



Article

# Journalism and social media in creator economies: Evolving structures and labor

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## Abstract

Amid journalism's business model crisis and the rise of creator economies, this article examines how legacy journalism and social media converge under neoliberal platform capitalism, reshaping industry structures, labor conditions, and journalism's democratic role. Drawing on a thematic analysis of 19 in-depth interviews with US-based journalists, social media editors, and independent news creators, it integrates critical political economy of media approaches with journalism and creator studies to analyze how workers navigate unstable revenue models, platform governance, and technological disruption. The findings reveal intersecting business- and labor-oriented crises characterized by algorithmic control, low pay, unpaid work, and varying degrees of autonomy and collective protection. While newsroom workers experience structural rigidity, independent creators—akin to freelance journalists—face intensified self-exploitation and financial risk through individualized branding and visibility pressures. Neoliberal platform capitalism reconfigures journalism labor around precarity, entrepreneurialism, and self-management, underscoring the need for sustainable public interventions to safeguard journalism's democratic role.

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**Keywords**

Creators, influencers, journalism, labor, news, political economy, social media, sociology of news production

The business model crisis and precarious employment in traditional journalism have paved the way for social media platforms, such as X, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, to become key spaces for independent news production and consumption (Newman, 2022; Salamon, 2025a). Many independent content creators covering news have more than 100,000 followers on at least one platform, with one-in-five American adults relying on news influencers as a news source (Pew Research Center, 2024). Most US-based news influencers are men, have no background or affiliation with a news company, and monetize through subscriptions, donations, and merchandise sales. In some cases, they rival the audience reach of established news companies. Researchers and trade publications have labeled these actors newsfluencers, journalist influencers or journo-influencers, and content-creator model journalists, noting differences in monetization models, reporting approaches (e.g. original reporting, aggregation, or commentary), platform use, and relationships to legacy media outlets (Hurcombe, 2025; Nelson, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2024; Stenberg, 2020). YouTube's News Creator Workshops illustrate how platforms position themselves as supporters of digital news creation (YouTube, 2022), while simultaneously reinforcing extractive, precarious platform labor conditions (Bonini and Tréré, 2024; Salamon, 2025b).

Journalism researchers have examined how traditional journalists use social media for news production, dissemination, and personal branding (Bélair-Gagnon and Revers, 2018; Humayun and Ferrucci, 2022). These practices have extended journalistic norms and disrupted established routines through incorporating self-branding and platform logics (Anter, 2024; Degen et al., 2024). Conversely, research on social media entertainment (SME) creators has examined how regionally specific factors, including platform governance, monetization programs, and emerging forms of labor organizing, shape creators' business models and working conditions (Bonini and Tréré, 2024; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). While SME studies highlight the precarious nature of creative platform work (Duffy, 2017), journalism-oriented research has tended to remain platform-specific, often focusing on tensions between platform practices and journalistic norms, rather than broader structural conditions (Anter, 2025; Harlow, 2024; Kallio and Mäenpää, 2025).

To address this gap, this study brings into dialogue multiple approaches to the critical political economy (CPE) of media with journalism and creator studies to examine how platform dynamics reshape news production business models and labor conditions. We examine two groups operating within US platform media economies: journalists and social media editors affiliated with a news company as well as independent news content creators with no affiliation with a news company (Pew Research Center, 2024). Drawing on in-depth interviews, we analyze how these actors navigate shifting revenue models, platform governance, technological disruption, and labor dynamics. The United States

represents a critical case due to its platform dominance and weak welfare protections, which heighten the risks of self-employment and amplify platform precarity (Cunningham and Craig, 2019).

The following research question guides this study: *How do US-based journalists and social media editors and independent social media news creators perceive and negotiate platform-era business models and labor conditions?*

Our findings show that some interviewees value the autonomy afforded by social media and creator-driven news production. Yet they also face intensified precarity, unstable monetization, platform control, and limited professional and collective protections. These dynamics illustrate how platformization is reshaping journalism's democratic role. Newswriters ultimately diagnose new, overlapping business- and labor-oriented crises.

## Literature review

### *Platform practices and evolving norms in journalism*

Social media platforms have become integral to journalism, enabling news companies and independent creators to generate, distribute, and promote content while engaging directly with audiences (Anter, 2024; Hendrickx, 2023). Sociology of news production research shows that journalists have used social media platforms for three key purposes: news production (e.g. sourcing, verification), dissemination (e.g. sharing stories and updates), and personal branding (i.e. curating a public professional identity) (Bélair-Gagnon and Revers, 2018; Humayun and Ferrucci, 2022). Journalists initially adopted social media voluntarily as part of their professional practices, but many newsrooms have institutionalized platform use, pressuring journalists to post content regularly to drive online engagement and traffic.

In adapting to these expectations, journalists and news content creators have extended established journalistic norms, including accuracy, relevance, and public service, while branding practices have blurred boundaries between professional and personal identities (Anter, 2024; Degen et al., 2024). Researchers have identified new hybrid journalistic role performances: journalists combine *traditional roles*—including watchdog, informational, and service roles (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2018)—with *platform-driven roles* that prioritize audience connection, visibility, and self-promotion, such as entertainment-oriented celebrity, joker, and promoter roles (Mellado and Hermida, 2022). For example, Mellado (2022) found that journalists in Chile used Instagram and Twitter to emphasize the service role and community building, while also leveraging the promoter role to strengthen professional and personal brands. In Belgium, public broadcasting journalists on Instagram relied on traditional values—primarily relevance—and community building (Hendrickx, 2023). In Germany and Austria, Instagram microbloggers embraced a strong public-service role and community building (Maares and Hanusch, 2020). In Germany, journalistic YouTubers upheld traditional journalistic roles, prioritizing advocacy or entertainment, or neutrality and public service (Lichtenstein et al., 2021). By contrast, US citizen journalists on TikTok stressed entertainment and personalization to determine newsworthiness (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024).

Platform affordances, dependencies, and audience interactions have shaped these adaptations (Hendrickx, 2023; Maares and Hanusch, 2020). For example, journalists on Instagram and TikTok adapted their content to prioritize visual aesthetics, interactivity, and personality-driven storytelling, aligning with the entertainment-oriented nature of these media (Bossio, 2023; Negreira-Rey et al., 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). TikTok citizen journalists also adapted serious news topics to fit perceived platform norms, believing that TikTok's algorithm promoted or suppressed their content based on engagement levels, platform features, and trending topics (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024). Journalistic YouTubers expanded their reach to younger audiences through entertaining formats, interactivity, and adaptation to platform logics (Lichtenstein et al., 2021). Compared to *independent* YouTubers, they had greater access to resources such as community managers. Although platforms expand journalism's reach, they also restructure newsworld around algorithmic visibility and online audience metrics, which can occasionally dilute journalism's public-service mission and professional autonomy while contributing to labor intensification (Degen et al., 2024; Perreault and Hanusch, 2024).

A growing global literature confirms these dynamics while also highlighting distinct power configurations among the state, news companies, and platforms in influencing journalistic practices. In Asia, news influencers play increasingly visible roles in shaping informational ecosystems. For example, social media platforms in China have amplified journalists' and microbloggers' struggles to assert autonomy from state control (Jian and Liu, 2018). In the Philippines, partisan YouTube influencers have gained prominence by circulating political commentary and delegitimizing established news companies (Soriano and Gaw, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, influencers across China, Japan, and South Korea strategically shared government-verified information to counter misinformation (Abidin et al., 2021), reflecting how influencers can fulfill service and advocacy roles. These cases illustrate how platformized journalism intersects with media-state relations and political trust, demonstrating regional variations in how platforms mediate news production. To better understand the changing nature of business models and labor, we must also consider the practices of creators operating outside journalism.

### *Social media entertainment and creators' labor*

Social media entertainment (SME) research has examined how creators pursue content creation as either a side hustle or a full-time entrepreneurial career across platforms (Abidin, 2018; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Salamon, 2025b). Researchers have emphasized that creators must simultaneously produce content, cultivate audiences, and navigate shifting platform governance regimes—activities that combine creative expression with commercial self-promotion. Duffy (2017) highlights the divide between the minority of creators who succeed financially and the remaining creators—often women—who provide *aspirational labor* for corporate brands. Such labor is sustained through individualized, entrepreneurial discourse around passion, authenticity, and self-branding. Creators feel encouraged to do what they love in the hope that unpaid work will eventually yield visibility, social capital, or material rewards.

This literature conceptualizes content creation as a contemporary form of precarious and nonstandard employment under neoliberal platform capitalism (Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). Under these conditions, the boundaries between work and leisure blur, leading to overwork, self-exploitation, and acceptance of passion as a substitute for pay. Economic inequalities exacerbate these pressures: creators often face inconsistent income, delayed or missing payments, and an uneven distribution of sponsorship opportunities. Algorithmic governance further amplifies these inequalities by determining creators' visibility and income streams through opaque and shifting monetization systems, such as YouTube's Partner Program. Marginalized creators, especially those from racialized or LGBTQ+ backgrounds, report that their content is rendered less visible or penalized when it addresses politicized topics, reflecting platform capitalism's exclusionary logics (Abidin, 2018; Bonini and Treré, 2024; Salamon and Saunders, 2024).

Despite these exploitative dynamics, creators leverage platforms to build micro-celebrity personas and develop distinctive cross-platform self-brands. These strategies often require extensive affective labor, as creators must engage audiences while maintaining professional credibility and algorithmic visibility (Abidin, 2018; Cunningham and Craig, 2019). Regionally specific factors, such as local professionalization schemes, monetization programs, and emerging collective organizing efforts, shape how creators manage these challenges and sustain their work (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). To better account for these dynamics, SME research situates creators' work within broader political-economic contexts. Platformized media production reflects not only individual entrepreneurialism but also structural variations in welfare, labor dynamics, and media markets across regions. These structural conditions shape how creators and journalists experience precarity and provide a foundation—grounded in CPE research—for understanding the systemic forces reshaping media industries under platform capitalism.

### *Critical political economy of journalism, labor, and platforms*

While newsroom sociology and creator studies illuminate the social and cultural factors that influence media production, CPE approaches foreground the broader structural forces shaping journalism and workers' experiences under platform capitalism. As journalism has adapted to digitally-mediated capitalism, researchers have advanced *crisis narratives* (Salamon, 2025a; Siles and Boczkowski, 2012), characterizing industry change through *business instability* and *technological disruption* (Metzger, 2024; Pickard, 2011), *financialization* (Almiron, 2010; Salamon, 2025a), and *precarious employment* (Cohen, 2016; Mathews et al., 2023; Örnebring, 2018). Taken together, factors like digitalization, ownership concentration, investor-driven ownership, job insecurity, overwork, and low pay can undermine journalism's democratic role by eroding the institutional and labor dynamics necessary to inform the public and serve democracy (Almiron, 2010; Cohen, 2016; Pickard, 2011).

Distinct CPE approaches trace how ownership concentration, financial logics, cost-cutting, and platform governance shape journalistic labor and journalism's public-service mission (Mosco, 2009; Salamon, 2024). The *corporate ownership and control*

approach highlights the role of concentrated media ownership and commercial priorities in shaping content, labor relations, and public policy proposals for structural change (McChesney and Nichols, 2022; Mosco, 2009). Murdock (1982) distinguishes between allocative control (owners setting overarching strategic priorities) and operational control (managers and editors implementing those priorities through everyday decision-making). The *platform capital and labor* approach foregrounds how digital intermediaries structure the production, distribution, and monetization of journalism (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2023). Platformization shifts power away from conventional editorial logics, notions of media plurality, and newsworker autonomy toward algorithmic and monetization imperatives, as social media companies like Google, Meta, Apple, and Amazon shape audience access, content visibility, and revenue streams. News companies and platform companies have become mutually dependent—dependencies that can vary across digital-native, legacy private-owned media, and public service broadcasters. News companies have increasingly relied on third-party subscription services and platforms, including Apple+ and Substack, to distribute and promote their content. The *infomedia* approach foregrounds the evolving relationship between news publishers and infomediary platforms in cultural industries (Nechushtai, 2018; Smyrniotis and Rebillard, 2019). What began as coope-tition—a mix of *cooperation* through content-sharing agreements and *competition* for advertising revenue—has shifted toward infrastructural dependency and asymmetrical power, with platforms shaping distribution and editorial logics.

A growing strand of CPE research has examined newsworker agency and *labor stand-points of resistance* as another structuring force, highlighting how journalists and creators navigate and resist structural pressures through unionization and new forms of labor organizing across platforms (Cohen, 2016, 2019; Mosco, 2009; Salamon, 2024). Researchers have documented rising job insecurity, low pay, overwork, and the erosion of professional standards in staff and freelance employment. Despite such precarity, freelance journalists have adopted entrepreneurial tactics, leveraging digital platforms and crowdfunding mechanisms to diversify their income streams and preserve professional autonomy amid limited institutional support (Cohen, 2016; Hunter, 2016; Salamon, 2024). Freelancers have used social media platforms to share their work, build visibility, and self-brand. They have further resisted through short-term digital campaigns and unionization, negotiating individualistic entrepreneurial subjectivity and collectivistic activism. At the same time, news staff have pushed back through traditional labor unions, professional associations, and emerging autonomous collective organizations, employing long- and short-term tactics: union mergers, publicity campaigns, direct action, legal action, and alternative journalism. While unionization efforts have increased across US news publishing and broadcasting since the 2010s, some workers remain skeptical of traditional unions' capacity to address their interests and platform - or creator-specific grievances (Higgins-Dobney and Sussman, 2013; Salamon, 2024). These tensions illuminate an evolving field of labor struggle marked by uneven institutional support and increasing precarity.

Overall, this literature illustrates that distinct national political-economic conditions shape platformized journalism and creator labor. In the US, a libertarian and deregulatory model of neoliberalism—characterized by weak or privatized welfare

protections—intensifies precarious work (Cohen, 2016; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Mosco, 2009). Stronger welfare systems in other advanced economies can partly mitigate the risks of self-employment, freelancing, or creator work. The US case therefore offers a critical context for analyzing how a distinct model of neoliberalism mediates platformized journalism and precarious working conditions.

Despite these valuable insights, research should integrate an analysis of journalistic structures and labor more systematically across legacy and independent creator economies. A more robust CPE framework is needed to understand how newswriters—in legacy institutions and independent content creators—interpret, navigate, and respond to such industry change. Such a framework should account for the power relations shaping social media news production, including the roles of revenue models, platform governance, working conditions, and labor resistance, while recognizing workers' agency in reshaping these conditions. *This article extends a CPE framework to examine how journalists, social media editors, and independent news creators perceive and respond to shifting industry and labor dynamics under neoliberal platform capitalism by communicating distinct journalism crisis narratives. By foregrounding workers' perspectives, it traces how structural transformations in revenue models, platform governance, and organizational strategy reshape labor; the viability of collective representation, and journalism's democratic role across diverse work arrangements.*

## Method

This study is based on 19 in-depth Zoom interviews with journalists and social media editors affiliated with a news company as well as independent news content creators with no affiliation with a news company (Pew Research Center, 2024). All of them use social media for producing or distributing news. Grounded in a critical realist epistemology (Mosco, 2009), we integrate multiple CPE approaches—corporate control, infomedia-tion, platform labor, and resistance—to highlight the social dimensions of news production. Our approach combines structural critique with an interpretive focus on how workers experience their business models and labor processes.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and averaged 43 minutes, with participants joining from various locations, including their workplace offices or at-home studios (Archibald et al., 2019). The flexibility to join outside the workplace enabled a few to speak more openly about frustrations with employers. The semi-structured, conversational interviews focused on labor production practices, perceptions of industry change, and media worker rights. This format allowed for customized follow-up questions based on each participant's unique role and work situation. To comply with the IRB, all personal identification and the names of outlets/channels were anonymized. Participants were also notified of their right to withdraw at any time.

We initially used purposive sampling (Boyatzis, 1998) to contact journalists, social media editors, and news content creators who regularly use social media for work. We found potential interviewees by consulting trade press lists (e.g. Neiman Lab, Poynters), staffing lists of news organizations' social media departments, and a journalist directory (Zaffarano, 2023). We sent recruitment emails to 71 potential participants, supplementing this approach with snowball sampling during the interviews to recruit others with similar experiences.

The final participant group consisted of 11 individuals affiliated with news companies (journalists or social media editors) and eight independent news content creators (solopreneurs). Interviewees ranged from 22 to 50 years old, with 2 to 23 years of work experience. Eleven had journalism training, and six were union-represented. All participants worked for US-based organizations, using platforms like Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube, and/or LinkedIn for social media engagement. Full details are in Table 1. This study uses a worker-centered inquiry approach within CPE (Marx, 1938 [1880]; Mosco, 2009; Salamon and Saunders, 2024), rather than focusing on participants' conjectures about algorithm function (e.g. Bucher, 2017). It examines interviewees' insights into their daily labor practices, business operations, employment conditions, and uses of digital technologies, including social media.

The US presents a valuable case for research on social media journalism for numerous reasons, including the declining trust in traditional news sources and the subsequent rise in social media use as a news source (Graves and Jenkins, 2025; Toff et al., 2023). In the US, media unions like the NewsGuild-CWA, the Writers Guild of America, East, and SAG-AFTRA represent journalists and staff across various publications (Cohen, 2016; Salamon, 2025a). Union eligibility is tied to employment status; while staff generally organize through local bargaining units, freelancers and creators are largely non-unionized. Freelancers may gain coverage through specific local branches or standard agreements, and SAG-AFTRA offers limited coverage via its Influencer Agreement. We situate our interviewees' accounts of labor dynamics within this broader, complex context of collective representation.

The third author conducted the interviews from May to September 2024, meeting concurrently with the first and second authors to write memos and discuss emerging topics. The third author used Zoom to record and Otter.ai to transcribe the audio files, storing transcripts in a secure Google Drive folder. The first and second authors then iteratively coded the dataset using NVivo and a shared Google Doc (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Saldana, 2021). They focused on structural factors (e.g. pay, platform precarity) and labor practices. The authors met to discuss codes and collectively developed the final themes and subthemes (Boyatzis, 1998).

Our analysis has several limitations. The diverse job roles in our sample prevent direct, across-the-board comparisons; thus, we focus on common themes across all employment situations. The US-based context of our participants restricts the generalizability of our findings geographically. Furthermore, the ability of interviewees to choose their Zoom location may have limited candor, particularly if they participated from their workplace despite anonymity assurances. While we do not seek statistical generalizability about structural transformations, our analytical insights into how journalists, social media editors, and creators perceive and negotiate business models and labor offer valuable grounding for future, larger studies seeking to test these implications for journalism's democratic role.

## Results

This section examines how traditional newswriters and independent creators perceive and interpret structural shifts in journalism and platform economies. It considers how

**Table 1.** Interviewees details.

Interview #	Role	Gender	Age	Years of experience	Professional training in journalism?	Union representation?
J1	Independent creator	Female	30	10	Yes	No
J2	Social media editor	Female	26	6	Yes	No
J3	Social media editor	Female	24	6	Yes	Yes
J4	Journalist (broadcast)	Female	22	2	Yes	No
J5	Independent creator	Male	33	12	No	No
J6	Journalist (print/online)	Female	41	19	Yes	Yes
J7	Independent creator	Female	28	7	No	No
J8	Journalist (broadcast)	Male	35	12	Yes	No
J9	Independent creator	Male	38	7	No	No
J10	Independent creator	Male	45	22	Yes	No
J11	Independent creator	Male	38	5	No	No
J12	Journalist (online)	Female	33	12	Yes	Yes
J13	Journalist (print/online)	Female	41	16	Yes	Yes
J14	Independent creator	Male	50	14	No	No
J15	Social media editor	Female	33	11	Yes	No
J16	Social media editor	Female	31	12	No	No
J17	Social media editor	Female	27	5	No	Yes
J18	Independent creator	Male	43	23	Yes	No
J19	Social media editor	Male	34	14	No	Yes

these changes have reshaped labor dynamics in digital newswork, focusing on revenue instability, volatile platform governance, technological disruption, the normalization of unpaid labor, and evolving forms of collective representation. Drawing from workers' accounts, we argue that these themes reveal *intersecting business- and labor-oriented crises in journalism and social media content creation*, marked by overlapping precarities in financial sustainability, institutional control, technological adaptation, pay, and labor organizing.

### *Intersecting business model-oriented crises in journalism and social media*

Interviewees describe widespread *financial precarity*, attributing it to the collapse of traditional revenue models (Metzger, 2024; Salamon, 2025a) and increasing dependence on platforms governed by unpredictable algorithms and shifting priorities (Hurcombe, 2025; Poell et al., 2023). Independent creator J10 captures this uncertainty: “[Journalists] don’t know what the landscape will look like in five years, 10 years. We don’t know which platforms will still be there, and we don’t know how we’re going to make our money as an industry.”

Many interviewees linked instability to overreliance on social media traffic. Social media editor J19 recalls, “When Facebook and Twitter . . . started deprioritizing news, all the click-through-based news businesses, all that revenue tanked.” Similarly, J13, who supplements their journalist job with a personal Substack-hosted newsletter, notes, “[News companies] got a little addicted to traffic, and now if something isn’t gonna get them traffic, it’s not so optimized . . . They also want subscriptions.”

In response, many news outlets and independent creators have adopted newsletters (often hosted on Substack) and SEO-driven strategies to cultivate longer-term, sustainable audience engagement. Social media editor J16 explains that “social can be a form of getting the most engagement and sparking conversation, and people will maybe eventually click on the site, subscribe to the magazine, buy a ticket to an event, or listening on a podcast.” These testimonies highlight diversification as an essential strategy to sustain journalism and news creation under volatile neoliberal platform conditions (Hurcombe, 2025; Poell et al., 2023). Interviewees also note that Substack newsletters foster more direct and durable audience relationships than short-form, discovery-oriented platforms like TikTok.

Nevertheless, newer revenue streams remain fragile. Social media editor J15 calls broader content economies “broken”: “we haven’t adapted our storytelling to the attention spans of social media.” While they emphasize the need to foreground “talent” to boost visibility and engagement, they conclude that “there is [no] way for a publication to stay alive unless it has a brand studio component”—an in-house content marketing and advertising operation. Their outlet’s in-house content studio—producing branded content for clients such as Red Bull and Google—now generates most of its revenue: “we create client-branded content . . . to be able to fund [our] journalism endeavors.” Despite such initiatives, most interviewees still depend on advertising and third-party sponsorships managed through agencies—both vulnerable to audience shifts and platform governance changes (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). Client-branded content

entails direct partnerships with advertisers through internal brand studios, whereas third-party sponsorships involve external funders who might not directly influence editorial decisions.

A recurring concern is that audiences expect news content to remain free. Independent creator J11 observes, “Starting [an online] news company is very challenging because everyone wants their information for free.” Social media editor J17 elaborates, “How can we continue to maintain the cost of producing journalism in a world in which people want free everything? . . . There just doesn’t seem to be a lot of demand for that right now.” Like in social media entertainment (Cunningham and Craig, 2019), news creators must also navigate algorithmic monetization logics that demonetize politically sensitive content, often undermining core journalistic values (Hurcombe, 2025). J11 recounts how their coverage of the Israel-Gaza conflict was frequently demonetized because it risks alienating advertisers. Their advertising agency bluntly stated, “YouTube is not a content platform supported by ads. It’s an ad platform supported by content.” Such accounts highlight tensions between journalism’s public-service mission and the commercial logics of neoliberal platform capitalism (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Salamon, 2025a). As J13 concludes, independent creators are ultimately unable to produce “the quality journalism that a lot of traditional media has produced,” given these deeply “flawed” revenue models.

Interviewees also highlight that *rapid technological integration and uneven innovation strategies reshape news business operations*. While some legacy news companies experiment with platform-native formats, interviewees portray adaptation as uneven and slow (Siles and Boczkowski, 2012). By contrast, independent creators must constantly respond to algorithmic changes, ownership shifts (e.g. Musk’s Twitter takeover), and fluctuating audience behaviors (Hurcombe, 2025; Poell et al., 2023). Several interviewees perceive legacy outlets as structurally resistant to transformation due to print-first cultures and a tendency to treat social video practices as peripheral to core business strategies. J13 asserts, “When you work for a legacy publication, they don’t understand the Internet . . . they don’t actually let their reporters use TikTok for reporting.” Independent creator J5 identifies a “disconnect” in “the current structure” of legacy journalism, observing that “reporters are leaving in masses” to launch independent, news-oriented social media accounts (Mathews et al., 2023). Within this context, J11 frames their move to Substack as a step toward “starting to branch into a company rather than just a person,” illustrating how creator agency and platform affordances enable new hybrid news startups to launch (Metzger, 2024). Substack offers potentially steadier and direct subscription-based income from loyal audiences, while algorithm-driven and advertising-supported platforms like TikTok and YouTube remain subject to volatile recommendation systems. These accounts reflect a broader rebalancing of power in news economies: platform infrastructures mediate visibility and monetization (Poell et al., 2023), while legacy companies retain more allocative and operational control (Murdock, 1982; Salamon, 2024).

Finally, interviewees emphasize that social media-driven news economies are shaped by *weak platform governance and intensifying political polarization*. They describe platformed news production as increasingly hostile, poorly moderated, and controlled by platform owners whose algorithms amplify conflict and

hateful content while diminishing visibility, stability, and credibility for legacy news companies and independent creators (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Poell et al., 2023; Soriano and Gaw, 2022). J17 recalls that Twitter, once a vital journalistic tool, deteriorated following Elon Musk's 2022 takeover: "We're getting tagged in the most graphic photos and posts . . . There's no moderation right now." Independent creator J14 adds that Instagram has deprioritized political content, "diminishing the reach [of] . . . all creators operating in the political space, but also news organizations that are focusing on politics." These reflections portray online media as spaces where creators attempt to uphold public-interest norms within profit-driven, engagement-based systems. Press freedom remains formally intact but increasingly precarious (Salamon, 2025a), constrained less by editorial autonomy than by opaque, profit-oriented platform governance that lacks democratic accountability (Lichtenstein et al., 2021; Poell et al., 2023).

### *Compounding labor-oriented crises in journalism and social media*

Amid precarious journalism and social media business models, interviewees report *low pay, unpaid work, and limited financial stability*, regardless of their specific job roles. They describe how worker pay structures systematically devalue journalistic creator labor and exacerbate industry-wide precarity (Cohen, 2016; Salamon, 2025a). Like freelance journalists and SME creators, many news creators encounter high financial entry barriers and long periods without compensation (Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Hurcombe, 2025). J11 reflects,

I meet a lot of folks that say I want to do this, be a YouTuber or be a TikToker. I think if you start trying to make it a living, it becomes hard because there are many years where there was no money coming in.

Interviewees characterize such financial precarity as an investment in future visibility and career stability—a form of aspirational labor (Duffy, 2017). Yet only those with alternative income sources or employment benefits could sustain this work, showing how privilege shapes who can absorb such risks. These findings mirror patterns observed among freelance journalists who can afford to engage in passion work due to additional income or job security (Cohen, 2016; Hunter, 2016; Salamon, 2024).

Such aspirational labor still coexists with ongoing financial insecurity, as interviewees struggle to convert online visibility and engagement into sustainable income. J14 admits,

We're not here to make money. We're just here to understand the space and how we can be part of the conversation. And maybe the next step will be at some point, to make it like a full-time job . . . It's not a business right now.

Independent creator J9 echoes this view of content creation as a side hustle:

I never relied on content creation as a source of income or thought of it as what I'm doing as a career. It's just like something to do on the side . . . [I]f I were to lean into it to try to make

money for my family, I feel like that adds some tension . . . especially when it comes to brand deals . . . and more journalism-esque type of content and accounts.

These reflections underscore the financial obstacles to building a sustainable, mission-driven journalism career in neoliberal platform economies.

Financial security remains elusive even for journalists and social media editors. However, they view such roles as more sustainable than independent content creation. Social media editor J2 remarks that “it feels like having a stable influencer job.” J13 captures the dilemma:

I really wish I didn't have to work in legacy media, but there's nothing else. There's no other way to do journalism because the economics are so bad on the social platforms that I just don't know how you really support it.

While J13 criticizes legacy companies' inflexibility and toxic organizational cultures, they acknowledge that “these new places don't really pay and it's hard to make money online on your own, and they don't have resources.” These reflections illuminate a larger paradox: legacy companies offer relatively stable paid work but might stifle innovation, worker autonomy, and long-term career satisfaction (Cohen, 2019; Örnebring, 2018).

Interviewees express skepticism about systemic reform, given *the absence of social safety nets*. They emphasize a lack of institutional support and social protections that could mitigate political and economic precarity—challenges long familiar to freelance journalists (Cohen, 2016; Salamon, 2024) and SME creators (Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Salamon, 2025b). J14 views creators as increasingly influential political actors yet believes that legacy institutions have failed to engage them meaningfully: “Creators are changing the space immensely and so I think organizations need to realize . . . how they can involve them in a way differently from reporters and journalists.” Meanwhile, J13 situates the problem in a broader political context:

I need health care . . . That is literally the only reason I work in traditional media . . . We need things like universal health care . . . so that people can just do their businesses without having to worry about that stuff . . . and have access to public programs.

This testimony shows how the lack of universal healthcare in the US compels journalists to remain employed by legacy news companies rather than risk independent content creation without basic benefits. These accounts overall highlight the absence of comprehensive policy frameworks to support sustainable journalism and independent content creation under neoliberal platform capitalism (McChesney and Nichols, 2022; Pickard, 2011). They also reaffirm the US as a critical case, where a libertarian variant of neoliberalism—marked by weak social welfare and labor protections—limits systemic reform (Cohen, 2016; Cunningham and Craig, 2019).

Journalists and social media editors further claim management often expect them to produce social media content in addition to core reporting tasks without additional compensation, reflecting exploitative forms of digital journalism work (Cohen, 2019; Salamon, 2024). J10 underscores how this dynamic contributes to burnout:

I've heard from a lot of my counterparts who are already facing burnout when their bosses come to . . . tell them they need to be doing more on social media. It's overwhelming, and they don't feel like they have enough hours in the day for all the demands, and given the falling pay in our industry, generally, most people are finding it's not worth it.

Journalist J12 echoes this tension: "I'm encouraged to do [social videos] more. It's just that it takes a lot of time. And it's not time that we have . . . We still have to do our regular reporting job." These accounts highlight how journalists must balance the expanding demands of platform-based labor with declining compensation and limited time (Hurcombe, 2025; Poell et al., 2023), mirroring broader patterns of intensified and devalued digital work (Cohen, 2019; Salamon, 2024).

While burnout was most prevalent among journalists and social media editors, some independent creators also described work exhaustion and mental health strain linked to continuous production cycles, blurred work boundaries, and pressure to remain constantly visible (Duffy, 2017; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). J1 reports "working on navigating how I can protect myself and avoid burnout and being overwhelmed when I am the only person navigating this platform." Similarly, J18 recounts the difficulty of "draw[ing] a boundary" as a solo operation, "effectively trying to compete with the BBC or CNN or the New York Times, but [as] a much smaller operation." Given these concerns, J11 admits anxiety about taking breaks, even on vacation, describing an "irrational fear that if I don't post something, that everything will go away." Unlike newsroom burnout, creators framed these pressures as individualized and self-imposed (Duffy, 2017; Salamon and Saunders, 2024)—echoing freelance precarity (Cohen, 2016; Hunter, 2016; Salamon, 2024)—rather than as the outcome of managerial expectations or operational control (Murdock, 1982).

Some journalists and social media editors also emphasize paying online contributors despite tight budgets (Cohen, 2016), rejecting creator-centric gift economy logics (Salamon and Saunders, 2024). J15 affirms, "From a compensation standpoint, we always made sure to pay everybody." J16 echoes this commitment: "[A] lot of creators aren't going to . . . produce all these videos and be in these videos for free . . . [I]t's also allocating a significant budget to paying a creator or a host to do this kind of work." J19 acknowledges tradeoffs involved in commissioning paid social media content: "since we have to pay per post for [independent creators], we can't make a video for every single thing."

Several interviewees also differentiate journalistic norms from influencer norms. J2 draws a clear boundary between them:

If I wouldn't take this free thing for a story, I won't take it for an Instagram thing . . . If I go to something and it sucks, I'm not going to bother to post about it. Because that is a huge difference [from] influencers.

J2 aimed to avoid posting positive or promotional coverage of free events, a position that they viewed as an ethical distinction from influencer norms. For J2, refusing perks preserves journalistic integrity, even with limited compensation. Beyond branded content, few interviewees raised ethical issues—for instance, verification, accuracy, and uses of

third-party material—but they did not constitute a core subtheme of platform *labor conditions*. Overall, interviewees depict a system where journalism’s public-service mission is often sustained by underpaid or unpaid labor, raising questions about long-term, sustainable, and equitable journalistic careers (Hurcombe, 2025; Salamon, 2025a).

To address labor concerns, some journalists and social media editors strongly *support collective representation*, while others question *unions’ effectiveness* in addressing challenges in platform economies (Higgins-Dobney and Sussman, 2013; Salamon, 2025a). Social media editor J3 praises their union for safeguarding job security and negotiating worker benefits: “I love my union . . . A collective of more than 1,000 people, we actually have a lot of sway over the newsroom.” Similarly, J17 notes,

All of our reporters are in the union, so we are able to advocate for ourselves . . . I think it would be tough to be at a news outlet right now without one . . . with how . . . news is really struggling.

Others express disillusionment about unions’ mediating role. J10 observes that unions like SAG-AFTRA rarely address *platform-based grievances* in their organizing efforts. Despite identifying as “a huge union supporter,” journalist J13 calls their union “impotent” and “completely useless.” These divergent accounts underscore how some media unions remain powerful actors in shaping employment relations yet might fail to address platform-era precarity, a tension common among SME creators and freelance journalists (Cohen, 2016; Salamon, 2025b).

Independent news creators are even more skeptical of unionization. J13 believes that creator economies are too individualistic and gig-oriented to accommodate unions (Salamon, 2025b): “I don’t see change happening with . . . the union stuff . . . for the content creator industry because it’s such a wide variety of people. It’s not interchangeable with gig work.” J15 adds that some clients intentionally recruit non-union creators, further undermining collective representation.

Nevertheless, some creators express cautious optimism about alternative forms of labor organizing. J14 highlights the American Influencer Council (AIC) as an early experiment—“like creating, I wouldn’t say a union, but sort of like a council”—aimed at advocating for and educating creators about their rights. These accounts depict news creator economies where support for formal unionization remains uneven, while hybrid advocacy structures are emerging as potential models for collective support (Cohen, 2016; Salamon, 2025b).

## Discussion and conclusion: toward sustainable models of intervention

This article examined how, under neoliberal platform capitalism, journalists and social media editors affiliated with a news company as well as independent news content creators with no affiliation with a news company navigate shifting political-economic and technological conditions. Adopting a CPE lens, it showed how transformations in revenue models, platform governance, technological adoption, and labor converge to produce overlapping business- and labor-oriented crises. While social media affordances

and institutional control enable novel modes of distribution, branding, and audience engagement, they intensify precarity, reconfigure professional norms, and put at risk journalism's public-service mission.

First, this article contributes to literature on how industry stakeholders extend and modify journalism crisis narratives (Mathews et al., 2023; Pickard, 2011; Salamon, 2025a; Siles and Boczkowski, 2012). Interviewees diagnosed overlapping crises from distinct structural positions and lived experiences. Although business, technology, and labor-oriented narratives remained dominant, particularly emphasizing financial instability and precarious work, discussions of financialization were largely absent, likely because most interviewees were not directly affected by equity or investment firm ownership (Almiron, 2010). Interviewees underscored the fragility of digital revenue streams, volatile platform governance, intensified political polarization, and weak social protections. Across roles, they foregrounded cross-industry precarity and journalism's public-service mission under threat, while highlighting the uneven value and limitations of collective labor representation in mitigating these challenges.

A second contribution lies in demonstrating how traditional media institutions and independent creators experience similar structural pressures, albeit from different positionalities. Independent creators enjoy greater creative autonomy and platform-native flexibility but lack institutional protections, social safety nets, and stable income. By contrast, journalists and social media editors retain salaries and, at times, access to collective representation but operate within rigid organizational cultures resistant to platform innovation. The conditions that facilitate journalistic innovation in creator economies—self-branding, diversified content strategies, and platform-native formats—also render such work economically unstable. This paradox, characterized by a desire for autonomy and collective protections, reflects long-standing features of journalistic labor (Cohen, 2016; Poell et al., 2023), which have been intensified and hyper-individualized under platformization.

This article also advances understandings of hybrid occupational identities, showing how independent news creators operate at the intersection of journalist-freelancer-creator roles by combining public-service news values with entrepreneurial self-branding. Freelancers have historically embodied neoliberal ideals of self-management (Cohen, 2016; Hunter, 2016; Norbäck, 2021), while creators' autonomy is more heavily mediated by platforms, rendering self-branding and aspirational labor preconditions for entry and survival (Duffy, 2017; Hurcombe, 2025; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). Whereas freelancers' labor has been client-dependent, creators' labor is platform-dependent, contingent on algorithmic visibility, advertising partnerships, and brand deals. Creators intensively commodify the self and audience engagement as prerequisites for income generation, while forfeiting a greater share of value to platforms through revenue splits and data extraction. These distinctions warrant further comparative research.

The findings align with CPE research on corporate control (McChesney and Nichols, 2022), infomediaion (Smyrniotis and Rebillard, 2019), platform labor (Poell et al., 2023), and resistance (Mosco, 2009). Allocative control (ownership-level strategic priorities) and operational control (managerial decision-making) (Murdock, 1982) largely remain with media owners, managers, and platform companies, whose algorithms and

monetization systems determine visibility and financial viability. Across media institutions and creator spaces, revenue diversification strategies (e.g. email newsletters, Substack-hosted publications, podcasts) represent necessary adaptations to declining advertising returns and volatile referral traffic. Such tactics remain precarious and dependent on inconsistent audience behavior and platform policy changes (Hurcombe, 2025; Poell et al., 2023). In creator economies, the pressure to produce large volumes of content to satisfy algorithmic distribution intensifies overwork and blurs boundaries between personal and professional time (Negreira-Rey et al., 2022; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). In traditional institutional settings, expectations to produce social media content without compensation mirror intensified digital labor and contribute to burnout or exits from the profession (Mathews et al., 2023; Örnebring, 2018). Support for collective representation emerged as a key point of divergence. Traditional journalists considered unions critical for protecting wages and benefits yet ill-equipped to address platform-specific grievances. Independent creators saw unions as less relevant or powerful given individualized work structures. New organizations such as the AIC offer emerging pathways for collective resistance that merit additional scholarly attention (Salamon, 2025b). Interviewees also described platforms' de-prioritization of political content, demonetization of sensitive topics, and weak moderation regimes. Platform logics increasingly shape what information circulates and how it is valued (Hendrickx, 2023; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024), creating tensions for news institutions that privilege public-interest information over engagement metrics.

Theoretically, this study demonstrates the value of integrating CPE approaches to capture the interplay between macro-level structures and micro-level labor practices (Mosco, 2009; Salamon, 2024). It highlights how news production conditions are reconfigured and how journalists, social media editors and creators negotiate platform infomedia under neoliberal platform capitalism (Nechushtai, 2018; Smyrnaiois and Rebillard, 2019). Future research should examine how identity and geography mediate access to resources, visibility, and financial sustainability.

Finally, sustaining journalism in creator economies will require interventions at three interrelated levels (McChesney and Nichols, 2022; Pickard, 2011; Salamon, 2024). At the *structural level*, policy initiatives expanding public funding for independent journalism and creator-led news could support alternative business models and more equitable platform payment schemes. At the *labor and collective representation level*, protection could be offered through stronger collaborations between creator councils and traditional unions, the inclusion of creator branches within unions, or pro-creator language in collective agreements, as seen in recent freelance journalist and SAG-AFTRA influencer provisions. At the *platform governance level*, accountability reforms could ensure fair monetization, transparency, and equitable treatment of public-interest and politically sensitive news content. Without such interventions, journalism's viability and democratic role could be at further risk of eroding under platform capitalism.

### **Data availability statement**

The original dataset generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available to protect interviewees' privacy.


## Ethical approval and informed consent statements

This research received institutional research ethics approval, and respondents gave informed consent before starting interviews.

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