

Adapted Journalists?

How Journalists in Germany Are Responding to Platformization and Artificial Intelligence. *By Megan Hanisch, Nicolas Even, and Marc-Christian Ollrog*

Digital platforms and artificial intelligence have become central infrastructures of public communication. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Spotify no longer function merely as distribution channels for journalistic content; they operate as structuring actors that shape journalistic production conditions through algorithmic prioritization, visibility regimes, and monetization mechanisms. Scholars have described this development as the emergence of a “platform society” (van Dijck et al. 2018) and a “platform revolution” (Parker 2017). At the same time, data-driven applications and generative AI are transforming journalistic workflows across research, topic selection, and content presentation.

These developments raise fundamental questions about the normative foundations of journalism. As a profession, journalism is bound to values such as truthfulness, independence, and societal responsibility. The growing orientation toward platform logics, audience metrics, and monetization requirements may challenge these normative foundations. While the structural and organizational dimensions of this transformation have received considerable scholarly attention, less is known about how journalists themselves perceive these changes and what consequences they see for their professional practice — particularly regarding the tension between professional norms and external adaptation pressures. This gap motivates the present study.

The study addresses the following research questions: What forms of adaptation can be observed in German journalism in response to platformization, digitalization, and artificial intelligence? How do platform logics, monetization demands, and digital technologies affect journalistic practices of research, selection, and presentation? And what forms of adaptation, modification, or innovation can be identified in journalistic working practices and media organizations?

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The paper draws on a theoretical framework that distinguishes between external and internal transformation forces. External forces originate in the socio-technical and economic environment of journalistic organizations and include platformization, the economization of journalistic production through audience metrics, and the increasing integration of AI systems into editorial processes. Internal forces — such as organizational routines, professional norms, and strategic management decisions — act as filtering and buffering mechanisms that translate external pressures into concrete journalistic practice.

Building on this framework, the study conceptualizes adaptation as occurring in three ideal-typical modes: (1) adjustment, in which external logics are integrated into existing routines; (2) modification or resistance, in which external demands are selectively limited or reframed; and (3) innovation, in which external impulses lead to the development of new practices, roles, or organizational structures.

The study employs a mixed-methods design combining a quantitative online survey and qualitative guided interviews. The survey was conducted between March and June 2025 using LimeSurvey, preceded by a pre-test with eight journalists. Recruitment drew on a purpose-built distribution list of German newsrooms across print, television, radio, online, and social media, supplemented by LinkedIn and personal networks. A total of 264 journalists from over 100 newsrooms participated; depending on the question, the sample size ranged between 192 and 62 respondents. The questionnaire covered demographic characteristics, professional identity, digital transformation, and platform-related influences. Data were analyzed using SPSS, applying descriptive statistics and chi-square tests.

Nine semi-structured guided interviews with journalists from various German media organizations were conducted and evaluated using qualitative content analysis (cf. Kuckartz-&Rädiker 2024) with MAXQDA. The final coding system comprised eight main categories and 50 subcategories across two levels.

The findings confirm that all three external transformation forces — platformization, metric-driven economization, and AI integration — are empirically traceable and interact in shaping journalistic practice.

Platform logics exert the strongest influence on content selection and presentation. Journalistic content has become shorter, more multimedia-oriented, and more entertaining. Titles and

teasers are systematically optimized for platform performance, and topic selection increasingly follows measurable resonance indicators. One interviewee captured this shift pointedly: whereas editorial staff once prescribed what the audience should find interesting, the logic has now reversed — journalists write about what data shows audiences are already interested in. This reflects a fundamental transformation of journalistic selection logic, consistent with research on algorithmic structuring of public attention.

The economization of journalism through audience metrics reinforces these trends. Click rates and reach dominate as success indicators, supporting the substitution of editorial judgment by data-driven feedback mechanisms described by Anderson (2011) and Christin (2020). Individual articles gain weight relative to the curated overall product, pointing to a fragmentation logic with structural consequences for the identity of journalistic offerings.

AI integration is already evident in newsroom practice but is viewed with considerable critical distance by a majority of respondents. Older journalists tend to use AI more for research and fact checking, while younger colleagues more frequently employ it for inspirational tasks such as generating topic ideas or headline suggestions. The strong demand for mandatory human oversight of all AI-generated content is not merely an organizational precaution but an ethical positioning signal: journalistic responsibility is understood as person-bound and non-delegable.

Regarding adaptation modes, adjustment is the most prevalent. SEO optimization, platform-tailored titles and teasers, and data-informed topic planning are widespread practices that integrate platform logics into existing editorial routines without fundamentally transforming them. Crucially, journalists do not interpret these practices as a capitulation to platform demands but as instrumental tools — for example, to draw readers behind a paywall. Adaptation thus proceeds not passively but embedded in organizational goals and professional meaning structures.

Modification and resistance are most evident in the handling of AI and data protection risks. The pronounced skepticism toward AI-generated content — particularly among senior staff and journalists aged 50 and above — and the demand for human oversight represent active boundary-setting strategies. Professional norms such as truthfulness, independence, and societal responsibility function as stabilizing reference frames

that inhibit the unreflective adoption of external requirements. At the same time, the finding that 43.7 % of respondents perceive no recognizable platform strategy in their organization points to a structural gap: modification requires strategic capacity that is not yet systematically developed in many newsrooms.

Innovation manifests most clearly in the emerging figure of the journalistic personal brand. That 60.9 % of respondents affirm the growing importance of personal brands marks a qualitative role shift: journalists become autonomous brand actors who partly control reach, agenda-setting, and audience engagement themselves. This development points to a restructuring of professional identity.

The study shows that German journalism currently operates in a mode dominated by adjustment, while modification and innovation appear more selectively and context-dependently. External transformation pressures are not directly converted into changed journalistic practices but are filtered and translated through internal organizational and normative structures. This confirms the theoretical assumption of the adaptation framework.

A central question crystallizes from the findings: under what conditions can journalism maintain its democratic orientation function when infrastructures, success metrics, and production tools are increasingly controlled by commercially driven platform companies? The evidence suggests that professional norms currently still function as effective insulation — skepticism toward AI, emphasis on human control, and instrumental framing of adaptations testify to an intact normative self-understanding. Yet the structural dependence on platform-mediated visibility means this protective layer is under sustained pressure.

From a media ethics perspective, this calls for adaptation processes to be understood not merely as pragmatic responses to market conditions, but as subjects of active professional and organizational reflection — through editorial AI guidelines, transparency norms, and institutionally anchored debate about the limits of platform-conforming adaptation. Future research should pursue these questions longitudinally, in comparative or organizational studies, and from a reception-oriented perspective.

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Full Article

(German):

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