

INTRODUCTION

BEYOND DETERMINISM: challenges and opportunities for journalism in a technological ecosystem



JOSE ALBERTO GARCÍA-AVILÉS
Universidad Miguel Hernandez – Spain

SUZANA BARBOSA
Universidade Federal da Bahia – Brazil

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The current situation, characterized by “zero journalism” and “post-platformization” (Brown & Ja wi ska, 2025), appears to amplify the challenges and tensions facing journalism. These terms refer to a moment of disillusionment for journalistic organizations that once believed Big Tech corporations like Meta/Facebook, Google, and X/ Twitter would serve as primary channels for sustaining operations, ensuring innovation, expanding reach, and monetizing audiences.

Following the wave of investments from platform companies, the subsequent decline in referral traffic, and the current limitation of visibility for original journalistic content due to generative AI systems, news organizations – as noted by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University (Brown & Ja wi ska, 2025) – are rethinking their strategies. They are now aiming to reach audiences more directly through their own proprietary environments. These organizations are also acting with greater caution in partnerships with platforms and AI-developing companies, given the recent experience

1 Universidad Miguel Hernandez – Spain. E-mail: jose.garciaa@umh.es

2 Universidade Federal da Bahia – Brazil. E-mail: suzana.barbosa@gmail.com

of dependency (Montenegro, 2020; Poell et al., 2022; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; Poell et al., 2023; Munoriyarwa et al., 2024), which has been characterized as the “capture of journalism by platforms” (Nechustai, 2018; Simon, 2022; Papaevangelou, 2023; Barbosa, 2025).

The rhetoric of “post-platformization”, as used in the Tow Center report, marks a new phase in journalism’s relationship with Big Tech. It anticipates greater dialogue and reduced power asymmetries, as most organizations now recognize the risks and are seeking to prioritize autonomy and resilience. They are also advocating for regulations that would protect journalists’ and publishers’ copyrights and ensure fair compensation for the use of the content they produce. This reality affects journalism and news organizations in diverse contexts, including the United States, Canada, Australia, Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, India, Indonesia, and Turkey.

The core premise of this dossier is to move beyond determinism to critically discuss, identify, and analyze the challenges and opportunities for journalism in a technology-driven ecosystem. It is important to acknowledge that technology neither becomes nor replaces journalism. Nonetheless, it has been a significant driver of change. As Tim P. Voss emphasized in an interview with Silva (2025, p. 6), technology integrates with economic, cultural, and political dimensions, shaping professional practices, processes, and routines. This influence is evident in the transformation of formats, the accelerated speed of production, the emergence of new narrative forms, and – building on Voss’s point – the ways audiences interact (or fail to interact) with journalism. Citing Zelizer (2019), who cautions that journalism is more than just digital technology and insists on the need to observe its values, routines, and sociopolitical contexts, Voss (in Silva, 2025, p. 6) reminds us that journalism remains a social and cultural practice shaped by factors far beyond the tools it employs.

As Appelgren (2023, p. 673) noted in her review article on technological determinism in journalism studies, the field of Digital Journalism Studies (DJS) is thematically oriented towards technology, platforms, and audiences. It focuses on change while simultaneously seeking new ways to conceptualize and analyze journalism. The continuous changes and transformations – particularly those related to digitalization (Boczkowski & Michelstein, 2021; Salaverría, 2019; Westlund & Steensen, 2021; García-Avilés, 2025), the platformization of society (Van Dijck et al., 2018; Poell et al., 2019, 2020; Scolari, 2022),

and the platformization of journalism (Bell, 2016, 2017; Rashidian et al., 2019; Jurno & D’Andrea, 2020; Napoli, 2021; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; Nielsen & Cherubini, 2022; Barbosa et al., 2024; Canavilhas & García-Orosa, 2024; Barbosa, 2025) – have been exponential. In a cycle of relentless acceleration, as observed by García-Avilés (2025, p. 137): “What once happened every ten years now occurs every three, and what became obsolete in six months now lasts only weeks”. In this context, it’s worth remembering that three decades have already passed since the emergence of the World Wide Web and the first journalistic websites.

Research indicates that, alongside the opportunities presented by technology, there are risks such as the loss of media credibility or trustworthiness, gaps in ethical standards, and the standardization of low-quality journalistic production (Murcia-Verdú & Ufarte-Ruiz, 2019). According to Reese (2021), the crisis journalism faces in terms of public trust stems from the fact that its institutional authority is no longer sufficient to make audiences trust what is said (and portrayed) in the news.

Drawing on Chadwick’s (2013) postulates, Reese considers the notion of a hybrid media system more appropriate for the contemporary moment. This concept better captures journalism’s new complexity, where power is no longer centralized in a single, predefined institution. Instead, interests align in constantly re-creating contingent interactions. In Reese’s view, the press today is a hybrid institution that extends beyond the news organization and newsroom, grounded in new configurations of professional, technological, and civil society elements. This assertion aligns with the critique by Deuze and Witschge (2018) of journalism’s normative expectations and the questioning of the newsroom’s centrality in journalism studies. It also addresses the marginalization of minority practices and non-hegemonic forms of journalism within the field.

The concept of the hybrid media system is certainly more attuned to the current context and the themes addressed by the texts selected for this dossier. These contributions resonate with the idea of innovation as a procedural and negotiable action that demands change at every stage (Fonseca, 2020). They also align with a holistic view of innovation, as proposed by García-Avilés et al. (2019), who move away from an exclusively technological or market-oriented perspective. They argue that innovation in journalism is “the capacity to respond by changing products, processes, and services through

the use of creative skills that allow a problem or need to be identified and addressed in a way that results in the introduction of something new that adds value for consumers and, in doing so, promotes the viability of a media organization” (García-Avilés et al., 2019, pp. 3–4).

More broadly, this dossier can be associated with Echeverría’s (2017, p. 17) understanding of innovation, which is defined beyond economy and technology. Echeverría emphasizes its social value by encompassing interactive processes that generate something new, transformative, and valuable within specific systems and environments. Such innovations may occur in the market, in society, in the arts, in language, in nature, and as well as in journalism.

As with the call for papers, this introduction was co-authored across the Atlantic in the second semester of 2025, itself an example of techno-writing (Echeverría & Almendros, 2020). Out of twelve submissions, four articles were selected through a rigorous peer-review process.

The four selected articles

The first article, “*The Sympoietic Journalism of Rede Wayuri: a making-with from the edges of the planet*”, by Evandro J. M. Laia, Marina Magalhães de Moraes, and Cândida Maria Nobre de A. Moraes, investigates the production practices of Rede Wayuri. This network is formed by Indigenous communicators from 23 ethnic groups in the Upper Rio Negro, Amazonas, Brazil. The authors conceptualize this as a “journalistic network” that encompasses human actors (communicators) and non-human actors (digital social networks, connectivity devices, streaming platforms, and the multiplatform instant messaging and voice call app WhatsApp, among others). These elements enable the production of a “translation of the world” grounded in reticular ecology (Di Felice, 2017). This approach includes but also extends beyond the platformized media environment, drawing on the ideas of “networks of networks” (Terso, 2023) and the “connection of all things” (Di Felice, 2023).

The article presents net-activism as an approach for thinking about narratives from the edges of the planet, using the concept of sympoiesis. This term refers to collective production systems that have no self-defined spatial or temporal limits, and in which information and control are distributed among components. The goal

is to create autonomous narratives that prioritize special content in the native language to facilitate understanding among relatives from different ethnicities, based on the most widely spoken Indigenous languages in the region. This sympoietic journalism, according to Laia, Morais, and Moraes, results from the intertwining of digital networks and ancestral technologies. It integrates fiber optic systems, satellites, human beings, climate, trees, boats, pen drives, and all other existing elements of the forest, producing something substantially different from the “translations of the world” generated in traditional newsrooms.

The second article, “*Generative AI and digital native outlets: a possible match?*”, by João Pedro Malar and Elizabeth Saad, examines innovations in journalism linked to intelligent generative systems, highlighting the necessity and legitimacy of an active, technologically adept journalism. The authors use a triangulation of thematic and methodological perspectives to analyze such systems, focusing specifically on digitally native outlets as prototypical representatives of the innovative potential of digitalization in journalistic processes in Brazil and Latin America.

The authors correlate aspects of innovation in journalism and algorithmization with the publicly stated editorial policy of five Brazilian digital native outlets: Agência Tatu, Aos Fatos, Núcleo Jornalismo, Revista AzMina, and Agência Pública. The period chosen for data collection (January 2023 to July 2024) was intentionally selected to coincide with the announcements stimulated by the ChatGPT hype, although the authors note that some outlets had made earlier announcements related to algorithmic intelligent systems. Although their final corpus is not exhaustive, they found that artificial intelligence “is an auxiliary tool for journalistic work in certain tasks, and not a substitute for journalists”. However, Malar and Saad caution that the publicly expressed view may diverge from the practical application of technology. The scenario they present engages with global studies on the subject, contributing to “opening more doors and raising more research questions around the issue”.

The third paper, “*Differences in the perceptions of reporters and editors regarding the use of audience metrics in Brazilian newsrooms*”, by Marcel Hartmann and Thais Furtado, explores how journalists reconcile traditional ethical values with the demands of audience metric analysis software. From a qualitative perspective, the study includes in-depth interviews with ten journalists from

Brazilian newsrooms in the Rio-São Paulo axis, the Central-West, and the South. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, the researchers employed French Discourse Analysis to examine the responses. In their findings, the authors identify that reporters express greater negativity, emphasizing the pressure to produce stories that appeal to audiences, while editors adopt a more conciliatory tone, highlighting the connection between the press and readers' interests.

They also conclude that, on one hand, the metrification of journalism allows for a connection with the public's interests and an attentiveness to readers' questions. On the other hand, it provides data to verify whether reporters and editors are producing stories that appeal to audiences and, consequently, to be evaluated based on their performance. The authors state that "in practice, metrics also serve as tools for work control and surveillance". Although monitoring audience interests is not a new phenomenon that began with the internet, the authors consider the current moment to be one of significant changes due to technological advances and the evolution of analytics software. This software can precisely measure audience consumption, including: how long a person remained engaged with online content; how far they scrolled through an article or watched a video; consumption times for different types of stories; which news sections generate the most interest; the traffic source (whether the reader typed in the site's address, was directed by Google, or came via social media); or the geographical origin of access. Hartmann and Furtado argue that metrics interfere when a news outlet decides whether to invest or divest in certain coverage areas. Citing Sartor (2016), they caution that it is not always negative, from a journalistic perspective, to take audience interest into account. However, there are risks, such as the one highlighted by Fonseca (2005), that the press may cease to be a source of knowledge and become a discourse aimed at pleasing the public.

The fourth and final article, "*Journalistic ecosystems: actors, characteristics and socio-technological environments*", by Carlos Franciscato, explores the definition of the characteristics of a journalistic ecosystem in a scenario of converging institutional and market crises and the rise of digital technologies as operational infrastructures and technological mediators of political, economic, and sociocultural relations. The methodological design includes bibliographic and documentary research based on secondary data from 38 reports with empirical diagnoses on contemporary

transformations in journalism. These reports were produced by three internationally recognized journalism research institutes: the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (University of Oxford), the Tow Center for Digital Journalism (Columbia University), and the Pew Research Center. The period covered spans 20 years of journalism studies (2004 to 2023). In a second stage, using Content Analysis, Franciscato compared the indicators of media and journalism transformations with reference literature on social phenomena such as the formation of social networks and the structuring of social fields. Looking at the situation, as the author notes, allowed for a portrayal close to the contemporary media system.

The author presents six characteristics that express contemporary configurations and functions of journalistic ecosystems: the diversity of media and journalism actors and models; the strength of technological mediations; the structural presence of digital platforms; the logic of engagement; the condition of growth and transition; and the vulnerability of ecosystems. These characteristics, Franciscato warns, are not stable and do not constitute a fixed structure, as they are affected by situational factors and by processes such as hybridization, social fragmentation, the acceleration of social processes, datafication, and, more recently, artificial intelligence and its penetrability into all social dimensions. The author proposes defining journalistic ecosystems as socio-technological ecosystems: a human construction resulting from technological structures and social interactions, bringing a socially configured intentionality that defines technologies, interests, and relations of dispute and power.

These four articles collectively explore the limitations of a purely deterministic approach and examine the challenges and opportunities for journalism to thrive in a technological ecosystem by reclaiming its role as a creative, value-driven enterprise.

A human-centered approach to journalism innovation

The digital revolution has reshaped our information ecosystems, and journalism finds itself at a critical juncture. The once-stable landscape of media production and consumption has been fractured by the rise of a pervasive technological infrastructure, giving rise to what is often described as a state of perpetual crisis. This crisis is frequently viewed through a deterministic lens,

where technological disruption and economic pressures are seen as inevitable forces that dictate the industry's trajectory. From this perspective, innovation is reduced to a reactionary adoption of new tools or a frantic chase after new business models to maintain market share.

However, this essay argues for a more holistic and human-centered view of innovation, one that moves beyond this deterministic framework. It posits that true innovation in journalism is not merely a technological or market-driven imperative, but a deep human capacity rooted in creativity and a commitment to civic values. By redefining innovation as the capacity to respond to complex challenges by changing products, processes, and services using creative skills, journalism can identify and address problems in a way that introduces new value for consumers, thereby promoting the long-term viability of a media organization.

For too long, the prevailing narrative of media innovation has been dominated by two intertwined forms of determinism: technological and economic.

Technological determinism, in its most basic form, suggests that new technologies are the primary drivers of social and cultural change. In journalism, this perspective has led to an almost obsessive focus on adopting new platforms and tools – from websites and blogs to social media and artificial intelligence – as the sole measure of progress. The result is a cycle of reactive adaptation, where newsrooms chase the latest trend without a clear understanding of its long-term strategic value. This approach often leads to a “solutionism” mentality, where technology is seen as a cure-all for deep-seated problems like declining trust and dwindling revenue, without addressing their underlying causes. For example, the early adoption of social media was often driven by a fear of being left behind, leading to a proliferation of content on platforms that ultimately commoditized journalistic labor and failed to build a sustainable relationship with audiences.

Similarly, economic determinism frames innovation almost exclusively in terms of market-based solutions. In this view, the primary goal of any change is to increase revenue, reduce costs, or capture a new audience segment. The focus shifts from journalism's core public service mission to a competitive, commercial one, where value is measured in clicks, ad impressions, and subscription numbers. While a viable business is necessary for sustainability, this

model often leads to a focus on sensationalism, clickbait, and content that prioritizes virality over civic utility. The pressure to innovate for purely economic reasons can corrode journalistic standards and erode the public trust that is the very foundation of the industry. News organizations may find themselves in a race to the bottom, adopting strategies that promise short-term gains but undermine their long-term credibility and relevance.

The convergence of these two deterministic forces creates a narrow and often self-defeating definition of innovation, where journalism is not the agent of its own change but a passive recipient of external forces (García-Avilés, 2025).

Toward a holistic and human-centered model

To move beyond the limitations of determinism, journalism must embrace a more holistic model of innovation, one that places human creativity and purpose at its center. This model begins not with technology or the market, but with the fundamental mission of journalism itself: to inform the public and hold power accountable. Innovation, therefore, is not a goal in and of itself, but a means to better achieve this mission in a constantly evolving environment. This requires a shift in mindset from “what new tool can we use?” to “what problem are we trying to solve for our community?”

A comprehensive approach to innovation in journalism can be broken down into three key components:

- **Problem-centered inquiry:** true innovation begins with a deep understanding of audience needs and the societal problems that journalism can help address. This is a process of creative inquiry that involves listening to communities, analyzing information gaps, and identifying underserved needs. For instance, rather than simply launching a new podcast because the format is popular, a news organization might identify a community’s lack of accessible information on local public health resources. The innovation would then be to create a new product – a podcast series, a data visualization tool, or a series of in-person community forums – designed to fill that gap. This is not innovation for its own sake; it is innovation born from a clear, identified need.

- **Creative skills and interdisciplinary collaboration:** this model rejects the idea that innovation is the sole domain of

technology departments. Instead, it argues that creative skills – such as storytelling, design thinking, and audience engagement – are the primary drivers of innovation. It requires a newsroom culture that fosters collaboration between journalists, editors, designers, developers, and community managers. For example, a team might use design thinking principles to co-create a new digital product with community members, moving from ideation and prototyping to testing and iteration. Innovation is not just the final product but the collaborative process itself, which builds stronger relationships with the audience and ensures the solution is genuinely valuable.

● Value-driven outcomes: the ultimate measure of innovation in this holistic model is not economic success alone but the creation of new value for audiences. This value can take many forms: increased civic engagement, a better-informed electorate, a stronger sense of community, or a deeper understanding of complex issues. While commercial viability is essential for sustainability, it is seen because of providing genuine value, not as the primary goal. An organization that innovates by producing high-quality, impactful investigative journalism might attract a loyal subscriber base not through sensationalism but through the proven value of its work. The business model, in this case, is a mechanism for sustaining the mission, not a force that dictates it.

In conclusion, the path forward for journalism in a technological ecosystem requires a fundamental shift in perspective. The deterministic view, which reduces innovation to a reactive cycle of technological adoption and economic necessity, has proven to be a dead end. By embracing a holistic model of innovation, one that is problem-centered, creatively driven, and focused on delivering genuine value to the public, journalism can reclaim its vital role in a democratic society. This requires the courage to ask, “what problem are we solving?” before asking “what new technology can we use?” It requires a cultural transformation within newsrooms to foster interdisciplinary collaboration and prioritize empathy and creative inquiry. The challenges are formidable, but the opportunities for a journalism that is truly viable and valuable, a journalism that is not just a product of its time but a purposeful force within it, are immense. The future of journalism will not be determined by the technology it adopts, but by the creativity and integrity with which it chooses to innovate. The journey beyond determinism is not just an opportunity; it is an imperative.

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JOSE ALBERTO GARCIA AVILES. Catedratic Professor of Journalism at Miguel Hernández University (UMH) in Elche, Spain, where he also heads the Department of Social Sciences. Since 2000, he has conducted comparative research on the effects of digitalization on television news and on newsroom convergence. His current work focuses on innovation in journalism and information quality. He is a member of the Network of Excellence in Digital Journalism. Email: jose.garciaa@umh.es

SUZANA BARBOSA. Associate Professor in the Department of Communication and a permanent faculty member of the Graduate Program in Communication and Contemporary Culture (PósCom) at the School of Communication, Federal University of Bahia (FACOM-UFBA). She is a researcher and currently coordinates the Online Journalism Research Group (GJOL) at the same institution. Email: suzana.barbosa@gmail.com