patronage is sometimes referred to as a community-supported model: a group of the most loyal fans finance what everyone else can enjoy free of charge. Globally, Patreon has played a huge role in monetising independent podcasters. Thousands of podcasts generate a steady monthly income there—from small sums to tens of thousands of dollars. Some creators offer patrons additional episodes, discussion groups or merchandise, while others simply thank them for their support on air. One example of success is the American podcast *Chapo Trap House*, which, thanks to its community of patrons, earned

over £70,000 per month on Patreon for a time, breaking the platform's records (Patreon data, 2021). Although this is an extreme case, it shows the potential of an engaged audience. In Poland, the patronage model has so far brought the most spectacular results. Dariusz Rosiak's podcast *Raport o stanie świata* (Report on the State of the World)—created by an experienced journalist after leaving Radio Trójka—has become a prime example of successful crowdfunding: since the beginning of 2020, listeners have been financing it through Patronite, enabling the programme to continue as an independent podcast. By May 2022, *Raport...* had exceeded PLN 100,000 per month in contributions from patrons (with approximately 6,800 active supporters), and the total amount collected since its launch exceeded PLN 2 million (Wirtualnemedia, 2022, pp. 88–96). Rosiak stated that this amount was "enough to function comfortably"—at that time, the team consisted of six people living off these revenues, and the podcast was able to finance reporting trips and ambitious projects (Wirtualnemedia, 2022, pp. 100–107). This is an unprecedented case in the Polish media, showing that grassroots community funding can ensure the independence and long-term sustainability of even demanding journalistic audio projects. Of course, the success of *Raport...* is due to a combination of unique factors: the creator's reputation, the quality of the content and the loyalty of the audience built up over the years. Nevertheless, an important precedent has been set—today, other Polish news and current affairs podcasts (e.g., *Stan po Burzy* and *Dałeś Głos*) also appeal to listeners for support. Patronite has become the main platform for this model in Poland. Apart from Rosiak, several podcasters earn several thousand zlotys a month there, which is sometimes enough to treat podcasting as a full-time job. Patronage is used especially by independent creators who do not want to or cannot count on large advertising budgets—e.g., podcasters dealing with narrow topics (history, science, culture) or those who deliberately do not want to "clutter" their content with advertisements and prefer to rely on their listeners. This model has an ideological element—many patrons support creators out of a sense of mission, a desire to maintain a valuable, niche voice in the public sphere. It is worth noting that the line between subscription and patronage can be blurred. Creators often offer different support tiers and differentiate benefits, which makes patronage similar to the classic freemium model (e.g., regular listeners get two episodes per month, patrons get four episodes). The decision on which model to choose therefore depends on the creator's strategy: whether they want to treat content as a commodity to be sold (in which case they introduce a paywall) or as a public good financed voluntarily (in which case they opt for patronage). In practice, hybrid models are increasingly common—for example, a podcast releases a free episode every week, but every other episode is premium and only available to patrons. This approach allows the creator to maintain a wide audience (thanks to free content that builds reach) while monetising the most engaged fans.

Another important monetisation model is to create content on behalf of sponsors or in collaboration with brands, i.e. branded content. In this model, the podcast becomes a content marketing tool—the company finances the production of a programme related to its area of activity in order to subtly promote its brand image or convey valuable content consistent with its brand values. A global example is *The Message* podcast—a futuristic audio thriller financed by General Electric, which also promoted GE technologies. Another example is a series of podcasts created by banks, insurance companies and clothing brands, which tell stories related to topics important to the brand (e.g., personal finance, healthy lifestyles, entrepreneurship), without being classic product advertisements. For podcast creators, collaboration with a brand can take the form of a media partnership. For example, a well-known podcaster may record a limited series of episodes with financial support from a sponsor, where the themes are agreed in advance but editorial independence is maintained. Such branded podcasts (sometimes referred to as corporate podcasts) are becoming increasingly common in Poland—for example, an automotive brand may sponsor a series of talks on road safety, and a financial institution may sponsor a podcast educating listeners about investing. For the company, this is an opportunity to reach audiences through valuable content, and for the podcaster, it is a source of income and often the opportunity to produce at a higher level thanks to the budget. According to American market research, the share of so-called branded content in the overall revenue structure of podcasts is growing—it was predicted that between 2021 and 2023, the share of native advertising, sponsored content and brand mentions would increase from 48% to 61% of all revenue (IAB, 2022, pp. 5–7). This trend shows that traditional advertising are gradually being supplemented or replaced by more subtle forms of brand integration with content. In Poland, the area of branded content in podcasts is still developing. For example, Orange Polska has produced its own technology podcast educating about the 5G network, Allegro has sponsored a series of interviews with e-commerce entrepreneurs, and large banks are starting to create economic podcasts under their own brand. For companies, this is a relatively inexpensive way to reach a younger, more engaged audiences in a long-form format (which allows for a more complex message than in advertising). For the podcast creators, it is another source of funding without generating the same level of audience resistance as much as intrusive advertising, because they receive valuable content (often from experts sharing their knowledge) paid for by the sponsor. Partnerships can also include merchandise sales and live events as indirect monetisation models. Popular podcasts build communities around themselves, to which they then sell products (T-shirts, mugs with quotes from the show) or tickets to live recordings and fan meetings. Although this is a rather additional, small stream of revenue, it shows the growing importance of the podcast brand—podcasters are becoming influencers whose personal brands generate commercial value in

their own right. In Poland, for example, the creators of the well-known entertainment podcast *Imponderabilia* have already organised paid events with audience participation, and the author of the podcast *Historia bez cenzury* (Uncensored History) sells books and merchandise under his brand. This phenomenon indicates that monetisation can go beyond the audio file itself, encompassing the multiplatform exploitation of a show's reputation.

It should also be noted that the rapid growth of the podcast market has recently been accompanied by signs of market correction. Around 2023, analysts began referring to a possible "podcast bubble", particularly in the United States. Several podcast studios and platforms reduced investment, cancelled projects and laid off staff, after initial expectations regarding advertising revenues proved overly optimistic. The difficulty of accurately measuring advertising effectiveness and attributing conversions to podcast listening has reduced some advertisers' confidence in the medium. As a result, the industry has increasingly focused on improving measurement standards and diversifying monetisation models beyond traditional advertising.

The Role of Large Podcast Platforms

Audio distribution platforms—such as Spotify, Apple Podcasts, YouTube Music and YouTube—play a key role in the podcast ecosystem, largely determining both the ways in which podcasts are consumed and the earning potential of creators. In the early days of podcasting, Apple Podcasts (iTunes) served as the primary platform—an open RSS directory that was not directly involved in monetisation (Apple neither introduced advertising nor charged fees, but only served as a directory for podcasts). However, with the commercialisation of the medium, large platforms began to actively compete for dominance by introducing their own business and monetisation features.

Spotify is an example of the most aggressive expansion. With hundreds of millions of music users. Around 2018, the platform also set out to become a leader in podcasting. Within a few years, it acquired major players (podcast studios Gimlet and Parcast, distribution tool Anchor, advertising platform Megaphone) and integrated these acquisitions into a single ecosystem. As a result, Spotify now offers a comprehensive solution: from podcast hosting, to audience analytics, to advertising monetisation (thanks to the acquisition of Megaphone and integration with audio advertising networks). The company has also introduced its own Streaming Ad Insertion technology, which, unlike traditional file-based podcasts, allows real-time delivery of personalised ads to Spotify listeners (using data on users' profiles, behaviour, and even the time of day). This has brought the podcast advertising model closer to the model used in online advertising, where ads can be precisely targeted and dynamically

optimised. As a result, Spotify launched a self-service advertising programme, as well as a Partner Programme for creators, allowing them to generate revenues through multiple channels—from advertising, premium subscriptions and, for example, built-in support features (Jones, 2025, pp. 299–307). Spotify's strategy also includes content available only on this platform—content available only on this platform. The most notable example is the aforementioned contract with Joe Rogan, whose show became available exclusively on Spotify. Similarly, other popular podcasts (e.g., Dax Shepard's Armchair Expert) were withdrawn from the open RSS ecosystem and moved exclusively to the Spotify app. The goal was to attract users and create a competitive advantage. Apple Podcasts, although historically a pioneer, remained open and neutral for a long time. However, in response to the actions of its competitors, Apple has also introduced monetisation tools—the aforementioned premium subscriptions (from 2021) and affiliate programmes for creators (Apple emphasises that it is particularly successful in the paid subscription segment, where it has an advantage over Spotify due to its integration with iOS and the App Store). According to analyses, Apple retains a large share of the podcast playback market (estimates for 2025: approx. 34% share in the US, just behind Spotify with 38%) and is particularly dominant on iPhone devices (SQ Magazine, 2025, pp. 228–236). In view of YouTube's expansion (more on that in a moment), Apple is trying to emphasise privacy and a high-quality environment—no aggressive tracking of users for advertising purposes, which is intended to build trust (SQ Magazine, 2025, pp. 240–244). For monetisation, this means that Apple is likely to be less involved in data-driven advertising (it has not launched its own programmatic advertising network in podcasts), focusing instead on paid content (subscriptions, individual premium episodes) and promoting its ecosystem of services (podcasts as added value to Apple devices). YouTube—although not a traditional podcast platform—is playing an increasingly important role, redefining podcasting through video. Many popular podcasts have started recording their conversations on video and publishing them on YouTube, which has attracted a huge audience beyond typical audio apps. YouTube offers creators something that was missing in the RSS ecosystem: easy monetisation through advertising (AdSense). When a video podcast gets a large number of views, the creator automatically generates revenue from ads displayed before and during the video—without the need to find sponsors themselves. This has prompted many podcasters to focus on YouTube as their main channel (or at least equivalent to audio distribution). In the US, 2022 marked a significant moment: a study by Edison Research showed that YouTube had become the most popular platform for podcast consumption, ahead of Spotify and Apple (YouTube's share among podcast users reached about 25%)[4]. The platform responded by creating a dedicated Podcasts section and integrating podcasts into the YouTube Music service. This means that the line between traditional audio podcasts

and video content is blurring—a new paradigm of "podcast as a video format" is emerging. This is of great importance for monetisation: video ads on YouTube have an established auction model, price lists and a revenue sharing system, which gives creators a predictable income (albeit dependent on algorithms and platform policy). For example, the popular Polish podcast *Imponderabilia* has hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube, which generates real revenue from AdSense—this is a model that has been unusual for audio podcasts, where the creator would have to sell such a large advertising equivalent themselves. In other words, YouTube has introduced automation of podcast monetisation: if you have viewership, you earn revenue through the platform without having to seek out advertisers. This lowers the entry threshold for monetisation, although of course the competition for attention on YouTube is fierce and requires adaptation in content format (e.g., attractive videos, shorter clips). In Poland, YouTube is particularly important—a 2025 study showed that as many as 66% of Polish listeners use YouTube to listen to podcasts, making it the most popular "podcast application" in the country (followed by Spotify with 36% and Empik Go with 12%)[5]. This is due, among other things, to the lack of technical barriers (everyone knows YouTube) and a preference for consuming podcasts in video form. For advertisers, YouTube offers proven demographic targeting and analytics capabilities, which is why podcast campaigns increasingly include YouTube (e.g., a sponsor decides to feature a product in the video frame).

Other platforms also play an important role: Google Podcasts (gradually being replaced by YouTube Music), Amazon Music (integrating Audible and Wondery content), Pandora and iHeartRadio (in the US), and locally, for example, the Audioteka and Open FM apps. Each of them can offer their own monetisation opportunities—for example, Amazon integrates podcasts with Amazon Ads and Prime subscriptions, while iHeartMedia is building an advertising network based on its podcasts and radio stations. However, globally, Spotify, Apple and YouTube form the three dominant platforms. Their influence extends beyond distribution—they increasingly shape the very logic of podcast monetisation: Spotify is pushing a hybrid model (advertisements + subscriptions, plus exclusivity), Apple is pushing a quality model (premium subscriptions, Apple ecosystem) without aggressive advertising, and YouTube is pushing an open model with monetisation through video advertising algorithms. For creators, this means they need to adjust their strategy: for example, whether to remain independent and distribute their podcasts across multiple platforms (relying on their own advertising agreements) or to enter into a partnership with a platform (e.g. by signing a Spotify Originals agreement, which will provide upfront funding but limit the availability of content).

From a Polish perspective, the dominance of global platforms is undeniable—domestic podcast platforms and applications play a niche role. The exception is Radio TOK FM, which, thanks to its unique position (a news

broadcaster with on-demand content), operates its own application with paid podcasts. In general, however, the monetisation of Polish podcasts is closely linked to the mechanisms introduced by the the major global platforms. So if Spotify launches its Ads Marketplace programme in Poland (which happened, among other things, through integration with Adswizz/Triton), Polish creators can add their programmes to the global audio advertising network and earn revenue per stream—even if they have a small audience individually, collectively they become part of a broader advertising offering targeting the Polish market"", they become part of the offer for advertisers. The platforms also enable geographical targeting of advertisements—a Polish listener to a global podcast can hear a Polish advertisement inserted dynamically, which creates a new market for domestic advertisers (e.g., they can purchase a campaign in the category "sports podcasts in Polish" regardless of individual titles). This type of programmatic approach to advertising sales (more on this in the next chapter) means that large platforms are becoming new advertising brokers—effectively competing with traditional advertising networks or podcasters' independent efforts to find sponsors.

However, entering into contractual relationships with major platforms often involves strategic compromises. Exclusive distribution agreements may provide financial stability and promotional support but simultaneously limit the openness of the podcast ecosystem. Creators who accept exclusivity deals may lose access to audiences using competing platforms and also relinquish part of their control over distribution, audience data, and advertising strategies. Some podcasters therefore pursue alternative strategies based on platform independence and direct audience support. A widely discussed example is the American podcaster Joe Budden, who publicly disclosed the financial performance of his independent podcast network to demonstrate that creators can build sustainable businesses without entering into exclusive platform contracts.

Advertising Networks and Programmatic Audio Technology

As podcast advertising grew in importance, the need emerged for intermediaries capable of connecting thousands of independent podcasters with hundreds of potential advertisers. This role is fulfilled by podcast advertising networks and programmatic audio systems that enable the automated purchase of advertising inventory. Podcast ad networks operate on a similar principle to those in the blogosphere or on websites—they bring together many publishers (podcasts), standardise the advertising offer and sell them to advertisers at scale. For example, the American network Midroll (Stitcher Ads) specialised in connecting popular comedy and news podcasts with advertisers by offering packages of sponsored episodes. Other global networks include Acast (a Swedish company that has

been pioneering targeted advertising in podcasts since 2014—now also operates in Poland), iHeartMedia (a traditional radio group from the US that has created its own podcast network and sells cross-media) and Wondery (Amazon). These networks often provide DAI technology—hosting podcast episodes and inserting advertisements dynamically—relieving the podcaster of the technical side of monetisation. For creators, joining a network usually means sharing revenue—e.g., 70% for the creator, 30% for the network—but in return, the podcast is included in campaigns that would be difficult to obtain on its own. A small podcast with 10,000 listens per episode is unlikely to be noticed by a large media agency, but a network can gather 100 such podcasts on similar topics and sell a total of one million listens as an advertising package. This allows even medium-sized or small creators to earn something from advertising, although the unit rates tend to be low. In the podcast industry, the accepted metric is CPM (cost per mille)—the cost of reaching a thousand listeners. The average CPM for audio ads in podcasts is approximately US$18–25 (for a 30-second spot), with top shows in narrow demographic groups commanding higher rates (e.g., US$40–50 CPM) (SQ Magazine, 2025, pp. 290–294). In Poland, due to the smaller market, CPMs are lower—industry estimates indicate a range of PLN 10–20 per thousand views, although there is no official data. To illustrate: a podcast with 10,000 episode views, broadcasting two adverts at an average of PLN 20 CPM, could earn approx. 2 x 10,000 ÷ 1,000 x PLN 20 = PLN 400 per episode. These are not impressive amounts, which shows that scaling reach or acquiring premium sponsors is the key to more significant revenues.

This is where programmatic audio comes into play, an automated purchasing model known from display and video advertising. Programmatic audio in podcasts allows advertisers to bid in real time for advertising inventory, based on various targeting criteria. This usually operates through advertising exchanges—for example, platforms such as Triton Digital and AdsWizz (both owned by global audio groups iHeart and SiriusXM, respectively) operate audio advertising exchanges where podcast slots, among other things, are available. When a user downloads or streams an episode, DAI systems can query such an exchange for an advertisement matching the listener's profile (e.g., an advertisement targeted at women aged 25–34 in large cities) and insert that advertisement dynamically. Everything happens automatically in a fraction of a second. This real-time bidding model in podcasts is still in its early stages, but it is developing rapidly because it attracts large advertisers with its scale and precision. Targeting podcast audiences is becoming increasingly sophisticated. At a basic level, you can target contextually—by content category (e.g., sports equipment ads go to fitness podcasts). You can also target geographically—for example, a campaign for a Polish retail chain will only be embedded in plays within Poland (detected by the listener's IP address). Programmatic audio also allows the use of device type and user behaviour data—e.g., different advertising

creatives for smartphones vs. smart speakers. Advanced platforms (such as Spotify) can use demographic data because users access service through authenticated accounts (their gender, age and music preferences are known). In fact, Spotify has a very rich user profile, which makes the ads served there extremely precise—the company boasts that the CTR (click-through rate) for dynamically served ads on Apple Podcasts (where listeners are usually anonymous) is 22% lower than on Spotify, suggesting the advantage of a data-collecting platform (SQ Magazine, 2025, pp. 203–207). Apple, on the other hand, focuses on privacy—it does not share user identifiers with external networks, which limits targeting to contextual and geographic targeting (SQ Magazine, 2025, pp. 241–244). As a result, the programmatic market for podcasts has developed more in environments such as Spotify and iHeart (where users listen through closed platform ecosystems) and less in the traditional RSS ecosystem (where players are independent applications such as Pocket Casts or Overcast, which do not share demographic data).

Programmatic audio is a relatively new phenomenon in the Polish market. In 2021, the Eurozet Group (owner of Radio Zet and, among other assets, the Audioteka platform) announced the implementation of OneAudio, a solution integrating radio and digital advertising sales, including podcast advertising (Audiobroker, 2021). Advertisers can purchase campaigns simultaneously on online radio and in podcasts from Eurozet's offering (mainly programmes produced by its own radio stations and content partners). In addition, global networks such as Acast have entered Poland—Acast has opened an office in Warsaw and acquired popular Polish podcasts to its network (e.g., *Stan po Burzy*), offering creators monetisation through international advertising. Local advertising networks are also emerging. For example, Audioteka offers advertising packages in its original productions, while Wirtualna Polska has experimented with selling advertising in podcasts from the WP portfolio. However, the scale is still small: many Polish advertisers are just learning about the podcast medium and do not always have dedicated audio creatives or KPIs for podcast campaigns.

The benefits of programmatic advertising include its efficiency and monetisation of the so-called long tail. Podcasts with relatively small audiences, which cannot attract sponsors on their own, can generate advertising revenue through their programmatic networks—although the income may be modest, the combined inventory of thousands of smaller podcasts, it adds up to a significant supply that can be offered to local or niche advertisers. The disadvantage is a partial loss of control—the podcaster does not always know which advertisements will be inserted into their episodes (they can set exclusion categories, but there is no full guarantee). There may be inappropriate brand associations or a decline in exclusivity. Some top creators therefore avoid programmatic advertising, preferring their own sponsors who are a better fit for the content and strengthen

the podcast's identitity (e.g., a well-known show may choose only a few premium sponsors per year, instead of giving slots to automatically served, often repetitive advertisements).

Targeting Podcast Audiences

As discussed above, one of the key factors for effective podcast monetisation, particularly through advertising, is the ability to precisely target audiences—so that the right message reaches the right group of listeners. For many years, podcasts were a medium with only limited targeting capabilities. Downloading files via RSS provided almost no information about listeners other than the IP address (enabling geolocation at best) and limited device data. As a result, early podcasts relied primarily on contextual targeting. Advertisers chose shows with content that matched their product (e.g., audio equipment was promoted in a music podcast), assuming that listeners would broadly match the desired customer profile. This contextual approach is still relevant and can be sufficient for podcasts with very specific themes (e.g., an advertisement for protein supplements in a bodybuilding podcast is likely to reach potentially interested listeners). However, in order for large marketing budgets to flow into podcasts, it was necessary to overcome these data limitations targeting mechanisms similar to those used in online advertising. The most important of these are:

1. Geographic targeting has become a standard feature thanks to dynamic ad insertion (DAI). The model allows advertisers to purchase campaigns limited to a specific country, region or even city. This is useful, for example, for retail chains (serving different advertisements in different cities), local events (promoting concerts only within a specific area) or brands operating regionally. In Poland, as early as around 2020, platforms such as Audioteka offered geographically targeted advertising—something that was unthinkable in traditional radio (where advertisement reach everywhere the signal reaches). This has made podcasts attractive to, for example, local authorities or regional e-commerce businesses.
2. Demographic targeting—e.g., by age or gender—remains more challenging unless the user is logged in. Streaming platforms have an advantage here: Spotify has access to demographic information (from registration, surveys or linked Facebook accounts), as do YouTube/Google. RSS-based applications, on the other hand, do not usually collect such data. Audience measurement panels provide a partial solution. for example, Nielsen Media in the United States has launched a service called Podcast Buying Power, where audience data is combined with its own consumer panels, allowing the demographic profile of a given podcast's audience to be estimated. This enables advertisers to plan campaigns for groups

such as women aged 25–44 with above-average incomes. In Poland, the industry relies more on declarative data—a Eurozet report (2025b) indicates that 54% of podcast listeners are women, 60% are aged 35+, and almost half have higher education[6][7]. Although such data provide a general picture of the target group, but we are still a long way from individual-level targeting.

3. Behavioural targeting—i.e. based on interests, lifestyle, purchasing behaviour—is still at an early stage in podcasts, but can be implemented indirectly. For example, Spotify can target advertisements based on music genres they listen to or listening patterns that may indicate particular lifestyle preferences such as fitness. Such data could also be used in relation to podcast advertising in the future. For instance, an advertisement for healthy food could be delivered to a listener whose activity on the platform suggests interest in fitness, regardless of which podcast they are currently listening to.
4. Device-based targeting—e.g., delivering different messages to smartphone and smart-speaker users—is both possible and widely used. This is important, for example, when advertisements include calls to action: an advertisement delivered on a smartphone may encourage users to click on a provided in the episode description, whereas through a smart speaker is more likely to direct listeners to visit a website or remember a web address. Programmatic audio systems can distinguish between device types and serve appropriately formatted advertisements.
5. Brand safety and brand suitability are closely related to audience targeting: advertisers can stipulate that their advertisement should not be placed alongside controversial content (political discussions, explicit language, etc.). Advertising networks classify podcasts according to content and exclude those that are undesirable for a given brand. In practice, large platforms (Apple, Spotify) enforce their policies—for example, Apple may remove a podcast that violates its rules (e.g., spreading hate speech). For Polish advertisers, it is important that their message is not in a context that conflicts with their brand values, so brand safety tools have been developed alongside the commercialisation of podcasts.

It should be noted that in Poland, due to the relatively modest size of the podcast market, targeting in podcast campaigns is often relatively simple: e.g., campaigns are often directed at broad categories, such as national news podcasts (i.e., targeting by genre and reach), without very sophisticated segmentation. However, as marketing investment increases, there will be a demand for more precise targeting—e.g., campaigns aimed at young mothers (in which case parenting podcasts plus possibly demographic data from platforms would be selected). The necessary technologies already exist, however, they just need to be more widely adopted by media planners. The future of targeting may

bring the integration of podcasts with the cross-media advertising ecosystem. For example, what a listener hears in a podcast may influence the adverts they see later on the internet (cross-channel retargeting). Or vice versa—someone who has visited an onlineretailer's website may be added to a segment that will be targeted by advertising in free podcasts (e.g., remind them about the promotion when they listen to the podcast in the evening). Although this sounds advanced, the underlying infrastructure is already largely available—it requires user identifiers and cooperation between audio platforms and display advertising platforms. In an era of growing concern for privacy (restrictions on cookies, GDPR), this may be limited by regulations, but the direction of media integration is clear. From the podcast creators' point of view, targeting is, on the one hand, an opportunity (it helps to monetise niche content—even a small but clearly profiled audience is valuable because it can be targeted with a specific message), and on the other hand, it may raise concerns about maintaining listener privacy. Many listeners value podcasts as a break from tracking platforms—the lack of personalisation was often seen as a positive thing. Now, listeners may begin to notice that podcast advertisements closely reflect their recent online activities—for example, hearing an advertisement for insurance shortly after searching for insurance offers online. Such experiences may create discomfort and increase expectations regarding transparency from platform providers, including clear explanations of why particular advertisements are being provided). This represents an ethical challenge that is likely to receive more attention as podcast advertising continues to digitise.

Barriers and Challenges to Monetisation

Despite the progress described above, the podcast monetisation market continues to face numerous barriers and challenges—technological, market-related and cultural. Discussing these challenges is essential in order to understand what factors may hinder further development and what problems need to be solved for monetisation models to mature.

One of the fundamental obstacles is the fragmentation of the podcast ecosystem. Podcasting is a decentralised environment in which thousands of creators operate independently across multiple platforms. The lack of a unified infrastructure or standardised audience measurement metrics makes it difficult for advertisers to achieve scale and effectively evaluate campaign performance. Although organisations such as the IAB have developed audience measurement standards, their implementation remains inconsistent across the industry. Advertisers often have to negotiate with multiple intermediaries, which limits the fluidity of advertising investments, and the lack of consistent data undermines confidence in the medium.

Measuring podcast effectiveness is another barrier. Unlike visual media, podcasts do not provide clickable interfaces, which limits the ability to attribute specific user actions to exposure to an advertisement. Download statistics do not necessarily indicate actual listening, and the discount codes used are a half-measure, mainly possible in e-commerce. As Nielsen (2023, pp. 275–281) points out, only 49% of marketers worldwide report being confident in their ability to measure ROI in p odcasts—the lowest score among digital channels.

Competition for audience attention is a universal challenge. Podcasts have to compete with music, social media and video-on-demand services for consumers' limited time. In Poland, traditional radio remains the dominant audio medium: more than 70% of the population listens to it every day, whereas only about 10% report listening to podcasts daily (Eurozet & Publicis Groupe, 2025). Consequently, changing audience habits and shifting advertising budgets towards podcasts will require time and market education.

Low advertising saturation is one of the factors making podcasts attractive to listeners, but it also potentially limits their revenue potential. Excessive commercialisation may lead to audience attrition. According to Riverside data (2025, pp. 752–755), 16% of listeners already report they would stop listening to a podcast if the advertisements became too intrusive. Creators must therefore skilfully balance the interests of advertisers and maintaining listener loyalty.

The limitations of small language markets, such as Poland, constitute a barrier to scale. Smaller reach translates into lower revenues, while local creators have limited access to global advertising budgets. Programmatic audio solutions are slow to emerge, and the number of potential advertising partners is limited. At the same time, the costs of producing a professional podcast are comparable globally, reducing the return on investment in smaller or peripheral markets.

The lack of professionalisation among creators further limits the market's potential. The low barrier to entry favours the development of podcasting, but also means that many creators lack commercial skills. Without knowledge of how to prepare media kits, pricing offers or establish relationships with advertising agencies, their content remains unmonetised. Associations and support initiatives are slowly emerging in Poland, but have not yet reached critical mass.

The growing dominance of major platforms creates an industry paradox. On the one hand, platforms such as Spotify, Apple or YouTube provide essential infrastructure, enabling global distribution, analytics and monetisation tools that individual creators could not develop independently. On the other hand, increasing platform concentration may reduce the autonomy of creators and reshape the open architecture that has historically characterised podcasting. From a systems perspective, platforms simultaneously stabilise and constrain the ecosystem: they facilitate scalability but may also centralise power and data within a limited number of technological intermediaries (Rodrigues Maia, Maçada, Lunardi, 2025).

Finally, legal and licensing issues—such as copyright compliance or content regulation—may become relevant as the market matures. The European Union is considering regulatory initiatives that would impose obligations on podcast platforms similar to those applicable to traditional media. This could lead to the need for content reporting, moderation and licensing, which would be a barrier to entry for many independent creators.

Despite these challenges, the podcast market has considerable potential for further growth. Trends point to consolidation, professionalisation, the development of new advertising formats and greater integration with e-commerce. We can expect the emergence of specialised agencies, the development of interactive formats, the growing use of artificial intelligence in content personalisation and language translation (Spotify, 2025), as well as the gradual standardisation of audience measurement metrics and audience currencies. In Poland, although development is progressing more slowly, we are seeing a growing presence of brands, the creation of original content and stronger interest from advertisers. Overcoming barriers requires cooperation between entities, market education and the implementation of technological solutions. Overall, the long-term outlook for podcast monetisation remains positive, provided that future growth is managed effectively.

Conclusions

Over the last decade, the podcast market has undergone a remarkable transformation, evolving from a niche hobby for audio enthusiasts into a rapidly growing segment of the media industry. An analysis of the evolution and the dominant monetisation paradigms currently shaping it allows us to draw several key conclusions.

Firstly, podcast monetisation is based on a variety of models, the most important of which are advertising (in the form of host-read and dynamically inserted advertisements), subscriptions and paid premium content, listener patronage, branded content and sponsorship. The global market is dominated by the advertising model, generating billions annually, but other forms of monetisation are gaining importance as complementary income streams (e.g., subscriptions to Apple Podcasts, which give creators an alternative or additional income alongside advertising). In Poland, the advertising-based monetisation is just gaining momentum, and voluntary patronage has played an important role so far (as evidenced by the success of initiatives such as *Raport o stanie świata*). It can be expected that with the professionalisation of the advertising market in podcasts, advertising will also become the main source of revenue for most popular podcasts in Poland—although niche and more popular projects will continue to rely on community support.

Secondly, major distribution platforms (Spotify, Apple, YouTube) have become key actors shaping the podcast ecosystem. They bring both opportunities—in the form of new monetisation tools, including programmatic advertising technologies, affiliate programmes, integration with subscription systems, and increased reach—and challenges, such as the creators' potential dependence on platform policies or the risk of a more closed ecosystem. Paradoxically, competition between the giants (Spotify vs Apple vs YouTube) benefits creators and advertisers, as it leads to innovation and competition in the services they provide. In the long term, sustainable market development will require a balance between platformisation and creator independence, so that podcasts remain an open medium while benefiting from the economies of scale and technological capabilities offered by the largest platforms.

Thirdly, when analysing the Polish perspective against the global one, the Polish market remains at an earlier stage of monetisation maturity, although it is developing rapidly. Podcasts gained widespread popularity in 2019–2023, which laid the foundations for the development of business models. Challenges specific to Poland include a relatively limited advertising expenditure compared with English-speaking markets, a lower willingness of audiences to pay for content, and the need to educate marketers about the potential of podcasts. Nevertheless, the Polish market has certain advantages—e.g., strong radio traditions and a long-standing popularity of spoken-word formats—which may favour the further growth of podcasts as a medium. Language also remains an important constraint—Polish content has limited potential to reach international audiences—which limits certain models (e.g., the inability to attract global advertisers and sponsors). However, it can be concluded that over the next 2–3 years, the Polish podcast segment will undergo further commercialisation: there will be more professional productions financed in advance (by platforms or sponsors), national audio advertising networks will emerge, increasing revenues for creators. As the market continues to mature, the most successful Polish podcasters may achieve earnings comparable to those of leading YouTube creators or bloggers.

Fourthly, existing barriers and threats—such as problems with measuring effectiveness, market fragmentation, the risk of audience fatigue resulting from excessive advertising, or limitations resulting from the small scale of individual podcasts—are significant, but do not appear insurmountable. The industry is taking steps towards standardisation (e.g., IAB Podcast Measurement), improving the use of audience data for targeting (which increases advertising effectiveness and audience satisfaction through more tailored messages), and creators are learning to optimise their business models (e.g., by building a multi-platform presence, diversifying revenue streams or collaborating with networks). Continued cooperation between stakeholders—creators, platforms, advertisers and listeners—will be key to developing a sustainable ecosystem that balances the interests of all parties.

Fifth, looking ahead, dynamic growth and innovation are expected to continue. Forecasts indicate that globally, podcasts will become a multi-billion dollar industry within the next 5–10 years (The Business Research Company, 2025, pp. 284–292, 345–353). The integration of podcasts into the wider digital media ecosystem will increase—perhaps new ways of consumption will emerge (e.g., personalised podcast playlists), new advertising formats (interactive, real-time contextual) and increasingly advanced audience analytics (e.g., advertising effectiveness and brand lift measurement available almost instantly thanks to measurement panels). In Poland, following the example of Western countries, large companies and public institutions are likely to enter the market, financing their own audio content (corporate, local government and educational podcasts), which will further expand the spectrum of monetisation beyond purely commercial advertising, encouraging a hybrid funding models: somewhat like public radio (patronage, grants) intertwined with a commercial model (advertising, sponsorship).

In summary, the podcast ecosystem is evolving from an experimental stage into a mature phase of commercialisation, while retaining much of its defining characteristics: a close relationship between creators and listeners, the diversity of niche content, the flexibility of format. Monetisation, although sometimes viewed as a purely commercial necessity, plays a key role in ensuring the long-term sustainability and continued development of this medium. It enables creators to professionalise their activities and invest in higher-quality content, advertisers to reach engaged audiences, and platforms to continue innovating to improve the podcast listening experience. The most likely scenario for the coming years is further mutually reinforcing growth: as audiences expand, the more money flows into the market, which in turn attracts new creators and investments in content, which in turn increases the attractiveness of podcasts to audiences. If emerging obstacles are overcome wisely, podcasts have the potential to become one of the defining media formats of the twenty-first century, combining the best features of radio (the intimacy of voice and narration) with the potential of the internet (global reach, on-demand, personalisation)—and podcast economy will become as sophisticated and economically significant as that of other digital media.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / *perspectives* on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.09

The Development of Media Management in Central Asia

ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a comparative study of the development of media management in five Central Asian countries. Based on an analysis of institutional conditions and management practices in media organisations, it demonstrates that similarities and differences in media management in the region are shaped not so much by the degree of formal liberalisation of media markets, but rather by the nature of the interaction between the state, market mechanisms, and institutional legacies. This confirms the analytical value of the media management concept for the study of media transformation in post-Soviet societies. The empirical results reveal the hybrid nature of Central Asian media systems, characterised by contextual adaptation and multi-level governance. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan exhibit more dynamic development of the digital media environment and an expanding private media sector, while Tajikistan and Turkmenistan maintain poorly diversified and predominantly state-controlled media systems. Kyrgyzstan occupies an intermediate position, combining the presence of private media with increased regulatory restrictions. Overall, media management in the region is characterised by high cross-country variation and a stable hybrid structure.

KEYWORDS: media management, Central Asia, journalism

STRESZCZENIE

Rozwój zarządzania mediami w Azji Środkowej

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia wyniki badania porównawczego rozwoju zarządzania mediami w pięciu krajach Azji Środkowej. Na podstawie analizy uwarunkowań instytucjonalnych i praktyk zarządzania w organizacjach medialnych wykazano, że podobieństwa i różnice w zarządzaniu mediami w regionie kształtowane są nie tyle przez stopień formalnej liberalizacji rynków medialnych, ile

Suggested citation: Myssayeva, K. & Akynbayeva, A. (2026). The Development of Media Management in Central Asia. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 137–158. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.09
Submitted: 08.01.2026 Accepted: 06.05.2026

raczej przez charakter interakcji między państwem, mechanizmami rynkowymi i dziedzictwem instytucjonalnym. Potwierdza to analityczne znaczenie koncepcji zarządzania mediami dla badań nad transformacją mediów w społeczeństwach postsowieckich. Wyniki empiryczne wskazują na hybrydowy charakter systemów medialnych Azji Środkowej, odznaczających się adaptacją kontekstową i wielopoziomowym zarządzaniem. Kazachstan i Uzbekistan charakteryzują się bardziej dynamicznym rozwojem cyfrowego środowiska medialnego i rozwijającym się prywatnym sektorem medialnym, podczas gdy Tadżykistan i Turkmenistan utrzymują słabo zróżnicowane i w przeważającej mierze kontrolowane przez państwo modele. Kirgistan zajmuje pozycję pośrednią, łącząc obecność mediów prywatnych z rosnącymi ograniczeniami regulacyjnymi. Ogólnie rzecz biorąc, zarządzanie mediami w regionie charakteryzuje się dużą zmiennością między krajami i stabilną strukturą hybrydową.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: zarządzanie mediami, Azja Środkowa, dziennikarstwo

Introduction

Theoretical and empirical research on media management has gained significant prominence in recent years. Driven by the general trend toward comparative research in the broader field of mass communications, media management as an analytical concept and object of scholarly analysis has assumed a central position in media studies. Works by Albarran, Chan-Olmsted and Wirth (Eds.) (2006), Compaine and Gomery (2000), Christensen and Overdorf (2000), Greco (1999), Gershon (2000), Lacy and Blanchard (2003), Picard and van Weezel (2008), and Picard (2004), Mierzejewska and Hollifield (2006) represent just a few examples of the extensive and growing body of literature in this field.

One reason media scholars are increasingly turning to the concept of media management is the recognition that the transformation of media systems cannot be explained solely through the lens of political regimes, normative models of journalism, or issues of freedom of expression. In the face of digitalisation, audience fragmentation, and intensifying competition from global platforms, media organisations increasingly depend on management decisions, economic strategies, and organisational models to sustain their sustainability and ability to adapt to the changing media environment (Mierzejewska & Hollifield, 2006). Although this concept purports to bridge general management theory and the specifics of the media industry, the field of media management itself remains far from clearly defined or theoretically coherent (Küng, 2007).

Another important advantage of using media management as an analytical starting point lies in two key characteristics of the concept of management in the social sciences. First, its interdisciplinary nature, which allows for

the integration of economic, sociological, political, and cultural approaches to the analysis of media organisations. Second, its focus on decision-making processes that link the structural constraints of media systems to the day-to-day activities of editorial offices and media managers (Jung, 2022). This approach enables the analysis of media not only as a public institution but also as an organisational actor operating under conditions of limited resources, regulatory pressures, and market competition. Furthermore, this perspective remains open to the constant rethinking and transformation of journalism, as management itself is a process of continuous change, revision, and redefinition.

Thus, the concept of media management integrates earlier research examining how news routines and professional cultural norms shape journalists' work (Hirsch, 1977), as well as how media production technologies, as elements of organisational culture, influence the formation and evolution of the professional norms underpinning news routines (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989; Killebrew, 2003).

To avoid conceptual ambiguity, the distinction between media management and media governance is clarified early in the paper. Media management refers to the practical management of media organisations, which includes leading teams, producing content, and developing business strategies. Media governance, on the other hand, refers to the broader framework of rules, policies, and institutional processes that shape the functioning of the media system within society.

In this study, we examine media governance in Central Asia through the lens of media management, as these everyday practices reveal how governance operates and how it is applied, negotiated, and experienced within the region's media systems.

This perspective allows us to consider media production as the outcome of the interaction among journalists' professional values, management decisions, and institutional constraints, which is particularly valuable in analysing media systems in the context of hybrid political regimes and constrained media markets that characterise Central Asian countries.

The primary goal of this study is to analyse media governance in Central Asian countries in the context of the interaction between established theoretical models of media management and local management practices. The article examines the key factors that shape media management in five countries of the region: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, including state regulation, economic sustainability, digital transformation, and human resource constraints. It focuses on the following research questions:

RQ1: How is media governance conceptualised in academic studies of Central Asian media systems?

RQ2: What dominant models of governance and state regulation have emerged in relation to media organisations in the region?

RQ3: How do state regulation, institutional legacies, and digital transformation shape media governance practices in Central Asia?
RQ4: To what extent does the existing research reflect hybrid models of media governance that combine market-oriented, state-oriented, and legacy-based approaches?

We recognise that such descriptive comparisons can provide only a broad approximation of the complex, multi-layered differences among media management models, as substantial systemic variation also exist within individual countries. In this sense, this article is viewed as a first step in a comprehensive analysis of media governance in Central Asia through the lens of media management practices.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework.

This study distinguishes between media governance, media management, and media systems as analytically distinct yet interrelated levels of analysis. Media management refers to organisational and strategic practices of individual media outlets, including decision-making processes, resource allocation, and business models. In the Central Asian context, these practices are shaped by hybrid ownership structures, political influence, and ongoing digital transformation. Media governance refers to the legal, regulatory, and institutional frameworks that shape media activity. It encompasses both state regulation and interactions between state institutions, media actors, and, increasingly, international organisations and digital platforms. In Central Asia, governance remains largely state-centred, although it is gradually incorporating more complex, multifaceted dynamics. Media systems describe the broader structural configuration of relationships among media, politics, and society.

An important starting point for this study is the assumption that media governance is operationalised through organisational practices and should therefore be analysed not only at the institutional level but also through the actions of media organisations, institutional mechanisms, and managerial decision-making, rather than solely through formal ownership structures or regulatory frameworks. This approach allows us to view media management as a process in which economic interests, professional journalistic norms, technological capabilities, and political constraints interact to shape the operating models of media organisations (Jung, 2022).

Within the existing literature, media governance is most often conceptualised as a set of strategic and operational practices aimed at ensuring the sustainability of media organisations in the face of uncertainty and structural constraints (Albarran, 2002; Picard, 2004). These practices include resource allocation, the formulation of editorial policy, business model adaptation, and

the management of human resources and technological processes. At the same time, media management differs fundamentally from management in other sectors of the economy because of the dual nature of media as both economic organisations and public institutions with social and cultural responsibilities (Küng, 2007; Picard & van Weezel, 2008).

A substantial body of research emphasises that media management decisions cannot be examined outside the institutional context in which they are made. The institutional approach emphasises the role of formal rules, informal norms, and historically established practices that constrain and guide the actions of media managers (North, 1990; Hall & Taylor, 1996). In media studies, this approach has been productively used to analyse the influence of government regulation, political pressure, and the legacy of previous media systems on contemporary forms of media governance, particularly in post-socialist and transitional societies.

Concurrently, research drawing on organisational theory and the sociology of professions demonstrates that media management is shaped by the interaction between management strategies and the professional culture of journalism. Editorial routines, values of autonomy, and notions of the media's social mission can both support and constrain the implementation of managerial innovations (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989; Hirsch, 1977; Killebrew, 2003). In this sense, media management should not be understood as a hierarchically imposed process, but as the outcome of ongoing negotiations among managers, editors and journalists.

Contemporary scholarship places particular emphasis on the impact of digital transformation on media management. The proliferation of online platforms, algorithmic content distribution systems, and audience analytics has transformed managerial decision-making, increasing the emphasis on metrics, short-term efficiency, and flexible organisational structures (Küng, 2017; Picard, 2011). However, research indicates that digitalisation does not lead to the convergence of management models but rather exacerbates differences among media systems, depending on their level of economic development, degree of state control, and institutional legacy.

In the context of the Central Asian countries, these theoretical approaches allow media management to be understood as a hybrid phenomenon that combines elements of market-oriented governance models, state-centred control mechanisms, and practices inherited from the Soviet media system (Shafer & Freedman, 2003). Despite growing interest in the region, existing research remains fragmented and tends to focus either on issues of political influence and media freedom or on the structure of media markets, leaving the managerial dimension comparatively underdeveloped. This study addresses this gap by offering an integrative conceptual framework for analysing media governance in Central Asia through the integration of institutional, organisational, and professional approaches.

Central Asian Media Studies

Contemporary media studies on Central Asia demonstrate a steadily growing scholarly interest in the transformation of media systems amid digitalisation, political change, and globalisation. Since the region's independence, several key research areas have emerged over the past three decades, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Central Asian media landscape.

One major area is the study of the transformation of journalism from the Soviet model to the media systems of independent states. Researchers note institutional changes associated with the dismantling of party-state control, the emergence of private media and formally pluralistic structures, as well as the persistence of elements of the Soviet professional legacy in editorial culture and journalistic practice (Shafer & Freedman, 2003; Kenny & Gross, 2008; Mickiewicz, 2008; Cengiz, 2016; Nussipov, 2019). Despite structural reforms, political and economic constraints continue to significantly influence the development of independent journalism, contributing to the emergence of hybrid media systems. The second significant area of research concerns the role of the media in democratisation processes and freedom of expression. This approach views media as both a potential institution of public accountability and an object of state regulation and political pressure. Research shows that even with constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression, media systems in Central Asian countries operate predominantly under authoritarian or hybrid political regimes, which limit the autonomy of editorial boards and journalists (Freedman, Shafer, & Antonova, 2010; Freedom House, 2023; Kenny & Gross, 2008; Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2022). The third area of research focuses on issues of professional ethics and the quality of journalism. Scholars analyse issues of self-regulation, objectivity, and journalistic responsibility, as well as the prevalence of self-censorship as an adaptive strategy in the face of political, legal, and economic constraints (Freedman, 2011; Kurambayev & Freedman, 2020; Kurambayev & Myssayeva, 2025; Mould & Schuster, 1999; Voltmer, 2013). These studies highlight the gap between normative models of journalism and actual professional practice in the region. The fourth area of research comprises studies of journalism education in Central Asian countries. Researchers point to the inertia of the Soviet educational model, the inadequacy of curricula to meet the demands of the digital media environment, and the limited effectiveness of educational reforms, despite the influence of international initiatives and projects (Freedman & Shafer, 2012; Gross & Kenny, 2008; Skochilo, Toralieva, & Jonbekova, 2020; UNESCO, 2018). At the same time, gradual changes associated with digital technologies and the transformation of media consumption patterns are noted.

Finally, interest in media culture and media development research has increased in recent years. These studies focus on the management of media organisations, the economic sustainability of media outlets, digital business

models, and strategies for competing with global platforms (Kurambayev, 2022; Muratova, 2023; Nurumov et al., 2021; Picard, 2011). Despite the growing body of research, media management in Central Asia remains underdeveloped, particularly from a comparative and empirical perspective.

Overall, media research in Central Asia is interdisciplinary in nature and reflects an effort to move beyond universalist Western models, by taking into account local political, cultural, and economic contexts. The limited development research in media management and strategic governance within media organisations creates a research gap that this study aims to address.

Methodology

Country selection was based on the principle of purposive sampling, aimed at identifying key institutional and governance-related variations in media systems within a single macro-region (Patton, 2015). The study included Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, enabling a comparison of media organisations operating under different levels of state regulation, market development, and digitalisation, while sharing a common historical and institutional legacy rooted in the Soviet media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The study relies on secondary data analysis, a method widely used in the social sciences to investigate hard-to-reach or politically sensitive areas, including media governance and institutional practices in authoritarian and hybrid regimes (Johnston, 2017; Heaton, 2004). Secondary analysis not only enables a reinterpretation of previously collected empirical material but also identifies recurring patterns, inconsistencies, and theoretical gaps in existing research (Bryman, 2016).

Sources were selected based on clearly defined inclusion criteria. In addition to academic credibility, priority was given to publications in English and Russian, reflecting the dominant languages of scholarship on Central Asia. The temporal scope primarily covered the period from the late 1990s to 2025, capturing the post-Soviet transformation and digitalisation of media systems. Sources were included if they directly addressed media management, media governance, or media systems in Central Asia or comparable post-socialist contexts. Publications lacking empirical grounding, clear methodological frameworks, or regional relevance were excluded.

The empirical base of the study comprised several categories of sources. First, 11 academic publications (e.g., Fredman & Kurambayev, 2020; Gross & Kenny, 2008; Kurambayev & Freedman, 2020; Kurambayev & Myssayeva, 2025; Skochilo, Toralieva, & Jonbekova, 2020; Mould & Schuster, 1999; Nussipov, 2019; Oates, 2007; Rizoev, 2025; Voltmer, 2013; Vartanova, 2018) were analysed. Second, three policy and NGO reports (e.g. UNESCO, 2021; Internews, 2024; Statista, 2024) were examined. Academic sources focused on

media systems, journalism, and media management in Central Asia and other post-socialist contexts, while policy and NGO reports provided empirical data on media markets, regulation, and governance. Third, regulatory acts, government strategies, and official documents defining the institutional framework for media governance were included in the analysis. Efforts were made to ensure a balanced representation of sources across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan; however, this balance was partially constrained by uneven data availability and differing levels of research coverage across countries. These reports often serve as a key source of empirical information for regions with limited media transparency.

Central Asian Media System

The Central Asian media system is a hybrid structure shaped by the historical legacy of the Soviet media system, political control, and economic constraints (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Voltmer, 2013). The region is characterised by highly concentrated media ownership, significant reliance on state subsidies (Kurambayev & Myssayeva, 2025), and limited editorial freedom, particularly in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where the state controls key television channels and print media (Freedom House, 2022; Oates, 2007).

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, media organizations enjoy relative autonomy, which facilitates the development of market-oriented management models and experimentation with digital platforms. These countries have witnessed the expansion of the private media sector, the emergence of independent online news outlets, and the adoption of audience analytics to support audience engagement (Picard, 2011; Küng, 2017).

Digitalisation is a key driver of media system transformation, enabling media organisations to adopt new formats, expand their audiences, and optimise management processes. However, its impact is constrained by infrastructural barriers and political control in some countries in the region, particularly Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (UNESCO, 2021).

Professional standards of journalism in Central Asia also retain elements of Soviet practice, such as formalised routines and procedures, but are simultaneously influenced by international norms and market logic. This creates a dynamic interplay between journalists' professional values, managerial decision-making, and institutional constraints, shaping distinctive national models of media management (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989; Hirsch, 1977; Voltmer, 2013).

Thus, the Central Asian media system is characterised by hybridity, contextual adaptation, and multi-level governance, in which state-centred, market-oriented, and inherited practices interact to shape media organisations' resilience and capacity to adapt to changes in the digital and political environment.

Analysis of Central Asian Media Systems by Country

As international monitoring organisations indicate, Central Asian media systems exhibit marked differences in ownership structures, levels of digitalisation, and degrees of state control. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are characterised by mixed ownership models with state dominance in key sectors and relatively high internet penetration (approximately 90% and 83%, respectively), while Kyrgyzstan retains a more developed private media sector (approximately 80%), albeit under increasing regulatory pressure (Freedom House, 2022; Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

According to Reporters Without Borders (2025), Tajikistan and Turkmenistan remain media environments characterised by predominantly or entirely state-controlled media, low levels of digital pluralism, and limited internet access (~56–67%). The World Press Freedom Index confirms this pattern—from moderately restricted conditions in Kazakhstan (141/180) and Kyrgyzstan (144/180) to a highly repressive environment in Turkmenistan (175/180), demonstrating the persistence of hybrid models of media governance that combine digital transformation with enduring state regulation practices (Voltmer, 2013; Reporters Without Borders, 2025) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative Media Environment, Digital Indicators, and Press Freedom in Central Asian Countries (2025)

Indicator	**Kazakhstan**	**Kyrgyzstan**	**Tajikistan**	**Turkmenistan**	**Uzbekistan**
Media ownership structure	Mixed; state-dominant in key outlets	Mixed; relatively more independent outlets	Predominantly state-controlled	Fully state-controlled	Mixed; strong state influence
Internet penetration rate	High (~90%+)	Moderate-high (~79.8%)	Moderate (~56.8%)	Limited (~60–67%)	High (~83.3%)
Mobile & 4G coverage	Extensive	Near nationwide	Moderate, rural gaps	Limited, uneven	High nationwide
Press Freedom Index (2025)	141/180	144/180	153/180	175/180	148/180
Trend in press freedom	Declining	Declining	Very limited	Extremely restrictive	Limited improvements
Digital media diversity	Growing, constrained	Exists, under pressure	Limited	Minimal	Expanding
Degree of state control	High (traditional sectors)	Increasing	Very high	Near total	High with some openings

Compiled from RSF (2025), Internews (2023), and national data sources.

As shown in Table 1, qualitative indicators such as ownership structure, digital infrastructure, and press freedom provide a more reliable basis for assessing media governance conditions.

Comparative analysis indicates that the region's media systems are shaped by historical legacies, the level of digital infrastructure, and the degree of state control. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have relatively more developed digital environments and a growing private media sector, while Tajikistan and Turkmenistan remain characterised by limited media diversity and comprehensive state control. Kyrgyzstan occupies an intermediate position: private media exist but operate under increasing regulatory restrictions. These data confirm that media governance in Central Asia is characterised by hybridity and significant variation across countries.

A key observation is that internet penetration is an important indicator of media consumption and digital media management: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan demonstrate high levels of internet usage, reflecting a broader digital audience; Kyrgyzstan also exhibits significant digital engagement, while Tajikistan and Turkmenistan lag significantly behind, which impacts the development of digital media and their governance models.

The analysis process included several stages. The first stage involved a systematic selection of sources based on their thematic relevance, academic credibility, and temporal scope, primarily covering the period since the early 2000s, which corresponds to a period of active transformation of the region's media systems (Picard, 2011). The second stage employed qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurring categories related to media management models, the role of the state, economic strategies, and digital transformation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The third stage involved a cross-country comparison of the findings to identify both general patterns and context-specific differences (see Table 2).

Table 2. Analytical Categories of Content Analysis

Category	**Analytical Focus**	**Indicators in Literature**
Institutional legacy	Persistence of Soviet-era structures	Vertical management; centralised decision-making; limited editorial autonomy
Role of the state	State involvement in media governance	Regulation; ownership; political influence; censorship mechanisms
Economic and business models	Financial sustainability and revenue strategies	Advertising dependence; state subsidies; diversification; platform monetisation
Digital transformation	Impact of digitalisation on management	Cross-platform strategies; audience engagement; newsroom convergence

Professional culture	Editorial autonomy and journalist–manager relations	Self-censorship; ethical norms; professional standards
Hybrid management models	Coexistence of market, state, and legacy-based governance	Integration of commercial logic and political control

The authors' elaboration based on the literature.

As shown in Table 2, the analytical categories operationalise the study's theoretical concepts by translating them into observable indicators, thereby enabling a systematic examination of hybrid media management models across Central Asian contexts.

Table 3. Stages and Procedures of Qualitative Content Analysis

Stage of Analysis	**Analytical Task**	**Description**	**Output**
Open coding	Identification of key themes	Initial coding of texts to capture recurring concepts	Preliminary codes and thematic clusters
Axial coding	Conceptual integration	Linking initial codes to broader theoretical categories	Refined analytical categories
Selective coding	Theory building and comparison	Integration of categories into higher-order dimensions	Typology of media management models

Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006).

Table 3 illustrates how the coding process links empirical material to theoretical constructs, ensuring consistency and comparability in the cross-country analysis.

The results of the content analysis were interpreted in relation to the research questions, revealing dominant patterns and country-specific differences in Central Asian media systems. Particular attention was paid to the emergence of hybrid models of media governance shaped by digital pressures, political constraints, and inherited institutional frameworks.

The adopted methodology provides the foundation for future empirical research, including interviews with media managers, analyses of strategic policy documents, and comparative case studies to advance media governance research in Central Asia.

Table 4. Mass Media in Central Asian Countries (February 2025)

Type	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan
Newspapers	1923	92	600	179	27
Magazines	1061	50	866	154	28
TV channels	235	31	89	53	8
Radio stations	96	24	29	34	4
News agencies	6491	2662	–	–	–
Online media	554	34	738	23	4
Bulletins	–	–	21	–	–
Production studios	–	–	–	14	1
Foreign TV & radio corporations	305	–	190	–	–
Foreign media accredited by MFA	37	29	32	18	32
Total	4860	272	2571	481	106

Data compiled from Rizoev (2025) and national statistical sources; figures are not fully comparable across countries.

Table 4 provides an overview of the scale of media sectors across the region; however, these figures should be interpreted with caution. Differences in national statistical methodologies and reporting practices limit direct comparability. Moreover, the number of media outlets does not necessarily reflect diversity, autonomy, or managerial independence, as quantitative expansion may coexist with strong state influence.

This table provides a comparative overview of the media sectors in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as of February 2025. According to Rizoev (2025), the governments of the Central Asian countries seek to develop a media system that combines democratic freedoms with the degree of control over the information space considered necessary to maintain political stability (Rizoev, 2025). The categories included comprise newspapers, magazines, television channels, radio stations, news agencies, online media, newsletters, production studios, foreign television and radio broadcasters, and accredited foreign media. The data reveal significant differences among countries in media diversity, state control, and digital development. The presence of foreign media is noticeable only in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, reflecting their more open media environments. The differences in Central Asia's

media systems support the concept of hybrid media management: the combination of market models, state-oriented practices, and historical legacies creates unique national media structures. Overall, the findings underline the need to consider the institutional, economic, and digital context when analysing media organisations in the region.

Media Management in Central Asia: Per-country Overview

In Kazakhstan, the media system developed under Soviet-era centralised control and censorship. Following independence in 1991, private outlets expanded, which was accompanied by increasing commercialisation. Junisbai (2011) notes that financial-industrial groups associated with former President Nursultan Nazarbayev acquired substantial media assets, influencing multiple sectors of the media industry. Today, Kazakhstan's media system is characterised by a hybrid model: strong state influence coexists with private and digital initiatives, with an emphasis on multimedia and digital platforms.

In Uzbekistan, the Soviet media model dominated until 1991; after independence, private media emerged, yet state control remained strict. By 2025, the number of online media outlets had reached 738, while traditional newspapers and radio declined. Television broadcasting and magazine publishing expanded. Media management follows a hybrid model, combining state oversight with emerging digital and market-oriented initiatives.

Kyrgyzstan developed a liberal media environment after 1991, despite initial state monopoly over broadcasting and limited resources (Ibraeva & Kulikova, 2002). Independent newspapers, radio, and television channels expanded, supported by the adoption of digital technologies. Media management combines market-based and state-centred mechanisms and characterised by strong online engagement.

In Tajikistan, most media remained state-owned following the collapse of the USSR. By 2024, newspapers, magazines, and news agencies continued to largely operate under government control. Television reaches 96% of the population, while internet penetration is 66.6%. Press freedom remain limited, and independent media outlets face challenges. Media management is totalitarian, with low editorial independence and slow digital transformation.

Turkmenistan maintains full state control over the media, with virtually no independent outlets. Digital media remain underdeveloped; social media penetration is only 3.2%. Media management is fully state-controlled, with negligible market-oriented or hybrid approaches.

Results

The analysis of secondary data reveals several interconnected patterns of media management across five the Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

One of the most consistent findings is the enduring influence of institutional legacies and state regulation. In countries where state control remains strong, particularly Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, media organisations operate under tight regulatory oversight. Editorial decision-making and personnel management are often shaped by political considerations, limiting managerial autonomy and constraining innovation. By contrast, media organisations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan function in comparatively more flexible regulatory environments, which allows managers greater scope to adapt organisational strategies and respond to changing market conditions (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Voltmer, 2013).

Economic conditions further shape management practices across the region. Limited advertising markets, reliance on public funding, and insufficient revenue diversification place media organisations under persistent financial pressure. These constraints create ongoing tension between economic sustainability and professional standards. While media organisations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been more successful in experimenting with diversified revenue models, organisations in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan face structural financial barriers that limit managerial innovation (Albarran, 2002).

Digital transformation has emerged as another important driver of change in media management. The growing adoption of online platforms, audience analytics, and digital content strategies is most evident in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In the remaining countries, however, infrastructural limitations and political constraints continue to slow the integration of digital technologies into everyday management practices (Küng, 2017).

Taken together, these findings indicate the widespread presence of hybrid media management models that combine elements of state oversight, market logic, and inherited institutional practices. Such models allow media organisations to maintain operational stability while selectively adapting to economic and technological change (Voltmer, 2013).

Discussion

Media governance in Central Asia is considerably more nuanced than a simple distinction between market-driven or state-controlled. Across the region, media organisations operate within a hybrid environment shaped by historical legacies, politics, economics, and journalistic practices. Soviet-era legacies, state

oversight, and financial pressures intersect in ways that challenge one-dimensional frameworks. This supports Mierzejewska and Hollifield's (2006) multidimensional approach while also providing new insight into how hybrid governance operates in practice rather than merely in theory.

Historical legacies remain a powerful influence. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, for example, centralised hierarchies and entrenched bureaucratic norms continue to shape managerial decision-making, reflecting patterns identified in post-Soviet media studies (Hallin & Mancini, 2012). At the same time, economic pressures require media organisations to balance financial sustainability with professional autonomy, a tension also observed in transitional media systems more broadly (Picard, 2011). Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, exhibits a more pluralistic model, in which editorial diversity coexists with increasing regulatory oversight, highlighting how different historical and political contexts give rise to distinct hybrid forms.

Digital transformation adds a further dimension. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, digital technologies have expanded audience reach and enabled more flexible, market-oriented strategies. By contrast, in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, digital transformation remains fragmented, constrained by limited infrastructure and extensive state control. These patterns are consistent with Küng's (2017) argument, showing that technology alone does not reshape governance; it interacts with existing institutional and political conditions, sometimes reinforcing established practices rather than overturning them.

Two broader conclusions emerge. First, hybrid governance is inherently context-dependent: historical legacies, political structures, and economic conditions jointly shape the operations of media organisations. Universal models that ignore these factors risk oversimplifying the realities of transitional media systems. Second, digital transformation is uneven and conditional; its impact depends on institutional capacities and political openness. These findings extend beyond Central Asia, offering a conceptual lens for other transitional or semi-authoritarian media environments where hybrid governance persists.

This study has several limitations. It relies primarily on secondary sources, which cannot fully capture internal managerial perspectives. Rapidly changing digital infrastructures and regulatory frameworks mean some observed patterns could shift over time. Additionally, while regional trends are evident, significant country-level differences caution against brad generalizations.

In sum, media governance in Central Asia is a hybrid, context-sensitive phenomenon shaped by the interplay of historical legacies, political oversight, economic pressures, and digital transformation. Recognising this complexity enriches our understanding of post-Soviet media systems and provides a framework for analysing transitional media systems other transitional media environments, in which historical legacies continue to shape organisational practices and the media of the future.

Against this background, the study addresses its first research question:

RQ1: How is media governance conceptualised in academic studies of Central Asian media systems?

Academic studies of Central Asian media systems conceptualise media governance as a multidimensional process extending beyond formal regulation. Governance is commonly understood as the outcome of interactions among state institutions, media organisations, digital infrastructures, and audiences, encompassing regulatory control, editorial autonomy, market mechanisms, and digital innovation (Cabar.asia, 2023; Freedom House, 2022). A recurring finding in the literature is the enduring influence of the Soviet media legacy, which continues to shape organisational structures and managerial practices, particularly in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. This perspective conceptualises media governance as historically embedded rather than institutionally neutral.

RQ2: What dominant models of governance and state regulation are identified for media organisations in Central Asia?

The literature identifies three dominant models of media governance across the region. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are most frequently characterised as operating under hybrid governance models characterised by strong state influence, the presence of private media, and ongoing digital development. Kyrgyzstan is commonly associated with a pluralistic yet regulated model, in which a relatively diverse media sector coexists with periodic legislative constraints. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan represent highly centralised governance models, marked by extensive state control and minimal editorial independence. Together, these models illustrate varying configurations of political control, market openness, and institutional capacity.

RQ3: How do state regulation, institutional legacies, and digital transformation shape media governance practices in the region?

State regulation remains the primary factor shaping both media content and organisational structures, particularly in countries with limited press freedom. Institutional legacies inherited from the Soviet media system continue to be reflected in centralised decision-making and bureaucratic governance arrangements. At the same time, digital transformation has created new opportunities for independent and private media by expanding audience reach and enabling more flexible governance practices. These dynamics are most evident in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, whereas limited internet penetration and infrastructural constraints continue to limit digital media development in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

RQ4: To what extent does existing research reflect hybrid models of media governance that combine market-oriented, state-centred, and legacy-based approaches?

Across the literature, hybrid media governance emerges as the dominant analytical framework in Central Asia. In most countries, state regulation

intersects with market dynamics and digital transformation rather than functioning as a single governing logic. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan exemplify this hybridity through the coexistence of state oversight, market competition, and digital development. In Kyrgyzstan, hybridity assumes a more pluralistic form shaped by editorial diversity alongside legislative oversight. By contrast, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan exhibit limited hybridity due to entrenched centralised regulation and underdeveloped digital infrastructure (Freedom House, 2025).

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that media governance in Central Asia is best understood as a context-dependent, hybrid phenomenon shaped by the interaction of historical legacies, political regulation, and uneven digital transformation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that media systems in Central Asia are shaped by a complex interaction of global media management dynamics and the enduring influence of post-Soviet institutional legacies. Although countries in the region differ in important respects, they share a common feature: hybrid models of media governance in which market forces and digital transformation coexist with strong state regulation.

The findings contribute to the literature on media management by showing that hybridity in non-democratic and semi-authoritarian contexts is not merely a temporary phase between state-centred and market-oriented systems. Instead, it constitutes a relatively stable and deeply embedded form of governance. This challenges assumptions often found in Western-centred theoretical frameworks, where media systems are expected to move toward greater market autonomy. In Central Asia, state influence remains not only pervasive but also adaptable, continuing to shape the governance and management of media organisations. In this way, the study offers a more grounded understanding of hybrid governance, emphasising the enduring significance of political control and institutional history.

Looking more closely at the region, several common patterns emerge. The state continues to play a dominant role in media governance and management, particularly in traditional media sectors, limiting both managerial and editorial autonomy. At the same time, Soviet-era institutional legacies, such as hierarchical structures and centralised decision-making, remain evident in many media organisations. Digital transformation is also reshaping the media landscape, albeit unevenly. In countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, it has created some space for adaptation and limited media pluralism. In contrast, in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, digital development remains constrained and fragmented. These shared characteristics exist with important

national differences, reflecting each country's specific political, economic, and institutional context.

Theoretical implications

Beyond the regional context, the findings contribute to broader debates in media management. First, they highlight the importance of context, demonstrating that media governance cannot be fully understood without considering historical legacies and political conditions. Second, they challenge the idea that media systems follow a single, linear path toward liberalisation, showing instead that hybrid governance can be a stable outcome in its own right. Third, they suggest that digital transformation is not inherently disruptive; its impact depends on the surrounding regulatory and infrastructural environment. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for more flexible and globally inclusive theoretical frameworks.

Limitations and future research

As has been said, this study has several limitations. It relies primarily on secondary sources, which means it cannot fully capture what happens inside media organisations. In addition, the rapidly evolving nature of digital technologies and regulatory environments means that some of the patterns identified here may evolve over time.

Future research could build on these findings by incorporating primary data, such as interviews with media managers and journalists, as well as in-depth case studies of individual media organisations. Longitudinal and comparative studies would also help to enhance understanding how hybrid governance develops over time. Expanding the focus to include audiences and digital platforms could further deepen our understanding of how media governance operates in practice.

In conclusion, Central Asia provides an important lens through which to rethink media management in hybrid and semi-authoritarian contexts. Rather than converging towards a single global model, media governance in the region is shaped by the ongoing interaction of state power, market forces, historical legacies, and digital transformation. Recognising this complexity not only deepens our understanding of the region but also offers valuable insights for scholars studying media systems in other parts of the world.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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The Newest Slovak Television and Radio: Management Facing Low Brand Recognition

ABSTRACT

This paper examines branding management at Slovakia's public-service broadcaster, STVR, established on 1 July 2024, with particular emphasis on the implications of operating without a corporate visual identity (CVI). The absence of a coherent visual identity has resulted in a fragmented brand relying on logos from predecessor institutions, some of which are more than 30 years old, while public trust in the broadcaster has declined by seven percentage points in a single year. Using the corporate visual framework developed by Van den Bosh, Elving, and De Jong (2005), linking CVI to visibility, distinctiveness, authenticity, transparency, and consistency, the study investigates how the absence of CVI affects STVR's reputation. Based on desk research of publicly available documents, the study finds that reliance on a newly introduced name and legacy visuals undermines the broadcaster's reputation. STVR also illustrates Balmer and Greyser's (2002) model of five organisational identities: actual, communicated, conceived, ideal, and desired.

KEYWORDS: Slovak Television and Radio, Public-service media, brand management, corporate visual identity, reputation

STRESZCZENIE

Współczesna telewizja i radio w Słowacji: zarządzanie bez rozpoznawalności marki

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest analizie zarządzania marką w słowackiej telewizji i radiu publicznym STVR, utworzonym 1 lipca 2024 r., które funkcjonują bez spójnej identyfikacji wizualnej (CVI). W rezultacie marka jest niespójna (używa logo poprzednich instytucji). Zaufanie do niej spadło o siedem punktów procentowych w ciągu roku. Wykorzystując ramy Van den Bosha, Elvinga i De Jonga (2005), łączące CVI z widocznością, autentycznością, przejrzystością i spójnością, badanie analizuje, jak brak CVI wpływa na reputację STVR. Na podstawie analizy dokumentów publicznych stwierdzono, że poleganie na nowej nazwie i dotychczasowych elementach wizualnych częściowo szkodzi

Suggested citation: Sámelová, A. (2026). The Newest Slovak Television and Radio: Management Facing Low Brand Recognition. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 159–175. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.10
Submitted: 11.12.2024 Accepted: 06.05.2026

reputacji nadawcy. W tekście analizuje się też model pięciu tożsamości organizacyjnych Balmera i Greysera (2002): rzeczywistej, komunikowanej, postrzeganej, idealnej i pożądanej.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Słowacka telewizja i radio, media publiczne, zarządzanie marką, korporacyjna tożsamość wizualna, reputacja

Introduction

In the contemporary media environment, it is highly unusual for a public-service broadcaster to operate without a corporate visual identity (CVI). Yet, this is precisely the situation of Slovakia's public-service broadcaster, Slovak Television and Radio (STVR). Following the 2023 general election, the new national-populist government and parliament dissolved the former public-service broadcaster, Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS). According to statements by members of the governing coalition, the newly established public-service organisation, Slovak Television and Radio, was the most straightforward and legally permissible way to replace the Director General before his term expired. The new politically controlled organisation began operations on 1 July 2024. However, despite STVR management functioning for over eighteen months without a corporate visual identity, by the end of 2025, Slovakia's public service radio and TV broadcaster still lacked unified institutional brand logo, slogan, colours, typography, font, imagery, radio and TV channel logos, and audio branding. In other words, it operated without the core elements that make an institutional brand recognisable.

Even when a corporate visual identity is carefully designed, a brand's power also depends on its institutional reputation, including visibility, distinctiveness, authenticity, transparency, and consistency. As demonstrated by Van den Bosh, Elving, and De Jong (2005), corporate visual identity and reputation are mutually dependent in these areas. This study, therefore, uses their analysis to examine how the absence of a CVI affects STVR's corporate reputation in Slovak society.

To address this objective, desk research was used based on official, publicly available analyses, documents, and politicians' statements regarding the establishment of STVR and its corporate visual identity. The analysis indicates that STVR's inconsistent brand communication, which relies on the new name and legacy visual elements, may negatively affect its reputation. This case also illustrates Balmer and Greyser's (2002) model of five organisational identities: actual, communicated, conceived, ideal, and desired. The study contributes to research on media branding by emphasising factors that can harm a media brand in the absence of a CVI.

Literature Review and Clarifying Concepts

Corporate visual identity forms a core element of organisational identity. It is commonly defined as the set of "qualities, characteristics, traits, or attributes" that are "fundamental, unique, and long-lasting" (Foroudi et al., 2024, p. 1). In practice, CVI encompasses the visual and audio elements through which an organisation communicates its purpose, mission, and vision, consistently expressing its strategic values and professional credibility (Balmer, 2008; Balmer, 2001; Baker & Balmer, 1997). It shapes how an organisation presents itself to its stakeholders (He & Mukherjee, 2009, p. 2). In the era of media convergence, media organisations must promote their brands not only through traditional platforms, such as print, radio, and television, but also digital channels, such as websites and social media, which is essential for both survival and growth in a competitive market (Melewar, Dennis, & Foroudi, 2022).

In public-service media, branding is inherently more complex because these organisations embody multiple organisational identities (Heckert, Boumans & Vliegenthart, 2022; Sarasvuo, 2021; Balmer & Greyser, 2002). Among these are "ideological" and "utilitarian" identities. Ideological identity reflects abstract human values, tradition, and the organisation's public-service mission, guiding it "to foster human well-being and the common good" (Heckert et al., 2022, p. 557). Utilitarian identity, on the other hand, emphasises commercial objectives, highlighting "economic rationality, maximisation of profits, and self-interests" (Heckert et al., 2022, p. 557). The coexistence of these identities has important implications for an organisation's reputation, as ideological and utilitarian identities involve fundamentally different value systems. Media organisations cannot fully control which identity becomes dominant in stakeholders' perceptions, particularly in public-service media that involve diverse stakeholder groups. When ideological identity is evaluated through utilitarian values, or a utilitarian identity through ideological values, can both lead to negative reputational assessments (Heckert et al., 2022, pp. 558–559).

Another important aspect of corporate reputation is that institutions, large and complex, do not possess a single unified identity but rather maintain five parallel identities: (1) *actual*, (2) *communicated*, (3) *conceived*, (4) *ideal*, and (5) *desired*, reflecting both internal and external perspectives (Balmer & Greyser, 2002). Together, these identities form the theoretical framework of the present study and are briefly outlined below.

1. *Actual identity* comprises an organisation's current characteristics, including its ownership, structure, management style, values, activities, and performance. It is shaped primarily by internal stakeholders.
2. *Communicated identity* refers to the visible and audible expression of an organisation through advertising, sponsorship, and PR, involving internal communication staff, partners, external agencies, and the media.

3. *Conceived identity* concerns perceptions of branding, image, and reputation. It is shaped by stakeholder perceptions that influence management decisions, primarily those of external groups such as government, regulators, NGOs, and audiences. Management must prioritise some stakeholder perceptions over others.
4. *Ideal identity* emerges from research and strategic analysis, reflecting planners' understanding of the organisation's capabilities and optimal market position, shaped by both internal planners and external experts.
5. *Desired identity* reflects the strategic vision of corporate leaders, primarily managers, the CEO, and the governing board (Balmer & Greyser, 2002).

Since these five distinct identities operate simultaneously, corporate reputation also depends on which identity aspect stakeholders find most salient when evaluating the organisation. This has further implications for management at both senior and middle levels. Research shows that managers need to understand corporate identity in order to communicate effectively with internal and external stakeholders.

Corporate reputation is also strongly linked to corporate visual identity, with the relationship operating in both directions. Dutch scholars Anette van den Bosh, Menno de Jong, and Wim Elving (2005) conceptualise this through five aspects: visibility, distinctiveness, authenticity, transparency, and consistency. Within media management research more broadly, media branding management has been examined within one of five thematic clusters. A researcher duo from Finland, Nando Malmelin and Johanna Moisander, identify the five "brand dimensions in media management": (1) brand as product, (2) brand as extension, (3) brand as identity, (4) brand as differentiation, and (5) brand as equity (2014, p. 12).

1. The brand-as-product refers to a tangible branded service that attracts audiences through engaging content, such as multichannel news, documentaries, or entertainment under the institutional or network brand.
2. Brand as an extension is a strategy in which a media company uses its existing name and reputation to launch new content, platforms, or products, thereby enhancing credibility and consumer loyalty.
3. Brand as identity relates to institutional visual elements—name, logo, colours, imagery, and typography—often referred to as the brand's "personality."
4. Brand as differentiation uses a media brand's unique identity—voices, visuals, values, expertise—across channels to stand out, employing authentic storytelling and platform strengths to enhance recall and preference.
5. Brand as equity reflects the relationship between a brand and its consumers, built on trust, awareness, and positive associations. Strong brand

equity boosts loyalty, supports premium pricing, enhances advertising effectiveness, and transforms the media platform into a valuable asset (Malmelin & Moisander, 2014, pp. 13–14).

Based on these five brand management clusters, we devised our data collection plan and methodological approach.

Methodology

This theoretical study is based on desk research conducted between June and December 2024 using publicly available documents, press releases, and other publications. Data were collected using the following search terms: "STVR brand," "STVR branding," "STVR logo," "STVR identity," "STVR visual identity," "STVR reputation," and "STVR public service." The search results showed that the CVI and reputation of the newly established public-service broadcaster attracted considerable mainstream media and politicians' attention. Political statements reflected different positions: members and supporters of the government coalition (pro-STVR bias) versus the parliamentary opposition (anti-STVR bias), while the mainstream media generally opposed the political takeover of the public-service broadcaster. While these sources reflected divergent political positions, they provided valuable information as they documented societal consensus (across both coalition and opposition) that the minister of culture interfered in STVR's institutional managerial decisions, such as ordering a new logo, and the associated costs. The main difference was that the coalition approved it, while the opposition and media rejected it.

Key sources included the 2023–2024 RTVS/STVR annual reports, the 2023 Government Policy Statement, parliamentary records, analyses published by MEMO'98, the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, reports of International Press Institute and Reporters Without Borders, as well as decisions of the Media Services Council. In addition, the study analysed visual materials published on the STVR website and in the STVR News archive to illustrate the broadcaster's evolving CVI.

Data collection

Following Malmelin and Moisander's (2014) five-dimensional media branding framework which involved categorising all data into the brand clusters (product, extension, identity, differentiation, and equity) examples are demonstrated in order to inform the first research question.

RQ1: Which dimensions of media branding were most affected by the absence of STVR's corporate visual identity? To answer this question,

the findings were interpreted using Van den Bosh, De Jong, and Elving's (2005) framework, which conceptualises the interdependence between corporate visual identity and reputation across five dimensions: visibility, distinctiveness, authenticity, transparency, and consistency.

RQ2: How, and to what extent, did the absence of STVR's corporate visual identity influence or undermine STVR's reputation in Slovak society?

The two theoretical frameworks adopted in this study focus on strategic management in the field of visual identity. They agree that CVI and media branding are not just about aesthetics but also serve as strategic tools for managing stakeholder relationships. They align with each other, as Malmelin and Moisander demonstrated a specific application of Van den Bosh et al.'s model to media organisations. However, they differ in their analytical emphasis. Malmelin and Moisander's (2014) framework focuses primarily on building a media brand. By contrast, Van den Bosch, De Jong, and Elving's (2005) emphasises developing a media reputation. That is why we decided to use both in this research. We chose the first framework for data collection as it covers a broader range of attributes related to media's institutional identity and considers narrative consistency—such as the coherence between the brand's story and media content—as a key aspect of a media organisation's visual identity. It emphasises that a media brand must be consistent not only visually (e.g., regarding its logo) but also in its narrative content, promoting narrative-visual unity. Using this framework, we captured a wider range of CVI elements for analysis, including political interference in STVR branding. The second model, on the other hand, is build upon the 5-dimensional framework of brand visual consistency and authenticity on managing the organisation's reputation. That is why we decided to apply this latter model for interpretation. In other words, for data collection, we used the model that aligned more with gathering a broader "enumerative" dataset to address RQ1. However, when interpreting the results, we focused on the "reputation-building model," which provides a better "interpretative" framework for addressing RQ2.

The study's main *conclusion* is informed by Balmer and Greyser's (2002) model, which argues that organisations do not possess a single identity, but comprise five distinct identities: actual, communicated, conceived, ideal, and desired. The case of the Slovak Television and Radio brand illustrates this concept. That is why we believe Balmer and Greyser's structured approach provides a useful understanding of how STVR media's top and senior managers could effectively target specific "identities" and progress towards the "desired" one. This is especially relevant given that the organisation is still in its early stages of institutional development and has yet to establish a coherent corporate visual identity.

Findings

Following STVR's establishment on 1 July 2024, it was managed by an interim leadership team, and did not have the authority to make decisions regarding future corporate branding. It fell under the jurisdiction of the upcoming regular management of the new Director General, who was expected to be appointed in the summer of 2024. However, tensions within the coalition prevented the National Council of the Slovak Republic from electing members of the board—the STVR Council—which is responsible for choosing the Director General. As a result, the current first STVR Director General, Martina Flašíková, was elected for a six-year term on 12 May 2025, nearly a year after the parliament adopted a law on the dissolution of Radio and Television of Slovakia and the creation of Slovak Television and Radio (20 June 2024), and following the institution's establishment (1 July 2024). Therefore, interim management focused solely on a provisional marketing and communication strategy, primarily to introduce a new institutional name.

The brand as a product has become the most prominent aspect of STVR's communication, focusing on the external promotion and internal cross-promotion of news programmes, political and societal talk shows, discussions, entertainment, drama, documentaries, sports, programmes for children and youth, co-production projects, partnerships with third parties, public interest campaigns, and live broadcasts. As a result, STVR carried out a necessary graphic redesign of the existing CVI elements inherited from the former institution and removed the previous logo and slogans from all relevant areas.

Although the verbal promotion sounded natural, all efforts in print, on television, and on social media appeared amateurish due to the lack of a corporate brand identity. Figure 1 shows two flagship STVR programmes in the news and current affairs section and the entertainment section—the Sunday political discussion *O 5 minút 12* (5 Minutes to 12) and the lifestyle show *Pečie celé Slovensko* (Whole Slovakia Bakes), both mainly promoted through the programme's name and logo, as well as through product-related symbols, such as the host and baked goods.

Figure 1. Promotion of STVR programme brands using programme name and its logo without STVR's CVI elements



Source: STVR.

Figure 2 also shows examples of current programme promotion without the STVR corporate logo, using only the graphic elements inherited from the former RTVS CVI (the first image, with magenta highlights, even features the former RTVS institutional logo).

Figure 2. The STVR programme promotion incorporates branding elements inherited from its predecessor, RTVS, which are identified by magenta and yellow circles



Source of images: STVR; Highlighting added by the author.

In the area of brand extension, the STVR interim management focused on SEO optimisation and preparations for website migration, including transferring the microsites "spravy.rtvs.sk" and "rtvs.sk" to the new domain STVR.sk. Afterwards, it concentrated on stabilising website traffic. However, following the launch of the new website, the number of visitors to the STVR website in the second half of 2024 decreased by 16.03% compared to the first half of 2024. STVR also experienced a 17.73% year-on-year decline in website traffic. Stream traffic fell by 3.57% year-on-year. Finally, traffic to the STVR News website

decreased by 15.34% compared to the period before STVR's establishment and by 14.87% year-on-year (STVR, 2025, pp. 214–217).

The corporate souvenir sale, which does not feature any STVR CVI elements, concentrates on popular programme brands, neutral images, or the silhouette of the iconic Slovak Radio building—the inverted pyramid, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. The corporate souvenirs without STVR's CVI elements



Source: STVR.

Brand as identity is the most challenging dimension in the case of STVR. The institution is strongly associated with the iconic inverted pyramid of the Slovak Radio building, as evidenced by its image or silhouette, which appears not only on souvenirs (as mentioned earlier) but also on various marketing, business, and sales materials. Figure 4 shows the almost identical appearance of the document with the business model of the current Media STVR and its predecessor Media RTVS. The main difference, however, is that STVR lacks any corporate logo, colours, font, typography, or any graphic elements that normally constitute corporate brand identity.

Figure 4. Almost identical graphic design of RTVS and STVR documents. *Advertising under One Roof* (*Reklama pod jednou strechou*) was the business slogan of STVR's predecessor, RTVS (left), together with the CVIs of all the main TV and radio stations. STVR (right) uses the same slogan without including any specific CVI element



Source: RTVS / STVR.

As mentioned above, STVR pragmatically adopts some corporate brand identity elements from the former RTVS to differentiate its programme services (television channels, stations, and streams), usually placing a colon before the numerical or textual designation of individual services, streams, and radio stations (e.g., :1, :2, :24, :Šport: Rádio Slovensko, :Rádio Regina, Live:1, Live:2, etc.). This practice is evident across internal and public documents, websites, social media platforms, print media, and broadcast media. In short, STVR lacks a consistent corporate brand identity, as illustrated in Figure 5, which presents the broadcaster's Christmas greeting. These display only the institutional name in a typographically neutral black font, with Slovak Television on the first line and Slovak Radio on the second line. The greeting reads, "A magical and loving Christmas."

Figure 5. STVR's corporate Christmas greeting, "A magical and loving Christmas," lacks any CVI elements; the institution's name is presented in a neutral black font



Source: STVR.

Figure 6. The STVR 7 p.m. news service *Správy*, 1 Oct. 2025.



Source: STVR; Highlighting added by author.

The most confusing and visually inconsistent aspect of STVR brand identity, however, appears in its daily news coverage. Reporters use plain black microphone covers, present news broadcasts without any corporate brand identity on the news ticker, and appear on a television channel under the branding of a broadcaster that no longer exists. This is illustrated in Figure 6, which shows the evening news edition *Správy* (News).

In contrast, Figure 7 shows a microphone flag (often referred to as a microphone cube) displaying the former Slovak Radio logo. According to Logopedia (n.d.), this logo was used by Slovak Radio from 1992 to 2004.

Figure 7. Using a microphone cube with the Slovak Radio (Slovenský rozhlas) logo from over 30 years ago



Source of image: TRUNI, 10 July 2025; Highlighting added by author.

The institutional identity was also affected by a political controversy after the Minister of Culture claimed that the entire new branding of STVR would cost less than €10,000. She dismissed experts who argued that such a rebranding would cost hundreds of thousands of euros. To support her claim, in June 2024, the minister commissioned the design of three logos—the institutional logo of STVR, the logo for Slovak Television, and the logo for Slovak Radio—for a total of €9,800. This politicisation of the new branding, even before the organisation was established, took on a new dimension when the current Director General of STVR announced that STVR would not use these logo designs, as it was developing an entirely new, cohesive CVI in-house.

Brand as differentiation. The interim management developed guidelines for the temporary communication of the new institutional name as the foundation for the future brand to mitigate reputational risks. It then established an internal working group to create a new CVI for STVR. Afterwards, they shifted their focus to fostering a positive perception of the newly established Slovak Television and Radio, mainly because its public-service image had been systematically undermined by political actors even before the institution's inception.

Since STVR lacked its own institutional narrative, it began to build one through marketing and communication support for its existing programme services—TV channels, streams, and radio stations—as well as through the success of its programmes.

Brand as equity. Without a CVI, the demands of daily communication make the most popular programmes its primary brand representation. Therefore, the institution focuses on promoting itself through its most popular programmes, such as the lifestyle TV entertainment show *Pečie celé Slovensko* (Whole Slovakia Bakes), the charitable fundraising programme Rádio Slovensko Slovensku (Radio Slovakia for Slovakia), or the Sunday political discussion *O 5 minút 12* (5 Minutes to 12), to ensure that at least the verbal brand "Slovenská televízia a rozhlas" becomes familiar to viewers, helping them become accustomed to the institution's new name.

Discussion

RQ1: Which specific aspects of brand dimensions in media management were affected by the absence of the STVR corporate visual identity?

The absence of a cohesive corporate visual identity hampers STVR's ability to communicate its brand effectively, as it relies solely on spoken or written brand names presented in neutral fonts on plain backgrounds. All brand dimensions identified by brand management researchers—product, extension, identity, differentiation, and equity—are affected by this shortcoming. The organisation, which possesses only an institutional name and lacks a unified brand, faces challenges in external communication, relying primary on product-related content such as teasers broadcast on programme logos (TV channels, streams, or radio stations). It also involves selling corporate souvenirs featuring only the logos of specific programmes or the silhouette of the iconic inverted-pyramid Slovak Radio building. The most recognisable features of STVR are the absence of branding beyond the institutional name "Slovenská televízia a rozhlas," displayed wherever space permits, and plain black microphones used by its reporters instead of branded microphone flags.

RQ2: How, and to what extent, did the absence of STVR's corporate visual identity influence or undermine STVR's reputation in Slovak society?

From an institutional reputation perspective, these findings reveal significant negative effects on reputation across all areas discussed. If corporate visibility is defined as the prominence of the brand in customers' minds (Van den Bosh et al., 2005, p. 109), then STVR remains largely invisible to the public. Although STVR could not remove all visual elements of its predecessor—for example, corporate vehicles or camcorders still display the old RTVS

logo—its microphones, news tickers, and programme promotions in print and on social media remain unbranded. The most visible manifestation of "visibility" for STVR in society is radio broadcasts. The reputational risk is that, after 18 months of its operation, STVR has remained almost invisible as a corporate entity. Meanwhile, its predecessor remains highly visible in media coverage.

Distinctiveness is an institution's unique image in the minds of stakeholders, extending beyond its corporate logo. It encompasses the entire CVI, supporting the strategic objective of distinguishing the organisation from competitors and ensuring this impression is memorable. Currently, STVR must preserve distinctiveness in two ways. First, to stand out from competitors such as radio and TV broadcasters in Slovakia. Second, to differentiate itself from its predecessor. None of the strategies currently employed seems to effectively enhance STVR's reputation. While plain black microphones are distinctive enough from competing organisations, as they are the only ones without a logo on the Slovak media market, maintaining a colon before the programme name, and sometimes also magenta, helps keep the dissolved public-service broadcaster relevant in Slovaks' minds, reminding them of the STVR brand's problematic branding transition.

Authenticity relies more on storytelling than on visual presentation. Nonetheless, CVI elements also influence this dimension of institutional reputation. They aim to link visual expression with the institution's origins, slogan, mission, or vision. Since STVR lacks these elements and, moreover, uses some of its predecessor's slogans, its reputation is affected in terms of independence, accuracy, reliability, and trustworthiness as a public-service broadcaster. This absence further weakens STVR's institutional reputation.

Furthermore, the authenticity of STVR is even lower than that of newly established institutions. In such cases, the public expects a clear mission and vision in an entirely new organisational narrative. In contrast, the story of STVR's establishment has already been closely linked to narratives about the politically motivated cancellation of RTVS. As the data collected in this study show, these narratives dominate Slovak political and media debates and international debates involving the EU, the EBU, Reporters Without Borders, and others. Consequently, politicians have undermined the authenticity of the STVR story, and the range of potential future narratives for STVR has been shaped by political decisions made during its founding and afterwards.

This is also evident from the perspective of CVI management, where the Minister of Culture interferes with STVR's managerial autonomy by issuing instructions on the corporate logo and its graphic elements, and then commissioning and funding their design. In addition, the story behind the logo of the now-defunct RTVS constitutes a compelling narrative in its own right. This visual identity received the prestigious gold award from the PROMAX World Academy in 2016 in the main category of global television design,

outperforming logos from companies such as CNN Worldwide, HBO, Fox Sports, and MTV (STVR, 2016). The award is regarded as the Oscar of graphic design. Thus, from the perspective of the future STVR logo, this legacy also seems limiting. Even if STVR management presents a graphically outstanding logo, it might still be overshadowed not only by politicised narratives but also by the highly acclaimed visual identity of its predecessor.

Considering Malmelin and Moisander's (2014) view that visual and narrative identity together form a brand, and Van den Bosh et al.'s (2005) argument that the authenticity of a brand's story influences its reputation, we can conclude that Slovak politicians have created a highly inauthentic and polarised narrative environment that hampers STVR's ability to establish its own identity. Simply put, regardless of the current management's efforts to present an authentic narrative, some stakeholders will regard it as a significant achievement without question, while others will never consider it sufficiently genuine. This narrative ambivalence does not provide a strong foundation for building an authentic and trusted institutional reputation.

Transparency is a vital factor that influences the reputation of public-service institutions. Questioning their transparency is like questioning their core purpose. In the case of STVR, transparency was compromised even before the Slovak Government coalition and its Members of Parliament established it. They have never concealed their intention to control the public-service broadcaster, and the institution's founding was a contentious yet lawful step to replace the former Director General, whose term ended with the dissolution of the previous STVR. Additionally, members of the STVR oversight bodies—the STVR Council and the STVR Ethics Committee—were appointed from among individuals affiliated or supporting the governing coalition. As a result, the transparency of matters related to STVR continues to be undermined by ongoing politicisation.

Consistency involves maintaining coherence across the institution's visual and auditory communications. It begins with adhering to clear and consistent communication guidelines without exception. This includes the institution's letterhead, with its characteristic graphic design and text layout, as well as external marketing communications. Currently, STVR lacks a unified CVI, resulting in inconsistent implementation. The institution's reputation, built around its new name while retaining its predecessor's CVI, enables STVR to function but not to develop a strong and coherent brand.

Conclusion

This study examined the corporate identity of Slovak Television and Radio (STVR), which has operated without a CVI for 18 months. The analysis showed that the absence of a visual identity can significantly threaten an

organisation's reputation. Since the organisation has no authentic brand identity beyond its name, the research focused on the management of visual identity in external communication. This is characterised by a pragmatic yet confusing use of visual elements inherited from its predecessor, RTVS, especially the colon preceding the names of television channels, streams, and radio stations, as well as plain black microphone covers. As a result, the brand remains partly visible, while the new institutional identity is marginalised.

STVR's actual identity remains uncertain, as it still incorporates elements inherited from the former RTVS, such as the magenta colour. All eleven radio stations continue to display their former corporate colours, and the distinctive RTVS colon used before channel and programme symbols remains in use.

STVR's communicated identity emphasises the institution's presence by highlighting the popularity of its flagship programmes, political discussion, charitable initiatives, and entertainment.

The STVR's conceived identity remains fragile in terms of reputation because it depends on politicising various issues, from the controversial reasons for establishing the institution to the political influence exerted over it and the appointment of political nominees to the board, ethics committee, and management. As a result, it also faces media scrutiny with negative references.

STVR's ideal identity remains unclear, and it is difficult to generalise because STVR has yet to present a CVI; consequently, no research on its current brand position is available. The provisional communication established by the organisation primarily aims to familiarise the public with the new STVR brand name.

STVR's desired identity remains unclear because the institution lacks a clearly articulated strategic vision. The statements made by the political representatives who established and politicised the institution are of limited relevance from a strategic standpoint. However, the Director General outlined her vision during the election hearing; in her project, she described it as "point zero," signifying a new beginning. Nonetheless, she did not specify which institutional qualities she aims to build upon and develop, which she plans to gradually phase out, or which she would abandon immediately.

It is clear that STVR's current state of corporate visual identity results not from management's failure to rebrand but from hurried political decisions. These decisions overlooked the long-term consequences of abolishing an institution without allowing sufficient transition time between the adoption of the legislation and establishing a new entity. The issue affects not only the visual dimension but also the institutional narrative. Such a transition period is vital for developing the corporate identity of the new institution, as it enables the smooth integration of new elements with existing ones, creating a natural visual and narrative link between the old and the new.

Conversely, the current STVR management faces not only the absence of visual identity but also a narrative gap that disrupts the continuity of the Slovak

public broadcaster's story. However, given the current leadership's already fragile reputation, this situation may also present an opportunity. After more than a year and a half of using a hybrid visual identity—combining elements of the former radio and television identities with muted, neutral colours and fonts under the new name—the experience gained during this transitional period can inform strategic decisions in developing a future CVI. A detailed analysis of the actual, communicated, and conceived identities should serve as the basis for STVR management to develop its ideal and desired identities. The first step could involve conducting a broad internal survey of employees in the sales, marketing, and public relations departments, as well as other key stakeholders, to gather insights into their experiences communicating the STVR brand over the past 18 months. Focusing on positive branding experiences—despite polarised and often negative narratives—could help restore the organic development of the public broadcaster's visual identity, which has been disrupted by political influences. In this way, the complex process of addressing reputational damage caused by politically driven rebranding could shift towards a narrative that aligns the development of the new STVR brand with the strengthening of the existing public-service broadcasting brand.

The study does not provide a comprehensive overview of STVR's operation without a CVI, but it highlights pitfalls of branding management that lead to tension and inconsistency in public communication. It contributes to media branding theory by demonstrating how the lack of CVI can undermine the reputation of a media brand.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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Ethics and Media Management in Romanian Journalism: A Longitudinal Analysis Based on the Worlds of Journalism Study

ABSTRACT

This article analyses changes in journalists' ethical orientations and professional values in Romania by comparing data from the second and third waves of the *Worlds of Journalism Study*, with particular attention to newsroom hierarchy. The study is based on surveys of 341 Romanian journalists in WJS2 (data collected between 2014 and 2015) and 365 journalists in WJS3 (data collected between 2022 and 2023), representing a cross-section of the media landscape (television and radio stations, newspapers, online outlets, independent newsrooms). Focusing on four core ethical statements—absolute professional standards, ethical standards with exceptions, situational ethics, and personal judgment—the article examines longitudinal changes and positional differences among journalists without managerial responsibilities, middle management, and top management roles.

KEYWORDS: journalism ethics, media management, professional standards, situational ethics, *Worlds of Journalism Study*

STRESZCZENIE

Etyka i zarządzanie mediami w rumuńskim dziennikarstwie: analiza oparta na badaniu Worlds of Journalism

Badanie opiera się na ankietach przeprowadzonych wśród 341 rumuńskich dziennikarzy w ramach Worlds of Journalism (dane zebrane w latach 2014–2015) oraz 365 dziennikarzy w ramach WJS3 (dane zebrane w latach 2022–2023), reprezentujących stacje telewizyjne i radiowe, gazety, serwisy internetowe, i niezależne redakcje. Koncentrując się na czterech podstawowych wartościach etycznych – standardach zawodowych, standardach etycznych z wyjątkami, etyce sytuacyjnej i osobistym osądzie – artykuł skupia się na zmianach w czasie i różnicach

Suggested citation: Anghel, G. & Matei, A. (2026). Ethics and Media Management in Romanian Journalism: A Longitudinal Analysis Based on the Worlds of Journalism Study. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 177–192. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.11
Submitted: 30.12.2025 Accepted: 28.02.2026

w stanowiskach wśród dziennikarzy niepełniących funkcji kierowniczych, średniego szczebla kierowniczego oraz najwyższego szczebla kierowniczego.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: etyka dziennikarska, zarządzanie mediami, standardy zawodowe, etyka sytuacyjna, badanie *Worlds of Journalism Study*

Introduction

Trust in the Romanian mass media has been in continuous decline in recent years. In 2025, the overall level of public trust fell to 26%, whereas in 2021 it stood at 42% (Radu, 2025). This alarming deterioration may also be attributed to the socio-political context in Romania, marked by recession, corruption, and instability, culminating in the cancellation of the 2024 presidential elections (Despa, 2026). The unfavourable situation facing the Romanian media is further reflected in the country's position in the 2025 World Press Freedom Index, where Romania ranked 55th, down from 49th the previous year (Marica, 2025). Romania's media environment is classified as "problematic," with a diverse and relatively pluralistic media landscape, yet one marked by political pressures, media ownership influence, lack of transparency in media financing, journalists' sense of safety, and the absence of a national media literacy program, which encourages the proliferation of misinformation (*Europe—Central Asia: Romania*, 2025).

Romania does not diverge from the international context, where media consumption has become increasingly selective and specialised due to "the increasing abundance of options" (Ksiazek, 2019) generated by accelerated digitalisation and the proliferation of social media. At the same time, the Romanian media market "is diversified but fragmented" (*Europe—Central Asia: Romania*, 2025). Botan (2024) highlights a significant shift in media consumption, indicating "a gradual move from traditional sources to online platforms and social media" (p. 10). The fragmentation of the Romanian media market also has a negative effect, as "editorial decisions are often subordinated to the interests of owners, transforming the media into a propaganda tool" (*Europe—Central Asia: Romania*, 2025).

Although the era of 'mogul media' has long passed in Romania's media landscape (Nicola, Călin, Anghel, & Oprea, 2023), owner influence remains an important factor that can undermine editorial independence and can shape ethical decision-making in newsrooms. A recent example occurred in 2023, when journalists from *Libertatea* and *Gazeta Sporturilor* accused Ringier management of owner interference in editorial policy. According to journalists, they were asked to submit in advance articles concerning certain betting companies and to establish a lobbying organisation for the betting industry, similar to one

operated by a Ringier majority-owned publication in Bulgaria (*Redacția Libertatea...*, 2023). The journalists refused, stating: "We wish to work together with you in a company that supports ethical journalism, not journalism subordinated to commercial or political interests" (Tolontan, 2023). The conflict ended with the dismissal of 20% of the journalists from the two publications.

Furthermore, the relationship between politics and the media is often problematic and has negative consequences for editorial independence, particularly for ethical decision-making in newsrooms. Some of the most common forms of political interference in the Romanian media include political pressures, intimidation, or non-transparent funding, all of which severely affect independent journalism. "Media funding mechanisms are often opaque, even corrupt" *(Europe—Central Asia: Romania*, 2025), resulting in situations where "millions of euros go non-transparently to certain websites [media outlets] as payment for the content which is not even marked as advertising" (*Report// The State of the Press...*, 2024). Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the media industry received €50 million in public funds, and in 2023, "political parties in Romania allocated approximately 24.5 million euros in public subsidies to finance media activities or political propaganda" (Toma, 2024, p. 7).

From the early post-communist years to the present, aggression against journalists has remained a persistent feature of the Romanian political landscape (Oprea & Anghel, 2025), and this climate of hostility constitutes another factor shaping ethical decision-making within the profession.

All of the dynamics outlined above directly affect how Romanian journalists practice their profession and call into question the stability of the ethical norms that should guide journalistic activity. In such a context, it becomes essential to understand how Romanian journalists relate to professional standards, to what extent these standards influence everyday ethical decisions, whether their value orientations have changed over the past decade, and whether significant differences exist among journalists without managerial responsibilities, middle management, and top management. These concerns naturally lead to the following research questions designed to clarify how ethical orientations are articulated and negotiated within the Romanian media sector: RQ1: What ethical principles guide media managers and journalists from the Romanian press? RQ2: To what extent have media managers and journalists in Romania redefined ethical behaviour in journalism between 2014–2015 and 2022–2023?

Literature review

Journalism ethics is a concept that has been theorised for a very long time and is deeply rooted in universal philosophical thought, supporting values such as truth, objectivity, and freedom. From a pragmatic perspective, "ethics is applied

philosophy, and journalism ethics is philosophy applied to the practice of journalism" (Patching & Hirst, 2021, p. 157), on the basis of which one may define "what constitutes good work" (Wilkins & Brennen, 2004, p. 297 as cited in Oso, Adeniran, & Arowolo, 2024, p. 2). However, regardless of the conceptual approach, "inherent in ethics is the notion of responsibility", because "mass media define social reality and this implies a lot of power to influence (...) public policy in general", so journalists must be "answerable for their conduct and actions" (Oso et al., 2024, pp. 3, 6). Responsibility in journalistic practice is not attributed to a single individual but manifests itself across several levels. At the first level, journalists who produce the material are responsible for their own content, followed by "media owners and platform operators"—newsroom and platform operators—who share responsibility for published materials, and finally media users themselves, who must be responsible for reporting inappropriate content (Mast, 2018, p. 472). In addition to the responsibilities assumed by individual journalists, a substantial share of ethical accountability rests with media managers, whose decisions shape the organisational environment in which journalism is practised. Their role extends far beyond editorial decision-making, encompassing broader organisational areas such as human resource management, financial management, operational strategy, and interdepartmental coordination, making the role of managers considerably more complex (Albarran & Moellinger, 2017, p. 27). In essence, media managers "set the rules of the game," because "they are actors in the process of creating social order in media organisations and, affected by societal expectations like values beyond a simple profit motive, contribute to the landscape of the media system as a whole" (Greck, Franzetti, & Altmeppen, 2017, p. 121).

Decision-making, regardless of organisational level, involves a combination of intrinsic values and extrinsic factors, grounded in professional norms expressed in various documents such as codes of ethics. These documents, which laid the foundations for the professionalisation of journalism, seek to establish clear standards of conduct for journalists to ensure ethical professional behaviour (Hujanen, Ruotsalainen, Vaarala, Lehtisaari, & Grönlun, 2023, p. 2672; Karlsson, Ferrer Conill, & Örnebring, 2023, p. 554). Nevertheless, "codes of ethics can never be more than a guide to action because circumstances will always vary" (Patching & Hirst, 2021, p. 4), and moreover, codes of ethics are often interpreted differently by journalists or newsrooms (Bucholtz, 2020, p. 4). Although ethical codes share certain fundamental elements, yet the most important, encompassing all others, is truth, which can be achieved only through accuracy, objectivity, fairness, balance, comprehensiveness, and related principles (Christians et al., 2024; Michailidou & Trenz, 2021; Oso et al., 2024).

Among the first codes to appear in the Romanian media landscape are *The Journalist's Statute* and the *Journalist's Code of Ethics*, adopted in 2004

by the Media Organisations Convention. Work on these documents began in 2002 (Radu & Thiemann, 2017, p. 2). The most recent revision was made in 2009. Additionally, the Union of Romanian Journalists published in 2018 its own code of ethics in 2018 (*CODUL...*, 2018), which was last updated in 2020 (*CODUL DEONTOLOGIC...*, 2020). Beyond these national codes of ethics, there are also internal codes that regulate journalists' professional activities within individual media organisations (see *Codul Digi24*, n.a.).

Although codes of ethics play an important role, Voakes (1997 as cited in Bucholtz, 2020, p. 25) argues that journalists' ethical decisions are influenced by a range of social factors. He identifies seven levels of social influence on journalists' ethical decisions: "individual, small group, organisational (internal rules, goals, demands, and values of the company), competitive (activities of rivals), occupational (professional norms and standards), extra-media (advertisers, PR, audience, information sources), and legal (law-related)." In Romania, the framework described by Voakes (1997) is evident in cases such as political funding of the press and owner interference, which justify a comparative analysis of journalists' ethical values over time.

Tsetsura and Valentini (2016) proposed a global model for understanding media ethics in journalistic decision-making that integrates intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Beyond individual characteristics—such as background, gender, and experience—and country-level influences like politics, economics, and socio-cultural norms, the authors emphasise that ethical decision-making is also shaped by journalists' personal, professional, and environmental values (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016, p. 577). Personal values—such as love, friendship, family, belonging, and economic security—operate at a deeply individual level, while professional values like freedom, equality, fairness, balanced representation, and autonomy reflect the more objective norms embedded in codes of ethics (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016, p. 576). Environmental values encompass both organisational and societal norms that tend to prevail a given context (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016, p. 578). Scholars argue that media practice often absorbs the values of the surrounding society (Oso et al., 2024, p. 9), which suggests that in environments marked by corruption, journalists may be more inclined to compromise ethical principles. The same authors note that organisational culture, if strongly anchored in ethical norms, can positively influence journalistic practice, even in a corrupt society (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016, p. 578).

This multilevel understanding of values can be complemented by Forsyth's (1980) taxonomy of ethical orientations, which explains how individual moral philosophies shape judgments about right and wrong. Forsyth identifies four ethical positions—"absolutism (rules are to be followed at all times), situationism (the situation decrees the most ethical solution), exceptionism (rules are generally accepted but may be waived if circumstances demand it), and subjectivism (moral judgments should depend primarily on one's own

personal values)" (as cited in Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & De Beer, 2019, p. 202)—that help explain why journalists who share similar professional norms may nevertheless approach ethical dilemmas differently. These orientations, formed through lifelong experience, add another layer to our understanding how Romanian journalists navigate ethical decisions in a context marked by political pressure and organisational constraints.

This theoretical framework suggests that journalistic ethics result from the interaction of personal, professional, and contextual values, and that in Romania these dynamics are amplified by political, economic, and organisational pressures. Based on these premises, the present study examines the ethical orientations of Romanian journalists and how they have evolved between the two waves of the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS 2 and WJS 3).

Methodology

The article is based on a comparative analysis of data collected in Romania as part of the international Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS); using samples from the second wave—WJS2 (341 journalists, data collected between 2014 and 2015) and the third wave—WJS3 (365 journalists, data collected between 2022 and 2023). Globally, the second wave (WJS2) included 27,500 journalists from 67 countries (WJS2: 2012–2016, n.d.), while the third wave (WJS3) contains data from 32,354 journalists across 75 countries (Lauerer & Grünewald, 2021, p. 8). The longitudinal comparability of these datasets is supported by a methodological framework with a common core established at international level (Worlds of Journalism Study, 2012; Lauerer & Grünewald, 2021, p. 8).

To ensure the integrity of the analysis, both stages of research adhered to the rigorous standards established by the methodological framework. In both waves, the eligibility criteria for participation in the study remained nearly identical: respondents had to derive at least 50% of their income from journalism or devote at least 50% of their working time to the profession. These criteria ensure that comparable professional populations were analysed over a nine-year interval.

The sampling procedure followed the same algorithm: (1) selecting media organisations based on clearly defined criteria (media type, ownership, and distribution) and (2) selecting journalists to ensure representation across all editorial roles. A standardised questionnaire was used in both waves. In both cases, the Romanian translation followed a validation protocol involving back-translation by multilingual experts. The response rate for WJS2 was 54% (Coman, Matei, Milewski, & Șuțu, 2016), and for WJS3, it was 26% (Vasilendiuc et al., 2025). Although the methodological framework remained the same, the application method evolved with technological developments: while WJS2 employed some direct methods, WJS3 administered the questionnaire exclusively online.

Both national samples were designed to represent the approximate population of journalists in Romania, maintaining a 95% confidence level and a maximum margin of error of 5%—a threshold required for data acceptance into the international database. For WJS2, the estimated population of journalists was 3,000 (Coman et al., 2016), while for WJS3, it was estimated at 5,000 (Lauerer & Grünewald, 2021). Data from both waves were analysed by the WJS Centre in Munich, which verified the reliability and internal consistency of the responses before granting access to the consolidated database. For the present article, we worked exclusively with the processed dataset provided by the WJS team and conducted a secondary analysis of the finalised variables and indicators, focusing on declarative ethical orientations rather than observed behaviour.

To capture Romanian journalists' ethical orientations, this article employed the *Worlds of Journalism Study*'s standardised measurement framework, which operationalises Forsyth's (1980) taxonomy of moral philosophies. This model classifies ethical orientations along two fundamental dimensions: idealism (the degree to which an individual believes that moral action should always avoid causing harm) and relativism (the extent to which universal moral rules are rejected in favour of context-specific considerations). By combining these axes, the four profiles used in the study emerge: situationism—the situation decrees the most ethical solution, absolutism—rules are to be followed at all times, subjectivism—moral judgments should depend primarily on one's own personal values, and exceptionism—rules are generally accepted but may be waived if circumstances demand it (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 202).

Within the *Worlds of Journalism Study*, these four ethical orientations were assessed through a set of standardised statements, using a five-point Likert scale to measure journalists' level of agreement (see Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 205). In this professional context, Forsyth's concepts are adapted to journalism. For example, absolutism no longer refers to universal moral rules in a broad philosophical sense, but rather to the unconditional adherence to professional codes of ethics. Thus, these orientations reflect the general professional ethics of journalists, in which moral decisions are evaluated in light of the tension between formal standards and the exceptionalism dictated by circumstances.

Results

Between 2014–2015 and 2022–2023, the profile of Romanian journalists shows both continuity and notable changes (Coman et al., 2016; Vasilendiuc et al., 2025). In terms of gender, women constituted the majority of journalists in both periods. In terms of age, in 2014–2015, Romanian journalists were remarkably young, with an average age of 30.65 years, while by 2022–2023, the average age had increased to 36.9 years, suggesting an ageing workforce and greater professional continuity.

Regarding education, the proportion of journalists holding a bachelor's degree remained relatively stable, while the share of those with a master's degree increased substantially, from 26.7% to 40.6%. In terms of professional status, 22.6% of respondents in WJS2 were senior and executive managers, 21.7% were junior managers, while 55.7% of the journalists held no managerial position. In WJS3, 66.5% of Romanian journalists held no management positions, 25.3% were in middle management, and 8.2% were in top management positions.

Romanian journalists expressed strong support for professional ethical standards in both periods, although with significant shifts over time. In 2014–2015, 91.5% of respondents agreed that journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of the situation or context, compared with 78.9% in 2022–2023. The proportion of journalists who believed that ethics depends on the specific situation declined from 48.7% to 28.2%. Similarly, the proportion of respondents who considered ethics to be a matter of personal judgment decreased from 20.1% to 14.5%. By contrast, agreement with the statement that professional standards should apply unless extraordinary circumstances require them to be disregarded increased substantially, from 22.6% to 47.7%.

With regard to the organisational levels of Romanian journalists, data reveal differences in attitudes toward strict adherence to professional ethics across organisational ranks in both WJS waves. Agreement with the statement that journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics regardless of situation and context was reported by 21.2% of respondents in top management positions in 2014–2015, but dropped sharply to only 6.3% in 2022–2023. For middle management, the percentages remined virtually unchanged in the two waves: 20.3% in WJS2 and 20.8% in WJS3. The highest levels of agreement were consistently observed among journalists without managerial responsibilities in both years (50.0% in WJS2 and 51.8% in WJS3).

On the other hand, data from the *Worlds of Journalism Study* allow a direct, longitudinal comparison of whether journalists and media managers believe that what is ethical in this profession should depend on the specific situation. Attitudes on this topic changed notably across all organisational levels, indicating a growing distance from situational ethics. Agreement declined over time in every category: among journalists with no management role, it decreased from 27.1% in 2014–2015 to 19.7% in 2022–2023; in middle management, from 11.8% to 6.6%; and in top management, from 9.7% to 1.9%. Additionally, disagreement increased substantially between the two waves: among non-managerial journalists, it rose from 18.9% in the second wave to 37% in the third wave; in middle management, from 6.8% to 16.5%; and in top management, it declined from 10% to 5.7%. Indecision regarding this issue remained relatively stable among journalists without management roles, but decreased among managerial ranks, from 3.2% to 2.5% in middle management and from 2.9% to 0.5% in top management.

The *Worlds of Journalism* data indicate a clear predominance of disagreement in both waves with the statement "What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment." In WJS2, disagreement was most pronounced among journalists without management roles (31.0%), followed by middle managers and top managers (both with 14.2%). By 2023, disagreement increased substantially for non-managers (46.3%) and middle managers (18.9%), while it dropped among top managers (6.3%). Agreement with the statement remained comparatively low and declined slightly over time, particularly among journalists without management responsibilities (from 10.7% in 2014–2015 to 8.8% in 2022–2023) and among top managers (from 5.3% to 1.3%), while remaining relatively stable among middle managers.

Attitudes toward setting aside moral standards in extraordinary circumstances reveal differences across organisational levels and important shifts between WJS2 and WJS3. In 2014–2015, agreement with this statement was relatively low across all positions, with 4.7% of top managers, 3% of middle managers, and 15% of journalists with no management responsibilities expressing agreement. In 2022–2023, agreement doubled among journalists without management roles (31.2%); increased more than fourfold in middle management than in 2014–2015 (13.7%), and it dropped to only 2.7% in top management. Disagreement with the idea of setting aside moral or professional standards in extraordinary circumstances declined across all organisational ranks between the two periods. Disaccord was comparatively high in WJS2, particularly among journalists without management roles (24.7%) and middle managers (15%), and also notable among top managers (13%). In WJS3, disagreement declined across all categories, most visibly among middle managers (from 15% to 7.4%) and top managers (from 13% to 4.1%), though it remained relatively high among journalists without management roles (21.3%). Overall, while non-managerial journalists consistently expressed the highest levels of disagreement in both waves, longitudinal comparison indicates a general softening of opposition to ethical exceptions across all hierarchical levels.

Reflecting on the factors shaping their professional activity, Romanian media practitioners identified journalistic ethics as the most important influence in both waves (81.4% in WJS2, declining to 67% in WJS3). Similarly, the influence of personal values and beliefs decreased substantially from 71.2% to 38.6%. Among organisational influences, the importance of editorial supervisors and senior editors decreased slightly (41.2% to 37.2%), while the influence of business managers increased from 30.4% to 33%, and that of media owners from 25.1% to 29.6%.

Discussion

The distribution of respondents by organisational level shows a clear shift in the professional positioning of Romanian journalists between WJS2 and

WJS3. In 2014–2015, managerial roles were relatively evenly distributed, with 22.6% of journalists occupying senior or executive management positions and 21.7% holding junior management roles, while a majority (55.7%) reported having no management responsibilities. By 2022–2023, the proportion of journalists without any management position had increased substantially to 66.5%, indicating a strengthening of the profession's non-managerial core in Romania. At the same time, the proportion of top managers declined considerably alongside a reconfiguration of middle management roles, suggesting more limited access to senior decision-making positions within news organisations, as well as a restructuring of hierarchical positions over a short but intense period. Between WJS2 and WJS3, journalists have experienced multiple crises, beginning with the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a deeper impact on journalistic work practices more than any other crisis in modern peacetime (Backholm & Idås, 2024; Posetti, Bell & Brown, 2020). The pandemic brought economic, psychological and professional challenges not only to journalists but also to media managers. Across the world, they faced increased responsibilities, organisational downsizing or restructuring driven by financial constraints, and also the need to identify and implement adaptive strategies in real time (Perreault & Perreault, 2021).

The data indicate an important change in Romanian journalists' ethical orientations between WJS2 and WJS3, reinforcing the idea that journalistic ethics constitute a social practice that is constantly evolving (Baasbank, 2021). In 2014–2015, an overwhelming majority (91.5%) agreed that journalists should always adhere to professional codes of ethics regardless of situation or context. By 2022–2023, the unconditional commitment to professional standards had declined to 78.9%, indicating a more nuanced approach to ethical decision-making. These findings demonstrate a continuing, though evolving, commitment to professional ethical standards among Romanian journalists, differentiated according to hierarchical position within newsrooms (Șuțu, 2025).

The strongest endorsement of the professional ethical standards, regardless of the situation or context, is expressed by journalists without managerial responsibilities, reflecting the fact that they navigate through very practical professional situations and editorial decisions on a daily basis, and they are the ones who report experiencing professional pressures more frequently than those in coordination or leadership positions (Oprea & Anghel, 2025). Economic and societal factors shape both the internal dynamics of media organisations, including their workforce (Altmeppen, Hollifield, & van Loon, 2017). Accordingly, the lower and declining levels of agreement among top managers may indicate greater exposure to organisational, economic, or political pressures that complicate the application of universal ethical standards in practice.

Views on setting moral standards aside in exceptional circumstances point to a growing acceptance of a more situational approach to ethics among

Romanian journalists without managerial responsibilities. If, in WJS2, 15% of the journalists without managerial responsibilities believed that they should follow standards except in extraordinary situations, in WJS3 the number has more than doubled to 31.2%. Journalists' inclination to combine orientations (for example, absolutism and situationism) was noted by Thomas Hanitzsch et al. (2019) at the international level in the second wave of the *Worlds of Journalism Study.* In the third wave, Romanian journalists have also shown a greater inclination towards a situationist position, in which the circumstances determine the most ethical course of action, rather than absolutism (principles must be respected at all times), as they did in 2014–2015. However, the declining levels of disagreement and neutrality among managers, especially at the top level, regarding the idea that extraordinary circumstances may justify departing from professional standards may indicate a consolidation of ethical positions shaped by institutional responsibilities and strategic considerations as top management provides leadership for the entire media company, promotes organisational values and sets goodwill standards (Albarran & Moellinger, 2018).

While openness to extraordinary circumstances increased among journalists without managerial responsibilities, support for the view that ethics should be determined entirely by each specific situation declined considerably across all three organisational levels (top, middle and no management). Top management recorded the most important drop, from 9.7% agreeing that what is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation to only 1.9% in WJS3. This indicates a preference for ethics grounded in professional standards, while allowing for clearly defined exceptions. These findings are consistent with earlier qualitative research (Vasilendiuc, 2010), which suggests that Romanian journalists adhere to professional ethical norms, particularly with regard to the principle of political independence. Romanian journalists reported that they are generally not politically affiliated and do not promote political parties in their professional activities, not only because of organisational restrictions imposed by employers but also because of internalised professional codes of ethics.

The sharp rise in disagreement among journalists without managerial responsibilities regarding extraordinary circumstances (from 18.9% in 2014–2015 to 37% in 2022–2023) could reflect a growing awareness among Romanian journalists regarding the risks associated with ethical relativism in a media environment marked by political polarisation and declining trust in the news media (Radu, 2023; Radu, 2025). The *Worlds of Journalism* data also suggest a clear shift away from personal judgment as the basis for ethical decision-making, especially among top managers. In the second wave, 10% of the top managers agreed that what is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment, compared with only 5.7% in the third wave.

The WJS2 and WJS3 findings suggest that ethical orientations among Romanian journalists should be interpreted within the broader structural and political

context of the country. Taking into account both the factors shaping the professional activity and ethical orientations, WJS data show that journalistic practice is shaped by a complex interplay of professional norms, institutional frameworks, and organisational power structures (such as editors, business managers, and media owners), rather than by individual ethical beliefs alone. These patterns are consistent with recent evidence on the Romanian media environment, which points to increasing political and economic pressures, including the use of public funds to secure favourable media coverage, obstacles to investigative journalism, and attempts to limit press freedom (Radu, 2023; Radu, 2024).

Conclusions

Firstly (RQ1), data from WJS2 and WJS3 show that Romanian media managers and journalists continue to express support for ethics grounded in professional standards. At the same time, there is a decline in support for ethics based on personal judgment or situational relativism, especially among top managers, while journalists without managerial responsibilities have started showing some openness to ethical flexibility in extraordinary circumstances. Compared to WJS2, disagreement with the idea that ethics should be a matter of personal judgment increased substantially across all newsroom positions, indicating a consolidation of a more collective and institutional understanding of journalistic ethics. Secondly, these findings (RQ2) suggest that newsroom position (management vs non-management) significantly influences how professionals perceive professional ethical standards and extraordinary situations. Also, findings from WJS2 and WJS3 indicate that the ethical orientations of Romanian journalists and media managers have evolved as an adaptive response to media market instability, financial problems, digital challenges, political interference, and declining public trust in the media.

The present findings would benefit from further research, particularly qualitative studies that can capture potential gaps between declared ethical orientations and actual journalistic practices, or further substantiate the findings of the *Worlds of Journalism Study*. In particular, in-depth interviews with journalists across all organisational levels (e.g., journalists without managerial responsibilities, as well as middle and top management) could provide insight into how ethical principles are negotiated every day in Romanian newsrooms.

Acknowledgment

This publication is based on data collected as part of the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (WJS), a comprehensive international research initiative examining the state of journalism worldwide. The authors would like to thank

the members of the Romanian WJS team and the media professionals from a wide range of public and private media organisations for their invaluable contributions and support.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.12

Managing Media in Prison: The Case of Prison Radio

ABSTRACT

This study examines the governance and editorial control of prison radio across diverse regulatory environments, with a particular focus on a closed-circuit prison radio station located in one of Poland's largest prisons. Drawing on data from the Global Prison Radio International Survey covering 48 radio initiatives across 18 countries, analysis of the mission statements of selected prison radio projects published online, interviews with prison radio representatives from India, Norway, and Australia, and a case study from a prison in Grudziądz, Poland, the research investigates how institutional structures shape content creation, access, and inmate participation. While some prison radio projects allow incarcerated individuals limited editorial freedom, many are tightly controlled, with content restricted to rehabilitative messaging and available only for the incarcerated within prisons. The study reveals tensions between security-driven media governance and the rehabilitative and expressive potential of prison radio.

KEYWORDS: prison radio, radio, radio management, prison, media in prison

STRESZCZENIE

Zarządzanie mediami w więzieniu na przykładzie radia więziennego

W artykule przedstawiono modele zarządzania oraz kontroli redakcyjnej radia więziennego w różnych środowiskach regulacyjnych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem radiowęzła więziennego działającego w jednym z największych zakładów karnych w Polsce – w Grudziądzu. Opierając się na danych z międzynarodowego badania Global Prison Radio International Survey, obejmującego 48 inicjatyw radiowych z 18 krajów, analizie misji wybranych projektów radia więziennego publikowanych online, wywiadach z przedstawicielami radia więziennego z Indii, Norwegii i Australii oraz studium przypadku radiowęzła Zakładu Karnego w Grudziądzu, pokazano, w jaki sposób struktury instytucjonalne wpływają na tworzenie treści, dostęp do mediów i udział w takich projektach osób osadzonych. Chociaż niektóre projekty radia więziennego zapewniają osobom pozbawionym wolności ograniczoną swobodę redakcyjną, wiele z nich podlega ścisłej kontroli, a publikowane treści mają głównie charakter informacyjny i resocjalizacyjny oraz są dostępne wyłącznie dla osadzonych wewnątrz

Suggested citation: Doliwa, U. (2026). Managing Media in Prison: The Case of Prison Radio. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 193–214. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.12
Submitted: 05.11.2025 Accepted: 12.06.2026

zakładów karnych. Potrzeba podporządkowania się wymogom bezpieczeństwa nie zawsze sprzyja pełnemu wykorzystaniu potencjału resocjalizacyjnego radia więziennego.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: radio więzienne, radio, zarządzanie radiem, więzienie, media w więzieniu

Introduction

Defining the term prison radio is difficult because of the heterogeneity of practices and institutional and national contexts in which such media emerge. Some scholars have suggested that prison-related radio can be divided into two primary genres. The first includes programs broadcast from outside prison walls—typically via community or internet radio—that are addressed to incarcerated people or discuss issues related to incarceration. These are often referred to as prisoners' radio and tend to operate independently of penal institutions (Anderson, 2012). The second genre, commonly labelled "prison radio," is produced within correctional facilities and often involves incarcerated individuals in the creation and presentation of content (Anderson & Bedford, 2017a). While Anderson and Bedford propose using prisoner radio as a broader term encompassing both types, the international landscape increasingly adopts prison radio as the common label for all audio activities related to incarceration. The establishment of Prison Radio International (PRI) in 2022—a global network connecting prison radio initiatives—confirms this linguistic and conceptual consolidation.

One of the most inclusive definitions of prison radio comes from McDonald (2014), who conceptualizes it as audio media produced for and often by people in prison, involving diverse actors such as prisoners, former prisoners, their families, community activists, and professional broadcasters. This definition, although remains relevant, predates a significant transformation of the media environment, in which traditional broadcasting has been supplemented—or, in some cases, replaced—by digital distribution channels, including podcasts and internet radio. The contemporary understanding of prison radio needs to encompass audio projects that extend beyond conventional radio broadcasting, while retaining key characteristics, including regular production, participation of incarcerated individuals, and alignment with the goals of prison radio.

There has been a growing interest in establishing prison radio projects, but also in conducting research in this field. Recent work by Kaun and Stiernstedt positions prison radio within the broader category of prison media, examining prisons not only as sites of punishment but also as environments of media production, technological experimentation, and information flow. The authors

highlighted the ambivalent role of prison radio as both a platform for inmate self-expression and a mechanism of institutional control (Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2023, pp. 113–120). Studies conducted by leading researchers in this field, Anderson (2008; 2012) and Bedford (2015; 2018), have primarily focused on the civic and transformative potential of radio produced by or with prisoners. Subsequent publications by both authors analyzed prison radio as a space for empowerment (Anderson & Bedford, 2017b; 2019) and a tool for community development (Anderson, 2013; Anderson & Bedford, 2021). They also highlighted the diversity of approaches to operating prison radio, which is influenced by geographical, technical, and institutional factors (Anderson et al., 2022).

Regional differences are evident in media practices, including management models, as culture influences both media practices (Hanusch, 2009, pp. 621–622) and media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2017). At the same time, many similarities exist, as the idea of media convergence promotes the standardization of media content and media organizational models (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 3–4). These processes also influence prison radio, which is increasingly becoming a global phenomenon.

Prison radio forms part of the non-commercial media sector, where management practices differ significantly from those in commercial organizations. Strategic decisions are guided primarily by an organization's mission and values, shaping choices related to content, programming, and audience engagement, rather than profit maximization (Howley, 2009). The mission statements of prison radio projects around the world offer valuable insight into the objectives and identity narratives that underpin their operation. As Lister, Mitchell, and O'Shea (2009) argue, mission statements are essential to the management of radio stations, because they express brand values that shape internal culture and external perception. Research also shows that clearly defined mission statements enhance organizational performance by fostering internal cohesion and supporting consistent leadership practices (Desmidt, Prinzie, & Decramer, 2011).

This is especially important in organizations in which volunteers play a significant role, which is often the case in prison radio projects. In such organizations, managers must foster a culture where members contribute not out of contractual obligation but because of shared values and mutual benefit (Enjolras, 2009; Young, 2001). Accordingly, the first aim of this article is to address the following Research Question 1: What are the recurring elements of the mission statements of prison radio projects around the world?

Organizational structures in non-commercial media tend to be participatory, often involving volunteers and community members. This model is most commonly supported by nongovernmental organizations, but it can also be implemented through other legal forms, such as cooperatives, trusts, and

educational institutions (Lewis & Booth, 1989). Accordingly, the second aim of this article is to address Research Question 2, which examines the legal forms adopted by prison radio initiatives.

Management in these settings requires the careful allocation of limited resources, including funding, equipment, and human capital, often provided through grants, public support, or nonprofit sponsorship (Picard, 2011). Content and audience management are informed by research and consultation with target communities to ensure relevance and engagement, while human resource management emphasizes the training, coordination, and motivation of diverse teams (Howley, 2009; Lewis & Booth, 1989). Non-commercial media must also balance technological innovation with practicality, by adopting low-cost and digital platforms (Jenkins, 2006; Howley, 2009). Finally, risk and compliance management are important, as these organizations must adhere to ethical standards (Lewis & Booth, 1989). The third aim is to address Research Question 3, which examines prison radio management practices in three different radio stations: RøverRadion (Norway), Jailbreak (Australia), and Tinka Tinka (India). These practices include risk and compliance management, reflected in consent procedures; content and audience management, closely linked to balancing rehabilitative aims with security and reputational concerns; human resource management, including decision-making processes, participatory practices, the recruitment and training of incarcerated producers, and pathways for people with lived experience to move into staff or governance roles; And, finally, production and distribution management, reflected in different systems for distributing programs.

The fourth aim is to examine similarities and differences between the management model of the prison radio station in Grudziądz, Poland, and those used by other stations discussed in this article, in terms of mission, legal form, and management practices (Research Question 4). Additionally, the study examines the similarities and differences between the mission statement of the Prison Radio Service in Poland and the recurring elements identified in the mission statements of other prison radio stations, as well as the capacity of the prison radio station in Grudziądz to achieve the goals set by the Polish Prison Radio Service (Research Question 5).

The problem of management in prison radio can be understood in two ways: as the internal organizational system of prison radio projects and as a tool for managing the incarcerated community. For example, research has shown that prison radio can be an effective tool in reducing feelings of hostility and anger among incarcerated people and promoting trust between them and prison staff (Einat & Nagar, 2023). This is also confirmed by the evaluation of the functioning of RISE (Rehabilitating Inmates Seeking Empowerment) Maximum Radio (RMR), which was launched in Trinidad and Tobago's Maximum Security Prison (Prison Radio International, 2025).

Both aspects of management in prison radio are important and merit discussion. However, this article focuses on management practices within prison radio projects.

Materials and Methods

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining international survey analysis, qualitative interviews, mission statements analysis, and a case study. The Global Prison Radio International Survey is an initiative of Prison Radio International (PRI) aimed at creating a global database of prison-related radio projects. The survey was developed in collaboration with Justice Matters Ltd, with support from the Prison Radio International Advisory Board, of which the author of this article is a member. Responses that formed the basis of the research were collected between October 6, 2023, and May 29, 2024. Participants were representatives of prison radio projects from various continents and countries.[1] As a member of the Prison Radio International Advisory Board, the author had access to the raw data collected during and obtained permission to use it. The results of the analysis were valuable in identifying the organizational forms of prison radio projects, as legal form shapes management practices (Research Question 2), and in informing the selection of projects for the subsequent stage of the study.

All online mission statements of projects that participated in the above-mentioned Global Prison Radio survey during the study period were collected and compiled into a Word file. The primary source used to identify each project's mission statement was the project's website. If the mission was not available on the website, or if the project did not have a website, descriptions provided on its social media accounts were taken into account. In some cases, Spotify profiles were included. This approach was particularly relevant

1 Argentina (Acá estamos, Atravesando Muros, Es Un Cine Para 25 Espectadores y Más, Esquina la libertad producciones, FM de Adentro, Radio Mosquito, Radio Ranchito, Radio Tiempo Fuera, RadiOculta, Retumba La Radio!, Voces, Voces en Libertad, Fuera de Sietema), Australia (Beyond the Bars, Jailbreak Health Project, Justicematters, Locked In, Loddon Radio, Prisoner Radio Network Australia, Proposed: Western Plains Community Radio, The Prison Show), Belgium (Radio Haren), Cameroon (Jail Time Records), Ecuador (Proyecto radial 22.000 voces), Hungary (Adj Hangot), India (Radio Parvaz, Tinka Tinka Jail Radio), Ireland (Inside Radio), Japan (Kousei Radio), Mexico (Taller de Radio CEJUV), Denmark (Bandit Radio – RøverRadion), Kenya (Prison Radio Kenya), South Korea (Special Radio Documentary for PRI), Trinidad and Tobago (Rise Maximum Radio – Radio for Change), the United Kingdom (Breakdown Podcast, Life After Prison, National Prison Radio in HMP Brixton, Outside In, The Lived Experience Series PodcastUK, Trapped: The IPP Prisoner Scandal – podcast), the United States (Ear Hustle, Inside Wire: Colorado Prison Radio, Making Amends, Outside: Inside Radio, Uncuffed), and Uruguay (Boquete).

for podcast-based prison radio projects. In the case of RISE Maximum Radio in Trinidad and Tobago, the source of the mission statement was a Prison Radio International newsletter. All the sources are included in the bibliography. The aim of this analysis was to identify the main themes and priorities in formulating the mission of these projects. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze this material. The author familiarized themselves with the material and identified recurring thematic categories. The analysis made it possible to answer the Research Question 1 about the recurring elements of prison radio mission statements as an important factor shaping the management strategies.

To identify different approaches to organizing and managing prison radio projects and to address Research Question 3, three interviews were conducted. The interviewees were managers of the following prison radio projects: Knut Erik Wold: CFO & Daily Manager of RøverRadion in Norway (2014–2024); Kate Pinnock who manages daily operations and editorial decisions in the Jailbreak prison radio project in Australia and Vartika Nanda, the founder and CEO of Tinka Tinka in India. The interviewees were asked four questions: Who is responsible for managing daily operations, and how are decisions made in the projects you supervise? How can incarcerated individuals participate in decision-making regarding program content and other key aspects of the prison radio project? How do prison authorities influence or participate in decisions regarding the program content and overall development of the prison radio project? Is there a specific procedure for content approval before broadcasting? If so, please provide a brief description. Responses were received in different formats: transcribed answers to the questions sent by email (Kate Pinnock, 12.05.2025), text messages sent via Messenger (Knut Erik Wold, 28.04.2025), and a real-time conversation conducted via WhatsApp, which was transcribed afterwards (Vartika Nanda, 17.05.2025). Where necessary, follow-up questions were sent to clarify individual responses.

The Polish case study is based on a research conducted in one of the largest prisons in the country, located in Grudziądz, which houses a predominantly female prison population. The radio program is produced by women and primarily for women. Two main research methods were used in this study. The first method involved unstructured interviews. One interview was conducted with Elwira Strublewska, the lead coordinator responsible for overseeing the prison radio service. The prison visit to also provided an opportunity to interview three incarcerated women involved in producing the radio program. Although the interviews were unstructured, the main topics were defined in advance and focused on the process of creating the radio content, the participants' influence on the program, and the benefits associated with such work. They were conducted with the assistance of prison staff, who remained in a separate room but could listen to the conversation, which may have influenced the responses to some extent.

In addition, surveys among incarcerated people were carried out among potential listeners of the prison radio. The questionnaire was partly inspired by a prison radio survey distributed by National Prison Radio (2014). However, the questionnaire was adapted to the Polish context and the objectives of the research project. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed at random among women in the facility in February and March, and another 150 among men in November and December 2023. In total, 123 questionnaires were returned from the women's section and 103 from the men's section.

Additionally, the monthly radio program schedule for March 2023 was also analyzed and the visit to the correctional facility in Grudziądz provided an opportunity to observe the live broadcast of the radio program.

This part of the research, conducted at the prison in Grudziądz, addresses Research Question 4 by examining similarities and differences between the management model of the prison radio station in Grudziądz, Poland, and those used by other stations discussed in the article, drawing on the above-mentioned interviews and observations. Interviews, surveys, observations, and an analysis of the monthly program schedule were also used to address Research Question 5, which focused on assessing the capacity of the Grudziądz prison radio station to achieve the goals identified by the Polish Prison Radio Service.

The research project received a favorable opinion from the Scientific Research Ethics Committee at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (decision of 14 February 2023), signed by Dr. hab. Beata Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, Professor at the University. Furthermore, the project received official permission to conduct research at Correctional Facility No. 1 in Grudziądz from the Plenipotentiary for Science of the Academy of Justice in Warsaw, Dr. hab. Michał Tanaś, Professor of the Academy of Justice (decision of 28 February 2023). Written consent was not obtained from the incarcerated participants to protect their privacy and ensure the confidentiality of their identities.

Results

The analysis of the mission statements of selected prison radio projects

This thematic analysis explores recurring patterns in the mission statements of the prison radio projects whose representatives participated in the Global Prison Radio Survey. As the survey did not include questions about mission statements, an online search was conducted to identify if any relevant statements could be found regarding these projects and to highlight any significant information discovered in those statements. In total, 19 mission statements were found and analyzed.

A central theme across many prison radio initiatives is the emphasis on empowerment and self-expression. Many mission statements frame radio as a platform where incarcerated individuals can make their voices heard, often in opposition to stigmatizing or silencing discourses. For instance, Radio Tiempo Fuera describe its purpose as "a space where we build a life of dignity" by "becoming aware of our rights and exercising freedom of expression through education" (Radio Tiempo Fuera, 2024). Radio Escolar aims to "increasing young people's scope for expression" (UIL, 2024). Similarly, the Uncuffed project in California frames its mission around enabling people in prison "to tell their own stories" through structured training in narrative production (Uncuffed, 2024). A similar emphasis can be found in the mission of Prison Radio (USA). It is a San Francisco-based radio and advocacy project whose mission statement is "to include the voices of incarcerated people in the public debate" (Prison Radio, 2025). In Australia, the Jailbreak program highlights the power of radio as a bridge between people inside and outside prison, stressing the importance of "talking about life inside" and offering content curated by formerly incarcerated people themselves (Jailbreak, 2024).

Another recurring theme is the use of prison radio as a platform for rehabilitation and reintegration. Mission statements often link the act of participation in media production with the development of skills and the positive changes that prepare individuals for life beyond prison. The Tinka Tinka Jail Radio project in India explicitly describes its platform as one that "provides inmates with a platform to express themselves, develop communication skills, and engage in creative activities, thereby facilitating their rehabilitation and reintegration into society" (Tinka Tinka, 2025). Likewise, Radio Haren in Belgium describes its programming as contributing to rehabilitation and its aim is to "help inmates develop skills for reintegration into society" (Radio Haren, 2024) and Jail Time Records presents itself as an initiative "helping social reintegration" (Jail Time Records, 2024).

A third recurring theme, often highlighted across the sample is the effort to challenge dominant representations of incarceration and promote more human-centered portrayals of prison life. For example, Radio Ranchito in Argentina characterizes its production space as one that enables incarcerated young people to participate with the explicit aim of challenging and counteracting the "stigmatizing narratives often imposed on them" (Radio Ranchito, 2023). Similarly, RøverRadion in Norway seeks to "shift perspectives, build bridges, and foster greater understanding" by broadcasting the lived realities of incarceration to the public (RøverRadion, 2024). In the United States, Inside Wire: Colorado Prison Radio also presents itself as offering a "rare glimpse into a stigmatized and often mythologized world," emphasizing its role in encouraging reflection and understanding across social boundaries (Inside Wire, 2024) and Jail Time Records aims at "changing society's perception of imprisonment" (Jail Time Records, 2024).

Many projects also highlight the role of prison radio in building relationships—both within the incarcerated community and between those inside and their families, cultures, and communities outside. In these accounts, radio becomes a medium of emotional continuity and relational resilience. The Beyond the Bars project in Australia, which focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inmates, emphasizes its role in "connecting with culture and community" (Beyond the Bars, 2024). Similarly, the Jailbreak program highlights the need for "linking families and communities across Australia," stressing its emotional and communicative function (Jailbreak, 2024). Likewise, Retumba La Radio! is offering "a feeling of freedom, of being part of something again, and of feeling useful to society" (Quintana, 2024).

The analysis helps to better understand the goals of these prison radio projects, which are closely related to management strategies. A particularly important feature of the mission statements is their strong emphasis on the human perspective.

Legal form: an important aspect of management

An organizational structure defines the roles of (and the relationships between) the different people, departments, and functions within an organization. It helps specify the division of work and the hierarchy, authority and formal lines of communication.

The global landscape of prison radio is marked by a variety of legal structures, reflecting the diversity of contexts in which these initiatives operate. According to the *Global Prison Radio International Survey*, most prison radio projects are run by charities, non-profit organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This model is especially common in Europe, where projects like National Prison Radio, The Lived Experience Series Podcast, Outside In (UK), Bandit Radio—RøverRadion (Norway), and Radio Haren (Belgium) have adopted this approach. The now-defunct Adj Hangot/Speak Out project from Hungary also followed this organizational model. Beyond Europe, this form of organization is widely used in South America (Radio Tiempo Fuera and Atravesando Muros in Argentina; RISE Maximum Radio in Trinidad and Tobago), North America (Ear Hustle and Uncuffed in the United States), as well as in Asia (Radio Parvaaz in India and Kousei Radio in Japan), Australia (e.g., Jailbreak Health Project and The Prison Show), and Africa (Prison Radio Kenya).

Another significant organizational model is operating as part of an educational institution, such as a school, university, or college. This form is particularly common in Argentina, where the projects include Radio Ranchito, Retumba La Radio!, Acá Estamos, Radio Mosquito, and Fuera de Sistema. The same organizational model is also found in other regions, by Radio Haren

(Belgium), Loddon Prison Radio (Australia), Inside Wire: Colorado Prison Radio (United States), Boquete (Uruguay), and Outside: Inside Radio (USA) reporting educational affiliations.

Some prison radio projects are run directly by the state or government. Examples include Western Plains Community Radio (Australia, currently in the planning phase), Voces en Libertad (Argentina), and South Korea's Making Waves Behind Bars. In Israel, the Israeli Prison Service (IPS) launched Radio Focus in 2017 at Ayalon, a high-security prison, providing a rare instance of a government-operated station run by and for incarcerated people.

Privately run or individually managed projects, particularly podcasts, represent another common organizational model. This is especially the case among projects from the United Kingdom and the United States that participated in the study, where initiatives such as Trapped: The IPP Prisoner Scandal, Breakdown Podcast (both UK), and Making Amends (USA) exemplify this form. Some collective projects also adopt private organizational forms, such as Justice Matters (Australia) and Inside Radio (Ireland).

In addition to these main categories, other legal structures were also identified. For example, Esquina Libertad Producciones in Argentina operates as a cooperative, while Tinka Tinka Jail Radio in India is managed by a trust.

Management practices in prison radio

Understanding how stations position themselves within their mission statements and having knowledge about organizational structures is important, but it does not directly explain the managerial practices. It is therefore useful to examine the operations of certain projects. To this end, interviews were conducted with representatives of three projects from three different continents: Europe (Knut Erik Wold, RøverRadion), Asia (Vartika Nanda, Tinka Tinka), and Australia (Kate Pinnock, Jailbreak).

RøverRadion is a Norwegian prison radio run by an NGO, established in 2013 and operated by an association. This prison radio is made for and by incarcerated people in Norway, and is produced in five prisons: Oslo, Bergen, Halden, Eidsberg and Bredtveit prison for women. The program is broadcast within Norwegian prisons, and also, uniquely, nationally through Norway's public service broadcaster, NRK. Knut Erik Wold, served as CFO and Daily Manager of RøverRadion from 2014 to 2024 and was responsible for the day-to-day management of the organization. Editorial responsibility, however, was shared by Martine Rand and Mina Hadjian, with all major decisions made collectively by the three of them.

Before any content could be broadcast, it underwent a multi-step review process. First, the material was reviewed by the Norwegian Correctional Service,

followed by approval from the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). Only after these steps (which could take up to two weeks) was it permitted to air.

Regarding regulations and ethical standards, Wold highlighted the importance of both written legislation and editorial ethics. Legal obligations included the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and privacy laws, which are particularly important in the context of incarcerated individuals. Additionally, editorial practice was guided by the *Vær Varsom-plakaten* (Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press). Some principles that are important when reporting on prisoners or individuals involved in criminal cases include the need to respect individuals' privacy, identity, ethnicity, and religious beliefs. Journalists are advised to avoid unnecessary exposure or stigmatization, especially when such information is not relevant to the case. According to this document, journalists must not present suspects or accused individuals as guilty before final court judgment. The media should avoid publishing names, photographs, or other identifying details, particularly when they involve vulnerable individuals, minors, or ongoing investigations. Identification should only occur if there is a compelling public interest. Journalists are also required to protect confidential sources, which is especially important in sensitive environments like prisons (Presseforbund, 2021).

The Jailbreak Health Project (JHP) is run by the nonprofit organization Community Restorative Centre, based in Sydney, which supports people and families in New South Wales, Australia, affected by incarceration. The radio program has been running for more than 25 years. Kate Pinnock, the Jailbreak Health Project Coordinator, is responsible for the project's day-to-day operations and the editorial decision-making. She reports to a manager in the organization who in turn reports to the CEO of the organization.

The prison radio program has historically been supported by Australia's community radio sector, which is particularly well developed in Australia. A key part of the mission of community radio stations is to provide an alternative voice and amplify the perspectives for minority groups, which is very close to the mission of many prison radio projects around the globe. The Jailbreak prison radio program is broadcast locally in Sydney on 2SER 107.3 FM, a community radio station. Nationally, it is distributed through the Community Radio Network (CRN), enabling access to a diverse range of regional and metropolitan community radio stations across Australia (Community Restorative Centre, n.d.). Jailbreak is also available as a podcast, with episodes accessible on digital streaming platforms including YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music, and Mixcloud. Recently, the program has become accessible to everyone in the New South Wales prison system secure tablets similar to iPads, originally designed for the United States prison system and offering limited access to internet content.

The structure of the program follows guidelines developed from an evaluation study that gathered listeners' feedback about the program. Throughout

the production process, participants can decide how and what they contribute. They can listen to the program once it has been completed and before it is broadcast. As Kate Pinnock emphasized, participants can withdraw their consent to be included in the program at any stage of the production. All voices featured in the program belong to people with lived experience of incarceration, including health promotion content and station jingles. Participants with such an experience are also represented on the Community Restorative Centre committees and boards. Many go on to become staff members.

The involvement of the prison authorities focuses more on rule enforcement and damage control than program guidance. All material intended for broadcast on community radio must be submitted to the commissioner's media unit for approval. Recently, however, the production process has changed since the program is now accessible to everyone in the New South Wales prison system via tablets. As a result, the prison authorities have requested an extra layer of editorial guidelines to protect the listeners and reflect the correctional service's requirements. This includes the removal of vulgar language from music and spoken content. Prison identification numbers are also to be deleted to protect incarcerated individuals from one another. It takes approximately a month to broadcast the prepared content due to the need to receive appropriate consent.

The Tinka Tinka Foundation Public Charitable Trust supports prison reform and prisoner rehabilitation in India through art, culture, literature, and media, including prison radio. The foundation provides training and supports 14 prison radio projects, which operate through a closed-circuit cable system and the Tinka Tinka Jail Radio Podcast.

The project operates under the central oversight of its founder, who serves as CEO and creative director, Vartika Nanda, while implementation remains decentralized across India's independently managed prison facilities. Each collaborating unit designates a nodal officer to liaise with Tinka Tinka, who reviews content and grants broadcasting permission, allowing adaptation to the specific constraints of each institution.

The management process begins with recruitment coordinated through the prison superintendents. Following auditions, 10–15 incarcerated people are selected, with preference for those serving long-term sentences to ensure continuity. Training sessions, conducted in person or online for five to twenty days, develop broadcasting and social skills. Trained inmates work in rotating teams for the morning and evening show, following a schedule that accommodates prison security protocols and operational realities. Editorial control operates as a collaborative process between Tinka Tinka leadership and local prison authorities. Incarcerated participants propose and produce content, often following seasonal themes or educational priorities, but final approval for broadcast rests with prison officials. According to the CEO, most material receives minimal interference, especially in institutions where trust has been established,

though sensitive topics receive greater scrutiny, with approval typically taking up to five days.

The initiative operates with very limited resources—almost no funding and only a small number of staff. Until recently, the founder personally managed all training and production, with occasional assistance from volunteers responsible for podcast editing. While these resource constraints, restrict the scale, they contribute to the project's grassroots ethos and independence.

The case of the prison radio in Grudziądz

There are 120 prisons and detention centers in Poland, each with its own internal radio station. The broadcast programs include organizational announcements, educational content, competitions, legal information, and religious services. According to the Prison Service website, the educational and rehabilitative function is the primary role of prison radio stations. It is also stressed that the radio system enables incarcerated people to spend their free time actively and meaningfully, while also allowing them to participate in cultural life. By participating in the production of radio programs, prisoners gain a sense of purpose, which in turn boosts their self-esteem. They learn to cooperate and acquire new skills that may be useful after their release (Zespół Prasowy CZSW, n.d.). This mission of Polish prison radio closely aligns with key goals identified in the mission statements of other prison radio projects mentioned above, which include empowerment and self-expression, rehabilitation, and relationship building. One element that is absent is the ambition to challenge dominant representations of incarceration. The reason is that Polish radio projects are available only within prisons, with programs distributed through closed-circuit cable systems operated separately in each correctional facility.

Prison radio in the correctional facility in Grudziądz

The primary objective of the research conducted in Poland was to examine the management practices in relation to those described above from Norway, India, and Australia and the extent to which the prison radio operating in this facility is able to achieve the goals outlined on the Prison Service website, which closely resemble those expressed in the mission statements of various other prison radio projects analyzed from around the world. The research was conducted in one of the largest prisons in Poland, located in Grudziądz, which has a majority female population. This prison's radio station is also run by women, which makes it unique in the Polish context. The station's operating model is very similar to that of other prison radio stations in Poland, as confirmed by

previous research on prison radio projects in Poland (Doliwa, 2013; Anderson et al., 2022).

The radio station is run by a small team of three incarcerated women, who are supervised by a prison staff member. In Polish prisons, cultural and educational activities are typically overseen by a cultural and educational officer. This officer is part of the prison's education or rehabilitation department and plays a key role in organizing and implementing programs that support personal development and reintegration into society for people in prison, including a radio program. In the Grudziądz prison, which houses more than 1,000 men and women, there are only two cultural and educational officers employed, and one of them is the main supervisor responsible for the radio activities. However, radio is only a one of her many responsibilities, and the time she can dedicate to radio program is limited. Furthermore, cultural and educational officers are usually not trained in media production. This is one of the reasons why the program has a relatively standardized and conventional format that has remained largely unchanged for decades.

The radio equipment is very basic. The station has no dedicated studio. Instead, the broadcasting equipment is housed in a cabinet in the supervisor's office next to the library. A microphone is connected, a stool is placed, and the broadcast begins.

The management process in this radio station follows a top-down model. Elwira Strublewska, the cultural and educational officer, is the lead coordinator, and Mateusz Górka, the second cultural and educational officer, provides support as needed. Together, they work with a group of incarcerated women in preparing the program.

The program is produced primarily and presented by three incarcerated women. One of them is dedicated only to radio duties, while the other two divide their time between the radio and work at the prison library. Only two of the three are paid; both are employed for one-eighth of a full-time contract and typically work between 9:00 and 10:30 a.m. The third works as a volunteer. The women involved in running the station range in age from 36 to 50. One holds a degree in economics and management, another in dietetics, while the third has completed primary education.

Staff selection is based primarily on recommendations from prison staff. Other selection criteria include basic computer literacy, an appropriate sentence length, and placement in a semi-open prison ward. Being involved in the station is considered a privilege and may have a positive impact on parole decisions.

Involvement in prison radio production appears to be highly beneficial for the incarcerated women involved. During the interviews, all incarcerated interviewees described the work as "meaningful," "enriching," and "empowering." It provides them with a rare opportunity for personal growth, teamwork, and learning, in contrast to the physical labor that comprises 99% of available prison jobs. Time spent at the station offers a sense of normality and a chance to do

"something meaningful." One of the interviewees also mentioned that for her, an opportunity to be a radio presenter was a chance to overcome a kind of barrier from her childhood to present something in public.

The program

Operating daily between 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m., the station primarily retransmits content from mainstream Polish radio stations, including Eska, RMF FM, Radio Zet, Jedynka, and Radio Maryja. In addition, the station broadcasts a daily program, usually aired between 9:30 and 10:00 a.m., providing information relevant to everyday life in prison, but also helping listeners to prepare for reintegration into society after their release.

The program consists, for example, of meal schedules, prison shop opening hours, ID photo sessions, and pricing updates. Messages from the prison administration, such as updates on privileges such as television viewing hours, package allowances, or activities organized by prison staff, like auditions for the prison music group, are also provided. In the program schedule, the listeners can also find competitions (typically two per month). From time to time, music from CDs and audiobook excerpts are broadcast. Talk segments—typically around 15 minutes long—are prepared in cooperation with a psychologist, the station supervisor, and educators from the penitentiary department, but presented exclusively by incarcerated participants, who read scripts on air. The written content is approved by the prison management at least two weeks before it is broadcast.

Overall, the program can be evaluated as highly structured and somewhat old-fashioned, as it relies heavily on scripts. Additionally, the content feels outdated because the scripts must be accepted weeks before the broadcast. There is limited scope for the creativity.

The broadcast reaches approximately 1,400 inmates. While roughly 85% of cells are equipped with a television, radio is a medium available to everyone. The audience consists predominantly of women, reflecting the percentage of women in this facility (around 85%).

The survey shows that, even though radio plays an important role in prison, and more than 55% of the respondents identified as regular listeners, the level of satisfaction with the program is relatively low. For example, only 37% of respondents in the men's and 72% in the women's section reported that they had an opportunity to hear something useful on prison radio.

Moreover, the program's poor quality—perceived as old-fashioned and outdated—was identified as one of the main reasons for not turning on the loudspeaker, second only to a preference for watching television rather than listening to the radio.

Discussion

The first aim of this article was to identify recurring patterns in how prison radio projects define their goals (Research Question 1). Across the sample of 19 mission statements, the most frequently identified themes were: empowerment and self-expression, rehabilitation and reintegration, challenging stigmatized representations of incarceration, and fostering human connection and community. This suggests a strongly human-centered orientation, which is reflected in managerial and strategic objectives.

The second aim of the study was to identify the different legal forms adopted by prison radio projects as another important factor influencing management practices (Research Question 2). Across the global prison radio landscape, the most prevalent legal form is that of a charity or a non-governmental organization, reflecting a strong orientation toward public service, social justice, and independence from direct state control and the human-centered orientation identified in the mission statements. Alongside this dominant model, prison radio initiatives also operate as educational projects embedded within schools or universities. Some initiatives take the form of privately managed or individually led ventures, particularly podcast-based projects. State-run services administraded by prison authorities are less common.

These variations demonstrate the adaptability of prison radio models to local legal, social, and institutional contexts around the world. The most common legal structure—a non-governmental organization—enables projects to operate with relative editorial autonomy while securing funding through grants, donations, and partnerships, and it often facilitates collaboration with prisons, community organizations, and media professionals. In general, projects led by individuals or independent organizations working in cooperation with prison staff are more likely to maintain autonomy in program production and management, as they operate according to their own agendas, values, and missions and are therefore better positioned to negotiate the terms of collaboration. By contrast, prison radio services managed directly by prison administrations operate within a highly hierarchical system, which may limit the participatory nature of prison radio management, as is, to some extent, demonstrated by the Polish case discussed in this article.

The third aim was to examine selected management practices in prison radio projects from three countries: Australia, Norway, and India (Research Question 3). In these prison radio projects, a conventional hierarchical management structure is observed while simultaneously fostering collaborative decision-making processes to varying degrees across the three cases. In some projects, an approach can be seen that Carpentier (2011) would term "maximalist participation," institutionalizing the involvement of people with lived experience of incarceration across multiple dimensions of production and governance. This

reflects a broader concept of "the right to communicate" that transcends symbolic inclusion (Howley, 2009) and is consistent with Rodriguez's (2001) conceptualization of citizens' media, in which participation constitutes a form of citizenship praxis.

This kind of approach to prison radio concept is particularly evident in Australia in the Jailbreak project, where people with lived incarceration experience are integrated into decision-making processes as members of the board and committees of the organization that runs the prison radio. Content development follows a collaborative approach in which participants are involved in selecting modes of expression, maintaining editorial control, and approving final productions. The radio program exemplifies the strategic development of participatory media practices within carceral contexts. This approach may also reflect the fact that Australia's strong tradition of community radio, and the close links between the community radio sector and prison radio projects.

A similar approach is observed, though to a lesser extent, in the RøverRadion project and Tinka Tinka in India, where people with lived prison experience have an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process regarding the daily program, but not necessarily in shaping the projects' long-term strategies. The fact that the production is managed by external organizations—an NGO in the case of RøverRadion and a trust in the case of Tinka Tinka—allows these projects to balance an inclusive production model with the hierarchical nature of the prison institution. This organizational structure demonstrates an adaptation to the constraints of the correctional environment, a management framework satisfying security requirements and some rehabilitative goals simultaneously.

In the Polish context, prison radio continues to operate according to a model that has remained largely unchanged for decades. The fourth aim was to compare the operation of the prison radio station in Grudziądz with other stations discussed in this article (Research Question 4). Overall, the organizational and management model differs from that of most prison radio projects worldwide. Because it relies on the limited and dispersed resources of the prison staff, without support from an external organization that could provide expertise in prison radio production, the effectiveness of the medium is reduced. The power relations between the staff and the incarcerated people involved in producing the radio are asymmetrical. The model of management is predominantly top-down with limited scope for reflection on how to organize the production process in a way that is both more inclusive and responsive to listeners' needs.

When comparing the objectives of prison radio activities published on the official Polish Prison Service website with the mission statements of prison radio stations worldwide (Research Question 5), it becomes clear that they are very similar. However, the alignment between these ideals and everyday practice is only partially achieved.

The primary role of prison radio stations in Poland is defined as educational and rehabilitative, and it is stated that the program aims to "enable inmates to spend their free time actively and meaningfully, while also allowing them to participate in cultural life". It is worth emphasizing that this kind of content is provided by the prison radio station in Grudziądz, however, its effectiveness is limited by the old-fashioned style of presentation and the top-down model of management and production, which makes listeners more critical of the content provided.

Another goal, mentioned on the Polish Prison Service website, is that through participating in the production of radio programs, incarcerated people feel that "they are valued, which in turn boosts their self-esteem, and they learn to cooperate and acquire new skills." This objective appears to be achieved only to some extent by the prison radio station in Grudziądz. The program is indeed presented entirely by incarcerated people, so their voices are literally heard, but the freedom of expression and the scope for creativity remain very limited.

At the same time, it is worth stressing that the potential of prison radio is only partly realized, the program is produced in a very basic way—the presenters simply read prepared scripts into a microphone, following a highly standardized format. As a result, there is little opportunity to develop new ideas, improve radio production skills, or encourage creative self-expression. In addition, no training in radio production is provided.

Despite the limitations of this model, both the producers and the listeners highlight several positive aspects of prison radio. In particular, it provides incarcerated people with access to essential information and offers participants an opportunity to spend their time in ways they perceive as meaningful and closer to the everyday life outside prison. Finally, it is worth emphasizing that Polish prison radio has considerable potential, as every prison in Poland operates its own closed-circuit radio system, making this medium accessible to all incarcerated people.

Conclusion

This article has shown that prison radio projects worldwide consistently define their goals in strongly human-centered terms, emphasizing empowerment and self-expression, rehabilitation, and reintegration, challenging stigmatizing representations of incarceration, and fostering social connection and community. These shared priorities are, to some extent, reflected in managerial and strategic choices, particularly in the predominance of non-governmental and non-profit organizational forms, which tend to support greater editorial autonomy, participatory practices, and alignment with social justice values.

An analysis of management practices in prison radio projects in Australia, Norway, and India demonstrates that while hierarchical structures remain

inherent to carceral settings, externally managed and independent organizational frameworks create greater opportunities for inclusive governance and meaningful participation. The Polish case highlights a gap between the declared rehabilitative aims of prison radio and everyday management practices, suggesting that without organizational autonomy, training, and participatory production and evaluation procedures, the full potential of the radio cannot be realized.

Overall, the findings position prison radio as a distinctive form of non-commercial media. Similarities can be observed between prison radio and student radio. Like student radio, prison radio functions as a training ground and a space for developing practical skills. Academic institutions also operate several prison radio projects. Many prison radio initiatives present perspectives that offer an alternative to those found in mainstream media, including alternative narratives about prisons and incarcerated people, while giving voice to individuals whose experiences are often absent from public debate. In this respect, prison radio is closely linked to the alternative radio sector. Prison radio also has strong ties to the community media model, within which alternative and student radio are also often situated (Doliwa, 2013). As this model of media organization has been well conceptualized, prison radio can incorporate many of the principles regarded as central to community media management. For example, Howley explicitly links non-commercial funding models with participatory production and participatory practices in management, arguing that community media management is inseparable from goals such as inclusion, empowerment, and representation. These values are equally relevant to prison radio. However participatory production and management are even more difficult to achieve in prison radio than in other community-oriented media projects because of hierarchical institutional structures and the need to balance rehabilitative aims with prison security requirements. Freedom of expression—one of the core values of community media—is also significantly constrained in prison radio by approval and censorship procedures. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that freedom of expression in community media is understood not merely as an individual right but also as a participatory practice that enables marginalized voices to articulate lived experience, challenge dominant narratives, and exercise the right to communicate (Carpentier, 2011; Howley, 2009; Rodríguez, 2001). This understanding has much in common with the prison radio phenomenon. Despite these challenges, prison radio should strive for a participatory model of production and, whenever possible, a management structure that includes people with lived experience of imprisonment. Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that, despite the challenges, this model is worth pursuing for anyone seeking to develop a media project that is relevant and meaningful to its community.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges access to data from *The Global Prison Radio International Survey*, an initiative of Prison Radio International (PRI) aimed at creating a global database of prison-related radio projects. The survey was developed in collaboration with Justice Matters Ltd, with the support of the Prison Radio International Advisory Board. The author also wishes to thank the staff and incarcerated people of Correctional Facility No. 1 in Grudziądz for their invaluable assistance in conducting the research, as well as Knut Erik Wold, Kate Pinnock, and Vartika Nanda for generously sharing their insights.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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The Challenge of a Small Market in a Politicised Society: Media Management in North Macedonia

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the media system of North Macedonia through the combined lenses of media systems theory, media economics, and media management. Here, media management is understood as the strategic organisation of financing, staffing, and editorial work under market and regulatory constraints. The paper argues that North Macedonia is a small, politically exposed market in which financial fragility and political polarisation interact to shape editorial autonomy. Drawing on the media typologies of Hallin and Mancini and Dobek-Ostrowska, it positions the country in a transitional media environment with strong features of polarised pluralism. The analysis combines macroeconomic indicators, market data on broadcasters, and qualitative evidence on ownership, public service funding, state advertising, paid political advertising, online media regulation, and journalists' working conditions. Rather than proposing a new typology, the paper presents a theoretically informed case study that shows how small-market conditions intensify the interaction among state intervention, political parallelism, and weak professional autonomy. The findings show a hybrid media market: traditional media remain influential but financially vulnerable, while online media exert growing agenda-setting power in a weakly regulated environment. Public money, whether through state campaigns or election advertising, affects not only financing but also competition, clientelism, and editorial independence. The conclusion identifies the institutional and managerial conditions under which journalistic integrity and democratic pluralism are more likely to be sustained in North Macedonia.

KEYWORDS: media management, media systems, North Macedonia, public service, financial sustainability

Suggested citation: Bachovska Nedikj, J. (2026). The Challenge of a Small Market in a Politicised Society: Media Management in North Macedonia. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(53), pp. 215–231. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.13
Submitted: 11.12.2025 Accepted: 6.03.2026

STRESZCZENIE

Wyzwania małego rynku mediów w upolitycznionym społeczeństwie: zarządzanie mediami w Macedonii Północnej

W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano system medialny Macedonii Północnej, łącząc perspektywę teorii systemów medialnych, ekonomii mediów i zarządzania mediami. Zarządzanie mediami rozumiane jest tu jako strategiczna organizacja finansowania, kadr oraz pracy redakcyjnej w ramach ograniczeń rynkowych i regulacyjnych. W artykule argumentuje się, że Macedonia Północna jest małym, upolitycznionym rynkiem, na którym niestabilność finansowa i polaryzacja polityczna współdziałają, kształtując autonomię redakcyjną. Opierając się na typologiach Hallina i Manciniego oraz Dobek-Ostrowskiej, artykuł umieszcza kraj w przejściowym środowisku medialnym o silnych cechach spolaryzowanego pluralizmu. Analiza łączy wskaźniki makroekonomiczne, dane rynkowe dotyczące nadawców i dane jakościowe dotyczące własności, finansowania usług publicznych, reklamy państwowej, płatnej reklamy politycznej, regulacji mediów internetowych oraz warunków pracy dziennikarzy. Zamiast proponować nową typologię, artykuł przedstawia oparte na koncepcji studium przypadku, które pokazuje, jak warunki małego rynku nasilają interakcję między interwencją państwa, paralelizmem politycznym i słabą autonomią zawodową. Wyniki wskazują na hybrydowy rynek mediów: media tradycyjne pozostają wpływowe, ale wrażliwe finansowo, podczas gdy media internetowe wywierają rosnącą siłę wyznaczania agendy w słabo regulowanym środowisku. Środki publiczne, czy to poprzez kampanie państwowe, czy reklamę wyborczą, wpływają nie tylko na finansowanie, ale także na konkurencję, klientelizm i niezależność redakcyjną. W podsumowaniu wskazano warunki instytucjonalne i zarządcze, w których istnieje większe prawdopodobieństwo utrzymania rzetelności dziennikarskiej i pluralizmu demokratycznego w Macedonii Północnej.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: zarządzanie mediami, systemy medialne, Macedonia Północna, media publiczne, stabilność finansowa

Introduction

Market forces shape media structures, content production, and the scope of pluralism in democratic societies (Picard, 2014). Media pluralism is therefore not only a normative democratic value but also an economic outcome, supported or constrained by the business models available to media organisations (Doyle, 2013). This article examines the media system of North Macedonia from this perspective. Media management herein refers to the strategic organisation of revenues, costs, staffing, and editorial decision-making in media organisations under market and regulatory pressures. The phrase politicised society is used to describe a context in which political competition strongly structures public

communication, access to resources, and public visibility. The central argument is that the country's media market cannot be understood solely through ownership patterns or professional norms. Rather, it must be analysed in the context of a small economy, a highly politicised public sphere, and management strategies shaped by financial insecurity.

North Macedonia is a small, open economy with a population of just over 1.8 million (State Statistical Office, 2022). Since gaining independence in 1991, it has undergone a prolonged and uneven transition that has affected its institutions and markets. According to the World Bank and the National Bank of the Republic of North Macedonia, GDP growth remains moderate, inflation has recently been driven by rising food and energy prices, and public debt and budgetary pressures remain significant due to energy subsidies and capital expenditure (National Bank of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2023). Unemployment has declined, partly due to active labour market policies and partly due to emigration, especially among younger citizens. Malevski and Barlakovski (2023) note that tens of thousands of young people have left the country, while many more express a desire to do so. These conditions are highly relevant to the media market because a limited consumer base, reduced purchasing power, and outward migration constrain advertising revenues and weaken the long-term sustainability of media organisations.

North Macedonia has held EU candidate status since 2005, which has shaped both its economic orientation and the normative framework in which media reform is discussed. The economy is export-oriented, closely integrated with the EU market, while major structural challenges continue to include the rule of law, administrative effectiveness, infrastructure, and the mismatch between educational outcomes and labour-market needs (European Commission, 2024). These broader governance deficits are relevant to media management because institutional weaknesses inevitably affect the media. They affect regulation, public procurement, access to information, and the ability of journalists and editors to act independently.

Table 1. Macroeconomic indicators for North Macedonia

Indicator	Value	Year
GDP	USD 16.68–16.7 billion	2024 (estimate)
GDP per capita	USD 9,169–9,310	2024 (estimate)
GDP (annual growth %)	2.8	2024 (estimate)
Unemployment (% of total labour force)	13.0%–13.4%	2024 (estimate)
Inflation, consumer prices (annual %)	3.5%	2024 (estimate)

Source: World Bank.

The media market must also be understood within the context of a deeply politicised society. Politics has a strong presence in everyday public life, and political elites dominate news agendas. Monitoring research has shown that television news provides significantly greater visibility to government actors than to other socio-political groups, while the voices of ordinary citizens, although present, remains secondary (Monitoring Report, 2019). This imbalance is not merely a matter of news selection. It reflects a political culture in which media attention is centred on those in power. As a consequence, the struggle for visibility in the media becomes closely intertwined with the struggle for political legitimacy.

The broader social context reinforces this pattern. North Macedonia remains deeply polarised, as repeatedly noted in recent European Commission reports (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2024). Transparency International ranks the country in relatively poorly, linking this to judicial scandals and the impunity of high-level corruption cases (Transparency International, n.d.). The State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption has likewise identified party-based recruitment and nepotism in public institutions (State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, 2024). For the media, the implications are clear: where political trust is low and public institutions are vulnerable to patronage, media outlets often become extensions of political competition rather than independent arenas for public deliberation.

In this environment, the media market assumes a hybrid character. Traditional broadcasters, particularly national television stations, remain influential, particularly in political news, yet they operate under persistent financial pressure. At the same time, online media increasingly shape the daily agenda, especially among younger audiences, but do so in a regulatory space characterised by ambiguity and limited oversight. This combination of economic fragility in legacy media and weak regulation in digital media creates conditions that are conducive to disinformation, manipulation, and politically motivated financing. The result is not simply a weak market but one in which financial vulnerability and political parallelism reinforce one another.

Methodologically, the paper combines comparative media-system analysis with economic and qualitative evidence. The empirical analysis is organised around the key dimensions emphasised in comparative media-systems theory: the role of the state, market structure, and professional autonomy. Section 2 positions North Macedonia within the typologies developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) and Dobek-Ostrowska (2015). Section 3 examines the country's media economy using macroeconomic indicators and market data from the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, including the number of broadcasters, revenues, costs, and public-service financing. Qualitative evidence from domestic institutions, journalists' associations, international reports, and specialised studies are used to interpret ownership structures, public advertising, political advertising, online media regulation, and labour

conditions in journalism. This design does not seek to propose a new media-system model. Its contribution is interpretive: it shows how the theoretical indicators of politicisation, state intervention, and weak professional autonomy are reflected in the everyday practices of a small transitional market.

North Macedonia in a Comparative Context: Media System Theory

According to the classical typology developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), North Macedonia most closely resembles the polarised pluralist model. Hallin and Mancini classify media systems according to the degree of development of the mass press, the degree of political parallelism, the level of journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state. In their framework, the liberal model is characterised by limited state intervention, high professional autonomy, and a low degree of political parallelism. The democratic corporatist model combines a historically strong party press with robust public service institutions and high newspaper circulation. By contrast, the polarised pluralist model is characterised by low newspaper circulation, elite-oriented and politically aligned media, stronger state intervention, and weaker professionalisation.

North Macedonia most closely fits this third pattern than the other two. Newspaper circulation is low, journalism has historically developed under strong political pressure, and media outlets are often perceived through the lens of their ideological or party affiliations. Moreover, the state remains a key actor in the media sphere, not only through regulation and public-service financing but also through state advertising and election-related payments. These characteristics make the Macedonian media system resemble the polarised pluralist model, even though the country belongs to a different historical and regional context from that of the Mediterranean cases discussed by Hallin and Mancini.

Dobek-Ostrowska (2015) offers a framework that is more specifically tailored to post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. Her classification employs indicators such as democratic performance, media freedom, gross national income, and internet penetration to distinguish four models: hybrid liberal, politicised media, media in transition, and authoritarian. Within this typology, North Macedonia is classified as a country in media transition, alongside Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and several other countries. This model is characterised by low democratic standards, fragile political and civic culture, strong media politicisation, and limited media autonomy. Dobek-Ostrowska further argues that North Macedonia also shows characteristics of the politicised media model, which more closely resembles the polarised pluralist pattern.

Taken together, these models are used here not as rigid classificatory frameworks but as interpretive tools. The paper argues that North Macedonia is best understood as a transitional small-market system in which the structural limitations of the market intensify features typically associated with polarised pluralism. The contribution of this case study, therefore, lies less in revising the typologies themselves than in demonstrating how economic fragility, public financing, and labour precarity give concrete expression to political parallelism and weak professional autonomy. Empirical indicators such as the financial concentration of advertising revenue, inconsistent public service funding, the return of state advertising, dependence on paid political advertising during election campaigns, weak regulation of online media, and the precarious socioeconomic position of journalists all point in the same direction. Together, they depict a media system in transition whose market logic is repeatedly shaped and constrained by political influence.

Empirical Data on the Media Market in North Macedonia

Legal and Funding Framework

Media financing in North Macedonia is governed primarily by the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, the Law on Media, and the Electoral Code. The first regulates the financing of the public service broadcaster, the operation of the media regulator, and the principal rules governing advertising. The Electoral Code determines the allocation of state funds for paid political advertising during election campaigns. The Law on Media sets out the rights and obligations of media outlets, including those operating in the print sector. Formally, this legal framework is intended to organise the market and safeguard media pluralism. In practice, however, it also creates channels through which political actors can affect market behaviour.

The law requires the state to allocate approximately 0.8% to 1% of the previous year's total budget revenues to the audiovisual sector. Of these funds, 74.5% are allocated to Macedonian Radio Television (MRT), 19.5% for the public enterprise Macedonian Broadcasting, and 6% for the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. At the same time, private media are expected to rely, in principle, on advertising revenue, subscriptions, and other market-based sources. In practice, however, the state continues to play an important financial role through public communication campaigns, paid political advertising during election campaigns, and direct subsidies to print media covering part of the printing and distribution costs of print media. This dual financial structure is important because it means that the market is not governed solely by market forces. Public funding remains a key resource for survival and competition.

Structure of the Traditional Market

According to the 2024 market analysis by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, North Macedonia had 103 commercial broadcasters at the beginning of 2024, comprising 40 television stations and 63 radio stations. By the end of the year, the number had fallen to 92. The sector generated slightly more than EUR 52 million in revenue and recorded an overall profit of slightly more than EUR 3 million. These figures, however, should not be interpreted as evidence of market stability. Once the internal structure of the market is considered, it becomes clear that revenues are heavily concentrated among a small number of national television stations, while local and regional media remain structurally fragile.

Table 2. Market analysis

Category	No. of outlets	Total revenue (mil. EUR)	Ad revenue (mil. EUR)	Total costs (mil. EUR)	Operating result (mil. EUR)	Avg. no. of employees
Macedonian public service broadcaster	/	22.17	0.55	20.56	1.42	630
Commercial televisions	36	26.10	24.60	24.39	1.46	887
National level (terrestrial)	5	21.36	20.21	19.37	1.82	585
National level (unlimited resource)	5	2.31	2.20	2.94	-0.65	177
Regional level	13	1.67	1.43	1.55	0.08	82
Local level	13	0.74	0.72	0.54	0.20	43
Commercial radio stations	53	4.00	3.14	3.65	0.35	186
National level (radio)	4	1.82	1.36	1.56	0.24	57
Regional level (radio)	14	1.38	1.17	1.26	0.10	60
Local level (radio)	35	0.79	0.60	0.82	0.02	69
Total		52.26	28.36	48.61	3.24	1703

Source: Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, 2024 *Note.* The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services is an autonomous and independent regulatory body whose competencies are defined in the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services.

Revenue concentration is particularly evident in the television sector. National terrestrial broadcasters account for the largest share of both total revenue and advertising income, whereas regional and local broadcasters operate with considerably smaller budgets. This uneven market structure is theoretically significant because it links the market's economic characteristics to the problem of political parallelism. Media outlets that are unable to secure stable commercial revenue are more likely to depend on politically dependent funding, informal networks, or short-term clientelist arrangements.

Macedonian Public Service Broadcaster

For most of the period following independence in 1991, the public service broadcaster was financed through a license fee paid by citizens. This model was characterised by high administrative costs and persistently low collection rates. After 2000, the licensee fee began to be collected through electricity bills, but payment compliance remained problematic. In 2017, following a change of government, the broadcasting fee was abolished, and the public service broadcaster became directly financed from the state budget.

Direct budget financing, however, has not resolved the underlying problem. For several years, the funds allocated to MRT remained below the level prescribed by law, a shortfall repeatedly highlighted by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. Only in 2024 was the full amount required by law finally transferred. The problem, therefore, concerns not only the amount of funding but also its predictability. A public service broadcaster that depends on annual political decisions to receive its legally mandated funding operates under conditions of persistent structural vulnerability. This vulnerability weakens its planning capacity, investment, and editorial confidence.

The broadcaster has also experienced a long-term decline in staffing, from more than 1,100 employees in earlier years to around 650. At the same time, it faces expanding programming obligations and the need for technological modernisation. As Apostolov (2024) argues, the public service broadcaster remains financially fragile and politically constrained. The broader implications are significant: when public service media cannot function as a stable and credible reference point, the commercial media sector faces less normative pressure to invest in public-interest content, and the overall information environment becomes more vulnerable to sensationalism and political capture.

Commercial Televisions

North Macedonia has relatively transparent formal ownership rules for radio, television, and print media owing to legal disclosure requirements established by

the Law on Media (2013). However, formal transparency does not automatically prevent political influence. In many cases, media ownership is not the primary business activity of the owners but rather an ancillary investment. As a result, media outlets may become susceptible to non-commercial objectives, including political influence, prestige, or the protection of broader business interests.

Although no official statistics on advertisers are available, observable advertising patterns suggest a concentration of commercial revenue in sectors such as automotive sales, telecommunications, banking, pharmaceuticals, and food and beverages. At the same time, the enforcement of ownership restrictions remains weak. Research has documented politically sensitive ownership patterns, including television stations owned by individuals linked to political figures, the use of offshore structures in print media ownership, and foreign ownership networks associated with the Hungarian political sphere (Dumont et al., 2021). These examples matter because they show that the market is not influenced only by direct state intervention. It is also shaped by business-political alliances that blur the distinction between economic investment and political positioning.

Radio

The 53 radio stations generated EUR 4.00 million in revenue and EUR 353,821 in profit. Compared with the television sector, the radio market recorded growth, partly driven by political advertising and partly because of increased commercial advertising. According to the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (2023), revenues grew by 32.76% compared with the previous year. However, this growth should be interpreted with caution. If the rise is driven in part by election-related spending, it does not necessarily indicate long-term structural sustainability.

The radio market also exhibits internal concentration. Just three stations—Antena 5, Channel 77, and Buba Mara—account for more than 42% of total costs in the sector. Local radio stations remain more fragile, with weaker commercial advertising performance. This reinforces the paper's central argument: when market survival depends on a small number of dominant actors and periodic injections of political funding, media pluralism may exist formally without being supported by stable economic foundations.

Online Media: Lack of Regulation and Vulnerability to Manipulation

Online media occupy an increasingly important position in North Macedonia's media system, yet the sector remains only partially regulated. There is no

mandatory official register of online media. The most reliable source of information is the Register of Online Media maintained through the ProMedia platform by the Association of Journalists of Macedonia and the Council of Media Ethics. The number of registered portals fluctuates, but in 2024 and 2025, the register contained approximately 100 or 101 outlets. Registration requires transparent ownership, an imprint, the registration of a legal entity, copyright law compliance, and respect for the journalistic code.

A separate register of online media is maintained by the State Election Commission for the purpose of paid political advertising. In this area, the contrast between formal registration and election practice is particularly revealing. Although around 100 online media outlets meet professional registration criteria, roughly twice as many appeared during election periods in anticipation of public funding. During the most recent election cycle, 249 online portals were registered for this purpose. Online media alone received around EUR 811,013 in public funding during the 2024 parliamentary elections, while the total for the presidential and parliamentary campaigns was estimated at around EUR 2 million.

This gap between professional registration and eligibility for election-related funding has important consequences. It encourages the creation of opportunistic media outlets, weakens incentives for editorial accountability, and facilitates the short-term instrumental use of media for political promotion. Planned legislative changes that would link eligibility for online campaign financing to inclusion in the professional register would therefore represent an important step forward (Metamorphosis Foundation & Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa, 2025). More broadly, the online media sector demonstrates how weak regulation can reinforce the politicised dynamic of a small media market: low barriers to entry create an appearance of pluralism, while the absence of robust professional standards makes manipulation easier.

Print Media: A Disappearing Format

Print media in North Macedonia have been steadily losing importance, largely as a result of digitalisation but also to the country's socio-economic and political conditions. Twenty-one print outlets are currently registered, yet only a few daily newspapers remain visible at the national level. The country's linguistic diversity and small population make it difficult to sustain more than one or two major daily newspapers in Macedonian and Albanian without incurring significant losses.

This viable fragility has direct political implications. Advertising is often the only realistic source of income capable of sustaining print outlets at scale, creating opportunities for political influence. Non-transparent ownership, financial vulnerability, and audience polarisation further reduce the prospects

for balanced reporting. The legacy of the Priebe reform agenda is relevant here as well, since international assessments linked media reform to broader rule-of-law deficiencies after the wiretapping scandal (Priebe, 2015). In other words, the decline of print media is not merely a consequence of technological change. It is also a story of how a weak market and a polarised political environment undermine the economic foundations of editorial independence.

Public Funding as a Structural Feature of the Media Model of North Macedonia

One of the most distinctive features of the Macedonian media system is the persistent role of public funding in the media market. In this sense, publicly funded support is not merely an external correction to the market but an integral part of the way the market operates. In a small and politically polarised environment, state resources do not function as neutral market instruments. They may shape competition, strengthen ties between political and media actors, and influence editorial decision-making. Their impact is greatest where commercial sustainability is already weak.

Government Advertising

Government advertising has long been one of the most controversial issues in North Macedonia's media landscape. Declining media freedom has repeatedly been linked to this practice in domestic and international monitoring reports. The European Commission's 2014 report on North Macedonia explicitly stated that government advertising was widely perceived as a form of indirect state control over media content (European Commission, 2014).

Between 2006 and 2016, under the VMRO-DPMNE-led government, the state became one of the largest advertisers through public campaigns, directing substantial funds to private television stations. Criticism from journalists' associations and civil society was unequivocal: state-funded marketing created financial dependence and distorted market competition (Association of Journalists of Macedonia, 2015). In 2018, amendments to the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services introduced a ban on state-funded campaigns in private media. At this time, this appeared to be an important corrective measure.

However, in May 2024, shortly before the parliamentary and presidential elections, state-funded advertising was reintrodused by a new legal amendment. Journalist associations, the journalist trade union, and media organisations strongly opposed this measure, warning that it would preserve the existing structure of the media market through the continued use of public funds.

The expected allocation amounted to approximately 0.1% of the state budget, or approximately EUR 2.3 million. The significance of this decision extends beyond campaign communication. Once state institutions regain the ability to purchase visibility in private media, the boundary between public information and political influence becomes increasingly blurred. Under such conditions, financial dependence on state communication spending is more likely to encourage editorial caution and self-restraint.

Paid Political Advertising During Election Campaigns

Paid political advertising during election campaigns is regulated by the Electoral Code. The law grants electoral participants the right to paid media representation, requires media outlets to submit advertising rate cards, and provides for state budget financing of campaign advertising. These funds are formally allocated to political actors, who then purchase advertising space in the media during the campaign period, which ends 24 hours before election day. The process is supervised by the State Election Commission and the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services.

In legal terms, the system seeks to ensure fair access and transparency. In practice, however, it reproduces existing inequalities. The largest share of available funding is allocated to the major governing and opposition parties. In the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections, around EUR 10.6 million was earmarked for this purpose. In a small media market, such sums are substantial enough to influence the behaviour of media outlets. The more media organisations come to rely on election periods as major sources of revenue, the more their economic priorities become aligned with the political calendars.

The problem is even more pronounced in the online media sector, where eligibility criteria have historically been weak and where large numbers of portals emerge immediately before elections. From a media management perspective, this creates a distorted incentive structure. Instead of rewarding investment in quality journalism, audience trust, and sustainable business models, the system rewards proximity to campaign funding. From a democratic perspective, the broader implication is a form of clientelism in which public funds intended to ensure political representation can instead normalise political dependence within the media sector.

Quality of Media Content

The sustainability of the media market is closely linked to the quality of media content. Research on the economic viability of the audiovisual sector

in North Macedonia shows that the largest private television broadcasters generate the highest revenues, yet not all are profitable, and most struggle to generate substantial income from digital platforms (Trpeska & Roksa-Zubcevic, 2023). Quality and editorial positioning are, therefore not abstract cultural concerns. They are directly tied to the economics of media production.

Most private broadcasters reduce production costs in order to survive, with inevitable consequences for content quality and diversity. National television stations are subject to more extensive legal obligations regarding programme structure, news production, and European works, while regional and local stations often provide more uniform and lower-quality programming. Local stations are particularly vulnerable. Limited revenues lead to cuts in current affairs programming, investigative content, and original content production. Unlike local media in some Western European countries, they do not benefit from stable public support mechanisms or protected local media markets.

This is important because content quality is one of the key links between the economic structure of the media market and its democratic function. When market pressures systematically push outlets toward low-cost entertainment and inexpensive studio formats, their capacity to cover environmental protection, the rule of law, European integration, or local accountability declines. Economic fragility is thus translated into a thinner public sphere.

Socio-Economic Position of Journalists

The socio-economic position of journalists in North Macedonia remains fragile, with direct implications for editorial independence. The *Shadow Report on Media Freedom in North Macedonia* indicates that journalists often work for low salaries, typically ranging from EUR 400 to EUR 650 per month, under conditions of considerable job insecurity (Metamorphosis Foundation & Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa, 2025). More than 55% of journalists earn less than the national average wage. Fixed-term contracts and part-time employment are common, and online media frequently operate under legally ambiguous employment arrangements.

The problem extends beyond low pay. Journalists also report unpaid overtime, weak enforcement of labour rights, and high levels of stress resulting from workplace bullying, gender-based violence, and political pressure. Attacks on journalists continued to be recorded in 2023 (Nikodinoska & Chausidis, 2025). Such conditions reduce professional autonomy because journalists who lack economic security are more vulnerable to pressure from media owners, political actors, and commercial interests. In this sense, labour insecurity becomes a structural constraint on media freedom.

Legal pressure reinforces this vulnerability. Recent assessments indicate continued exposure of journalists and media organisations to lawsuits and other forms of legal intimidation, while journalists' associations continue to document cases perceived as attempts to discourage investigative reporting (Metamorphosis Foundation & Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa, 2025; Nikodinoska & Chausidis, 2025). The impact of such cases cannot be measured solely by court outcomes. Their deterrent effect lies in the costs, time, and uncertainty imposed on journalists and independent media organisations. Without stronger collective protection, the profession remains vulnerable on both economic and legal fronts.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Macedonian media system can best be understood as a transitional system exhibiting strong features of polarised pluralism. The comparative frameworks developed by Hallin and Mancini and Dobek-Ostrowska help explain this classification, but the value of the present analysis lies in connecting those frameworks to concrete market practices in North Macedonia. The paper does not propose a new model of media systems. Rather, it demonstrates how, in a small media market, financial concentration, recurrent public funding, weak regulation of online media, politically sensitive ownership structures, and the precarious socio-economic position of journalists reinforce one another, translating political pressure into everyday media management practices.

These findings have broader implications for democracy. A weak public service broadcaster diminishes the availability of a stable public-interest benchmark. A commercial media sector dependent on state-funded campaigns or election-related spending is less able to resist political influence. Online media, established primarily to access campaign funding, distort the meaning of pluralism, while low-quality, low-cost production narrows the range of issues that receive sustained public attention. In such a setting, the challenge is not only how to keep media organisations financially alive but to sustain their public role under conditions that continually reward dependence.

Three broader implications emerge from these findings. First, a public-interest media environment requires predictable public service funding that is provided consistently rather than through unstable political bargaining. Second, the regulation of state advertising and paid political advertising is not merely a technical matter because, in a small media market, these flows of public funding can shape competition, foster dependence, and blur the boundary between public information and political influence. Third, economic diversification, stronger self-regulation, and more secure employment conditions emerge not simply as matters of managerial preference but as essential preconditions for professional autonomy.

These implications are particularly important for local and regional media, which remain the most fragile segment of the market. Where revenues are limited, resource-sharing arrangements, greater ownership transparency, and stronger collective protection for journalists become essential to long-term sustainability. More broadly, media quality, pluralism, and market sustainability cannot be treated as separate questions in North Macedonia because the same structural pressures shape all three simultaneously.

Ultimately, the challenge of media management in North Macedonia is inseparable from the broader challenge of democracy. In a small and politically polarised media market, media integrity is unlikely to be secured by market forces alone. It depends on credible regulation, professional solidarity, and organisational strategies capable of safeguarding editorial independence even when the political and economic environment rewards dependence.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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Between Transparency and Capture: Media Ownership in Romania

ABSTRACT

This article examines media ownership structures, transparency risks, and regulatory challenges in Romania as part of the *Euromedia Ownership Monitor (EurOMo) 2025* edition, a comparative research initiative aligned with the European Democracy Action Plan, the European Media Freedom Act, and the Anti-Money Laundering Directive. Drawing exclusively on publicly available and verifiable sources, the study maps ownership, control relationships, management structures, economic interests, political links, and public policy safeguards across a diverse sample of Romanian legacy media outlets and influential digital news accounts. The analysis also includes platform-based news actors, reflecting the growing role of social media—particularly TikTok and Facebook—in news consumption in Romania. The findings reveal a structurally diverse and pluralistic media landscape that nevertheless remains vulnerable to significant transparency deficits. While ownership information for audiovisual broadcasters is largely accessible through regulatory disclosure requirements, the ownership and funding structures of print media, online-only outlets, and platform-native news actors are often opaque or only indirectly traceable. A key risk identified by the study concerns the non-transparent flow of public funds—primarily through political party spending—into the media sector, undermining editorial independence and public accountability. Additionally, growing convergence of media ownership

Suggested citation: Andreea Alina Mogoș, A.A., Vincze, H.O., Meza, R.M., & Trofin, C. (2026). Between Transparency and Capture: Media Ownership in Romania. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 233–251. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.14
Submitted: 11.12.2025 Accepted: 06.05.2026

with non-media sectors, including telecommunications and public relations, raises further concerns about economic and political influence.

KEYWORDS: media ownership, transparency, media control, media capture

STRESZCZENIE

Między przejrzystością a zawłaszczeniem: Własność mediów w Rumunii

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje struktury własności mediów, zagrożenia dla przejrzystości oraz wyzwania regulacyjne w Rumunii w ramach edycji projektu Euromedia Ownership Monitor (EurOMo) 2025 – porównawczej inicjatywy badawczej zgodnej z Europejskim Planem Działania na rzecz Demokracji, Europejskim Aktem o Wolności Mediów (EMFA) oraz Dyrektywą w sprawie przeciwdziałania praniu pieniędzy. Opierając się wyłącznie na publicznie dostępnych i weryfikowalnych źródłach, badanie mapuje strukturę własności, relacje kontroli, struktury zarządzania, interesy ekonomiczne, powiązania polityczne oraz zabezpieczenia w ramach polityki publicznej w zróżnicowanej próbie rumuńskich mediów tradycyjnych (*legacy media*) oraz wpływowych cyfrowych kont informacyjnych. Analiza obejmuje również aktorów medialnych działających na platformach społecznościowych, co odzwierciedla rosnącą rolę mediów społecznościowych – w szczególności TikToka i Facebooka – w konsumpcji newsów w Rumunii. Wyniki wskazują na strukturalnie zróżnicowany i pluralistyczny krajobraz medialny, który pozostaje jednak podatny na znaczące deficyty przejrzystości. Podczas gdy informacje o własności nadawców audiowizualnych są w dużej mierze dostępne dzięki regulacyjnym wymogom ujawniania danych, struktury własnościowe i finansowe prasy, portali internetowych oraz aktorów natywnych dla platform cyfrowych są często niejasne lub możliwe do ustalenia jedynie w sposób pośredni. Kluczowe zidentyfikowane ryzyko dotyczy nietransparentnego przepływu środków publicznych – głównie poprzez wydatki partii politycznych – do sektora mediów, co podważa niezależność redakcyjną i odpowiedzialność publiczną. Dodatkowo rosnąca konwergencja między własnością mediów a sektorami pozamedialnymi, w tym telekomunikacją i public relations, budzi nowe obawy dotyczące wpływu ekonomicznego i politycznego.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: własność mediów, przejrzystość, kontrola mediów, zawłaszczenie mediów

Introduction

The contemporary European media landscape is undergoing a fundamental shift in governance, moving from disparate national frameworks toward a more centralised supranational model. This transition is primarily driven by the European

Media Freedom Act (EMFA) and the European Democracy Action Plan, which aim to establish standards for transparency and editorial independence (European Commission, 2024). These initiatives were adopted in the context of a fragmented and imprecise legal framework of digital media, where different norms co-exist and they are produced by an increasing number of legislators and public bodies, both national and international (de la Sierra, 2022). However, as Casarosa and Psychogiopoulou (2023) argue, the effectiveness of these mandates depends heavily on the domestic implementation of disclosure requirements and the role of European courts in overriding national opacity.

The interdependencies between media and political power have been conceptualised by Swanson (1997), who introduced the concept of the "political-media complex." In the Romanian context, regulatory efforts encounter a deeply entrenched political-media complex (Zankova & Mungiu-Pippidi, 2024), which translates into a symbiotic relationship , whereby public funds (often via political party advertising) are used to reward supportive media outlets and penalise those that are critical. The literature characterises this market through the lens of "media capture," a situation in which the news media are controlled 'either directly by governments or by vested interests networked with politics' (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2012, pp. 40–41) and the political and economic elites instrumentalise media outlets to serve non-journalistic interests rather than public information needs (Dragomir, 2024; Toma et. al, 2024).. A critical mechanism of this capture is the opaque distribution of public funds, which destabilises the media market by directing resources toward political allies, deterring healthy investment in favour of political loyalty, and allowing cross-sectoral conglomerates to instrumentalise news outlets as protective shields for their primary business interests. Research by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2024) highlights how political party subsidies are often funnelled into private media organisations, creating a system of financial dependency that undermines the public policy safeguards intended to protect journalism. While digital public sphere in CEE is currently a site of exclusion, polarization, and declining professional accountability (Koc-Michalska et al., 2024), the transparency deficit identified in recent monitoring efforts is exacerbated by fragmented data and the use of proxy ownership to mask beneficial owners (Figueira, 2023), which reflects a form of soft control, or the collusion between political elites and private media owners (Stetka, 2012). While audiovisual broadcasters are subject to stricter disclosure, online-only outlets often operate in a regulatory grey zone. This is particularly concerning given the platformisation of news, in which consumption is increasingly mediated by algorithmic environments such as TikTok and Facebook (Newman et al., 2024). As Napoli (2019) notes, these platform-native actors frequently bypass traditional accountability structures, making their ownership, funding, and control relationships difficult to trace.

Finally, the growing convergence between media ownership and non-media sectors, such as telecommunications and public relations, signals a trend toward vertical integration and media conglomeration (Evens & Donders, 2019). In Romania, this cross-sectoral ownership often functions as a strategic shield for broader business interests through political leverage (Marincea, 2023). By controlling both the distribution infrastructure (telecoms) and the media content, these conglomerates pose new challenges to media pluralism and transparency.

In an era marked by digital disruption and evolving media landscapes, systematic monitoring is indispensable for assessing whether news media are fulfilling their democratic functions. Tomaz and Trappel (2022) discuss the theoretical foundations and practical indicators required for such monitoring, aiming to provide a robust foundation for comparative studies of media systems.

The present study, which focuses on media ownership in Romania, is part of the Euromedia Ownership Monitor project, a structured database documenting media ownership, control relationships, and transparency risks across the European Union. EurOMo is a multinational research initiative funded under the European Democracy Action Plan and aligned with the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) and the Anti-Money Laundering Directive (AMLD) to enhance transparency in media ownership and influence (Euromedia Ownership Monitor, 2025). The purpose of EurOMo is to identify who owns and controls influential news media outlets in EU Member States, including both traditional legacy media (print, broadcast, radio, and online news) and digital news accounts on major platforms (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, X, TikTok, WhatsApp). The database supports comparative analysis by providing standardised information on ownership structures, economic interests, management, ties to political or organisational actors, and the robustness of national legal and regulatory frameworks.

Methods

The Romanian media market is characterised by structural pluralism that often masks significant transparency deficits and mechanisms of media capture. By applying the EurOMo 2025 methodology, this study seeks to map complex economic and political relationships and to provide an evidence-based assessment of the Romanian media landscape. To this end, it adopts a multi-layered methodology: unlike traditional registries, that merely identify legal owners, it investigates beneficial ownership, political affiliations, and cross-sectoral interests, including links to the telecommunications and public relations sectors.

Selection of the media outlets

By incorporating both legacy media and platform-native news actors—specifically influential accounts on TikTok and Facebook, the sample provides a comprehensive view of media pluralism that takes into account digital convergence and the non-transparent flow of public and private funds.

Overall, the EU sample comprises the most influential national news producers in each EU Member State, selected for their audience reach and agenda-setting power. National research teams identified between 15 and 30 major legacy media outlets per country, balancing representation across media types and socio-political contexts. Additionally, the 2025 sample included 5 to 10 influential news accounts on major digital platforms, defined as accounts that play a recognisable role in public information flows, irrespective of whether they originate from legacy media brands or independent digital initiatives. Non-news influencers and accounts primarily associated with political figures were excluded to maintain focus on news content.

Thus, based on data compiled from the Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2025) and from the Romanian Transmedia Audit Bureau—(BRAT), the Romanian sample included the following media outlets and digital news accounts: PRO TV and stirileprotv.ro, Europa FM, Antena 1, Observatornews.ro, Antena 3 CNN, HotNews.ro, Adevărul, Click, Libertatea, EVZ.ro, Digi24, Digi24.ro, România TV, Kanal D, B1 TV, Realitatea Plus, TVR 1, Radio România Actualități, Radio ZU, StiriPeSurse.ro, Gândul România (TikTok), Realitatea Plus (TikTok), Știrile ProTV ro (TikTok), Robert Turcescu Oficial (TikTok), Euronews România (TikTok), Epoch Times Romania (Facebook), Gen, știri (TikTok), Cristian Tudor Popescu (Facebook), MariusTucă (Facebook), Recorder (YouTube), and Romania Fast-Forward (TikTok).

The selected media outlets and social media accounts reflect the contemporary Romanian media landscape, where television and online media dominate, with news consumption led by several major news television stations and their associated news websites and social media accounts.

Data collection procedures

All data collected for EurOMo are based exclusively on publicly available and verifiable sources, including national and international company registers and official ownership databases; reports and filings issued by national media regulators and competition authorities; media outlets' public disclosures, including information on corporate structures and shareholders; corporate or financial statements published by media companies; qualitative information from press coverage and previous research.

Researchers conducted exhaustive searches to complete each database field, and information that could not be reliably verified was either left blank or explicitly coded as missing. The protocol prohibits the imputation or estimation of missing values, ensuring that transparency includes acknowledging what is unknown (Euromedia Ownership Monitor, 2025).

Multi-layered analysis

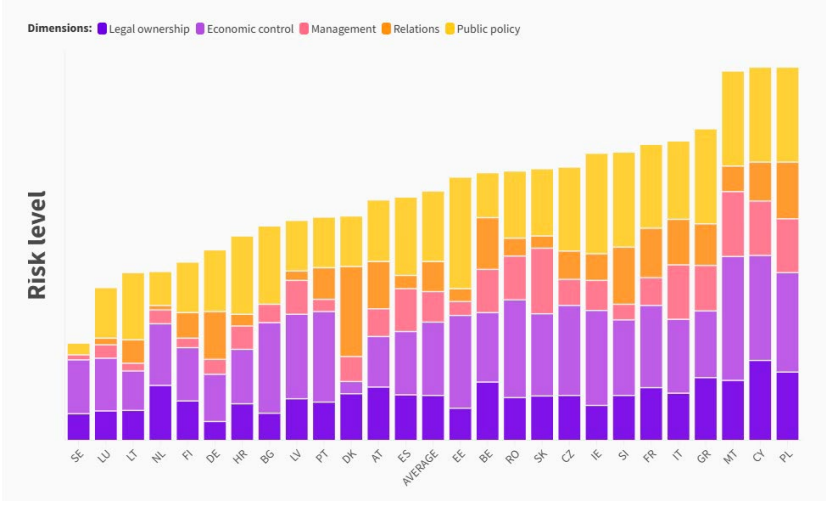
Traditional media monitoring often focuses too narrowly on legal shareholders. In the contemporary media environment, ownership is frequently obscured through shell companies, or control is exercised through non-equity mechanisms (such as debt or political alliances). To capture the complexity of ownership and control in contemporary media landscapes (Tomaz, 2024), the EurOMo 2025 methodology assesses five interrelated dimensions:

- Legal ownership—identifies direct and indirect ownership relationships and ultimate ("beneficial") owners as defined under AMLD standards.
- Economic control—examines financial influence, including revenue sources, public and foreign advertising, and shareholders' economic interests.
- Management—maps individuals occupying key editorial, executive, or strategic decision-making positions.
- Relations—tracks political and organisational ties, including the involvement of politically exposed persons (PEPs) that may influence editorial independence.
- Public policy—evaluates the national regulatory framework, focusing on laws, enforcement mechanisms, and safeguards related to transparency and media independence.

Each dimension comprises a set of risk indicators that measure the extent to which transparency is promoted or undermined. For example, legal ownership indicators include whether an outlet discloses its direct and beneficial owners, while management indicators capture whether chief executives and editors-in-chief are publicly identified.

EurOMo's risk assessment framework assigns quantitative scores (ranging from 0 = low risk to 3 = very high risk) to individual indicators for each media outlet. Outlet-level scores are then aggregated into national transparency risk profiles, weighted according to news consumption patterns derived from the *Eurobarometer: Media & News Survey 2023* ensuring that national scores reflect the relative influence of different media sectors (e.g., television, print, online media, social platforms). Higher aggregate scores indicate greater opacity and more substantial barriers to public visibility of ownership and control structures.

Chart 1. Overall risk to transparency in media ownership score



Source: EurOMo website, 2026.

EurOMo 2025 adopts the Beneficial Ownership Data Standard (BODS), a globally recognised open data standard that facilitates cross-country comparability and supports automated data processing. National research teams followed a harmonised codebook and quality assurance procedures to ensure consistency. Where discrepancies arose between sources, researchers documented their decisions and prioritised official or independently verifiable data (Euromedia Ownership Monitor, 2025).

Discussion: The transparency gap in the Romanian media system

The Romanian media system has undergone several structural transformations over the past three decades. . In the 1990s, total state control of the communist regime gave way to a model dominated by 'press barons', or media moguls, who had concentrated ownership and/or control of significant media assets and were able to influence their editorial, political or economic orientation (Hanretty, 2014). This led to strong institutional capture in the post-communist period, particularly around control of major television news broadcasters in the 2000s. This system has now evolved into a more diverse, pluralistic, and fragmented landscape, in which traditional broadcasters coexist with a wide range of digital--native outlets. Greater diversity and pluralism have been accompanied by new

forms of instrumentalisation and control (Gross, 2024). These include the non-transparent flow of public funds, primarily through political parties, as well as inconsistent ownership transparency across the market. While audiovisual license holders are required to disclose their ownership structures, ownership of digital-only media outlets is opaque. The 2024–2025 electoral cycle also exposed severe vulnerabilities to platform- capture (Usher, 2021), marked by opaque campaign financing, coordinated manipulation on social-media platforms, and alleged foreign information interference, which contributed to the annulment of the 2024 presidential (OSCE, 2025).

The contemporary media environment is characterised by the coexistence of major television networks and the growing importance of platforms as sources of news. In this context, new forms of editorial control are emerging. On the one hand, media projects can operate under the brand umbrella of established international or national outlets, even though these relationships are not reflected in the ownership chain recorded in the official registers. The registered owners also frequently have business interests in other sectors, which can include real estate or industrial production, as well as public relations, market research, and telecommunications infrastructure. The latter points to an emerging trend of the convergence of news media with the telecom sector. Furthermore, new projects may operate as social media accounts or networks of news influencers, creating new forms of disintermediated political communication bypassing ownership transparency requirements.

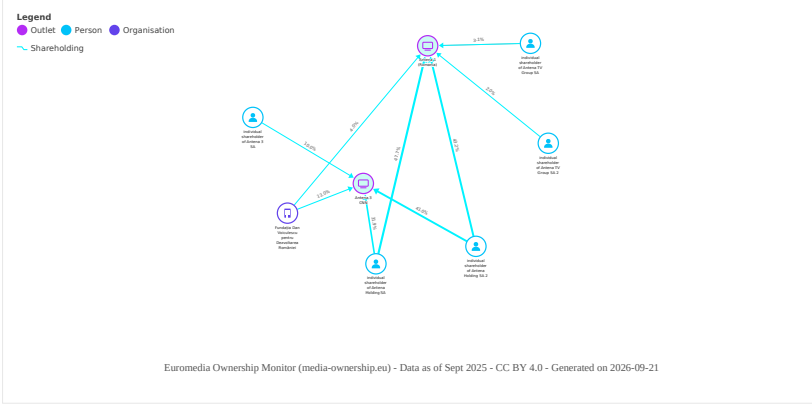
These developments pose regulatory challenges that the EMFA addresses only partially. National regulators for example, have recently broadened their interpretation of online media content providers, increasingly assuming responsibility to monitor public discourse online, while the ownership structures and funding mechanisms through which influence and control are exercised often remain opaque.

Key media outlets and owners

The Romanian Audiovisual Law requires that audiovisual media service providers disclose their shareholder structures. This information has been made available on the website of the National Audiovisual Council (CNA) in 2022, after having been removed in 2019, due to concerns related to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Direct owners are generally identified on the websites or imprints of outlets in our sample, except for social media accounts, where information must be inferred. Beneficial owners typically require consulting secondary public sources, especially for print or online outlets that do not hold audiovisual licenses. Among the owners of these outlets, we find both large international actors such as Ringier, Dogan Media, and CME Media

Enterprises, Romanian companies, and companies established abroad by Romanian nationals. Among the emergent news outlets that operate exclusively on social media and short form vertical video platforms, some (like Romania Fast Forward) provide no ownership or transparency information. Some media outlets in our sample are owned by foundations named after their founders, without these individuals appearing as shareholders, such as the Romanian businessman and politician Dan Voiculescu. Other outlets are owned by recently established companies, further limiting transparency (see also the *Media Pluralism Monitor*, Toma et al., 2024; and the *European Commission Rule of Law Report*, European Commission, 2025).

Chart 2. Most relevant ultimate owners of Antena 1, Observatornews.ro, and Antena 3 CNN



Source: EurOMo website, 2026.

In terms of non-media ownership, almost half of the owners in our sample are involved in non-media economic activities, ranging from financial services to wired telecommunications and real estate. Notably, several companies list their principal economic activities as public relations and communication, media representation, market research and public opinion polling.

Even though analysts disagree on whether the practice of financing information and communication campaigns with public finds—sometimes justified as a means of supporting the media in times of crisis—should be regarded as subsidies (Toma et al., 2022), observers consistently note that some media outlets receive substantial amounts of undisclosed government funding: "The widespread practice of diverting public funds to the media, in a non-transparent manner, distorts the market and undermines the media's watchdog function" (RSF, 2025; see also Toma et al., 2024). Media-related expenditure—including political advertising as well as content not labelled as paid

advertising—account for the largest category political party spending, exceeding €40 million in 2024 (Pârvu, 2024). However, such data is only available to only for political parties, and varying levels of detail, rather than for the media outlets receiving these funds, creating a major transparency risk. The first round of the presidential election in November 2024 was annulled by the Constitutional Court, in part because of undeclared sources of campaign funding, particularly for social media campaigning (Constitutional Court of Romania, 2024).

The absence of self-regulatory mechanisms, enforcement mechanisms, and protective legislation undermines editorial independence, newsroom autonomy, professionalism, and public-interest orientation (Toma et al., 2022). The Romanian media sector is governed by general laws and regulations, such as the Audiovisual Law, which provides a framework for broadcasting and electronic media, but Romania does not have specific media newsroom councils or editorial statutes at the national level. Media owners are not among the members of councils, and they have neither voting rights nor editorial responsibilities, because media councils do not exist in the Romanian media system. No official information politically exposed persons (PEPs) is available in Romanian official documents and registers. However, there are some initiatives and organisations that play a role in addressing issues related to press freedom, media practices and journalists' rights, such as the Romanian Press Club (*rom.* Clubul Român de Presă) and the Romanian Union of Journalists—SRJ MediaSind (*rom.* Sindicatul Român al Jurnaliştilor MediaSind—SRJ MediaSind).

News distribution

According to the 2023 Media & News Eurobarometer Survey, television is the primary news source (79% of respondents identifying it as their most frequently accessed source of news), 8 percentage points above the EU average. Television, which is the most widely used source across all age groups, is followed by social media (48%), online news platforms (47%), radio (33%), video platforms (31%), messaging apps (20%), print media (19%), podcasts (12%) and blogs (8%) (EP Media & News Survey, 2023). Internet penetration reached 89% in 2025 (Newman et al., 2025).

According to the 2024 report of the National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications (ANCOM), the total number of subscribers to television retransmission services reached 7.83 million in 2022, of whom 90% subscribed via cable television (CATV), 10% via direct-to-home (DTH) services, and fewer than 0.01% via IPTV. The television distribution market is dominated by Digi (74.8%), followed by Orange (13.3%), and Vodafone (9.2%).

The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) of market concentration is 5.871, indicating a highly concentrated market.

Romania ranks 13th globally (and second in Europe) in fixed broadband internet speed (247.12 Mbps) and 52nd in mobile internet speed (74.88 Mbps) largely because of infrastructure differences between rural and urban areas. Internet services are affordable. Internet traffic consists of 87% fixed broadband and 13% mobile connections, with the share of mobile traffic increasing by 3 percentage points since 2022.

According to the ANCOM 2024 Report, Digi dominates the fixed broadband market with 71.9% of connections, followed by Orange (16%) and Vodafone (10.3%). The mobile internet market share distribution differs considerably, with Orange leading (35.3%), followed by Digi (30.2%), Vodafone (22.3%), and Telekom Mobile (12.2%). The HHI of market concentration is 5,530 (fixed) and 2,941 (mobile), indicating high concentration on both markets.

The 2025 Digital News Report shows that 25% of Romanian respondents use TikTok as a source of news.

The radio market is diverse, but radio broadcasting remains predominantly analogue. According to the 2022 report of ANCOM, the 2020 national strategy for the implementation of digital audio broadcasting had not yet been approved.

The circulation of major paid print publications have declined by approximately 35% to 45% between Q2 2022 and Q2 2025, according to data from the Romanian Transmedia Audit Bureau on major print news publications.

Relevant non-linear distributors

According to the Digital News Report 2025, online news websites, apps, and video platforms have became the main sources for news (70%), and 24% of Romanian respondents admitted to share news via social media, messaging apps and email. The same report identifies the leading social media and messaging platforms used for news (Newman et al., 2025), with Facebook remaining a clearly dominant platform for news-related use. Compared with previous years, TikTok has experienced a particularly significant increase in use as a news source, as well as in its overall popularity.

Table 1. Top social media and messaging platforms for news and overall use

Platform	News	Overall use
Facebook	50%	73%
YouTube	31%	65%
TikTok	25%	42%
WhatsApp	22%	66%
Instagram	13%	34%
Facebook Messenger	10%	38%

Source: Digital News Report, 2025.

Furthermore, with approximately 690 million monthly visits, Google (google.com and google.ro) is the most visited website and search engine in Romania. It is followed by YouTube and Facebook in terms of website traffic, and by Bing and DuckDuckGo among search engines. Google accounts for 96% of the Romanian search engine market.

Main risks to transparency in the Romania media

The dominant provided in both the ISP and Cable TV markets, Digi, owns 12 television licenses and 79 radio licenses (according to the National Audiovisual Council). Its portfolio includes the Digi24 news channel and the *Digi24.ro* news website (both included in the sample), as well as the ProFM and DigiFM radio networks (not included in the sample), all of which are part of the RCS&RDS ownership structure. The Romanian "must-carry" list for 2025 includes 60 television channels. According to the 2022 ANCOM report, only isolated cases of net neutrality infringements have been identified, mainly involving disputed zero-rating offers by mobile internet service providers and access problems caused by technical or configuration errors.

Facebook dominates news-sharing practices in Romania. With regard to content moderation, Facebook lists the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) as third-party fact-checking partner for Europe, with Funky Citizens/Factual.ro as the only verified member from Romania, according to the EFCSN register.

Google News ranks among the most widely used news app, but the Digital News Report survey results does not identify any news aggregator as playing a particularly significant role. Google News Showcase is a global content licensing programme through which Google pays participating publishers to curate and present content. Google News Showcase was launched in June 2022 in Romania

with 16 partner publications: Adevarul.ro, Agerpres.ro, Descopera.ro, Digi24.ro, Edupedu.ro, G4Media.ro, Gandul.ro, HotNews.ro, iDevice.ro, Mobilissimo.ro, News.ro, Newsweek.ro, Profit.ro, StartupCafe.ro, StirileProTV.ro, Wall-Street.ro, Digi Sport, PaginadeMedia.ro, ZiarulFinanciar, and Libertatea.ro. News agencies Agerpres and Mediafax were also included in Google News Showcase in 2023.

All relevant intermediaries operating in Romania either provide no information or disclose only general criteria on pages that are not accessible from the content itself. Although some intermediaries claim that paid content may be prioritised, they do not commit to disclosing the existence of commercial agreements underlying such content.

Legal framework

The Romanian Constitution guarantees freedom of the press, including the freedom to establish publications. It also provides that the law may require media organisations to disclose their sources of funding, particularly public funding and funding received during electoral campaigns.

Romania has not adopted a dedicated Press Law, and the constitutional provisions on the freedom of the press, including the freedom to set up publications, their ownership and funding, were detailed by several laws, either by sector-specific legislation (Audiovisual Law 504/2002, as well as public Law on Public Radio and Television 41/1994) or by general legislation applicable to all businesses, which os specific to the printed press.

Audiovisual Law No. 504/2002 contains detailed provisions on the definition of participants in the audiovisual market, the ownership and ownership transparency, the shareholding structure, anti-concentration provisions, licensing and the public registration of licenses, the prohibition of censorship, and the protection of editorial independence. The law also prohibits any single market participant from acquiring a dominant position in shaping public opinion by limiting market share to 30%. Shareholding structures are publicly available through the website of the National Audiovisual Council. In the past, however, controversies arose over the publication of the shareholding register, which was not always publicly accessible or kept up to date despite the legal obligation to do so. At present, the register is regularly updated and publicly available.

Law No. 504/2002 also regulates the establishment, organisation and duties of the regulatory body in the audiovisual field, the National Audiovisual Council, an independent body under parliamentary control.

The Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) has been transposed into Romanian law. Its provisions have been currently incorporated into Law No. 504/2002, which regulates the audiovisual sector and includes general provisions applicable to intermediary service providers.

Public television and radio services are governed by a dedicated legal framework, namely Law No. 41/1994 on the organisation and functioning of public broadcasting. They are financed predominantly from the state budget, with additional revenue generated through advertising. Both public television and public radio operate as editorially independent and autonomous public service media under parliamentary oversight.

The leadership of the audiovisual regulatory body as well as the public radio and television services is appointed by the public authorities, including Parliament, the Government, and the President. Although the appointees do not necessarily belong to a political party, decisions can sometimes be influenced by the political majorities or governing coalitions.

Transparency requirements regarding funding in the audiovisual sector remain limited, with disclosure obligations applying primarily to public funds and electoral campaign funding.

The print media sector is subject to less extensive regulation. It operates under general commercial legislation, including the Companies' Law (Law No. 31/1990), the Trade Register Law (Law No. 265/2022), the Competition Law (Law No. 21/1996) and the Civil Code. Although information on shareholding structures can be obtained, it is available only indirectly through paid requests for extracts from the Trade Register.

Funding is also not transparent in the print media sector. Only public funds can be traced, but only indirectly, through requests addressed to public authorities under the Public Information Law (Law No. 544/2001), or by examining the revenue and expenditure budgets of public authorities, and not from companies that own print publications.

Editorial responsibility rests with individual journalists, and there are no statutory content regulators or media supervisory bodies for the print press; the only legal requirements are to respect public order and public morality. In the event of a violation, only civil sanctions may be imposed, and only by a court of law.

As for digital platforms and video-sharing platform, services , regulations also exist in Law 504/2002, which transposes the AVMSD, but these are minimal and generally apply to all audiovisual communications. They include the requirement to establish and regular updating a register of providers of video-sharing platforms that are established or deemed to be established in Romania. The body responsible for drawing up and publishing the list is the National Audiovisual Council. The law establishes a general obligation on platforms to protect minors and the general public from programmes and user-generated videos that incite violence or hate on the basis of prohibited grounds of discrimination, and from commercial communications that constitutes public incitement to commit criminal offences.

Content regulation for digital publications has become more precise following the Digital Services Act, the new audiovisual code, and Law No. 50/2024.

Law No. 50/2024 designates ANCOM as the coordinator of digital services in Romania. ANCOM is responsible for monitoring and enforcing compliance with the provisions of the DSA.

Platforms and intermediary service providers are required to submit relevant information to the National Audiovisual Council, but no publicly available register could be identified, unlike for broadcasting services.

The ownership of digital publications can still be determined only indirectly, through consultation of public registers.

The new regulations, adopted to implement the DSA, regulate direct sanctions against platforms, content distributors, or users, including fines, removal of illegal content, restriction of access to it, or suspension of user accounts. Service providers of hosting services for video-sharing platforms may be required to remove, disable or restrict access to a video-sharing platform. Domain name registries which allocate domain names to video-sharing platforms may be required to remove the domain name of the respective video-sharing platform. Beyond these measures specific to digital content, and the DSA or AVMSD, which are directly applicable, constitute the principal regulatory framework; several enforcement decisions have already been adopted.

Conclusion

Overall, EurOMo research (Aleksevych, 2026) identifies systemic patterns across the European Union by clustering EU Member States according to their dominant ownership models, examining how these configurations relate to broader socio-political, economic, and institutional characteristics of national media systems. In the European context, the Romanian news market is characterised by a diversity of brands and ownership structures. However, lack of transparency and public accountability regarding funding mechanisms, as well as of strong professional associations capable of promoting effective self-regulation, creates conditions conducive to questionable practices. The substantial public funding available to political parties and spent on media-related activities without direct public disclosure, continue to constitute one of principal risks to both transparency and editorial independence.

Comprehensive ownership information is publicly available for broadcasters and intermediary service providers, not for the print media companies and online content providers. Content distributors on online platforms, even if they operate as news organisations or provide services comparable to those of traditional mass media, are treated merely as platform users and are not subject to any registration; the only records relating to their activities are maintained by the platforms themselves.

The implementation of the DSA in Romania highlights not only the fragmented responsibilities and limited effectiveness of the competent authorities with diverse areas of competence but also a reactive and inconsistent approach. European regulations are unlikely to have a meaningful impact if they are not properly implemented and national authorities do not clarify their roles and ensure precise, effective communication among themselves.

By mapping the intricate control relations and political links that shape the current Romanian media ecosystem, this study highlights the indirectly traceable funding mechanisms—most notably the flow of political party subsidies—that point to a *de facto* form of media capture. The analysis of the platform-native news actors demonstrates how algorithmic governance complicates traditional concepts of ownership and accountability. As Romania navigates the integration of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), current findings provide an evidence-based roadmap for regulators to provide an evidence-based foundation for the development of more integrated, cross-sectoral transparency databases and regulatory oversight.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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Municipal Social Media Governance: Organizational Anchoring, Competency Profiles, and Artificial Intelligence Capability

ABSTRACT

Social media have become a routine component of communication in Polish municipalities, yet research has focused more often on platform presence than on the organisational conditions under which this communication is managed. This article examines municipal social media governance, with particular attention to organisational anchoring, operational capacity, formalisation, measurement maturity, response practices in challenging situations, and declared readiness to use AI-based tools. The study is based on a nationwide CAWI survey conducted in the fourth quarter of 2023 among 1,793 municipalities, representing 72.4% of the population. Most respondents (86.1%) reported using social media, with Facebook clearly dominating; therefore, the detailed analyses were conducted within the Facebook module (N = 1,465). Three composite indicators were applied: the Operational Capacity Index (OCI), the Formalization Index (FI), and the Measurement Maturity Index (MMI). The results show that models of organisational anchoring are associated with differences in OCI, FI, and MMI. Regression models controlled for municipality type and

Suggested citation: Rydzak, W., Hybka, M.M., Trębecki, J., Tadeusz-Ciesielczyk, M., & Marzęda, A. (2026). Municipal Social Media Governance: Organizational Anchoring, Competency Profiles, and Artificial Intelligence Capability. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 253–290. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.15

Nadesłano: 21.10.2025 Zaakceptowano: 7.05.2026

demographic-financial characteristics. Formalisation is associated with a greater likelihood of performance measurement, while measurement, rather than the mere existence of a communication strategy, co-occurs with more frequent proactive moderation practices. In communication on high-stakes community issues, dialogic objectives are the strongest predictor of including Facebook among preferred communication channels, while image-building objectives are also positively associated with this outcome. Perceived Facebook effectiveness is associated with both communicative objectives and governance maturity. Declared readiness to use AI is associated with measurement maturity, formalisation, and support from municipal authorities, whereas actual AI use is associated primarily with measurement maturity and leadership support. Operational capacity does not emerge as an independent predictor of AI-related outcomes. The findings suggest that municipal social media management is best understood as a governance issue rather than merely a matter of platform presence.

KEYWORDS: social media governance, local government, municipalities, Facebook, public management, formalization, artificial intelligence

STRESZCZENIE

Zarządzanie mediami społecznościowymi w gminach: zakotwiczenie organizacyjne, profile kompetencyjne oraz zdolności w zakresie sztucznej inteligencji

Media społecznościowe stały się rutynowym elementem komunikacji w polskich gminach, jednak dotychczasowe badania częściej koncentrowały się na samej obecności na platformach niż na uwarunkowaniach organizacyjnych, w których komunikacja ta jest zarządzana. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje zarządzanie mediami społecznościowymi w gminach, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem zakotwiczenia organizacyjnego, zdolności operacyjnych, poziomu formalizacji, dojrzałości pomiarowej, praktyk reagowania w sytuacjach trudnych oraz deklarowanej gotowości do wykorzystania narzędzi opartych na sztucznej inteligencji. Badanie opiera się na ogólnopolskim sondażu CAWI przeprowadzonym w czwartym kwartale 2023 roku wśród 1 793 gmin, co stanowi 72,4% populacji. Większość respondentów (86,1%) zadeklarowała korzystanie z mediów społecznościowych, przy czym wyraźnie dominował Facebook; dlatego szczegółowe analizy przeprowadzono w ramach modułu dotyczącego Facebooka (N = 1,465). Zastosowano trzy syntetyczne wskaźniki: Indeks Zdolności Operacyjnej (OCI), Indeks Formalizacji (FI) oraz Indeks Dojrzałości Pomiarowej (MMI). Wyniki wskazują, że modele zakotwiczenia organizacyjnego wiążą się z różnicami w poziomie OCI, FI i MMI. Modele regresji kontrolowano pod względem typu gminy oraz charakterystyk demograficzno-finansowych. Wyższy poziom formalizacji jest powiązany z większym prawdopodobieństwem prowadzenia pomiarów, natomiast pomiar, a nie samo

istnienie strategii komunikacji, współwystępuje z częstszym stosowaniem proaktywnych praktyk moderacyjnych. W komunikacji dotyczącej kwestii o wysokiej wadze społecznej cele dialogiczne są najsilniejszym predyktorem uwzględniania Facebooka jako preferowanego kanału komunikacji, natomiast cele wizerunkowe są również dodatnio powiązane z tym wynikiem. Postrzegana skuteczność Facebooka wiąże się zarówno z celami komunikacyjnymi, jak i z dojrzałością zarządzania. Deklarowana gotowość do wykorzystania sztucznej inteligencji jest związana z dojrzałością pomiarową, poziomem formalizacji oraz wsparciem ze strony władz samorządowych, podczas gdy faktyczne wykorzystanie AI wiąże się przede wszystkim z dojrzałością pomiarową i wsparciem kierownictwa. Zdolność operacyjna nie wyłania się jako niezależny predyktor wyników związanych z AI. Uzyskane wyniki sugerują, że zarządzanie mediami społecznościowymi w gminach należy postrzegać przede wszystkim jako problem zarządczy (*governance*), a nie jedynie kwestię obecności na platformach.

KEYWORDS: zarządzanie mediami społecznościowymi, samorząd lokalny, gminy, Facebook, zarządzanie publiczne, formalizacja, sztuczna inteligencja

1. Introduction

The rapid development of information and communication technologies, initiated by the Web 2.0 revolution, has fundamentally reshaped the relationship between public institutions and citizens. Social media have become not only channels for disseminating information but also an infrastructure of everyday interactions where citizens' expectations regarding transparency, responsiveness, and the quality of communication are continuously articulated and in a publicly visible manner. From the perspective of local government, presence on social media is often described as an element of administrative modernisation; at the same time, it entails managerial decisions concerning the allocation of responsibilities, the provision of resources, the definition of communication objectives and performance measures, as well as the development of procedures for responding to challenging situations and discursive risks (Millard, 2023; Sfetcu, 2024; Stone, 2025).

The scale of this phenomenon indicates that this is no longer an incidental feature of municipal communication channels, but rather a durable component of local government operations. In the study forming the empirical basis of this article, 86.1% of municipalities that answered this question reported the use of social media, with Facebook clearly dominating as the platform used by the vast majority of active municipalities. This pattern is consistent with broader findings showing that Facebook remains the principal social media channel used by municipalities in public communication (Bonsón et al., 2012; Bonsón et al., 2015; Sobaci, 2016).

At the same time, mere presence on social media does not determine the maturity of their management. Of greater analytical importance is whether municipalities develop these practices in a planned and organised manner, supported by adequate resources, strategic planning, and performance measurement, or whether they rely primarily on reactive practices, dependent on ad hoc staffing and limited organisational capacities. Although the literature on social media in public administration and local government has documented such issues as publishing activity, content characteristics, and determinants of audience engagement, the organisational "backstage" of this presence remains less explored. This includes the institutional location of responsibility, the competency profiles of those responsible for channel management, the degree of formalisation, and the existence of systematic, data-informed organisational learning (Bertot et al., 2010; Bonsón et al., 2015; Criado & Villodre, 2022; Wang & Medaglia, 2017).

In the Polish context, these issues are particularly salient. Resource constraints, especially in smaller municipalities, may contribute to the persistence of a model in which digital communication is treated as an additional responsibility often at the expense of standardisation, analytics, and risk management. Under such conditions, communication is more likely to remain intuitive than strategically and systematically managed. This observation provides the point of departure for conceptualising municipal social media management as a governance issue rather than merely as a question of platform presence.

Accordingly, this article examines how organisational anchoring, operational capacity, formalisation, and measurement practices relate to the ways in which municipalities manage their social media presence. Attention is also devoted to the growing role of artificial intelligence-based tools in municipal communication. Rather than treating AI as an isolated technological trend, the article considers whether declared readiness to use such tools is associated with broader patterns of managerial maturity, including formalisation, measurement, and organisational support (Hybka et al., 2024; Rydzak, 2023).

The contribution of this article lies in shifting attention from the question of whether municipalities use social media to how this use is organised and governed in practice. Given the declarative and cross-sectional nature of the dataset, the article does not seek to assess the actual effectiveness of municipal social media communication on social media platforms directly. Instead, it identifies patterns of association within the organisational dimension of municipal social media governance and interprets them in the light of the existing literature on public sector communication, institutionalisation, and digital maturity (Criado & Villodre, 2022; Stone et al., 2024).

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Media in Local Government: Between Transparency, Participation, and Emerging Risks

The use of social media by public institutions is most commonly justified by their potential to strengthen transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. From the perspective of e-government, social media may support a culture of transparency by reducing the costs of information dissemination, facilitating access to public information, and enabling rapid responses to citizens' informational needs (Bertot et al., 2010). At the same time, these effects do not arise automatically from the adoption of digital tools. Their practical significance depends on the institution's organisational capacity to sustain communication activities, including content creation, monitoring public reactions, responding to inquiries, and managing interactions under conditions of heightened public attention and conflict.

The literature also shows that social media expose public institutions to new forms of risk. These include foreign information manipulation and interference, conflict escalation, discursive polarisation, violations of deliberative norms, and organisational demands associated with content moderation (Bauschke & Jäckle, 2023; Chan & Yi, 2024; OECD, 2024). Consequently, some institutions may limit the dialogic character of their social media presence and prioritise informational or promotional communication which is perceived as easier to control. This tension is particularly evident at the local level, where the interactions between institutions and residents are especially intensive, while organisational capacity often remain limited.

Although previous research has documented such issues as publishing activity, content characteristics, and audience engagement, the organisational "backstage" of municipal social media communication remains less explored (Sobaci, 2016; Raposo et al., 2024). Relatively little is known about how responsibility for social media is institutionally anchored, how competencies are distributed, how far governance is formalised, and whether municipalities develop routines of measurement and organisational learning.

2.2. Institutionalisation of Social Media Management in Public Administration

In studies of social media in the public sector, the perspective of institutionalisation has gained increasing prominence. Institutionalisation is understood as a transition from ad hoc and fragmented activities towards practices embedded within organisational structures and supported by formal rules, routines, and

leadership. From this perspective, the key question is not simply whether public institutions are present on social media platforms, but whether social media have been integrated into organisational management: whether responsibility is clearly allocated, whether formal procedures exist, and whether communication is supported by organisational leadership (Criado & Villodre, 2022).

This perspective is closely linked to the notion of organisational maturity. In the context of social media governance, maturity may be understood as a configuration of practices that includes the formalisation of objectives, the allocation of responsibility, the existence of strategy, the use of performance measurement, and the development of data-informed learning processes. This understanding is consistent with broader public management frameworks, in which communication is viewed not as an isolated activity but as a managerial function requiring the coordination of time, resources, responsibilities, and organisational change (Mickoleit, 2014; Wang & Medaglia, 2017).

2.3. Organisational Anchoring of Social Media Management

From a governance perspective, one of the central dimensions of social media management is organisational anchoring, understood as the institutional allocation of responsibility for communication and the associated decision-making and accountability structures. The literature describes a range of arrangements, from concentrating responsibility within promotion or public relations units, through decentralised and hybrid models, to outsourcing and ad hoc solutions. Public-sector guidelines and management-oriented studies consistently emphasise that even a basic social media strategy requires clearly defined roles and responsibilities in order to avoid inconsistency, discontinuity, and excessive dependence on individual actors (Mergel, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Sobaci, 2016).

Research on European local governments indicates that governance arrangements may be associated both with the level of activity and with the character of communication on social media platforms. Studies of municipal Facebook practices suggest that the way profiles are managed may relate to differences in audience engagement, content types, and media formats, which in turn highlights the significance of competencies and work organisation on the administrative side (Bonsón et al., 2012; Bonsón et al., 2015; López Alonso & Moreno López, 2019).

In the Polish context, this perspective is complemented by scholarship that highlights tensions between bureaucratic logic and the logic of digital platforms, as well as the need to embed communication within a broader model of local government management (Guzowski, 2015; Szczuka, 2023). Organisational anchoring should therefore not be understood merely as a structural

feature. It also defines the municipality's capacity to coordinate communication, respond to difficult situations, and maintain minimum standards of transparency and accountability.

2.4. Professionalisation of Resources and Competencies

The professionalisation of social media management involves not only the formal embedding of communication functions within the organisational structure, but also the provision of resources and the development of competencies. In practical terms, this includes the number of people involved, the amount of working time allocated to communication tasks, and the competencies required for content production, moderation, and analysis.

Polish scholarship emphasises that work in social media requires both media-related and organisational competencies, ranging from content and format design to understanding engagement mechanisms and responding to crises and online hate (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2011, 2014, 2016). From a managerial perspective, assigning social media tasks as an "additional duty" without training and analytical support may reinforce intuitive rather than data-informed practices.

International literature increasingly frames social media management in public institutions as a form of trust work. Qualitative studies of municipal channels suggest that individuals managing profiles often function as trust intermediaries and points of institutional access, combining publishing activity with the maintenance of relationships and credibility (Lovari & Materassi, 2021). In this perspective, professionalisation is not reducible to posting frequency; rather, it refers to the organisation's capacity to sustain interaction quality, message coherence, and accountability under conditions of public pressure.

2.5. Strategy, Measurement, and Organisational Learning

Management-oriented approaches emphasise that organisational maturity in social media depends on a cyclical process of planning, implementation, measurement, and adjustment. Strategy plays an integrative role in this process: it helps structure objectives, identify audiences, define moderation rules, select formats, and designate communication channels for sensitive issues. In contrast, the absence of a strategy encourages reactive decision-making and weakens the basis for systematic evaluation.

Empirical studies of European local governments show that content types and media formats affect levels of citizen engagement, reinforcing

the importance of analytics and ongoing testing of communication solutions (Bonsón et al., 2015). At the same time, even institutions that declare dialogic objectives may restrict interaction when dealing with conflict-prone topics. For this reason, it is analytically important to examine together the declared objectives of social media presence, preferred channels for high-stakes community issues, and actual response and moderation practices.

Measurement and evaluation are also increasingly discussed from the perspective of frontline public sector employees. Research in this field suggests that mature communication management requires not only collecting metrics but also interpreting them in relation to public goals and organisational learning (Stone et al., 2024). In the public sector, however, measurement often competes with limited resources and multiple task pressures, which may favour minimal monitoring practices at the expense of deeper evaluation.

2.6. AI and Automation as an Element of Governance

Artificial intelligence, including generative and analytical tools, is increasingly considered a potential support for social media management. Such tools may facilitate content production and adaptation, assist in discourse monitoring, support crisis detection, and enable more advanced forms of analysis. At the same time, the implementation of AI in public institutions requires appropriate governance conditions, including competencies, procedures, quality control, and awareness of legal and reputational risks.

In the Polish context, the issue of municipal readiness to use AI in social media-based communication has already been addressed in earlier research, which linked AI adoption capacity to the level of professionalisation of social media practices, including staff training and the presence of outcome measurement (Hybka et al., 2024). From this perspective, AI can be treated not simply as a technological trend, but as a potential indicator of the broader maturity of communication management. This justifies examining whether declared readiness to adopt AI is associated with resource deficits, support from municipal authorities, and prior measurement and evaluation practices.

2.7. Research Gap and Research Logic

The literature reviewed above leads to three conclusions that justify the research logic adopted in this article. First, social media have become a stable component of municipal communication infrastructure, but their contribution to transparency and participation depends on organisational capacities rather than on technology alone (Bertot et al., 2010). Second, existing studies

of local governments highlight the importance of profile management practices, content choices, competencies, and analytics for shaping communication outcomes (Bonsón et al., 2015; López Alonso & Moreno López, 2019). Third, the institutionalisation perspective suggests that the transition from ad hoc activity to more standardised and routinised management remains a central issue in the public sector, while the AI dimension further underlines the role of measurement maturity and organisational support (Criado & Villodre, 2022; Hybka et al., 2024).

Against this background, the article addresses social media management in municipalities as a governance problem and examines it through four interrelated research questions: the organisational anchoring of responsibility, the relationship between formalisation and measurement, the role of declared communication objectives in the management of high-stakes community issues, and the conditions associated with declared readiness to adopt AI-supported tools.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Research Design, Research Questions, and Data Collection

The empirical basis of the article is a nationwide quantitative study conducted in the fourth quarter of 2023 using the CAWI technique (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing), addressed to all municipalities in Poland. Invitations to participate in the study were sent to the official e-mail addresses of municipal offices, and the questionnaire was completed by individuals described as being the most knowledgeable about social media issues in a given unit. This approach was intended to increase the accuracy of information regarding organisational arrangements, resources, and channel management practices.

The analysis is structured around four research questions:

RQ1: Which models of organisational anchoring of social media management dominate in municipalities, and how are they related to professionalisation, understood in terms of staffing resources, team size, and strategy formalisation?

RQ2: Is the existence of a strategy, and its age, associated with (a) outcome measurement, (b) the use of analytics, and (c) response practices in challenging situations?

RQ3: How do the declared objectives of social media presence (informational, dialogic, and image-building) correspond to preferred communication channels for high-stakes community issues and with assessments of Facebook's effects?

RQ4: Is readiness to use AI associated with governance maturity, support from municipal authorities, and operational capacity?

The article focuses on the governance of municipal social media management rather than on direct observation of communication outcomes on digital platforms. Accordingly, the empirical material is used to identify organisational patterns and statistically observable relationships within the declarative dataset.

3.2. Sample, Population Coverage, and Respondent Structure

The study yielded N = 1,793 completed questionnaires, corresponding to 72.4% of the total population of municipalities in Poland (N = 2,477). This level of coverage substantially reduces the risk of selection bias and provides a strong empirical basis for describing social media management practices in Polish municipalities.

Regarding respondent roles, the survey was completed primarily by general administration staff, municipal secretaries, and employees of units responsible for communication, such as promotion or press offices. This is important given the subject of the study, which concerns the internal organisation of social media management and therefore relies on respondents occupying positions that provide insight into municipal communication routines and responsibilities.

3.3. Measurement Instrument and Thematic Scope

The questionnaire comprised several thematic blocks covering the use of social media and Facebook, objectives of platform presence, organisational arrangements, formal rules and strategies, outcome measurement, response practices in challenging situations, and readiness to use AI-based tools. The instrument was designed to capture both the presence of social media channels and the organisational conditions under which they are managed.

For the purposes of this article, the following modules are of particular importance: (1) resources and organisational anchoring, including the unit responsible for social media and Facebook, direct subordination to municipal authorities, the number of persons involved, and the allocation of working time expressed in full-time equivalents (FTE); (2) measurement and analytics, including declarations regarding whether the municipality evaluates or measures the outcomes of its social media or Facebook activities and which indicators are used; (3) rules of interaction, including the existence of formal rules governing interaction and the year of their introduction; (4) support from

municipal authorities for the use of social media; and (5) the current or planned use of AI-based tools in communication activities.

Given the strong dominance of Facebook in municipal communication practices, analyses concerning Facebook objectives, perceived Facebook effects, channel preferences for high-stakes issues, interaction rules, and Facebook-specific management practices are conducted within the Facebook module. Variables describing broader social media governance, such as measurement, training, support from municipal authorities, organisational anchoring, staffing, and FTE allocation, are analysed for municipalities declaring social media use, with the relevant analytical base reported separately in each table.

3.4. Variables, Operationalisation, and Synthetic Indicators

The empirical analysis is based on variables describing five interrelated areas: (1) the organisational anchoring of social media management, (2) staffing and time resources allocated to communication, (3) the formalisation and maturity of management processes, (4) measurement and analytics practices, and (5) readiness to use artificial intelligence tools. The scope and content of the questionnaire make it possible to analyse both individual variables and broader synthetic indicators describing the quality of management.

Regarding organisational anchoring, the key variable identifies which unit or function within the municipal office is responsible for managing social media. The responses reflect a range of arrangements, including promotion offices, press offices, dedicated units, externally provided management, ad hoc arrangements, and cases without a permanent assignment. This governance dimension is central to RQ1, as it makes it possible to compare responsibility models and relate them to organisational capacity and communication practices.

The second pillar of operationalisation concerns resources, understood as the municipality's capacity to sustain the continuity and quality of its social media activities. Resources are captured using two complementary measures: the number of people involved in managing social media and the amount of work devoted to these activities, expressed in full-time equivalents. This combination makes it possible to distinguish between formally multi-person arrangements with low time allocation and more concentrated arrangements supported by a larger FTE commitment. The resource dimension is relevant to both RQ1 and RQ4.

The third area concerns formalisation, understood as the existence of stable rules and standards for communication on social media. In the study, formalisation is measured primarily through the existence of written strategies and

formal rules of interaction, supplemented, where possible, by information on the age of these documents. This allows formalisation to be treated not only as a binary feature, but also as an indicator of the degree of consolidation of communication practices. This dimension is central to RQ2.

The fourth area concerns measurement and analytics, understood as a basic mechanism of organisational learning. Measurement is operationalised both as the declaration that a municipality evaluates or measures the outcomes of its social media activity and as the scope of such measurement, captured by the number of indicators used. These include, for example, reach, reactions, comments, shares, and follower counts. This dimension is relevant to RQ2 and RQ4, since it reflects the extent to which communication is linked to evaluation and organisational learning.

The fifth area concerns readiness to use artificial intelligence in social media management. This variable includes both current use of AI-based tools and declarations concerning future implementation. In analyses related to RQ4, AI readiness is treated as an outcome variable embedded in a broader organisational context.

To capture the multidimensional character of social media governance more systematically, three synthetic indices were constructed. The Measurement Maturity Index (MMI) combines information on whether a municipality conducts any evaluation or measurement of social media activity with the intensity of measurement, understood as the number of indicators used. The Formalization Index (FI) reflects the degree of institutionalisation of communication rules by considering the existence of formal rules of interaction and, where available, the age of these rules; the presence of a strategy is also included as an element of planned and standardised communication. The Operational Capacity Index (OCI) synthesises organisational and competency-related resources required for the stable management of social media. It is based on the number of people involved, the full-time equivalent allocation, and the presence of competency development practices. The competency component was operationalised as *training_any*, coded as 1 when the municipality provided either formal training or informal learning through "learning by doing," and 0 otherwise.

The three indices were calculated for municipalities using Facebook (N = 1,465), since questions concerning strategy and rules of interaction were addressed exclusively to this group. Consequently, the FI is not defined for municipalities using other social media platforms without Facebook (N = 79). Throughout the article, individual variables and synthetic indices are used in a complementary manner: single variables describe specific organisational arrangements, whereas indices make it possible to identify broader patterns of association. The analytical base differs depending on the scope of the variable. Facebook-specific variables are analysed within the Facebook module, whereas broader social media governance variables are analysed among municipalities declaring social media use.

Regression models use complete cases for the variables included in each specification; therefore, model N may be lower than the descriptive base.

For analyses related to RQ3, the declared objectives of municipal Facebook activity were grouped into three functional categories based on responses from municipalities using Facebook. The most frequently declared objectives included disseminating important information, strengthening ties with citizens, building the image of a modern municipality, and promoting the municipality beyond its borders. These objectives were aggregated into three binary variables: informational objectives, including dissemination of important information, increasing transparency, and reaching specific groups of residents; dialogic objectives, including intensifying interaction and strengthening ties with citizens; and image-building objectives, including building the image of a modern municipality and external promotion. Each variable was coded as 1 if the respondent selected at least one objective belonging to the category and 0 otherwise. For regression analyses in RQ3 and RQ4, municipality type and demographic-financial characteristics were included as control variables. Municipality type was treated as a categorical variable, with urban municipalities serving as the reference category. Demographic-financial characteristics included population size, total revenue per capita, the share of own revenues in total revenues, debt, the age structure of the population, and unemployment.

The analytical strategy combines descriptive statistics with comparative and regression-based analyses corresponding to the four research questions. Given the declarative and cross-sectional nature of the dataset, the results are interpreted as representing patterns of association within the observed organisational field. They do not provide a basis for strong causal claims regarding the actual effectiveness of municipal communication on social media platforms.

4. Results

4.1. Scope of Social Media Use

Out of the 2,477 municipalities in Poland to which invitations to participate in the study were sent, 1,793 local government units provided valid responses to the question on social media use, representing 72.4% of the population. The use of social media was declared by 1,544 municipalities (86.1%) (Table 1). Among municipalities present on social media, configurations based on Facebook clearly dominate: 760 municipalities (49.2%) use Facebook only, 705 (45.7%) combine Facebook with other social media platforms, and 79 (5.1%) use other social media platforms without Facebook (Table 3). Given this pattern and the logic of the questionnaire, Facebook-specific analyses are conducted within the Facebook module (N = 1,465), whereas broader governance variables are

analysed among municipalities declaring social media use, with the analytical base reported separately in the relevant tables.

These results confirm that Facebook occupies a central place in municipal social media communication. At the same time, the key analytical issue is not platform presence as such, but the way in which this presence is organised, formalised, and managed within municipal structures.

4.2. RQ1: Organisational Anchoring and the Professionalisation of Management (OCI, FI, MMI)

The model of organisational anchoring significantly differentiates the level of professionalisation measured by the three synthetic indices (Table 14). The Kruskal–Wallis test indicates statistically significant differences for all three measures:

- OCI: $H(6) = 76.40$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.052$, $N = 1{,}358$
- MMI: $H(6) = 90.44$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.058$, $N = 1{,}465$
- FI: $H(6) = 42.22$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.025$, $N = 1{,}465$

These results indicate that the institutional location of responsibility for social media is associated with differences in operational capacity, formalisation, and measurement maturity. The pattern is most visible for the MMI and OCI, while the effect for the FI is weaker, though still statistically significant. In substantive terms, this suggests that organisational anchoring is not a neutral structural feature. Rather, it co-occurs with broader differences in how municipalities allocate resources, formalise communication practices, and develop evaluative routines.

At the same time, the effect sizes remain moderate or modest. This is important for interpretation: the results support the conclusion that organisational anchoring is associated with professionalisation, but they do not justify treating organisational anchoring alone as a sufficient explanation of broader management maturity. Professionalisation appears instead as a multidimensional configuration in which responsibility models coexist with differences in staffing, formalisation, and measurement practices.

4.3. RQ2: Formalisation, Measurement Procedures, and Responses in Challenging Situations

4.3.1. Formalisation and Outcome Measurement

Measurement of social media activity is significantly associated with the level of formalisation. The relationship between the FI and measurement is statistically significant: $\chi^2(2) = 49.41$, $p < .001$, $V = 0.184$, $N = 1{,}465$. In addition,

the mere presence of a strategy is also associated with measurement, although more weakly: $\chi^2(1) = 15.95$, $p < .001$, V = 0.104, $N = 1{,}465$.

Within the Facebook module, 447 municipalities (30.5%) declare conducting measurement. In the group using other social media platforms without Facebook, this share is much lower and amounts to 5 municipalities (6.3%) (Table 9). The reported set of indicators used in practice, including reach, reactions, comments, and shares, coherently forms the basis of the MMI index (Table 10).

Taken together, these findings suggest that formalisation is associated with a greater likelihood of measurement. At the same time, the difference in effect size between the FI and strategy alone indicates that more developed formalisation matters more than the mere existence of a strategic document.

4.3.2. Measurement and Response Practices (Moderation/Proactivity)

Questions concerning municipal actions in challenging situations were asked only to respondents who had experienced discussions violating norms of civil behaviour or involving hate speech on their Facebook profiles ($N = 1{,}123$). Within this group, measurement is associated with more frequent use of proactive solutions, defined here as blocking users and/or preventive moderation of comments before publication (Table 7): $\chi^2(1) = 10.79$, $p = .001$, V = 0.098, $N = 1{,}123$.

Proactive practices are declared by 30.8% of municipalities conducting measurement, compared with 21.8% of municipalities not conducting measurement. By contrast, the mere presence of a strategy does not significantly differentiate proactive moderation practices: $\chi^2(1) = 0.67$, $p = .412$, V = 0.025, $N = 1{,}123$.

This pattern suggests that the link between formalisation and proactivity operates less through strategy alone and more through a broader configuration of managerial and evaluative maturity. In other words, municipalities conducting measurement appear more likely to report proactive moderation practices than those relying solely on the existence of strategic documents.

4.4. RQ3: Objectives of Facebook Presence, Channel Choice for High-Stakes Community Issues, and the Assessment of Facebook's Effects

4.4.1. Objectives and the Use of Facebook for High-Stakes Community Issues

Variables concerning preferences for communication channels for high-stakes community issues were operationalised restrictively. The dependent variable

takes the value 1 if Facebook is preferred, either in a mixed configuration or as the dominant channel, in at least two out of three issue areas: property tax rates, local fees and charges, and expenditure cuts in the event of a budgetary crisis (Table 5).

The logistic regression model indicates that dialogic objectives are the strongest predictor of including Facebook among preferred channels for high-stakes community issues (Table 20). Image-building objectives are also positively associated with this outcome. This means that the willingness to use Facebook for difficult topics should not be interpreted solely as a function of relational openness. It is also linked to an active concern with how the municipality is publicly perceived. At the same time, FI, OCI, and MMI do not reach statistical significance in this model (Table 20). This suggests that, in the specific context of high-stakes community issues, channel choice is linked more strongly to the communicative role assigned to Facebook than to formalisation, operational capacity, or measurement maturity alone.

4.4.2. Assessment of the Effects of Facebook Use

The assessment of Facebook's effects was operationalised as the mean of five scale items, with high internal consistency retained in the scale. Regression analyses were conducted on cases with available OCI data (N = 1,356). Descriptive assessments of Facebook's effects are presented in Table 8, while regression results are reported in Table 20. The linear regression model shows that higher assessments of Facebook's effects are positively associated with dialogic objectives, image-building objectives, FI, OCI, and MMI (Table 20). The model explains approximately 15.4% of the variance in perceived Facebook effectiveness ($R^2 = 0.154$). These results suggest that more positive evaluations of Facebook are associated not only with declared communication goals, but also with more mature organisational arrangements. Dialogic and image-building objectives are both positively related to perceived Facebook effectiveness. At the same time, FI, OCI, and MMI are also significant, indicating that perceived effectiveness is connected with formalisation, operational capacity, and measurement maturity. The findings should be interpreted cautiously, since the model is based on declarative assessments rather than direct performance indicators. Within this framework, however, they suggest that municipalities with more formalised and measurement-oriented practices are also more likely to perceive Facebook as a useful communication channel (Table 8).

4.5. RQ4: Readiness to Use AI as a Function of Governance and Operational Maturity

The final research question concerned the relationship between governance maturity and the declared readiness to use AI-based tools in municipal social media management. Two dependent variables were analysed: AI readiness, defined as current AI use or declared plans to use AI-based tools, and actual AI use, defined as the current use of AI tools in communication activities. According to Table 17, within the Facebook module (N = 1,465), 21.9% of municipalities declare readiness to use AI, understood as either current use or plans for future use, while 7.2% report the actual use of AI tools. This indicates that AI remains at an early stage of adoption in municipal social media management. For this reason, AI readiness and actual AI use were analysed separately.

4.5.1. Readiness Model (Use versus Plans)

In the logistic regression model for AI readiness (N = 1,356), the results are as follows:

- MMI: OR = 1.28, 95% CI [1.19; 1.38], $p < .001$
- FI: OR = 1.35, 95% CI [1.00; 1.82], $p = .049$
- Support from municipal authorities: OR = 1.26, 95% CI [1.04; 1.52], $p = .016$
- OCI: OR = 1.02, 95% CI [0.95; 1.09], $p = .602$

These results indicate that declared readiness to use AI is associated with measurement maturity, formalisation, and support from municipal authorities. The OCI does not reach statistical significance in this model. This suggests that declared readiness to use AI is less closely related to staffing and training resources than to the existence of managerial support and evaluative routines.

4.5.2. Actual Use Model (AI_actual)

In the model for actual AI use (N = 1,356), the following variables are statistically significant:

- MMI: OR = 1.19, 95% CI [1.07; 1.33], $p < .001$
- FI: OR = 1.42, 95% CI [1.03; 2.15], $p = .099$
- Support from municipal authorities: OR = 1.38, 95% CI [1.01; 1.87], $p = .040$
- OCI: OR = 1.05, 95% CI [0.95; 1.16], $p = .342$

As in the readiness model, actual AI use is associated most clearly with measurement maturity and support from municipal authorities. Formalisation

shows only a borderline association. OCI does not reach statistical significance, which suggests that operational capacity does not emerge as an independent predictor within the model. Overall, the results related to RQ4 indicate that AI-related outcomes are more strongly associated with measurement routines, formalisation, and organisational support than with operational capacity alone. Within the declarative dataset, AI appears less as a simple response to staff shortages and more as a component of broader managerial development.

5. Discussion

5.1. From Social Media Presence to Governance and Professionalisation

The findings confirm that social media have become a routine communication channel for Polish municipalities, with Facebook remaining the central platform both as a stand-alone channel and as a component of broader multi-platform configurations (Tables 1–3). This pattern is consistent with earlier findings in the literature on local government communication, where Facebook is regularly described as the primary platform for interaction with residents and the most important point of reference in studies of municipal social media use (Bonsón et al., 2012, 2015, 2017; Wimberger, 2024, p. 17).

At the same time, the empirical results presented in this article make it possible to shift the analytical focus from the question of whether municipalities are present on social media to how this presence is organised—that is, to the issue of governance: the allocation of responsibility, the securing of resources, the regulation of interactions, learning through measurement, and the management of discursive risk. In this sense, a key contribution of the study lies in showing that municipal social media communication practices are embedded in broader organisational configurations rather than being reducible to platform use alone. This perspective is consistent with broader approaches to public management and institutional communication, in which the quality of communication depends primarily on organisational and processual "backstage" factors rather than on publishing activity alone (Bertot et al., 2010; Millard, 2023; Wang & Medaglia, 2017).

The results suggest that municipal communication practices do not emerge randomly. Rather, they appear as organisational configurations combining responsibility models, resource allocation, formalisation, measurement maturity, and declared readiness to adopt AI-based tools (Tables 9–17). This does not imply a deterministic model of development. It does, however, indicate that municipal social media communication is better understood as a structured organisational practice than as an informal extension of routine administrative activity.

5.2. Organisational Anchoring and Professionalisation (RQ1)

The analysis related to RQ1 indicates that the organisational location of responsibility for social media is associated with differences in operational capacity, formalisation, and measurement maturity (Tables 14–16). This relationship should not be reduced to a simple ranking of organisational units. A more adequate interpretation is configurational: some anchoring models tend to co-occur more often with higher levels of organisational capacity and more developed management routines than others.

The results reported in Table 14, together with the distributions of staffing and full-time equivalent allocations presented in Tables 15 and 16, support the view that institutional embedding matters in social media governance. When responsibility is more clearly located within the municipal structure, it may be easier to sustain continuity, transfer knowledge, standardise activities, and develop at least minimal evaluative routines. Conversely, when responsibility is dispersed or weakly anchored, social media activity may be more vulnerable to ad hoc decision-making and less likely to generate stable organisational learning. Such an interpretation is consistent with the literature stressing that effective public-sector communication depends not only on technological adoption, but also on institutional support and routinisation (Bertot et al., 2010; Criado & Villodre, 2022).

At the same time, the effect sizes observed in the analysis remain moderate or modest (Table 14). This is important, because it suggests that organisational anchoring is an important part of the picture, but not a sufficient explanation of managerial maturity. Professionalisation appears instead as a multidimensional process in which structural responsibility coexists with staffing, training, formalisation, and measurement practices. In this sense, the differences captured by OCI, MMI, and FI should be read as evidence of co-occurring organisational configurations rather than as proof that organisational anchoring alone determines the quality of municipal social media management (Tables 14–16).

5.3. Formalisation, Measurement, and Response Practices (RQ2)

The results related to RQ2 provide a more differentiated picture of formalisation. On the one hand, formalisation, especially when captured by the broader FI index, is associated with a greater likelihood of conducting measurement (Tables 9, 10, and 18–19). This is consistent with management-oriented approaches, in which structured communication is expected to be accompanied by some form of evaluation and monitoring (Stone et al., 2024). Municipalities

with more formalised arrangements appear more likely to connect communication practice with at least basic measurement routines.

On the other hand, the findings suggest that not all forms of formalisation operate in the same way. The mere existence of a strategy is associated with measurement, but this relationship is weaker than in the case of the FI, which combines strategy with rules of interaction and, where possible, document age (Tables 18–19). Moreover, the presence of a strategy does not significantly differentiate proactive moderation practices in challenging situations (Table 7). This distinction is analytically important. It suggests that strategy may have a declarative or orientation-setting role, whereas more operationally relevant practices may depend on a broader configuration that includes formal rules, routines, and measurement maturity.

The association between measurement and more frequent use of proactive moderation practices also deserves attention (Tables 6–10). Within the declarative dataset, municipalities that report conducting measurement are more likely to declare preventive or interventionist actions in challenging situations than those not conducting such measurement (Table 7). This does not demonstrate that measurement causes proactivity. It does, however, support the interpretation that evaluative routines may co-occur with greater organisational readiness to manage interactional risk. In this sense, measurement appears not only as a reporting practice, but also as a possible component of managerial preparedness in digital communication. From the perspective of public relations and crisis communication in the digital environment, such a mechanism is consistent with the logic of early warning and escalation management, in which monitoring—even at a basic level—strengthens the capacity for faster response and more standardised action (Adamus-Matuszyńska et al., 2023; Rydzak, 2016a, 2016b, 2023).

5.4. RQ3: Dialogic and Image-Building Objectives in the Use of Facebook for High-Stakes Community Issues

RQ3 concerns one of the more demanding areas of public communication. On the one hand, municipalities declare dialogic and relational objectives for their social media presence (Table 4). On the other, when dealing with sensitive and potentially conflict-prone issues, they may prefer communication channels perceived as more controllable (Table 5). These two levels are not necessarily contradictory. They may reflect a rational attempt to balance openness with risk management.

A key question, however, is what differentiates municipalities that systematically include Facebook among the preferred channels for high-stakes community issues (Table 5). The model adopted in this article shows that the primary predictor is a dialogic orientation: municipalities that place stronger emphasis

on interaction and relationship-building are more likely to include Facebook in communication about high-stakes issues (Tables 4 and 5). Image-building objectives are also positively associated with this outcome. This means that communicating difficult issues through Facebook should not be interpreted solely as a function of relational openness. It is also linked to an active concern with how the municipality is publicly perceived. A more plausible explanation is therefore that municipalities more willing to use Facebook for high-stakes issues combine dialogic orientation with a broader readiness to manage visibility and public image in a more open communication environment.

At the same time, the broader governance indicators do not emerge as independent predictors in this specific model (Tables 5, 14–16, and 18–19). This suggests that the decision to include Facebook in communication on sensitive issues is associated more with the declared role of social media in municipal communication than with governance maturity as measured by the OCI, FI, and MMI. In interpretive terms, this points to a distinction between communicative orientation and broader organisational maturity. Both matter for municipal communication, but they may matter in different ways and at different stages of the communicative process.

The second part of RQ3 concerns the assessment of Facebook's effects. Here, more positive evaluations are associated not only with dialogic and image-building objectives, but also with the FI, MMI, and OCI (Tables 4, 8–10, 15-16, and 18–19). This suggests that perceived Facebook effectiveness is not explained by communicative objectives alone. It is also associated with the institutional maturity of social media management: formalisation, operational capacity, and measurement maturity. Since these are declarative assessments, the results should not be read as proof of objective effectiveness. They do, however, indicate that more mature communication arrangements are associated with more favourable internal assessments of Facebook's value. In this sense, RQ3 connects with RQ1 and RQ2: Facebook tends to be evaluated more positively where communication is more formalised, more systematically measured, and organisationally better supported.

5.5. RQ4: AI as an Extension of Governance Maturity rather than a "Magic Solution" to Resource Shortages

The results related to RQ4 suggest that readiness to use AI in municipal social media management is more strongly associated with governance maturity than with resource shortages alone (Tables 17 and 21). In the readiness model, measurement maturity, formalisation, and support from municipal authorities are positively associated with AI readiness. In the model predicting actual AI use, the pattern is more selective: actual use is associated primarily with measurement

maturity and support from municipal authorities, while formalisation shows only a borderline association. Operational capacity does not emerge as an independent predictor in either model.

This pattern is important because it complicates a common assumption that AI is primarily adopted where staffing shortages are strongest. In the present study, declared AI readiness appears more closely related to the presence of evaluative routines, formalised communication arrangements, and leadership support than to resource constraints as such (Tables 9–10, 13, 17, and 18–19). This suggests that municipalities may be more likely to consider AI where communication is already embedded in a broader managerial framework. In this sense, AI appears less as an emergency substitute for limited human resources and more as an extension of existing governance maturity.

The role of support from municipal authorities is also meaningful (Table 13). Within the declarative dataset, leadership support is associated both with AI readiness and with actual AI use (Table 21). This may indicate that technological experimentation in municipal communication depends not only on technical or organisational capacity, but also on symbolic and managerial legitimisation. Such an interpretation fits broader discussions of AI and digital transformation in public communication, where the adoption of new tools depends on organisational acceptance, decision legitimacy, and the ability to embed technology within established processes (Hybka et al., 2024; Rydzak, 2023).

At the same time, the weaker role of OCI suggests that staffing and competency-related resources may facilitate implementation without independently explaining either AI readiness or actual AI use (Tables 11, 12, 15, and 16). A plausible interpretation is that resources matter as part of the organisational environment, but that AI-related capabilities are more directly associated with measurement routines, formalisation, and institutional support.

5.6. A Broader Interpretation of the Findings

Taken together, the results support an interpretation in which municipal social media management is best understood as a multidimensional organisational practice. Organisational anchoring is associated with operational capacity, formalisation, and measurement maturity (Tables 14–16); formalisation is associated with measurement (Tables 9–10 and 18–19); measurement co-occurs with more proactive moderation (Tables 6–7); and AI readiness is linked primarily to measurement maturity, formalisation, and support from municipal authorities, while actual AI use is associated mainly with measurement maturity and leadership support (Tables 17 and 21). These relationships should not be interpreted as a linear causal chain. However, they do suggest that different dimensions of professionalisation tend to cluster together.

This broader pattern is consistent with the institutionalisation perspective in the literature. Social media management appears less like an isolated communication task and more like a field in which responsibility, routines, support, evaluation, and technological readiness are gradually combined into more stable organisational arrangements. From this point of view, the article contributes to research on digital public communication by showing that the managerial "backstage" of social media use deserves analytical attention.

6. Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study should be interpreted in light of several methodological boundaries inherent in its design. First, the article is based on a declarative perspective, that is, on responses provided by individuals responsible for social media activities in municipalities. This makes the dataset well suited to analysing organisational arrangements, formalisation, measurement practices, and declared readiness for innovation, while at the same time limiting direct insight into platform-level communication performance.

Second, some analytical blocks apply specifically to municipalities using Facebook. This reflects the clear empirical dominance of Facebook in the surveyed population and justifies the use of the Facebook module in more detailed analyses. At the same time, it means that the conclusions should be treated primarily as referring to Facebook-centred municipal social media governance rather than to all possible multi-platform configurations.

Third, the synthetic indices used in the article (OCI, FI, and MMI) are analytically useful tools for capturing broader dimensions of social media governance, but they remain simplified representations of more complex organisational realities. They should therefore be understood as instruments of comparative analysis rather than exhaustive measures of all aspects of communication management.

Fourth, the AI-related variables capture declared readiness and actual use at a relatively early stage of diffusion. This makes it possible to identify organisational correlates of AI readiness and use, but it does not allow for a detailed assessment of specific tools, workflows, quality of implementation, or the effects of AI on communication outcomes.

Finally, the study has a cross-sectional character. For this reason, the reported relationships are interpreted as patterns of association within the observed organisational field, not as definitive evidence of causal mechanisms.

These limitations do not diminish the value of the study's main contribution, which lies in examining the organisational "backstage" of municipal social media management on an unusually broad empirical basis. At the same time, they indicate productive directions for future research, especially research

linking survey-based evidence with observational approaches, including content analysis, platform-level interaction data, analyses of internal communication procedures, and longitudinal studies of AI implementation in local government communication. Such extensions could further strengthen our understanding of how governance arrangements relate to observable communication practices.

7. Conclusions

This article shows that municipal social media management in Poland is best understood as a governance issue rather than merely as a question of online presence. The scale of social media use is high, and Facebook remains the central communication channel in the surveyed municipalities (Tables 1–3). At the same time, the main differences between municipalities emerge not at the level of platform adoption itself, but in the organisational arrangements through which social media activity is embedded, supported, formalised, and measured, and linked to strategic communication objectives.

First, the findings indicate that models of organisational anchoring are associated with differences in operational capacity, formalisation, and measurement maturity (Tables 14–16). This suggests that the institutional location of responsibility for social media is not a neutral structural feature. Rather, it tends to co-occur with broader differences in the organisation of communication work. At the same time, the results do not justify a deterministic interpretation: organisational anchoring should be seen as one important dimension of professionalisation, not as its sole source.

Second, the results suggest that formalisation is associated with measurement, but that a strategy alone is not a sufficient condition for more process-oriented management of challenging situations (Tables 7, 9, 10, and 18–19). Municipalities declaring measurement are more likely to report proactive moderation practices, whereas the mere presence of a strategy does not differentiate such behaviour in a statistically significant way. This points to the importance of evaluative routines and operationalised management practices rather than formal documents alone.

Third, in communication on high-stakes community issues, the strongest predictor is dialogic orientation, although image-building orientation is also positively associated with the inclusion of Facebook among preferred channels (Tables 4 and 5). Municipalities declaring stronger dialogic objectives are more likely to include Facebook among the preferred channels for discussing more demanding public issues. This suggests that declared communicative objectives may matter more in this context than the broader governance maturity captured by the OCI, FI, and MMI.

Fourth, readiness to use AI-based tools appears more strongly associated with governance maturity and organisational support than with resource deficits alone (Tables 17 and 21). AI readiness is associated with measurement maturity, formalisation, and support from municipal authorities, whereas actual AI use is associated primarily with measurement maturity and leadership support. Within the declarative dataset used in this study, AI therefore appears less as a simple response to staffing shortages and more as an element of broader managerial development.

Taken together, the results support the interpretation that municipal social media management is a multidimensional organisational practice in which responsibility, resources, formalisation, measurement, and readiness for innovation tend to cluster together. Because the study is based on declarative and cross-sectional data, these findings should be read as patterns of association rather than as definitive evidence of causal relationships or platform-level communication effectiveness. Even so, the study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the organisational "backstage" of municipal social media use constitutes an important field of inquiry.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that municipalities may benefit less from simply expanding their social media presence and more from strengthening the managerial foundations of that presence: clear allocation of responsibility, minimum resource stability, formal rules of interaction, leadership support, and basic measurement routines. These elements do not guarantee communication effectiveness in themselves, but they appear closely related to more mature and more structured forms of municipal social media governance.

Table 1. Municipalities using social media

	Responses	Percentage
We use social media platforms	1,544	86.1
We do not use social media platforms	249	13.9
Total	1,793	100.0

Table 2. Social media platforms used by municipalities

	Responses	
	N	Percentage
Facebook	1,465	94.9%
YouTube	698	45.2%
Instagram	365	23.6%
Twitter	72	4.7%
Other social media platforms	71	4.6%
TikTok	70	4.5%
LinkedIn	25	1.6%
WhatsApp	29	1.9%
Pinterest	5	0.3%
Snapchat	3	0.2%
Vimeo	3	0.2%

Table 3. Use of Facebook and other social media platforms by municipalities

	Responses	
	N	Percentage
Facebook only	760	49.2%
Facebook and other	705	45.7%
Other social media platforms without Facebook	79	5.1%
Total	1,544	100.0%

Table 4. Objectives of municipal Facebook use

	Responses	
N = 1,465	N	Percentage
More effective dissemination of important information	1357	92.6%
Intensifying interaction and strengthening ties with citizens	819	55.9%
Building the image of a modern municipality among citizens	635	43.3%
More effective communication with young people	512	34.9%
Promotion beyond the municipality	476	32.5%
Increasing transparency	272	18.6%
More effective reaching communication with older people	64	4.4%
Other objectives	31	2.1%
More effective communication with people from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds	13	0.9%

Table 5. Assessment of Facebook and other communication channels as preferred platforms for discussing selected topics with citizens

	Neither Facebook nor face-to-face meetings		Mainly during face--to-face meetings		Via Facebook as well as face-to-face meetings		Mainly by Facebook	
N = 1,465	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Climate change adaptation measures (e.g. more green areas, coping with heatwaves and heavy rainfall)	88	6.0%	525	35.8%	781	53.3%	71	4.8%
Planning public transport services	155	10.6%	625	42.7%	647	44.2%	38	2.6%
Organisation of childcare	197	13.4%	650	44.4%	580	39.6%	38	2.6%
Participatory (civic) budget	99	6.8%	452	30.9%	812	55.4%	102	7.0%
Property tax rates	452	30.9%	689	47.0%	307	21.0%	17	1.2%
Local fees and charges	444	30.3%	701	47.8%	302	20.6%	18	1.2%
Expenditure cuts in the event of a budgetary crisis	479	32.7%	673	45.9%	294	20.1%	19	1.3%
Organisation of cultural events (e.g. cultural summer programmes or Christmas markets)	29	2.0%	135	9.2%	770	52.6%	531	36.2%
Design of playgrounds, sports facilities, and recreational areas	138	9.4%	471	32.2%	772	52.7%	84	5.7%
Local public services for young people	76	5.2%	255	17.4%	806	55.0%	328	22.4%

Table 6. Municipalities reporting discussions exceeding norms of civil behaviour or involving hate speech

	Responses	
	N = 1,465	Percentage
This has never happened	342	23.3
About once a year	240	16.4
Several times a year	559	38.2
About once a month	153	10.4
About once a week	102	7.0
Several times a week	69	4.7
Total	1,465	100.0

Table 7. Municipal responses to challenging situations on Facebook

	Yes		No	
N = 1,123	% within row		% within row	
Drawing attention to inappropriate behaviour	645	57.4%	478	42.6%
Removing inappropriate comments	452	40.2%	671	59.8%
Ignoring such behaviour	306	27.2%	817	72.8%
Blocking users	219	19.5%	904	80.5%
Preventive moderation of comments before publication	80	7.1%	1043	92.9%

Table 8. Perceived effects of municipal Facebook use

	Mean	Standard deviation
Through our municipality's use of Facebook, the work of the municipal council becomes more transparent to residents	3.63	0.965
Through our municipality's use of Facebook, the work of the mayor (city mayor/mayor/village head) becomes more transparent to residents	4.26	0.762
Through our municipality's use of Facebook, the municipality learns more about citizens' preferences	3.87	0.825
Through our municipality's use of Facebook, trust between the municipality and citizens is strengthened	3.74	0.774
Through our municipality's use of Facebook, more citizens engage in public discourse	3.84	0.826
Using Facebook in communication with citizens is an asset for our municipality	3.67	1.031

Table 9. Evaluation and measurement of municipal social media activities

		Responses	
N = 1,544		N	Percentage
	Yes	452	29.3%
	No	1092	70.7%
Total		1544	100.0%

Table 10. Methods used by municipalities to measure social media activity

	Responses	
N = 449	N	Percentage
Number of likes	396	88.2%
Reach	374	83.3%
Number of shares	339	75.5%
Number of comments	264	58.8%
Number of followers	204	45.4%
Reaching specific target groups	82	18.3%

Table 11. Formal training provided for staff responsible for municipal social media communication

	Responses	
N = 1,544	N	Percentage
Some	428	27.7%
None	1,116	72.3%
Total	1,544	100.0%

Table 12. Informal training for staff responsible for municipal social media communication ("learning by doing")

	Responses	
N = 1,544	N	Percentage
Some	437	28.3%
None	1,107	71.7%
Total	1,544	100.0%

Table 13. Assessment of the statement: "municipal authorities support the use of social media"

	Responses	
N = 1,531	N	Percentage
Strongly disagree	21	1.4%
Disagree	32	2.1%
Neither agree nor disagree	307	20.1%
Agree	842	55.0%
Strongly agree	329	21.5%
Total	1531	100.0%

Table 14. Unit responsible for municipal social media

	Responses	
N = 1,531	N	Percentage
Municipal promotion office	757	49.4%
Other	398	26.0%
No permanent assignment	200	13.1%
The mayor (city mayor/mayor/village head) personally manages social media	65	4.2%
Press office	43	2.8%
Separate organisational unit responsible exclusively for social media	38	2.5%
External company	30	2.0%
Total	1531	100.0%

Table 15. Number of persons responsible (partially or fully) for social media communication

	Responses	
N = 1,530	N	Percentage
0.0	50	3.3%
1.0	581	38.0%
2.0	497	32.5%
3.0	235	15.4%
4.0	86	5.6%
5.0	45	2.9%
6.0	20	1.3%
7.0	8	0.5%
8.0	4	0.3%
9.0	1	0.1%
10.0	2	0.1%
11.0	1	0.1%
Total	1530	100.0%

Table 16. Number of employees responsible for social media in municipalities, expressed in full-time equivalents (FTEs)

	Responses	
N = 1,479	N	Percentage
0-0.24	434	29.3%
0.25-0.49	157	10.6%
0.5-0.99	138	9.3%
1.0-1.99	405	27.4%
2.0-2.99	169	11.4%
3.0-3.99	92	6.2%
4.0-4.99	38	2.6%
5.0-5.99	20	1.4%
6.0-10.0	20	1.4%
>10	6	0.4%
Total	1479	100.0%

Table 17. Use of AI in municipal social media activities

	Responses	
N = 1,480	N	Percentage
None	1158	78.2%
None, but we plan to use AI in the future	216	14.6%
Some, for generating own content and analysing external content	39	2.6%
Some, exclusively for analysing external content	1	0.1%
Some, exclusively for generating own content	66	4.5%
Total	1480	100.0%

Table 18. Formalisation of municipal social media activities: strategy and rules of interaction (Facebook Module; N = 1,465)

Formalisation indicator	Category	N (%)
Written social media strategy	Yes	162 (11.1%)
	No	1,303 (88.9%)
Official rules of interaction	Yes	114 (7.8%)
	No	1,351 (92.2%)
Formalisation categories (strategy / rules)	No formalisation	1,210 (82.6%)
	Strategy only	141 (9.6%)
	Rules only	93 (6.3%)
	Strategy and rules	21 (1.4%)

Methodological note: The Facebook module includes municipalities that declare having an official Facebook page. *Strategy* is operationalised as a binary variable (yes/no). *Rules of interaction* are operationalised as a binary variable (yes/no). The *formalisation categories* represents combinations of the strategy and rules variables.

Table 19. Age of the strategy and rules of interaction documents (among municipalities possessing them)

Document	Document age (years)	N (%) among those possessing the document
Written strategy (N = 162)	0–1 year	21 (13.0%)
	2–3 years	16 (9.9%)
	≥4 years	34 (21.0%)
	No data / do not know	91 (56.2%)
Rules of interaction (N = 114)	0–1 year	34 (29.8%)
	2–3 years	35 (30.7%)
	≥4 years	25 (21.9%)
	No data / do not know	20 (17.5%)

Document age was calculated as *the difference between 2023 and the year of document adoption* (0–1 years = documents adopted in 2022–2023; 2–3 years = 2020–2021; ≥4 years = 2019 or earlier).

Table 20. Regression models for RQ3: high-stakes community issues and perceived Facebook effectiveness

Predictor	High-stakes issues OR	95% CI	p	Facebook effects b	95% CI	p
Dialogic objective	1.91	1.43–2.57	< .001	0.209	0.142–0.277	< .001
Image-building objective	1.41	1.05–1.91	.024	0.099	0.030–0.168	.005
FI	1.28	0.95–1.73	.106	0.123	0.047–0.199	.002
OCI	1.02	0.96–1.09	.533	0.030	0.013–0.046	< .001
MMI	1.01	0.93–1.09	.865	0.073	0.054–0.092	< .001
N	1356			1356		
R^2	–			0.154		

Notes: The first model is a binary logistic regression predicting whether Facebook is included among preferred channels for at least two out of three high-stakes community issues. The second model is a linear regression predicting perceived Facebook effectiveness. Both models control for municipality type and demographic-financial characteristics: population size, total revenue per capita, share of own revenues in total revenues, debt, age structure, and unemployment. OR = odds ratio; b = unstandardised coefficient; CI = 95% confidence interval.

Table 21. Logistic regression models for RQ4: AI readiness and actual AI use

Predictor	AI readiness OR	95% CI	p	Actual AI use OR	95% CI	p
MMI	1.28	1.19–1.38	< .001	1.19	1.07–1.33	.001
FI	1.35	1.00–1.82	.049	1.42	0.94–2.15	.099
Support from municipal authorities	1.26	1.04–1.52	.016	1.38	1.01–1.87	.040
OCI	1.02	0.95–1.09	.602	1.05	0.95–1.16	.342
N	1356			1356		

Notes: Both models are binary logistic regressions. AI readiness is defined as current AI use or declared plans to use AI-based tools. Actual AI use is defined as current use of AI tools. Both models control for municipality type and demographic-financial characteristics: population size, total revenue per capita, share of own revenues in total revenues, debt, age structure, and unemployment. OR = odds ratio; CI = 95% confidence interval.

Funding

This research was conducted as part of the project *Social Media and Their Role in Local Policy—Polish-German Comparison*, co-financed by the German-Polish Science Foundation (Project 51105-19-16; Foundation project number 2022-19).

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No. 54 (3/2026)

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Social Media in Scholarly Communication According to Early Career Researchers in the Humanities, Theology, and the Arts

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the use of social media in selected aspects of scholarly communication, such as sharing ideas, networking and gaining visibility to build academic reputation. The study draws on longitudinal interviews with early-career researchers in the humanities, theology, and the arts in Poland. Two rounds of interviews were conducted, one in spring 2023 and a follow-up in 2024. The studies (as part of NCN grant No. 2022/45/B/HS2/00041) are closely linked to the *Harbingers* international projects. It was found that scholarly communication on social media within the scope of the analysis in the respondent group is uncommon and remains limited. Because the study employed the standardised *Harbingers* interview protocol, the findings from the Polish group of researchers across three fields can be compared internationally and across various areas and disciplines.

KEYWORDS: scholarly communication, social media, early career researchers, humanities, theology, arts

STRESZCZENIE

Media społecznościowe w komunikacji naukowej – według początkujących badaczy z humanistyki, teologii i sztuki

W artykule przedstawiono korzystanie z mediów społecznościowych w wybranych elementach komunikacji naukowej, takich jak dzielenie się pomysłami, nawiązywanie kontaktów oraz osiąganie widzialności w budowaniu reputacji. Respondentami byli polscy humaniści, teolodzy i artyści na wczesnym etapie kariery; przeprowadzono z nimi wywiady podłużne, czyli dwa w odstępie roku, wiosną 2023 i 2024 roku. Badania te (w ramach grantu NCN nr 2022/45/B/HS2/00041) są ściśle powiązane z międzynarodowymi projektami Harbingers. Zaangażowanie w komunikację naukową w analizowanym zakresie w mediach społecznościowych okazało się niezbyt powszechne w badanej grupie respondentów i cieszy się raczej umiarkowanym zainteresowaniem. Wyniki uzyskane

Suggested citation: Świgoń, M. (2026). Social Media in Scholarly Communication According to Early Career Researchers in the Humanities, Theology, and the Arts. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 291–305. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.16
Submitted: 09.12.2025 Accepted: 1.03.2026

w polskiej grupie badaczy z trzech dziedzin mogą być porównane – dzięki ustrukturyzowanemu kwestionariuszowi wywiadu – w skali międzynarodowej oraz pomiędzy różnymi dziedzinami i dyscyplinami..

SŁOWA KLUCZE: komunikacja naukowa, media społecznościowe, badacze na wczesnym etapie kariery, humanistyka, teologia, sztuka

Introduction

Studies of scholarly communication have shown that social media (with 5 billion users all over the world, Statista, 2025a) had already become an integral part even before the COVID-19 pandemic and, in particular, during its course (Rieger & Schonfeld, 2023; Herman et al., 2021; Nicholas et al., 2019; Jamali et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2024; Thiele & Luethje, 2022). Social media and other digital technologies continue to play an important role in the post-pandemic world, especially by the generation of early-career researchers, who often are digital natives.

The impact of social media on various aspects of scholarly communication has attracted considerable attention, for example, of the international research team led by David Nicholas, which has been conducting the *Harbingers* projects for a decade. with the project has investigated researchers in the early stages of their careers in countries such as the USA, the UK, France, Spain, Portugal, Russia, China, Malaysia, and Poland (https://ciber-research.com/harbingers.html). An important role of social media in scholarly communication was confirmed in the first project of the cycle in the years 2016–2019 (Nicholas et al., 2019) and in the second, carried out during the pandemic in 2020–2022 (Clark et al., 2024).

This paper examines the role of social media in selected aspects of scholarly communication, focusing only on Polish respondents, across three areas: humanities, theology, and arts (NSC grant No. 2022/45/B/HS2/00041). Particular attention is paid to sharing ideas, establishing contacts and building online visibility. This analysis adopts a broad understanding of social media, mainly public platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube), as well as communication apps (Messenger, WhatsApp) and academic social networking sites (ResearchGate, Academia.edu). These social media were selected because, following the completion of the *Harbingers 1* and *Harbingers 2* projects, they were among the most widely used platforms among researchers in the early stages of their careers in eight countries. Other information exchange services (Discord, Slack, Zoom, Teams), blogging services (WordPress, Blogger, etc.), and e-mail, which remains a traditional means of communication in the academic world were also mentioned in all *Harbingers* projects.

Literature Review

A review of the literature from 2014 to 2019 (Chugh et al., 2021) shows that early-career researchers mainly use social media to establish professional networks. Social media are also used in teaching and learning (Ziemba & Eisenbardt, 2022). Moreover, they play an important role in the academic publishing system, serving as a means of promoting monographs, papers, conference presentations, and other academic activities. In other words, social media help disseminate messages about published scientific papers, which is of particular importance in a world where the online environment is saturated with low-quality and low cognitive-value content. By increasing the visibility of research outputs and academic activities, which can help them build their scientific reputation (Clark et al., 2024).

The literature identifies several key motivations for researchers' use of popular platforms and services, as reported in the literature (Sugimoto et al., 2017; Jordan, 2019; Chugh et al., 2021; Francke & Hammarfelt, 2022; Clark et al., 2024). In particular, scientists use social media to promote research outputs, which is beneficial for building their reputation. Moreover, they establish professional networks and communicate across geographic barriers. They share knowledge and information, consult with experts worldwide, and disseminate research beyond academia. Depending on the scientific discipline, this can apply to industry, services, health, and entertainment (Rieger & Schonfeld, 2023; Herman et al., 2021; Nicholas et al., 2019; Jamali et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2024). Various social media platforms can also be used for these purposes to varying degrees. Some serve primarily as professional profiles, updated with new information, e.g. publication records (e.g. ORCID, Research Gate, Academia.edu), whereas others are used as platforms for sharing views and opinions (e.g. X/Twitter, Reddit, groups on Facebook).

Researchers' use of social media is shaped by... various individual and contextual factors (Puhringer & Wolfmayr, 2023; True Anthem, 2022; Wu, 2022). What is significant are the scientists' individual preferences. For example, increase their visibility is important for some, whereas others prefer to focus on their research without maintain an active presence. Moreover, the career stage also determines the way one's accounts on social media are used. Early-career researchers appear to use them more intensively than previous generations.

Findings from the *Harbingers* projects show (Jamali et al., 2020; 2023) that early-career researchers tend to use social media in ways that can directly benefit their academic careers, for example, by establishing contacts with scientists worldwide and developing international collaborations. However, these studies also show that scientists in the early stages of their careers struggle obtaining research grants, for their papers to be published in renowned international journals, and for permanent academic positions, and that this can be achieved

without maintaining active presence on social media. These conclusions are based on the *Harbingers*' interviews (since 2016), including the Polish project. In general, more respondents have been highly or moderately active on social media than those who use it rarely or never. The latter group was relatively small, and they were scientists from various disciplines and countries.

According to data collected in the *Harbingers 2* project during COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022), the most popular social media among respondents from eight countries were Twitter (70% of respondents mentioned it across the three interview waves) and LinkedIn (50%). These were followed by Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram (approx. 40% of the respondents each) and YouTube (over 20%). Interestingly, Messenger was referred to much less frequently than WhatsApp and had a similar rate to WeChat and Telegram (less than 10%). The following services appeared only once across the entire international dataset: TikTok, VKontakte, Discord, Weibo, Reddit and Pinterest. Polish respondents mentioned Facebook most frequently, followed by LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram. Compared to respondents in other countries, they differed in that they mentioned Messenger (there were no mentions in the other seven countries). It is noteworthy that the study analysed not the number of occurrences but rather such mentions in the broader context of each interview. Comparisons between the eight participating countries were also interesting: Malaysians and Russians were the most active in social media, whereas the French and the Chinese were the least so (Clark et al., 2024).

This paper provides a more detailed analysis of Polish respondents in selected areas, i.e., the humanities, theology and the arts. They have received relatively little attention in the *Harbingers* projects, which generally focused on natural sciences, engineering and technology, and related STEM discipline.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this and other *Harbingers* projects comprises a literature review, focus groups, longitudinal in-depth structured interviews, and questionnaires. However, the interviews constitute the core component of both the international and Polish parts of the projects.

An interview protocol in *Harbingers* projects comprises several main parts, unchanged since 2016, that address components of scholarly communication, including information seeking, evaluation, peer review, reputation, collaboration, ethics, informal communication, and the impact and dissemination of research findings. The Polish questionnaire (2023 and 2024) contained additional questions about external (international) conditions, such as the impact of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and generative AI (GenAI) tools on the research and teaching done by the respondents, but also about internal

conditions, such as the impact of higher education and research reforms on early-career researchers. that the project received ethical approval from the Scientific Research Ethics Committee of the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn on 16 January 2023.

The interviews conducted online via Skype, are recorded and subsequently transcribed, and the missing or unclear information is supplemented in e-mail correspondence. In the next step, these data are entered into a coding template. This template combines quantitative and qualitative data, i.e., close-ended responses (yes/no/don't know) responses, quotations from respondents, and, sometimes, the researcher's analytical notes (for joint international analyses). Some questions produced all three types of information, while others generated only some. The respondents' open-ended responses were analysed using thematic coding based on recurring themes in all respondents' answers.

This paper examines how Polish early-career researcher in the humanities, theology and the arts use social media, including both general-purpose platforms such as Facebook and X and academic social networking platforms, e.g., ResearchGate and Academia.edu. The analysis is based on longitudinal interviews conducted with the same respondents in spring 2023 and one year later, in 2024.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- Which social media platforms are most commonly used by the respondents?
- For which purposes associated with scholarly communication are the social media used. In particular, are they used for:
  - establishing and maintaining contacts within the academic community;
  - sharing research ideas;
  - increasing online visibility to build an academic reputation?
- Does the use of social media change as early-career researchers progress in their academic careers progress?

The study sample comprised Polish researchers in the early stages of their careers who were actively engaged in research, including scientific projects, regardless of the their employment status or type of contract. The respondents included doctoral candidates and PhD holders. The early-career researchers were usually young, i.e. under 40 years old. However, their short research experience was a more important criterion of respondent selection than age. In line with the *Harbingers* methodology, respondents were eligible if they were within seven years of completing their PhD, with career interruptions such as parental leave taken into account.

The respondents represented a range of disciplines within three broad fields: archaeology, philosophy, history, linguistics, literary studies, cultural studies, religious studies, Polish studies, theology, while the arts comprised

film and theatre, music, and visual arts and conservation. Twenty-five respondents (15 women and 10 males) took part in the first round of interviews, and 23 in the second. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study, which was anonymous and voluntary; respondents were free to withdraw at any stage (two respondents chose not to take part in the second round of longitudinal interviews). More information about the respondents and the sampling procedure can be found in other publications (Świgoń & Nicholas, 2023; Świgoń, 2023).

Results and discussion

Social media accounts

The analysis began by examining the respondents' social media accounts. The research focused on the eight most popular platforms identified in previous *Harbingers* studies (Clark et al., 2024). The results of this quantitative analysis based on the spring 2024 interview are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Social media accounts held by respondents in the humanities, theology and arts (2024)

	Social medium (2024)	*Yes* Total 23	*No* Total 23
1	Facebook (Messenger, WhatsApp)	22	1
2	YouTube	18	5
3	Instagram	17	6
4	Academia.edu	15	8
5	LinkedIn	12	11
6	ResearchGate	12	11
7	X (former Twitter)	7	16
8	TikTok	4	19

Source: own study.

These data show that Facebook was the most widely used platform among the group of respondents, followed by Meta's messaging applications, i.e., Messenger and WhatsApp. Nearly all the interviewees (22 out of 23) who took part in the second round of interviews had Facebook accounts and used one or both of the communicators. The the ways in which these platforms were used, as well as the intensity of their use obviously varied within the group across the sample. Some respondents admitted to being very active in Facebook groups, while

others talked about limiting the time spent on social media during working hours and using it more frequently in their private time.

Facebook was followed by YouTube in terms of the number of respondents using it (18 out of 23). It was used by the interviewees for various purposes: some used it as a source of knowledge, others as a platform to promote their work, and sometimes for science communication and public engagement. Individual respondents mentioned producing video content regularly and running their own YouTube channels.

Instagram was used by a similar number of respondents as YouTube (17 out of 23). Its popularity was particularly evident among the artists, as this is an image-based medium. Respondents from other disciplinary fields, not only in the arts, emphasised the growing popularity of Instagram in their communities and that it was increasingly preferred to Facebook.

The three most used social media platforms by popularity among the surveyed respondents are consistent with global usage trends from Statista (Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram had the highest numbers of users in 2024) (Statista, 2025b).

The study participants were also asked about two academic networking platforms: Academia.edu and ResearchGate. It was found that about half of the humanists and artists had an account on one or both services. At the same time, they admitted that they were not very engaged in maintaining their profiles, e.g. they did not update them with their latest academic achievements and publications. A large majority of users of both platforms said they did not participate in the discussion forums. Academia.edu is slightly more popular among researchers in the humanities and arts (15 respondents) than ResearchGate (12). These are completely different observations from representatives of the natural sciences and STEM disciplines, who were the subjects of earlier studies (Nicholas et al., 2019) and who valued ResearchGate more and used Academia.edu rarely or not at all.

X (formerly Twitter) was used by relatively few respondents (7) than the platforms discussed above. This contrasts with the findings of the international *Harbingers* study, in which X was among the most widely used social media platforms across the world, as shown by the recent study conducted across eight countries (Clark et al., 2024).

The fewest respondents (four) admitted to having a TikTok account, which may be attributed to this medium being rather popular among younger age groups.

In addition to the platforms included in Table 1, several respondents mentioned other online services used by the academic community, including Discord, Reddit, Telegram, VKontakte, and Spotify.

Visibility

The interview protocol contained a question about the role of online visibility achieved, inter alia, through social media, particularly in building academic reputation. This issue has been discussed in other publications (Świgoń, 2023; Clark et al., 2024), but some of those findings merit further attention, particularly the divided opinions of respondents in the humanities, theology and the arts on the role of online visibility in building reputation, including by using the services mentioned in Table 1.

The numbers of respondents (in both rounds of interviews) that confirmed actively seeking to increase the online visibility, including the use of social media, in order to achieve the maximum visibility of one's scientific and artistic achievements, and those who reported not pursuing such visibility, were nearly equal.

Notably, the second round of interviews revealed that the respondents' views to the issue had not changed over the one-year interval between the two interview rounds. Only one participant reported a change in attitude after creating an account on an academic networking platform before the follow-up interview.

Researchers who recognised the importance of online visibility in building one's academic reputation pointed to various benefits generated by it, as shown by the following excerpts:

> This is how you can reach a larger audience to present your research and build your reputation, which in the future can bring tangible benefits (...) (Literary Studies).

> The more of such activities [you undertake], the more recognisable you become as an artist and scholar, and this translates into external funding (Visual Arts).

In addition to their social media accounts, the interviewees mentioned their ORCID and Google Scholar profiles, as well as other forms of online academic presence, such as institutional profile pages and entries in international researcher databases, which they regarded as contributing to their online visibility.

By contrast, respondents who attached little importance to their online visibility often argued that they focused more on publishing in renowned periodicals, including open-access ones, than those whose presence on social media was not important for building their reputation.

> I'm not going to do anything about it except do my best to publish in prestigious journals, especially with publishers that have strong distribution networks (...) (Polish Studies).

Like many respondents in the humanities, who relied on the reputation of journals and publishers who disseminate their work, respondents in the arts often entrusted the promotion of their achievements and skills to publishers, distributors and other professionals.

> I left everything related to the promotion [of my album] to the publisher and simply shared it on streaming platforms (Music).

Other respondents argued that public engagements activities such as writing for non-specialist audiences were more effective ways of increasing their visibility, building their academic reputation than being active on social media.

> (...) writing popular science articles, which I do regularly, is the only meaningful way of increasing my visibility. I also deliver lectures for children, adolescents and adults (...) in schools, community youth centres and other venues. I'm not interested in social media at all. I don't think it contributes anything to my academic career (Theology).

Some respondents also explained that they did not like or actively use social media because they did not feel the need to do so, lacked the time, or had concerns about privacy and data protection.

The impact of generative AI on scholarly communication has been examined in separate studies within the *Harbingers* projects (Świgoń, 2024; Nicholas et al., 2024).

The protocol also referred to other means of increasing the visibility of one's outputs apart from social media, e.g. video abstracts, virtual posters, newsletter articles and blogs. However, these forms attracted relatively little interest in both rounds of the interviews.

However, the interviewees were unanimous in emphasising the importance of actively participating in conferences, both online and in person, as a means of increasing their visibility. This confirms the findings of an earlier study conducted by the author a decade ago in the Polish academic community (Świgoń, 2015). According to that study, conference presentations delivered are important, but not as much as informal conversations.

Forming ties

Data collected during the two rounds of interviews (in 2023 and 2024) indicated that new professional contacts are often established through informal conversations at scientific conferences, as well as during research visits, fellowships, and artistic events (exhibitions, festivals). Respondents from all three disciplinary highlighted this. Some respondents talked about contacts initiated by

supervisors, doctoral advisers, and senior colleagues. The respondents often expressed a need to expand their academic networks both nationally and internationally, which is natural in the early stages of one's career.

It is noteworthy that many respondents mentioned e-mail correspondence as an important method of establishing and maintaining professional relationships. Interestingly, this has been the primary channel of scholarly communication for many years, as this author's study showed (Świgoń, 2015), despite the development of many other technological methods. It seems that for many years now it has been a formal, unobtrusive, and convenient means of communication, as one of the respondents, a humanist, described it.

Moreover, the interviewees reported frequent using of online meeting platforms, such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Teams, which are effective for maintaining contacts within the academic community during the post-pandemic period.

Messaging applications, particularly Messenger and WhatsApp, were also widely used. As shown in Table 1, nearly all interviewees reported using at least one.

By contrast, academic networking platforms such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu were mentioned less frequently in the context of maintaining professional relationships, despite offering discussion forums and private messaging functions.

Telephone calls, including voice calls by Skype and WhatsApp, were mentioned only occasionally.

The above list is not exhaustive. Individual respondents also referred to other means of establishing and maintaining professional relationships online, including Facebook groups and platforms such as X and Discord.

This section concludes with a quotation that illustrates the advantages of face-to-face interactions over online ones:

> I meet the most interesting people at scientific conferences and symposia in my field. I find it difficult to establish similar relationships in the virtual environment (Theology).

Sharing ideas

The interview protocol also contained questions about how respondents share research ideas, understood as research plans, preliminary findings, and works in progress rather than formal publications. Most respondents reported that they did not use social media for these purposes. In other words, although maintaining accounts on various social media was common among respondents in the humanities, theology, and arts (see Table 1), these platforms were not used for sharing ideas.

Instead, the interviewees identified academic conferences and small-group meetings as the most appropriate settings for discussing research ideas and sharing preliminary findings. These interactions took place in face-to-face, hybrid, or online formats, with Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams being the most frequently mentioned online platforms. Across both rounds of interviews, respondents consistently indicated all three formats were regularly used for discussing unpublished knowledge.

When respondents used social media to disseminate their work, they shared links on social media to the final versions of their work, monographs or articles and preprints of publications accepted for publication. Respondents in the arts also used social media to promote exhibitions, festivals and other artistic events. The respondents also mentioned using Instagram or Facebook Stories to share their activities and events with the academic or artistic communities. Moreover, the interviewees used social media to follow news and updates from the scientific and artistic world.

The interviewee responses show that the exchange of research ideas through social media was generally limited to small, specialist groups or channels on Discord, Mastodon, Telegram, Facebook, Messenger, and WhatsApp.

Some respondents also described recording lectures and tutorials for students and wider audiences and making them available on YouTube. In their view, this represented another way to increase their online visibility as experts in their respective fields.

The respondents also mentioned giving interviews to the press or online media in which they discussed their research. Several suggested that presenting preliminary ideas in this manner could help establish authorship and reduce the risk of appropriating ideas.

Approximately half of the respondents reported depositing full texts of their publications on academic platforms such as Research Gate and Academia.edu (Table 1). Across both rounds of interviews, participants indicated that uploading texts to these platforms was often their only activity on these platforms. Most did not take part in the discussion forums there. Instead, they often used the platforms' private messaging functions to contact individual researchers, seeking advice or requesting a copy of a paper which could not be shared publicly for copyright reasons. One respondent described little response after posting a question on a discussion forum, which may suggest that researchers are generally reluctant to use these platforms for exchanging ideas. More commonly, respondents preferred to discuss research ideas through direct conversations.. ResearchGate and Academia.edu profiles are researchers' professional academic profiles. Only one respondent reported that a research project had originated through Research Gate, suggesting that such cases were exceptional among researchers under study.

Respondents in the arts also mentioned the following platforms, in addition to Instagram, that they used to share creative ideas and look for inspiration: Behance, Coroflot, Creativpool, and Shotdeck.

Some respondents, however, expressed reservations about sharing their ideas publicly, because of concerns about protecting their intellectual property:

> It is difficult to protect copyright, e.g. for a screenplay, so I would rather not share my ideas. Even submitting my work to competitions involves a degree of risk (Film).

Conclusion

The results of the empirical study can be summarised as follows: Polish early-career researchers in the humanities, theology, and the arts are present on various online platforms, both general-purpose and specialist for researchers and creative professionals. They make only moderate use of social media, at least with respect to the aspects of scholarly communication examined in this study, i.e. sharing ideas, establishing contacts and enhancing online visibility.

The interviews show that traditional forms of scholarly communication and sharing ideas play a significant role. These include informal face-to-face-conversations at academic conferences, exhibitions, and festivals, as well as e-mail, one of the oldest and most widely used forms of online information exchange.

The findings suggest that, although social media play an important role in contemporary scholarly communication, they are used to disseminate information about publications or artistic achievements rather than to share ideas or establish professional contacts. Respondents were also divided in their opinions on the contribution of social media to building academic reputation. These differences appear to reflect individual preferences rather than disciplinary affiliation or artistic field.

Funding details:

This research was funded by the National Science Centre in Poland, under Grant number 2022/45/B/HS2/00041. For the purpose of Open Access, the author has applied a CC-BY public copyright licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) arising from this submission.

Open Data
Świgoń, Marzena, 2025, „Wykorzystywanie social media przez humanistów i artystów na wczesnym etapie kariery", https://doi.org/10.18150/LLH-TAV, RepOD

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / *perspectives* on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.17

The Environmental Footprint of Television and Radio in France: A Media Management and Public Policy Perspective

ABSTRACT

The article examines the environmental footprint of television and radio in France from media studies, regulatory, and managerial perspectives. The aim of the study was to identify which elements of media infrastructure and patterns of media use generate the greatest environmental burdens and to assess the role of public policy in this area. The research was based on a qualitative analysis of secondary data and document analysis. The empirical material included reports and institutional documents produced by Arcom, Arcep, and ADEME, supplemented by literature on the sustainability of the audiovisual sector, media governance, climate communication, and research on personalised television. The findings indicate that the greatest environmental impact is associated with end-user devices, particularly television sets, followed by transmission networks and data centres. The analysis also showed that higher image quality, the growth of streaming services, programmatic advertising, and service personalisation increase environmental pressure within the media sector. The findings suggest that reducing this impact requires a combination of technological, regulatory, and educational measures, including eco-design of devices and services, extending equipment lifecycles, improving energy efficiency, and raising user awareness. The analysis also revealed differences between audio and video consumption patterns and showed that terrestrial radio constitutes an important reference point for assessing the environmental efficiency of distribution models. The article argues

Suggested citation: Chmielewska, A., Zawiślińska, I., & Marzęda, A. (2026). The Environmental Footprint of Television and Radio in France: A Media Management and Public Policy Perspective. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 307–323. https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.17
Submitted: 21.10.2025 Accepted: 07.05.2026

that the environmental dimension of television and radio should be treated as an important element of contemporary media policy.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: television, radio, environmental footprint, media governance, media management

STRESZCZENIE

Ślad środowiskowy telewizji i radia we Francji. Perspektywa zarządzania mediami i polityki publicznej

Artykuł analizuje ślad środowiskowy telewizji i radia we Francji, ujmując go jako zagadnienie z zakresu badań nad mediami, regulacji oraz zarządzania. Celem badania było zidentyfikowanie, które elementy infrastruktury oraz praktyk korzystania z mediów generują największe obciążenia dla środowiska, a także ocena roli polityki publicznej w tym obszarze. Badanie oparto na jakościowej analizie danych wtórnych oraz analizie dokumentów. Materiał empiryczny obejmował raporty i dokumenty instytucjonalne opracowane przez Arcom, Arcep oraz ADEME, uzupełnione literaturą dotyczącą zrównoważonego rozwoju sektora audiowizualnego, zarządzania mediami, komunikacji klimatycznej oraz badań nad telewizją spersonalizowaną. Wyniki wskazują, że największy wpływ na środowisko mają urządzenia końcowe użytkowników, zwłaszcza odbiorniki telewizyjne, następnie sieci transmisyjne oraz centra danych. Analiza wykazała również, że wyższa jakość obrazu, rozwój usług streamingowych, reklama programatyczna oraz personalizacja usług zwiększają presję środowiskową w sektorze mediów. Wnioski sugerują, że ograniczenie tego wpływu wymaga połączenia działań technologicznych, regulacyjnych i edukacyjnych, w tym ekoprojektowania urządzeń i usług, wydłużania cyklu życia sprzętu, poprawy efektywności energetycznej oraz wzmacniania świadomości użytkowników. Raport ujawnił także różnice między praktykami audio i wideo oraz wskazał, że radio naziemne stanowi istotny punkt odniesienia przy ocenie efektywności środowiskowej modeli dystrybucji. Artykuł argumentuje, że wymiar środowiskowy telewizji i radia powinien być traktowany jako ważny element współczesnej polityki medialnej.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: telewizja, radio, ślad środowiskowy, zarządzanie mediami, polityka medialna

Introduction

The digital transformation of the media has so far been described primarily through the lenses of platformisation, streaming, personalisation, and the attention economy. Much less attention has been paid to its environmental dimension. Meanwhile, contemporary television and radio rely on extensive technical infrastructure comprising end-user devices, transmission networks,

data centres, and digital services. Their operation is associated with energy consumption, resource extraction, and environmental emissions. The literature has increasingly emphasised that the audiovisual sector should be analysed not only in technological and economic terms but also from the perspective of sustainability (Lopera-Mármol & Jiménez-Morales, 2021; Lupu et al., 2023).

For the purposes of this article, television and radio are approached not only as broadcasting institutions and forms of communication but also as elements of a broader technical and service system. This perspective makes it possible to analyse not only content but also the material conditions of its production, distribution, and reception. The environmental footprint is understood here as the measurable impact of greenhouse gas emissions, energy consumption, and resource use throughout the media service lifecycle. This perspective brings media studies closer to questions of infrastructural, regulatory, and social responsibility within the media sector.

France constitutes a particularly interesting case study. In 2024, Arcom and Arcep, in cooperation with ADEME, published one of the most comprehensive European studies on the environmental impact of audio and audiovisual services. The study found that the practices under analysis accounted for 2.9% of electricity consumption in France, or approximately 13 TWh, and 0.9% of the national carbon footprint, amounting to 5.6 million tonnes of CO_2 equivalent (Arcom, Arcep, & ADEME, 2024, p. 34). The French case, therefore, provides not only quantitative data but also an important example of the institutionalisation of environmental concerns within media policy.

In the existing literature, analyses of the environmental footprint of media are still relatively rarely combined with a media studies perspective and with considerations of media governance and public policy. The research gap, therefore, concerns not only the scarcity of emissions data but also the ways in which such data are interpreted in relation to the functioning of the media sector. The aim of this article was to identify the main sources of the environmental footprint of television and radio in France and to indicate what conclusions can be drawn from this case for regulators and media managers.

The article's contribution is both analytical and interpretative. First, it organises the environmental footprint of television and radio into five interrelated layers: end-user devices, transmission networks, data centres, the service model, and audience practices. Second, it situates this issue within the field of media studies, showing that media should be understood not only as spaces of representation, but also as infrastructures with measurable environmental consequences. Third, the article translates the findings of the French case into a set of recommendations for regulators and managers in the media sector.

State of Research and Research Gap

For a long time, the relationship between media and the environment was approached primarily at the level of representation. Researchers focused on how the media depict the climate crisis, ecological lifestyles, or sustainable development. Much less attention was paid to the media sector itself as a material, technological, and infrastructural system. Yet it is precisely this dimension that has now become crucial. Contemporary television and radio function not only as communication institutions but also as technical systems with measurable environmental consequences. This perspective is increasingly visible in recent literature on the sustainability of the audiovisual sector (Lopera-Mármol & Jiménez-Morales, 2021; Lupu et al., 2023).

Two main strands can be identified in international research. The first concerns the sustainability of audiovisual production. Of particular importance is the concept of *green shooting*, which refers to practices aimed at reducing environmental harm at successive stages of the production process (Lopera-Mármol & Jiménez-Morales, 2021). The second strand focuses on the environmental costs of the distribution and consumption of digital content. From this perspective, media are understood as part of a complex system that includes end-user devices, transmission networks, data centres, and models of content access. These studies have shown that the environmental dimension of media cannot be reduced to production or streaming alone. It requires an analysis of the entire technological and institutional chain (Lupu et al., 2023; Arora & McClenaghan, 2024, pp. 873–878).

From the perspective of Polish media studies and research on France, the work of Katarzyna Gajlewicz-Korab is particularly useful. She has described transformations of the French media landscape in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, as well as earlier changes in the French public media sector in the era of digitisation and TNT (Gajlewicz-Korab, 2014; 2020). Although her analyses do not directly address the environmental footprint, they provide a valuable framework for understanding the French systemic, technological, and institutional context. This is important for the present article, since the French case cannot be understood solely as a set of environmental data but also as the outcome of a specific regulatory culture and model of media development.

In Polish scholarship, research on climate communication has so far been more developed than research on the material environmental footprint of media. Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska (2018, pp. 73–81) analysed the ways in which climate messages are constructed and the rhetoric of environmental discourse. Piotr Żuk and Kacper Szulecki (2020) examined the political and media frameworks of debates on energy and climate in Poland. Katarzyna Kopeć and Marta Materska-Samek (2023) described the development of green practices in Polish film production. These studies are important because they show how

environmental issues function as subjects of public debate and industry practice. However, they do not directly address the environmental cost of television and radio as media services that rely on a specific technical infrastructure.

Against this background, the French case is particularly significant. The study prepared by Arcom, Arcep, and ADEME is one of the most comprehensive European attempts to estimate the environmental impact of audio and audiovisual services. Its importance lies not only in measuring emissions and energy consumption but also in combining the environmental dimension with a regulatory perspective, that is, with questions concerning the responsibility of public institutions and market actors for shaping media infrastructure (Arcom, Arcep, & ADEME, 2024, p. 34).

A review of the literature, therefore, shows that the field remains fragmented. Research on climate communication, sustainability in audiovisual production, and the technological costs of streaming and digital infrastructure have largely developed in parallel. These perspectives are still too rarely combined within a single media studies framework. Even less frequently is the environmental footprint of media interpreted in terms of media governance and public policy. The research gap concerns not only the shortage of data but also the lack of a coherent conceptual framework that would enable understanding of television and radio simultaneously as communication institutions, technological systems, and objects of regulatory responsibility.

Conceptual Framework and Definitions

The starting point of this article is the assumption that the environmental issue does not constitute an external context for the functioning of the media but is part of the very logic of their contemporary operation. Media should therefore be understood not only as a communication system but also as a complex chain of infrastructure, technologies, and devices encompassing activities from production to content reception (Arora & McClenaghan, 2024, pp. 3–4). In this sense, the environment is understood here as the natural environment, that is, a system of resources, processes, and constraints in relation to which technological and communicative activity produces measurable effects (Environmental Protection Law, 2024, Art. 3, point 39). The environmental footprint, in turn, refers to the totality of impacts associated with the operation of media services, particularly greenhouse gas emissions, final energy consumption, and the use of mineral and metal resources. This understanding corresponds to the approach adopted in the French study conducted by Arcom, Arcep, and ADEME, which analysed audiovisual services not only in terms of emissions but also in terms of the entire life cycle of infrastructure and devices (Arcom, Arcep, & ADEME, 2024, p. 34; Lupu et al., 2023).

In this article, television and radio are not understood solely as forms of communication or broadcasting institutions. Instead, they are treated as elements of a broader technical and service system that includes end-user devices, transmission networks, data centres, access interfaces, and audience practices. This shift is of fundamental importance because it makes it possible to move from analysing media as a sphere of representation to analysing them as infrastructure. At the same time, it helps avoid a conceptual inaccuracy: radio is not a visual medium, but together with television, it now forms part of a common system of audio and audiovisual embedded in similar distribution and regulatory frameworks (Jędrzejewski, 2023, pp. 172–173; Chmielewska, 2025, pp. 68–69; Robak, 2025, pp. 90–95; Arcom, Arcep, & ADEME, 2024, p. 34).

At this point, reflection on personalised television proves particularly useful. Aleksandra Chmielewska (2025, pp. 68–69) argues that television is becoming a service environment rather than merely a linear transmission medium. This means that the analysis of television must encompass not only content but also service architecture, data logic, and the monetisation of reception. Marek Robak (2025, pp. 90–95), in turn, shows that television personalisation systems are based on profiling, segmentation, and distributed systems architecture. Consequently, contemporary television is increasingly dependent on continuous data processing, user identifiers, and computing infrastructure. From the perspective of this article, this is significant because it strengthens the argument that the environmental footprint of media results not only from devices and transmission networks, but also from the very logic of the service itself.

Another concept that helps structure the analysis is media governance. It does not refer solely to formal state regulation. Rather, it encompasses a broader network of relationships among public institutions, regulators, broadcasters, technology operators, platforms, and users. From this perspective, the environmental footprint of media is neither merely the result of consumer decisions nor solely an effect of technological progress. It is the outcome of a particular model of managing the media market, service architectures, and standards of responsibility. This perspective is especially useful when analysing the French case, because the environmental cost of television and radio has been explicitly incorporated into the activities of regulatory institutions there (Głowacki, 2015, pp. 26–27, 33–34).

The article also adopts two operational concepts: eco-design and digital sobriety. Eco-design refers to the design of devices and services in ways that reduce their resource and energy intensity throughout their life cycles. It includes, among other things, durability, reparability, compatibility with older devices, reducing data volumes, and rationalising service functions (European Commission, 2024, paras. 62–64; Arcep, Arcom, & ADEME, 2024, pp. 1–2). Digital sobriety does not mean giving up media altogether; rather, it means limiting those practices and settings that increase environmental costs without

generating a proportionate increase in user value. This includes, for example, extending device lifespans, reducing the number of devices, and adopting more moderate patterns of media use, especially for video consumption (ADEME & Arcep, 2023, pp. 1, 6).

For the purposes of this article, the environmental footprint of television and radio is therefore defined as the cumulative effect of five interdependent layers: end-user devices, transmission networks, data centres, the service model, and audience practices. This definition is operational in character. It makes it possible not only to describe the scale of environmental burdens but also to identify their sources and assign responsibility to particular actors within the media market.

Research Method

The study was qualitative in nature. It employed secondary data analysis and document analysis. The choice of these methods was driven by the nature of the research problem. The focus was not on audience declarations or the practices of a single organisation but on the institutional ways in which the environmental footprint of television and radio is described and measured. In a field that remains relatively underexplored, the analysis of documents and existing studies constitutes a useful research procedure because it makes it possible to capture the empirical, definitional, and regulatory dimensions of the problem simultaneously (Lupu et al., 2023; Arora & McClenaghan, 2024, pp. 873–878).

The French case was selected deliberately. The decisive factor in this choice was that French public institutions had prepared one of the most comprehensive European studies on the environmental impact of using audio and audiovisual services. The study conducted by Arcom, Arcep, and ADEME covered the main modes of television and radio reception, as well as all the key infrastructural layers, including end-user devices, transmission networks, and data centres. This made the French case particularly suitable for examining the institutionalisation of environmental concerns within media policy (Arcom, Arcep, & ADEME, 2024, p. 34).

The research material consisted primarily of the 2024 reports and summaries prepared by Arcom, Arcep, and ADEME, which served as the primary sources. Supplementary material included selected academic publications on the sustainability of the audiovisual sector, green innovation, media decarbonisation, climate communication, the French media system, and personalised television. This literature served a dual purpose. First, it made it possible to situate the French case within a broader research field. Second, it enabled the interpretation of the collected data from a media studies and regulatory perspective.

The research proceeded in three stages. In the first stage, key data concerning the scale of the environmental impact of the analysed services were identified. In the second stage, the material was organised according to five analytical layers: end-user devices, transmission networks, data centres, the service model, and audience practices. In the third stage, the findings were interpreted from a media studies perspective, with particular emphasis on the categories of media infrastructure, media governance, service personalisation, and public policy.

The unit of analysis was neither a single media institution nor a single technology. Rather, it was the environmental footprint of television and radio, understood as elements of a single technical service system. This approach moves beyond a narrow understanding of media as content or broadcasting institutions. It makes it possible to examine media as infrastructure whose operation has energy-related, material, and regulatory consequences.

The study also had several limitations. First, it relied on secondary data, that is, material already collected and processed by external institutions. Second, it focused on a single national case. Third, its aim was not to compare France with other countries, but rather to reconstruct and interpret one particularly well-documented case. These limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. Nevertheless, this approach makes it possible to maintain a clear definition of the research object and to examine the relationship between environmental measurement and the regulatory mechanisms of the media sector in greater detail.

The French Case: Main Sources of the Environmental Footprint of Television and Radio

The French case is important not only because it provides quantitative data. Its significance lies primarily in the fact that it makes it possible to understand media as a material infrastructure. The study conducted by Arcom, Arcep, and ADEME covered the main modes of using audio and audiovisual services, including live and catch-up television, radio, video-on-demand, and audio streaming. The report found that the uses analysed accounted for 2.9% of electricity consumption in France, or approximately 13 TWh, and for 0.9% of the national carbon footprint. The total footprint was estimated at 5.6 million tonnes of CO_2 equivalent (Arcom, Arcep, & ADEME, 2024, p. 34). These figures alone show that television and radio can no longer be understood solely in terms of content circulation, but also as infrastructures that generate measurable environmental burdens.

The French analysis clearly differentiates between audio and video practices, which is highly significant for the present article. Video remains considerably

more environmentally burdensome, primarily due to the role of television sets, higher image quality, and greater data transfer intensity. Audio, including linear radio and audio streaming, operates under different infrastructural and reception patterns. This means that radio should not be treated merely as an extension to television, but as a distinct field of analysis that makes it possible to better capture the relationship between content distribution models and the scale of environmental impact.

Radio requires particular attention within the analysis. The French report does not treat it as a marginal supplement to television, but as a distinct category of audio practices. It distinguishes between terrestrial radio, internet radio, and audio streaming and podcasts, while also showing that live radio listening—via terrestrial broadcasting or the internet—accounts for more than half of total audio use, measured in terms of listening time. This means that radio remains a mass medium not only in cultural terms, but also in infrastructural terms. From a media studies perspective, this is important because it encourages us to see radio not as a declining medium, but as a durable element of the contemporary ecosystem of audio services, operating simultaneously through broadcast and networked models (Arcom, Arcep, & ADEME, 2024, pp. 60, 273).

The most significant source of environmental impact was end-user devices. The production and use of these devices account for the largest share of the overall environmental footprint. The report places particular emphasis on the high material and energy footprint of television sets. This does not mean that television content itself is "more emissive" in any symbolic sense. Rather, it indicates that the mode of its reception, particularly the use of large screens that remain permanently connected, is a key factor contributing to the environmental footprint of television services (Arcom, Arcep, & ADEME, 2024, p. 34).

The second layer consists of transmission networks. Their contribution was smaller than that of end-user devices, but it remained significant. From a media studies perspective, this has a double significance. First, it reveals that contemporary media consumption is inseparable from telecommunications infrastructure. Second, it reveals that the environmental cost of media also depends on the model of content distribution. Broadcast transmission places different environmental demands on infrastructure than services delivered through fixed and mobile networks, while IP-based services rely on continuous data transfer and may involve such processes as programmatic advertising. Particularly important here is the status of terrestrial radio as a relatively environmentally efficient medium at the distribution level. The report indicates that broadcast networks, including TNT, FM, and DAB+, account for only a small share of the overall network footprint, despite their considerable contribution to the time spent using audio and visual services. This means that, from an environmental perspective, the transition from broadcast to digital distribution does not necessarily produce equivalent benefits across all media services. The case of radio

shows that broadcast transmission can still remain an efficient solution, especially where mass, simultaneous access to audio content is concerned. In this sense, terrestrial radio serves in the French analysis as an important counterpoint to the more resource-intensive forms of video consumption and IP-based distribution (Arcom, Arcep, & ADEME, 2024, p. 185).

The third level consists of data centres. In the French study, their contribution was smaller than that of terminals and networks, but it was by no means marginal. Importantly, the report challenges the popular simplification that the environmental impact of digital media is mainly a matter of "the cloud." Data centres are, of course, an important element of the infrastructure, but their significance needs to be considered in relation to the other layers of the system. This multi-layered approach is one of the most important analytical contributions of the French study.

Particularly significant, however, are the findings concerning the service model itself. The report showed that the greatest environmental burdens are associated with video consumption, especially linear television viewed on television sets. Advertising, particularly in the programmatic model, was also of considerable importance. The French analysis demonstrated that video viewing can substantially increase the carbon footprint because it adds additional network, computational, and measurement processes. From a media studies perspective, this is a highly important finding. It means that the environmental cost of media does not result solely from "content," but also from the economic model of its monetisation and from the mechanisms of capturing audience attention.

This dimension is particularly well illustrated by the literature on television personalisation. Chmielewska (2025, pp. 68–69) argues that television is ceasing to be a predefined medium and becoming a dynamic, adaptive digital service. Robak (2025, pp. 90–95) shows, in turn, that personalisation relies on user profiling and distributed-systems architecture, which must process large volumes of data while maintaining high availability and scalability. This means that contemporary television is becoming increasingly dependent on data, user identifiers, and computational infrastructure. The environmental footprint of media should therefore be analysed not only at the level of hardware and transmission, but also at the level of service design and its underlying logic.

The difference between radio and audio streaming is also analytically significant. Whereas linear radio preserves the logic of simultaneous reception and relatively stable distribution infrastructure, audio streaming and podcasts fit into a model of personalised data services dependent on IP networks, mobile terminals, and individual patterns of use. Thus, within the audio sphere, too, a tension emerges between traditional broadcasting logic and platform-based service logic. For the purposes of this article, this means that radio should not be analysed collectively with other audio practices, but rather in terms of differences in

distribution modes and content-use models (Arcom, Arcep, & ADEME, 2024, p. 273; Robak, 2025, pp. 90–95).

The French report also has a prognostic dimension. Under the trend scenario, greenhouse gas emissions associated with audiovisual uses were expected to increase by approximately 30% by 2030. At the same time, it was indicated that a combination of eco-design and digital sobriety measures could reverse this trend and even lead to a significant reduction in environmental impact (Arcom, Arcep, & ADEME, 2024, p. 34). The French report also shows that radio does not play a marginal role in the study in relation to television, but rather constitutes an important comparative case that helps clarify the relationship between the content distribution model, the type of terminal, and the scale of environmental impact.

At this point, the French case goes beyond mere diagnosis. It becomes an example of the transition from measurement to policy.

Table 1. Main Layers of the Environmental Footprint of Television and Radio in France

Analytical Layer	**Findings from the French Case**	**Media Studies Significance**
End-user devices	Television sets and other user terminals accounted for the largest share of the environmental footprint.	Highlights the materiality of media reception and the importance of equipment life cycles.
Transmission networks	Networks constituted the second key layer of environmental impact.	Reveals the dependence of media on telecommunications infrastructure.
Data centres	Their share was lower than that of terminals and networks, but still remained significant.	Challenges the simplification that the environmental problem of digital media can be reduced solely to "the cloud."
Service model	Streaming, high image quality, and programmatic advertising increased environmental pressure.	Links the environmental footprint to media economics and the logic of monetisation.
Audience practices	Quality, modes of use, and consumption intensity affected the scale of the environmental burden.	Indicates the importance of audience education and digital sobriety.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Arcom, Arcep, and ADEME (2024, p. 34) and Robak (2025, pp. 90–95).

The table organises the empirical material into five interdependent layers and shows that the environmental footprint of television and radio is systemic. It is not the result of a single infrastructural element, but rather of the interconnection between end-user devices, transmission networks, data centres, service

logic, and audience practices. For this reason, analysing this phenomenon requires moving beyond a reductive understanding of media either as mere content transmission or solely in terms of their carbon footprint. The French case demonstrates that the environmental cost of media should be examined simultaneously from technological, economic, regulatory, and cultural perspectives.

Against this background, the relevant question concerns not only where the media's environmental footprint is generated, but also which actors should be responsible for reducing it and how.

Discussion and Implications for Media Policy

The French case leads to a fundamental conclusion. The environmental footprint of television and radio cannot be understood merely as a side effect of digitisation. It is layered and systemic. It emerges at the intersection of end-user devices, transmission networks, data centres, service models, and audience practices. This means that the environmental problem does not concern a single segment of the media market, but rather the entire technological system within which media currently operate. In this sense, the French study reinforces the call for a systemic approach found in the most recent literature (Lupu et al., 2023; Arora & McClenaghan, 2024, pp. 873–878).

From a media studies perspective, it is particularly significant that the French analysis shifts attention from content itself to the material conditions of its accessibility. Television and radio are not merely carriers of meaning. They are also technical systems whose operation generates measurable energy-related and environmental consequences. This shift is important not only cognitively but also conceptually. It also changes the way responsibility within the media sector is understood. Such responsibility no longer concerns only the quality of content, pluralism, or public service obligations, but also includes the material cost of content distribution and reception.

The French study also challenges several simplifications present in public debate. First, it does not support the claim that the main environmental problem of digital media can be reduced to data centres. Their share remains significant but is lower than that of terminals and networks. Second, the report shows that technological efficiency gains alone do not solve the problem. Higher image resolution, autoplay, intensive advertising, and the logic of permanent content availability can offset some of the benefits of efficiency improvements. Third, the study reveals that the media's monetisation model also has an environmental dimension. In this way, the ecological issue ceases to be a purely technical matter. It becomes an element of the analysis of media economics and platform logic.

At this point, the category of media governance becomes particularly important. The French experience shows that the environmental footprint of

media should not be left solely to voluntary industry declarations. It requires institutionalised measurement, comparable assessment methods, and mechanisms for coordination among the media market regulator, the telecommunications infrastructure regulator, and institutions responsible for environmental policy. It is precisely the cooperation between Arcom, Arcep, and ADEME that constitutes one of the most interesting aspects of the case under analysis. It indicates that media governance in the digital age should encompass not only pluralism, competition, and audience protection, but also the environmental conditions under which communication infrastructure operates (Głowacki, 2015, pp. 26–27, 33–34).

From the regulator's point of view, three lines of action appear justified. First, environmental reporting standards should be introduced for entities operating in the audiovisual sector, covering not only emissions, but also the energy intensity of services, device durability, and content distribution models. Second, co-regulatory instruments should be developed to promote the eco-design of devices and services, including measures to limit default high-resolution settings and autoplay functions. Third, information systems should be developed for users to help them recognise the environmental consequences of particular ways of using media.

From a managerial perspective, the following appear crucial: extending device lifecycles, limiting redundant technical features, reducing the data footprint of audiovisual services, designing personalisation architectures more responsibly, and revising monetisation models that increase environmental costs without a proportionate increase in user value.

In this context, Polish research on personalised television is also helpful. Chmielewska (2025, pp. 68–69) showed that audiences today co-create the value of media services through their choices, interactions, and real-time data. Robak (2025, pp. 90–95), in turn, emphasised the importance of profiling, identifiers, and distributed systems. This means that the environmental footprint of media is not solely the result of the energy consumed by receiving devices, but also the outcome of how contemporary media services are designed and scaled. As a result, the development of personalised television should be analysed alongside questions concerning the environmental cost of data processing, recommendations, and service architectures.

From a public policy perspective, the case of radio leads to one additional important conclusion. Digital transformation should not be automatically equated with the full migration of all audio services to the IP model. The French data suggest that, from an environmental perspective, it is necessary to distinguish between broadcast distribution and network-based distribution. This means that rational media and telecommunications policy should take into account not only innovation and user convenience but also the environmental efficiency of different models of content access. In relation to radio, this may imply the need to

protect and modernise less environmentally intensive forms of distribution rather than replacing them exclusively with network-based services.

The French case also has broader significance. It shows that media studies should now take the materiality of media more seriously. This means that traditional reflection on communication must be combined with the analysis of infrastructure, regulation, and environmental costs. Only such an approach makes it possible to adequately describe the contemporary media sector. Television and radio have not disappeared in the digital age. What has changed is their technical, economic, and environmental context.

It is also worth noting that media are not only the objects of environmental regulation. They remain discursive actors that co-create interpretative frameworks for ESG issues, increase the visibility of particular problems, and influence the direction of public debate. Gulczyński, Królikowska-Tomczak, and Kuźmicz (2025, pp. 176–177) have shown that media participate in constructing the social meaning of ESG, shaping the public agenda, and legitimising specific narratives. In this sense, the environmental dimension of the functioning of television and radio should be analysed not only at the infrastructural level, but also at the communicative and normative levels.

Conclusions

The analysis conducted leads to the conclusion that the environmental footprint of television and radio should be treated as an important dimension of the contemporary functioning of the media. It is not a problem external to the media sector, nor merely a side effect of digitisation. On the contrary, it is an element of the operating logic of contemporary audio and audiovisual services, which rely on technical infrastructure, data transfer, end-user devices, and specific models of content access.

The French case has shown that the environmental impact of media is systemic. It arises at the intersection of end-user devices, transmission networks, data centres, service models, and audience practices. End-user devices, especially television sets, are of particular importance in this regard. This means that the analysis of television and radio can no longer be limited to content and broadcasting institutions. It must also include the material conditions of the production, distribution, and reception of media content.

The article has also demonstrated that the environmental cost of media is closely linked to the logic of market organisation. What matters are not only technological solutions, but also business models, service architectures, and the ways in which content is monetised. In this sense, the environmental footprint of television and radio should also be understood as a regulatory and managerial issue. It cannot be reduced to either user decisions or voluntary industry

declarations. It requires coherent measurement tools, greater transparency in media services, institutional coordination, and the incorporation of environmental criteria into media policy.

A particularly important finding is that radio does not merely serve as a supplementary category to television, but constitutes a distinct environmental case that enables a more accurate assessment of the significance of broadcast and network-based distribution models for audio content.

The contribution of the article, therefore, lies in combining a media studies perspective with infrastructural and regulatory analysis. The French case has been treated not only as a source of data, but also as an example of a new way of thinking about the responsibility of the media sector. This responsibility now encompasses not only the quality of content, pluralism, or the public interest, but also the material cost of operating media services.

At the same time, the study has its limitations. It was based on secondary data and focused on a single national case. It was not comparative in character. This opens up space for further analyses, especially studies concerning other media systems, international comparisons, and attempts to relate the French experience to the Polish media market. It also seems justified to conduct further research into the environmental dimensions of media platformisation, digital advertising, and audience practices associated with the growing intensity of content consumption.

Ultimately, it must be stated that the environmental footprint of television and radio is becoming an important subject of research in media studies. It requires a new language of description that combines reflection on media, technology, public policy, and sustainability. Only such an approach makes it possible to adequately understand the place of media within the social, technological, and ecological order of the twenty-first century.

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OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 54 (3/2026)

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Board games as an element of psychological training in developing soft skills among psychology students

ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of a study on the use of board games during group psychological training for psychology students. A longitudinal study design was employed, with data collected from participants in six psychological training groups during the first, fourth (midpoint), and seventh (final) sessions. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and a questionnaire containing questions developed by the authors were used. In three groups, psychological training was conducted using board games (n = 44), while in the other three groups it followed a "standard scenario" involving psychological exercises (n = 54). The collected data were compared between groups (game groups with vs. non-game groups) and within groups (first vs. fourth vs. seventh session).

In the first phase, participants in the psychological training groups using board games reported higher motivation to attend the sessions and rated them more highly in terms of their usefulness for personal development and understanding group processes. Anxiety related to participation in the sessions was similar in both groups and decreased significantly over the course of the training. In the second phase, greater changes were observed in the group not using games, where participants rated the sessions more highly in terms of their usefulness for self-understanding and personal development. It was also observed that self-esteem increased significantly in this group when comparing the first and final sessions.

Board games were particularly useful during the initial part of the training, when building motivation was an important aspect, whereas in the later stages of the training, less structured psychological exercises were more conducive to participants' development.

KEYWORDS: psychological training, board games, group processes, soft skills

Suggested citation: Lickiewicz, J., Wajda, Z. (2026). Board games as an element of psychological training in developing soft skills among psychology students. *Perspectives on Culture*, *3*(54), pp. 325–341 https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.18
Submitted: 07.05.2026 Accepted: 08.05.2026

STRESZCZENIE

Gry planszowe jako element treningu psychologicznego w kształtowaniu kompetencji miękkich u studentów psychologii

Artykuł przedstawia wyniki badania nad wykorzystaniem gier planszowych podczas grupowego treningu psychologicznego dla studentów psychologii. Zaprojektowano badania podłużne, w których zbierano dane od uczestników sześciu grup treningu psychologicznego podczas pierwszego, czwartego (środek) i siódmego (ostatniego) spotkania. Zastosowano Skalę Samooceny Rosenberga oraz ankietę z pytaniami własnego autorstwa. W trzech grupach trening psychologiczny był prowadzony z użyciem gier (n = 44), a w kolejnych trzech wg „standardowego scenariusza" zawierającego ćwiczenia psychologiczne (n = 54). Zebrane dane porównano międzygrupowo (grupy z grami vs bez gier) oraz wewnątrzgrupowo (pierwsze vs czwarte vs siódme spotkanie).

W pierwszej fazie, w grupie treningu psychologicznego z grami, uczestnicy deklarowali wyższą motywację do zajęć, oraz oceniali je lepiej pod kątem przydatności dla własnego rozwoju oraz rozumienia procesów grupowych. Lęk dotyczący udziału w zajęciach był podobny w obu grupach i istotnie malał wraz z czasem ich trwania. W drugiej fazie treningu, większe zmiany obserwowano w grupie bez gier, gdzie uczestnicy wyżej ocenili zajęcia jako przydatne dla rozumienia siebie i dla własnego rozwoju. Zaobserwowano również, że w tej grupie istotnie zwiększyła się samoocena, porównując pierwsze i ostatnie spotkanie.

Gry były przydatne szczególnie w pierwszej części zajęć, w których istotnym elementem było budowanie motywacji, zaś w dalszych fazach treningu ćwiczenia psychologiczne o mniejszej strukturze bardziej służyły rozwojowi uczestników.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: trening psychologiczny, gry planszowe, procesy grupowe, kompetencje miękkie

1. Introduction

1.1. Group Psychological Training

Group psychological training has long been used in education, particularly in the development of soft skills (Merta, Wolfgang, & McNeil, 1993; Martin et al., 2019). There are many types of psychological training based on different models, such as interpersonal training, encounter groups, and psychoeducational training, as well as training programs designed to develop specific skills and achieve particular goals, including assertiveness, personal development, communication, social skills, and relaxation, among others (Liu, Zhu, & Turner, 2021).

All types of training groups, as well as therapeutic groups, make use, to a greater or lesser extent, of small-group dynamics and "experiential learning" to achieve developmental or therapeutic goals. The literature identifies numerous factors associated with the effectiveness of group-based interventions.

The most well-known factor contributing to change is group cohesion. It has a long history of being studied in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy (Yalom & Leszcz, 2025). Systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicate that when group cohesion is higher, participants derive greater benefits from the group, and the group itself demonstrates greater effectiveness (Burlingame, McClendon, & Yang, 2018). This applies not only to developmental and psychotherapeutic groups but also to sports teams and work teams. As a dynamic aspect of group functioning, cohesion is not easy to describe, and many authors have proposed their own definitions over the years. Forsyth (2021) undertook an integration of this body of knowledge, proposing that cohesion be defined as the degree of unity within a group. Thus, a cohesive group is one characterized by a strong alliance, strong bonds, and a sense of unity, whereas a group with low cohesion has weak bonds, is divided, and its members are not engaged in its functioning.

Another important factor contributing to change is social learning. According to Yalom and Leszcz (2025), a properly conducted group sooner or later develops into a "social microcosm," that is, an environment in which participants (unconsciously) display their habitual patterns of behavior, emotions, and perceptions that shape their everyday functioning. During group sessions, this creates an opportunity to observe and identify these patterns and discuss their usefulness in different areas of life, both with the group facilitator and with other group members. Ultimately, participants may also have the opportunity to experiment with new ways of functioning in interpersonal relationships.

To stimulate group interactions and direct the group's attention toward aspects that maximize the achievement of intended goals, a variety of techniques are used. One of the more popular approaches is directing the group's attention to the "here and now," which involves encouraging the group to interact freely and then pause to jointly engage in a meta-analysis of what happened, how it happened, and why it happened (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). The group facilitator has a wide range of techniques at their disposal, which can be used depending on their needs and preferences, including role-playing, psychodrawing, group integration exercises, work in subgroups, sociometry, bodywork, relaxation, and psychoeducation (Chen & Rybak, 2018; Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2018). Another possibility is the deliberate use of games as a tool for stimulating group interactions, emotions, and behaviors, which can subsequently be subjected to metalevel reflection by the training participants.

1.2. Games

Board games have served as a source of entertainment for centuries. Their origins can be traced back to antiquity (Donovan, 2017). Today, they may seem to be increasingly displaced by electronic entertainment. This, however, is a misleading impression, as board games are gaining new significance in education (Boghian & Cojocariu, 2019) and even in the process of psychotherapy (Garcia-Roca et al., 2023).

A particularly important period during which board games gained prominence was the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed to limit people's ability to leave their homes. During this time, attention was drawn to the particular impact of board games on improving interpersonal relationships (Kritz, 2020). This process occurred somewhat incidentally, as the primary reason for using board games during the pandemic was the desire to spend the surplus free time productively. Electronic games generally do not offer the same benefits, as they are typically played individually or online, without direct, face-to-face interaction. The consequence of the latter is a lack of close contact and interpersonal connection.

The aforementioned use of board games in education has numerous positive consequences. They are used in language learning, improving problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, as well as enhancing social awareness (Pomichal, 2023). One of their important benefits is increased interest in new material and greater effectiveness of the educational process. The choice of game should depend on the intended objective. Donovan's (2017) proposed typology of games may be helpful in this regard, distinguishing between games based on mathematical thinking and those designed to elicit emotions.

However, as was the case during the pandemic, it is worth considering the impact of using board games on the relationships between participants in educational settings. Although their importance for the learning process is emphasized, it is difficult to overlook the often unintended process that unfolds somewhat independently and involves changes in interpersonal relationships among participants. It can be assumed that this influence may be bidirectional, as it cannot be ruled out that competitive games may have a different effect from cooperative ones (Toyan et al., 2021).

2. Method

2.1 Research Aim and Research Questions

At the Institute of Applied Psychology at Jagiellonian University, psychological training sessions are conducted as part of the psychology degree program. Their

aim is to develop a broad range of soft skills and foster personal growth, with particular emphasis on developing self-awareness and observational skills, experiencing different phases of the group process, improving the quality of interpersonal relationships, self-esteem and self-acceptance, acceptance of others, and control over one's emotional reactions, among other areas. Psychological training sessions, which take place during the first and second years of study, have become an important element of students' education, standing in marked contrast to traditional lectures and practical classes (Słowik & Passowicz, 2020). In subsequent years, students also frequently refer to these training sessions during other classes, as they provided them with an opportunity to experience group processes, psychological interventions, and other psychological phenomena from the perspective of a "participant" in a practical setting.

The decision was therefore made to obtain direct feedback from participants in the current edition of the training sessions and examine their perceptions of selected aspects related to the training. Students were invited to participate voluntarily and anonymously in the study described below.

The aim of the research presented in this article was to compare the benefits of using different techniques in psychological training, specifically board and card games, with training based on other exercises designed to stimulate group interactions. These benefits were understood as an increase in participants' self-esteem, as well as their subjective perceptions of their motivation to participate in the training, their level of anxiety related to participation in the group, the perceived benefits for their personal development and self-understanding, and the perceived benefits for understanding the group and group processes. Comparisons were made both between groups and within groups, as the study employed a longitudinal design with three measurement points.

Taking into account the research aim outlined above, the following research question was formulated:

Are there differences between participants in group psychological training involving the use of games and students participating in training without the use of games in their perceptions of the following aspects:

a. Changes in self-esteem
b. Changes in motivation to participate in psychological training
c. Changes in anxiety related to participation in group sessions
d. The perceived usefulness of the training for personal development
e. The perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding
f. The perceived usefulness of the training for understanding the group and group processes

2.2. Study Procedure and Participants

The study was conducted as part of a course entitled "Psychological Training," whose aim was to develop a broad range of soft skills and foster personal growth, with particular emphasis on developing self-awareness and skills related to observation, experiencing different phases of the group process, overcoming anxiety in interactions with others, self-esteem, and self-acceptance. The study participants were first-year psychology students for whom these classes were among the first components of their academic education. This was due to the fact that the students had not known one another previously, and the course provided their first opportunity to interact with each other. Therefore, they had no opportunity to establish informal social bonds before the course began.

A total of 98 first-year psychology students from Jagiellonian University participated in the study (44 in the game group and 54 in the non-game group). The mean age was 20.08 years (SD = 1.58). The study sample consisted of 81 women, 16 men, and one participant who identified their gender as "other."

The participants were divided into six groups. In three groups, the sessions were conducted using games, while in the remaining three groups, the training was conducted without their use.

The standard structure of the sessions was as follows: (a) an opening round; (b) an introduction to the exercise, including an explanation of its purpose and procedure and, when necessary, random assignment of participants to pairs or subgroups; (c) an exercise or game, depending on the kind of training; (d) a group discussion aimed at reflecting on the exercise or game; and (e) a summary of the session. The study used the following games: *Story Cubes*, *Dixit*, *Gra na emocjach* (*Iconicus*), *Codenames*, and *Coup*. These games have been used in previous studies, which demonstrated their impact on communication and cooperation within groups (e.g., Zsiray & Koos, 2022; Silva et al., 2023). A detailed description of each game is provided in Appendix 1.

2.3. Research Instruments

To assess the impact of board games, two research instruments were used: a self-developed questionnaire and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. In the self-developed questionnaire, students expressed their opinions regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of the training, its impact on their knowledge of the subject matter, and their motivation to participate in the sessions.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES) assesses global self-esteem, understood as a conscious attitude toward the self. It consists of 10 items, with respondents indicating on a four-point scale the extent to which they agree with each

statement. Previous studies have demonstrated correlations between SES scores and, among other factors, curiosity and emotional reactivity (Łaguna et al., 2007).

2.3. Study Procedure and Statistical Analysis

The psychological training was planned as seven sessions, each lasting four hours, for a total of 28 hours. Students completed the questionnaires during the first session (baseline measurement), the fourth session (midpoint measurement), and the seventh session (final measurement). At each measurement point, data were collected on selected variables according to the study design (e.g., motivation was assessed at the beginning and midpoint of the training, while the perceived usefulness of the training for personal development was assessed at the midpoint and at the end of the training).

The following variables were assessed at each measurement point:

- Session 1 (beginning of training): self-esteem (pretest), motivation to participate in the training, anxiety related to participation in the group
- Session 4 (midpoint of training): motivation to participate in the training, anxiety related to participation in the group, perceived usefulness of the training for personal development, perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding, perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes
- Session 7 (end of training): self-esteem (posttest), perceived usefulness of the training for personal development, perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding, perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes

To ensure anonymity, students were asked to use a pseudonym of their choice and to use the same pseudonym at subsequent measurement points, without providing their first or last names. Completing the questionnaires was voluntary. Students provided written consent to participate and were informed at the beginning of the sessions that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

The research project received a positive opinion from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Management and Social Communication at Jagiellonian University (dated May 16, 2023).

After the data had been collected, a database was created and statistical analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 29 Imago Pro 9.0. Two types of comparisons were performed: (a) between-group comparisons—examining the values of the variables at each measurement point in the training group using games versus the group without games; and (b) within-group comparisons—examining whether the values of individual variables changed over the course of the training.

As most of the variables were measured on an ordinal (rank-order) scale, non-parametric tests were used, namely the Mann–Whitney U test and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. For the self-esteem variable, which was measured on a quantitative scale, Student's *t*-tests for dependent and independent samples were used.

3. Results

3.1. Between-Group Comparisons

Tables 1–5 below present the most important results of the statistical analyses. In the first stage, comparisons were made between the psychological training groups in which games were used and the groups in which no games were used.

Table 1. Comparison of Variables Using the Mann–Whitney U Test for Psychological Training With and Without Games at Each Measurement Point (Sessions 1, 4, and 7)

Variable	**Training Using Games** (Mean Rank)	**Training Without Games** (Mean Rank)	Z	Significance
Session 1 (beginning of training)				
Motivation to participate in the training	55.59	39.20	-2.981	0.003
Anxiety related to participation in the group	47.10	46.02	-0.194	0.846
Session 4 (midpoint of training)				
Motivation to participate in the training	56.43	37.06	-3.571	<0.001
Anxiety related to participation in the group	46.81	45.31	-0.277	0.782
Perceived usefulness of the training for personal development	56.79	40.00	-3.023	0.003
Perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding	53.21	42.88	-1.845	0.065
Perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes	59.06	38.16	-3.757	<0.001
Session 7 (end of training)				
Perceived usefulness of the training for personal development	34.41	36.00	-0.309	0.757

Perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding	41.18	40.88	-0.058	0.953
Perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes	51.82	33.56	-3.477	<0.001

Source: own development.

The comparison of variables between the study groups presented in Table 1 indicates five statistically significant differences. In the groups using games, motivation to participate in the psychological training was significantly higher both during the first session and at the midpoint of the training. Students participating in the training involving games also rated the training as more useful for their personal development at the midpoint of the training and for understanding group processes at both the midpoint and the end of the training. Anxiety related to participation in the sessions was similar in both study groups. The groups also gave similar ratings of the usefulness of the training for personal development and self-understanding at the end of the training.

Table 2. Comparison of Participants' Self-Esteem Using the Independent-Samples *t*-Test at the Beginning and End of Psychological Training in Game- and Non-Game Groups

Variable	Week	**Training Using Games** (Mean)	**Training Without Games** (Mean)	*t*-test	Significance
Self-esteem	Session 1 (beginning of training)	27.21	28.17	-0.762	0.448
	Session 7 (end of training)	27.67	29.79	-1.560	0.124

Source: own development.

As shown in Table 2, the mean self-esteem scores did not differ significantly between the two groups. In the non-game groups, mean self-esteem was slightly higher and increased over the course of the training; however, the difference between the two groups did not reach statistical significance.

3.2 Within-Group Comparisons

In the second stage, within-group comparisons were conducted to determine whether the values of the variables under study changed over the course of the training. Table 3 presents changes in the results for the psychological

training group using games, while Table 4 presents the same variables for the group undergoing training without games. Finally, mean self-esteem scores at the beginning and end of the training were compared using the paired-samples *t*-test.

Table 3. Comparison of Variables Using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test at the Beginning, Midpoint, and End of Psychological Training in Groups Using Games

	Psychological Training Using Games					
	Median (ranks)					
Variable	**Session 1 (beginning) vs. Session 4 (midpoint)**	**Session 4 (midpoint)**	Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Z	Significance
Motivation to participate in the training	8	8	13.31	12.85	-1.5291	0.126
Anxiety related to participation in the group	4	3	16.60	10.00	-3.813	**<0.001**
X	**Session 4 (midpoint)**	**Session 7 (end of training)**	Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Z	Significance
Perceived usefulness of the training for personal development	8	8	7.33	7.63	-0.553	0.580
Perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding	6	7	12.29	12,59	-1.859	0.063
Perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes	8	8	11.08	10.97	-1.727	0.084

Source: own development.

Table 3 shows that only one change reached the required level of statistical significance: in the group using games, anxiety related to participation in

the sessions decreased at the midpoint of the training compared with the beginning. The variables concerning the perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding and for understanding group processes were also close to statistical significance. In the latter case, however, a surprising downward trend was observed.

Table 4. Comparison of Variables Using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test at the Beginning, Midpoint, and End of Psychological Training in Non-Game Groups

	Psychological training not using games					
	Median (ranks)		Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Z	Significance
Variable	**Session 1 (beginning)**	**Session 4 (midpoint)**				
Motivation to participate in training	6	6	13.81	19.19	-0.818	0.414
Anxiety related to participation in the group	5	3	20.39	7.50	-4.897	**<0.001**
	Session 4 (midpoint)	**Session 7 (end of training)**	Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Z	Significance
Perceived usefulness of the training for personal development	6	8	15.56	20.72	-3.423	**<0.001**
Perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding	5.50	7	17.67	19.84	-3.886	**<0.001**
Perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes	6	7	16.05	17.25	-1.088	0.277

Source: own development.

Table 4 shows that, similarly to the group using games, anxiety related to participation in the group sessions also decreased significantly in the psychological training group without games. Two other statistically significant changes were also observed: participants' ratings of the usefulness of the training for personal development and for self-understanding increased.

Table 5. Comparison of Participants' Self-Esteem Using the Paired-Samples *t*-Test at the Beginning and End of Psychological Training in Game- and Non-Game Groups

Variable	Group	Session 1 (beginning) Mean	Session 7 (end) Mean	t-test	Significance
Self-esteem	**Training using games**	27.21	27.67	-0.715	0.480
	Training not using games	28.17	29.79	-3.038	**0.004**

Source: own development.

As shown in Table 5, self-esteem increased in the psychological training group without games. Although the increase was only slightly more than 1.5 points, the change was statistically significant for the group as a whole. No statistically significant change in self-esteem was observed in the group using games.

4. Discussion

The research presented in this article aimed to address the question of whether there are differences in the educational experience when psychological training for students is conducted using games compared with training conducted without games. These differences concerned changes in self-esteem and participants' perceptions of selected aspects of the sessions. The study employed a longitudinal design, with data collected during the first, fourth, and seventh (final) sessions.

The study showed that after the first session, participants in the training using games reported higher motivation to participate in the psychological training. The first session of group training corresponds to the phase referred to in theories of group processes as the orientation and dependency phase (Corey et al., 2018; Ogrodniczuk, Cheek, & Kealy, 2021). This means that group members begin to establish an understanding of the rules governing their interactions and tend to be dependent on the leader. Games can reduce tension through their clear structure and instructions, while also providing somewhat greater opportunities to regulate the degree of interpersonal distance between participants. In comparison with training without games, participants in the latter condition are more likely to engage in conversations involving personal topics, self-exploration, and greater interpersonal confrontation. Moreover, games appear to be an attractive alternative to "typical" academic classes and create an atmosphere of play. Although somewhat different variables were examined, this is broadly consistent with previous research reporting increased

satisfaction resulting from the introduction of games into the teaching process (Hung, 2018; Sousa et al., 2023). Board games have also been shown to have a positive impact on engagement and group work (Cardinot et al., 2022).

Previous studies, however, concerned situations involving a lower degree of psychological intensity (e.g., classes in science-related subjects), where games served as an additional element making the learning process more engaging. The above-mentioned factors may therefore have contributed to the higher motivation observed among participants in the training using games. Motivation was also higher after the fourth session, which may suggest that participants in training involving games maintained somewhat higher motivation throughout the first part of the training. We also examined whether motivation changed in either group between the first session and the midpoint of the training. Although the scores changed numerically, the differences were not statistically significant.

No between-group difference was observed in anxiety related to participation in the psychological training. However, as expected, anxiety decreased significantly over the course of the first four sessions in both groups. This probably indicates that participants successfully navigated the initial phase of group development and progressed to subsequent phases characterized by lower levels of anxiety.

The study also examined how participants in the training with and without games perceived the usefulness of the training for their personal development, self-understanding, and understanding of group processes—variables that are important in psychological education and, more broadly, in academic education. These variables were assessed after the fourth and the concluding seventh group sessions.

At the midpoint of the training, after the fourth session, participants in the training involving games rated its usefulness for their personal development and for understanding group processes significantly higher. In the case of the latter variable, the significant difference persisted at the seventh session. At the same time, no between-group differences were observed after the final session in participants' ratings of the usefulness of the training for personal development and self-understanding.

It should also be noted that in the group without games, during the second part of the training (between the fourth and seventh sessions), there was a significant increase in ratings of the usefulness of the training for personal development and self-understanding. No such changes were observed in the groups using games. It may therefore be reasonably assumed that this finding supports the conclusions of previous research suggesting that games may provide sufficient justification for participating in educational activities, but not necessarily for active engagement in the process of self-improvement (Swank, 2008).

However, a distinction should be made between therapeutic games, which are specifically designed for work with clients/patients, and recreational games,

whose design serves purposes other than their use in interpersonal training or therapeutic groups. From the perspective of group development stages, the results may be explained by the possibility that, once the groups moved beyond the orientation and dependency phase, participants derived greater developmental benefits without the interaction structure imposed by games.

The study did not, however, include systematic observation of the stages of group development. Such observation could be particularly relevant because the orientation and dependency phase is followed by the conflict phase, during which processes of role and norm formation begin and interactions become characterized by competition (Corey et al., 2018; Ogrodniczuk et al., 2021). Competition is an essential element of most games; therefore, games may have acted as a catalyst for competitive behavior or may have provided a safe context in which such behavior could be expressed within the group. These aspects require further investigation.

The final variable examined was participants' self-esteem. Although no statistically significant between-group differences were observed at the beginning or end of the psychological training, a statistically significant increase in self-esteem was observed within the non-game group. Similar findings have been reported in previous research (Prihadi et al., 2018). However, the present study allows for a broader conclusion: introducing board games may, when the same overall training strategy is used, be a factor associated with a lack of change in self-esteem levels. This may be related to the fact that board games can serve as a source of distraction, potentially diminishing the salience of the primary goal of the training. Participants may focus on the playful aspect of the sessions, which could, in turn, hinder their process of personal development.

5. Conclusions and Limitations of the Study

Games can be an interesting element of psychological training in the educational process; however, both the benefits and limitations of their use should be taken into account. The findings presented in this study indicate that games were particularly useful during the initial part of the training, when an important objective is to build motivation to participate and address phenomena characteristic of the first stage of group development, namely orientation and dependency. The results suggest that games may be dispensed with during the later stages of training, as other psychological exercises may be more conducive to participants' development and to outcomes such as increased self-understanding and self-esteem.

The study also has several limitations. First, the variables examined were measured using highly subjective methods, and most of them were assessed using simple, single-item questions. Second, other potentially relevant variables

were not systematically controlled for, including participants' personality traits, changes in the stages of group development, and random life events that may have influenced their perceptions of the educational and developmental experience during the training (e.g., participants may have been taking part in other personal development activities, undergoing therapy, or experiencing other significant life changes). Third, although the longitudinal perspective is a strength of the study, the number of participants in the individual groups was relatively small, and the training involved psychology students exclusively. All of these limitations prevent the findings from being generalized too broadly. Nevertheless, they highlight the need for further research in this area.

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