

# Ensuring News Quality in Platformized News Ecosystems: Shortcomings and Recommendations for an Epistemic Governance

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## Abstract

Social media platforms are fundamentally disrupting public communication in two ways. First, non-journalistic actors, such as social media influencers, now have easier access to audiences, increasing the range of epistemic authorities. Second, established news outlets are increasingly reliant on platforms, pressuring them to adapt to the demands of social media. This platformization threatens the quality of public communication and citizens' realization of their epistemic rights. Drawing on these concerns, this article offers a holistic approach to systematically analyze and practically govern epistemic threats to news quality in the platform-driven hybrid news ecosystem by developing a comprehensive three-stage framework that distinguishes between the production, distribution, and reception of news quality. News quality needs not only to be produced (input) but also to be made visible on platforms (throughput) and processed by audiences (output) in order to contribute to an informed public discourse. Focusing on the EU, the article then discusses current regulatory shortcomings and the need for additional measures to safeguard news quality along its three dimensions.

## Keywords

epistemic authority; epistemic rights; governance; media policy; media regulation; news quality; platformization; social media platforms

## 1. Introduction: Social Media Platforms and the Quality of Public Communication

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have not only become central places for their users to create and engage with personal content (Mellado & Hermida, 2022; Newman, 2023, 2024a) but have also established themselves as essential data- and algorithm-driven infrastructure for public

communication (Staab & Thiel, 2022). This platformization of the public sphere(s) fundamentally affects the quality of public, especially journalistic, communication in two ways: First, social media platforms' relative openness allows a heterogeneous field of actors to self-publish content and potentially reach, produce, and engage with large audiences without having to pass through the filter of news media (Napoli, 2019). As a result, to keep up with current events, younger users especially do not necessarily rely on the accounts of mainstream news outlets but follow new "epistemic authorities" (Bartsch et al., 2025) involved in the production and distribution of (supposedly) credible descriptions of reality. Such information sources include professional commercial content creators, ordinary people, celebrities, political activists, and politicians (Wunderlich et al., 2022). More concretely, across all countries studied in the *Digital News Report 2024*, more YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok news users pay attention to online influencers and personalities than to journalists or news media when it comes to news (Newman, 2024b). Second, as social media platforms have become indispensable for news media looking for new target groups and revenue streams (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022), the latter are largely dependent on powerful platforms to produce, distribute, analyze, and monetize their products (Kristensen & Hartley, 2023; Poell et al., 2022). While some publishers manage to counterbalance platform power (Chua & Westlund, 2022), local, resource-poor news media in particular, having few or no alternatives to platform offerings, are pressured to adapt their professional norms and standards (such as independence and objectivity) to the logic of social media platforms (Broersma & Eldridge, 2019; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022).

These logics are characterized by (a) the affordances or technological architecture of the platforms and (b) algorithmic personalization serving data-driven personalized advertising marketing (van der Vlist & Helmond, 2021):

1. The platform architecture is the result of its technical features and design decisions. It determines who is granted access to the platform, which rules apply to participation, how content can be communicated, how usage activities are measured, which data can be viewed by whom, and how any costs and revenues are allocated (Bossetta, 2018). The platform architecture thus enables, restricts, and favors certain behaviors of its users.
2. Algorithmic decision-making processes involve the filtering, sorting, and personalization of information that is considered individually relevant to users. They, therefore, influence which posts are ultimately visible to the user. For this purpose, implicitly and explicitly generated personal and contextual data are extracted and used (Bozdag, 2013).

Furthermore, although social media platforms sometimes perform functions similar to those of the news media (e.g., providing citizens with relevant information and providing a forum for societal debate; Sevignani, 2022), platforms largely neglect their opinion power, with existing regulation falling short in addressing the dependence on, and the power of, platforms (Royal & Napoli, 2022; Seipp et al., 2024). This makes it easier for platforms to achieve their strategic goal of establishing a hegemonic position in the ecosystem "in terms of control over knowledge, information, and data flows" (Sevignani & Theine, 2024, p. 9).

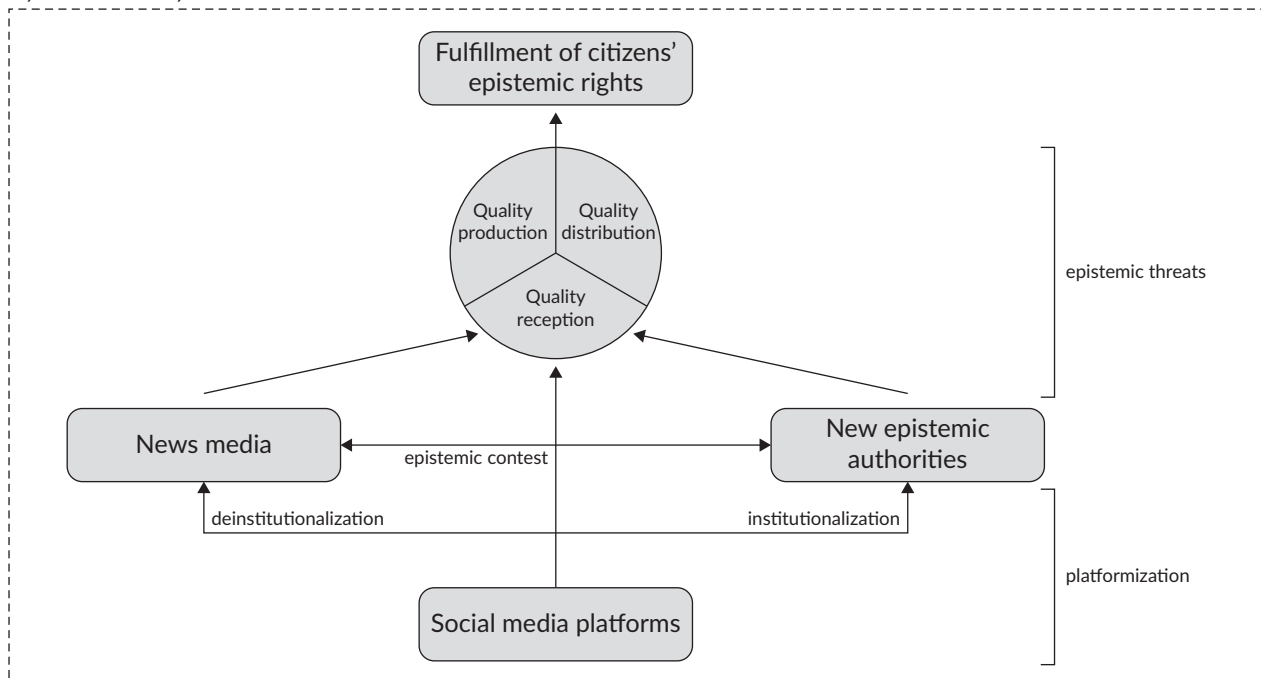
Taken together, platformization has become an important factor in the consolidation of a news ecosystem that is hybrid and correspondingly complex and dynamic in terms of actors and their goals, norms, communicative practices, and content (Chadwick, 2017), but also characterized by asymmetrical power relations (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). On the one hand, social media platforms promote the institutionalization

of new epistemic authorities, such as social media influencers. These are now achieving significant relevance in the mediation of current information, thus competing with the previously dominant players. On the other hand, social media platforms are putting pressure on established news media to adapt due to their success and their central position in the ecosystem, with their algorithmic values and digital architectural standards threatening the autonomy of journalism (van Drunen, 2021; Figure 1). These developments drive digital media concentration (Seipp et al., 2024) and catalyze long-standing journalistic failings. That is, commercial news media themselves aim to maximize data and revenues, have biases in their reporting, and often fail to meet normative expectations regarding their democratic role in public debate (e.g., Garnier et al., 2020). However, they also create new challenges. From a functional perspective, the news ecosystem's platformization is often associated with negative consequences for the quality of public communication and, thus, for the fulfillment of democratic functions of public spheres (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; R. Fischer & Jarren, 2023; Habermas, 2022; Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021; Seipp, 2023; Smyrniaios & Baisnée, 2023). For example, informed opinion-forming and decision-making of citizens, the representation of social heterogeneity, and a common meeting ground, as well as journalism's exercise of independent control and criticism, are said to be at risk (Schneiders et al., 2023).

These epistemic threats increase both academic (Lyubareva & Rochelandet, 2021; Napoli & Royal, 2023) and media policy (Council of Europe, 2022a, 2022b; Council of Europe's Steering Committee on the Media and Information Society [CDMSI], 2023) calls for governance measures—no longer based on competition law alone—to ensure that citizens can realize their epistemic rights in the platformized news ecosystem. Epistemic rights include “equality in access to and availability of all relevant and truthful information that concerns issues of will formation and decision-making” (Nieminen, 2024, p. 14). Accordingly, epistemic governance comprises measures that guarantee the basic media supply of socially relevant and truthful information to the population (Flew, 2024). Napoli and Royal (2023, p. 187) even assume that “news quality is a concept that may then become a central component of media policymaking.” To date, regulatory efforts in Western countries have focused on safeguarding media diversity and communicative freedom (Just, 2022; Kim & Kwak, 2017) but not the safeguarding of quality or even epistemic rights (e.g., Giotis, 2023). Figure 1 brings together the central concepts.

To what extent could policy interventions promote the quality of journalistic or quasi-journalistic output and the use of people's information in the platform society? Taking up this central question, our article first discusses news quality and synthesizes the body of research on how social media platforms' logic and practices impact news quality. Proposing a three-stage approach to news quality in the hybrid news ecosystem, a distinction is made between the production, distribution, and reception of news quality (Schneiders & Stark, 2025). Second, on this basis, this article offers a framework for epistemic governance. The framework serves two primary purposes at the intersection of news quality and platform governance: First, it provides a foundation for critically examining current regulations governing social media platforms, highlighting potential shortcomings in existing policies. Second, it equips research and policy with a comprehensive tool to propose risk-based targeted measures for safeguarding news quality across production, distribution, and reception in an increasingly platformized news ecosystem. Previous analyses are usually limited to one of the three quality dimensions instead of examining them in conjunction. As such, this article is among the first to systematically address and translate the idea of epistemic rights in the context of platformization and news quality.

Hybrid news ecosystem



**Figure 1.** Platformization of the news ecosystem and its impact on citizens' epistemic rights.

## 2. News Quality and How it is Threatened in a Platformized News Ecosystem

### 2.1. Defining News Quality

Determining and defining news quality is no easy task (e.g., Bachmann et al., 2022; Meier, 2019). However, media regulation must face up to this challenge because “without any clear definition and measure of quality, media regulation will be difficult to build” (Lyubareva & Rochelandet, 2021, p. 118). What is considered to be of high quality is the result of an evaluation process and differs depending on the object under consideration, the normative foundation, and the context of the quality assessment (Bachmann et al., 2022). In addition, criteria differ depending on the genre under consideration (e.g., information or entertainment), meaning that quality is relational. For this reason, and because there can be no fixed definition of the term or universally valid criteria, quality analyses of media products require a decision on the perspective to be used, e.g., which model of democracy should be drawn on to examine media content. According to a liberal model of democracy, news media:

Should inform the citizens about societally relevant problems and solutions proposed by political actors, control the elites, make politics and the elites' actions and decisions transparent for the citizenry, enable citizens' opinion formation by presenting different positions, and articulate different interests. (Magin et al., 2023, p. 672)

The deliberative model requires that news media actively involve society in dialogue and the civil exchange of arguments (Magin et al., 2023). Ideally, the public debate should lead to a social consensus (see also Bachmann et al., 2022; Habermas, 2022). From an agonistic understanding, news should activate, challenge hegemonic structures, and empower underrepresented groups in the public sphere (Sax, 2022). Depending on which

democratic model is referred to, very different sets of criteria are applied. This, in turn, has an impact on the expectations of media performances, the perception of threats to news quality, and the requirements and design of governance measures. For example, depending on the theory of democracy, emotional language is seen as less objective or more accessible (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014; Magin et al., 2023).

This article defines news quality as “relatively accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely independently produced information about public affairs” (Nielsen, 2017, p. 1259; see also Shapiro, 2014). This definition comes closest to a liberal model of democracy, fits with the epistemic right to relevant and truthful information, and is an expression of the “democratic realism” approach. The latter criticizes excessive normative demands on journalism that are based on abstract ideals rather than social practices. Instead, Nielsen (2017) argues in favor of a pragmatic-realistic approach to the distinctive performance of journalism. The primary purpose of journalism is, therefore, to keep people informed (see also Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Relative accuracy means that news attempts to ensure that all presented factual statements, “at the time of reporting, most faithfully reflect (or construct) the characteristics of phenomena or events in social reality at a certain point of time” (Bogdanić, 2022, p. 498). Consequently, content should not be misleading (Giotis, 2023). The pursuit of accuracy requires information to be verified, for example, through practices such as seeking multiple witnesses to an event or disclosing as much as possible about sources (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Accuracy can also be achieved by separating facts from inferences, conclusions, interpretations, or opinions based on those facts (Bogdanić, 2022). Accessibility should be ensured, among other things, by the choice of topics, perspectives, and language of news items so that they appeal to a large audience (Shapiro, 2014). Social relevance as a news factor is ideally the benchmark and result of an appropriate journalistic reduction of complexity in the form of journalistic selection decisions. A fact is never considered relevant on its own, but only if it has a potential or actual impact on other events, conditions, or actions and, therefore, is important to the audience (Schatz & Schulz, 1992, pp. 691–696). Content diversity can be characterized by the variety of topics, actors, and viewpoints (Napoli, 1999). It is an essential factor in the public function of journalism, which is to reflect social heterogeneity and to enable informed opinion-forming processes (Bachmann et al., 2022). At the same time, this means that the diversity norm can be in tension with the relevance norm (Vos & Wolfgang, 2018). Ascribing the same weight to every possible view or opinion on an issue is neither possible nor functional (Boudana, 2016). In contrast, too much diversity may prove counterproductive if it results in a diminished focus on the most pressing issues. That is, news should narrow down topic diversity to a certain extent in order to foster a common social reality of the problems that require attention (Magin et al., 2023). Timeliness, that is, focusing on current or recent events, is “a distinctive feature of news,” as news “is not feasible without the value of timeliness” (Bogdanić, 2022, p. 498). News should be published as soon as practicable (after fact-checking; Giotis, 2023). Finally, the independent production of news items involves “an original act of creation” (Shapiro, 2014, p. 558) and the preparation and presentation of topics according to certain self-defined institutional norms and standards. This distinguishes news from commissioned work in pursuit of externally defined goals.

The above definition leaves open whether the contributions fulfill deliberative requirements for detached, non-emotional language. In this respect, different ideas on the role of emotions exist depending on the theoretical approach to democracy (Magin et al., 2023). In our understanding, however, quality does not only include the ability to fulfill certain content and stylistic requirements, such as accuracy and social relevance (input). Equally important is that the quality produced gains visibility on the platforms (throughput) and is processed by the users (as unbiased as possible; output) in order to fulfill its information function.

How does platformization threaten news quality, and what can be done? To answer these questions systematically, this article proposes a three-stage analytical framework that distinguishes between the production, distribution, and reception of news quality in terms of threats to news quality and governance measures. In doing so, the framework builds on the mass-media era policy principle of source, content, and exposure diversity (Moe et al., 2021; Napoli, 1999) as well as on conceptualizations of diversity that differentiate between supply, exposure, and consumption diversity (Loechebach et al., 2020). For each of the three quality dimensions, the extent to which platformization jeopardizes news quality is examined. Ultimately, the tripartite framework makes it possible to delineate specific challenges unique to each quality dimension and to derive an interconnected bundle of customized epistemic governance measures.

## 2.2. Threats to News Quality

### 2.2.1. Production Quality: (De)institutionalization of Information Offerings, News Shortening, and Softening

To what extent do social media platforms and their logic promote or inhibit the production of quality news? First, it should be noted that the low access barriers to social media platforms lead to the institutionalization of a heterogeneous group of (new) epistemic authorities (Schneiders et al., 2023). Traditional, unrecognized, or false epistemic authorities are actors who participate in the production and distribution of (supposedly) credible knowledge and descriptions of reality and, in this process, strive for trust and legitimacy (Bartsch et al., 2025). These actors can now bypass journalistic gatekeeping positions and have different identities, resources, and degrees of professionalism. They range from alternative media to corporate publishing, activists, eyewitnesses, public authorities, alternative political commentators such as Ben Shapiro, political social media influencers, and news influencers. New epistemic authorities have the advantage of being less bound by the established rules and norms of a field. They can, therefore, introduce new or alternative logics and ideas into the ecosystem more easily than established actors and play a role as “agents of change” (Bannerman & Haggart, 2015), making ecosystems more hybrid. From a traditional understanding of quality, new epistemic authorities can be classified as non-journalistic, pseudo-journalistic, or quasi-journalistic (Neuberger et al., 2023). Some of them engage in “acts of journalism” (Örnebring et al., 2018, p. 418), share professional norms and standards such as factuality and objectivity (Maares & Hanusch, 2023), exhibit performances equivalent to journalistic functions (Leckner et al., 2019)—even if they sometimes use more unconventional communication styles (Riedl et al., 2023)—and are located in the periphery of the journalistic field (Hanusch & Löhmann, 2023). For example, political influencers contribute to content diversity (Peter & Muth, 2023) by giving a voice to topics, perspectives, and actors that have been little represented so far. Furthermore, news influencers help their audiences to better understand current events and civic issues (Stocking et al., 2024). Others enter into an epistemic contest with traditional news media for the production and interpretation of descriptions of reality (Carlson, 2025; Valaskivi & Robertson, 2022). They are characterized by strong opinions, affective wording, and attacks on political outgroups (T.-S. Fischer et al., 2022), challenge the logic and epistemic authority of journalism altogether, or even deliberately produce false or misleading information (Neuberger et al., 2023; Strömbäck et al., 2022). As social media platforms do not carry out quality control, “‘quality’ must prove itself after publication, at best in public discussion” (Sevignani, 2022, p. 92). The use of artificial intelligence is expected to contribute to the mass production of false or misleading information (Jungheer & Schroeder, 2023). In total, the platformized long-tail public tends towards not independently produced but interest-driven communication of widely varying quality or to a dissonant cacophony of different, juxtaposed voices, topics, information, and opinions (Eisenegger, 2021;



Pfetsch, 2018). It intensifies competition for the limited attention and loyalty of (new) target groups (Krebs et al., 2021).

In addition to the institutionalization of various actors, platforms increase the deinstitutionalization of news media (Schneiders et al., 2023). This means that their own norms and standards are becoming less important for news media compared to the social media logic. To avoid being algorithmically devalued, many news media are forced to incorporate the demands of the technological architecture and the presumed algorithmic values and audience metrics, such as shares, clicks, views, and comments, into their editorial decisions (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2020; Lamot, 2022). Newsrooms largely anticipate the (supposed) social media logic not only during distribution but also during the production of their journalistic contributions (Anter, 2023; Dodds et al., 2023). This has an impact on (a) journalistic selection rules and (b) the presentation of news and can drive social news softening, an editorial strategy to generate maximum audience attention (Klein et al., 2023). In terms of content, news softening manifests itself in an entertainment-oriented selection of topics. In terms of presentation, subjective and opinionated perspectives, visual elements, affect-oriented language, a focus on people and sensations, and the use of interactive platform elements are typical (Steiner, 2020). Moreover, most social media platforms' architectures incentivize short-form, audiovisual posts (Poell et al., 2023). For example, the length of an individual Instagram video is limited to 60 seconds, which is sometimes too short to depict diversity and convey background information (Fürst, 2020). The focus on soft topics such as celebrity news, sports, or criminal cases, and social news' limited length, conflict with the news quality requirement for relevance described above. So far, empirical studies have shown a contradictory picture of the extent of social news softening (Hase et al., 2023; Lamot, 2022; Steiner, 2020). Some social media newsrooms seem to adapt uncritically to the platform logic (Dodds et al., 2023). Other newsrooms, however, balance social media logics with professional journalistic norms and strategic objectives, trying to retain the information value of social news (e.g., Degen et al., 2024; Laaksonen et al., 2022; Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020; S. Wu et al., 2019). The extent to which social news softening manifests itself depends not least on the brand identity, the (presumed) audience preferences, and the revenue model of a news medium (Anter, 2023). What is more, as the logics of the individual platforms differ—for example, in terms of the possibilities for linking, the preferred modalities, or the intensity of algorithmic personalization (Hase et al., 2023)—serving the platforms can tie up considerable editorial resources. For Instagram and TikTok, in particular, social media posts are produced natively, i.e., exclusively for the platform, and are, therefore, more closely aligned with the logics of social media (Anter, 2023). As a result, there is sometimes less time for journalistic research and editing and, consequently, for producing quality content (Fürst, 2020).

To summarize: Social media platforms are intensifying competition for attention and favor short-form, soft formats. This entails the risk of news losing relevance, diversity, and depth. However, the adaptation of social media logic in editorial offices is not a deterministic but a negotiation process. While some new epistemic authorities contribute to accessibility and content diversity, others undermine the quality requirements of accuracy, diversity, and independently produced information.

### 2.2.2. Distribution Quality: Marginality and Discrimination of News Brands and Limited Exposure Diversity

What significance and visibility do quality news items have on social media? In terms of format and context, news posts are usually embedded between other, not necessarily journalistic content from various sources. That is, on social media platforms, news is part of a continuous stream of ephemeral, hybrid, and dislocated

snippets of information that are beyond the control of news media (Carlson, 2020). Furthermore, the presence of (hard) news in news feeds is a highly individual result of algorithmic values, user preferences, and users' networks. In contrast to news media, algorithmic values are not aimed at a dispersed audience that is to be informed about generally relevant topics but at individual consumers who are to be satisfied (Sevignani, 2022). Platforms are "radically indifferent" to the origin and quality of the content presented, whether journalistic or not (Zuboff, 2019, pp. 579–580). Their recommender systems are optimized to maximize data-generating user engagement and time spent (Lazar, 2022). Accordingly, the algorithmic attribution of relevance is fed, among other things, by the social proximity to the account posting a contribution, the previous interactions with the post, as well as the topicality and modality of the post (DeVito, 2017). This reduces the incentives for epistemic authorities to disseminate hard news. On YouTube, for example, news items are recommended less frequently than entertainment content. As a result, algorithmic recommendations are increasingly redirecting users from news to entertainment (Huang & Yang, 2024). Regarding news content features, Vermeer et al. (2020) show that Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) are more likely to expose users to entertainment news than to political, business, and other news. Similarly, the algorithmic recommendations on TikTok predominantly lead to entertainment and omit hard news and news organizations, even when providing explicit news interest signals to the algorithm (Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2023). In this context, there is a risk that social media platforms predominantly expose those users to the news that they are already interested in, which could widen the gap between better and less informed citizens (Thorson, 2020).

Algorithmic values are not static. In the past, there have been frequent unannounced changes to the opaque criteria for the algorithmic selection and weighting of news. For example, in 2018, Facebook announced that it would boost the content of family and friends over other content, such as news (Bailo et al., 2021). Meta has already made it clear on several occasions that news is not economically relevant to the company and can, therefore, be dispensed with (Meta, 2023). Other platforms have changed their algorithmic content moderation and recommender systems as a reaction to public accusations that they amplify harmful content. YouTube, for example, weights so-called "authoritative news sources" higher in search results and video recommendations for recent and relevant news events (Google, n.d.; see also Matamoros-Fernández et al., 2021). Congruently, studies conducted in Germany, Switzerland, and the US show that established, national (conservative) news media dominate search results and algorithmic recommendations related to breaking events on social media platforms (Krebs et al., 2021; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019; Nechushtai et al., 2023; Toff & Mathews, 2024). At the beginning of 2025, Meta announced that it would be reducing its moderation efforts, as is already the case with X and YouTube (Hendrix, 2025). In this regard, there is a risk that platforms will abuse their opinion power by emphasizing or suppressing certain epistemic authorities, topics, or perspectives in line with their economic or political interests (Seipp, Helberger, et al., 2023). Such algorithmic changes have feedback effects on the two other news quality dimensions. On the one hand, they create uncertainty among many news media, compelling them to continually adapt their strategies to align with opaque algorithmic modifications (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). On the other hand, declining social media traffic to news sites leads to declining consumption of and participation with news items (Altay, Fletcher, & Nielsen, 2024) from established news media (Bailo et al., 2021). As already mentioned, besides algorithmic values, user behavior and social recommendations influence the visibility of news quality. On Facebook, for example, users tend to interact with and to share articles about emotional and moralized issues rather than factual (background) articles (e.g., Brady et al., 2017, 2020; Kalsnes & Larsson, 2018; Rathje et al., 2021). Consequently, users and their (supposed) need for affective, negative, sensationalist,



group-identity-reinforcing messages contribute to the low visibility of quality news on social media (Dunaway & Ray, 2023; González-Bailón et al., 2023). In addition, there is a risk that users' selectivity, in conjunction with social recommendations and algorithmic personalization, can expose citizens to topical, ideological, or otherwise homogenous environments or echo chambers. Empirically, these threats are hardly evident. Only a small minority of the users—most probably the ones who already hold extreme opinions—end up in echo chambers (Stegmann et al., 2022). However, Wojcieszak et al. (2021) show that social media, while driving exposure to both dissimilar and congenial news, do not drive exposure to centrist news sources—that is, sources that appeal to broad audiences present balanced news from both sides and give equal voice to various political factions. In consequence, social media platforms have a potentially politically polarizing nature as they tend to expose users to partisan outlets from both sides rather than to less extreme news.

To sum up: On social media platforms, news is distributed primarily as dislocated snippets of information. Algorithmic recommendation systems largely steer their users away from hard news. Established news brands (now) enjoy relatively higher visibility than non-journalistic or pseudo-journalistic epistemic authorities. Among the news media, national outlets achieve disproportionately high visibility, indicating a lack of media source diversity. Users' selectivity, in conjunction with social recommendations and algorithmic personalization, can increase the risk of narrowing exposure to a diversity of issues and perspectives and of political polarization.

### 2.2.3. Reception Quality: Lack of Source Recognition and Credibility Cues, Self-Confirmative, and Superficial Processing

To what extent do news users perceive, select, and process quality news on social media platforms? First, information about current, socially relevant events is only a secondary motive for using social media (Cotter & Thorson, 2022). While social media users welcome the convenient opportunity to be informed quickly and in an entertaining way (Ehrlén et al., 2023), news access tends to be unreflective, incidental, and highly selective (Cotter & Thorson, 2022). Younger age groups, in particular, expect personally relevant but also reliable and diverse news to find them, for example, via algorithmic or social recommendations (Newman, 2023; Vraga & Edgerly, 2023). Whether news is produced by professional journalists or media outlets is of secondary importance (Loecherbach et al., 2024). Accordingly, the headline and illustration seem to play a greater role in the selection of news articles than the news media source behind them (Vergara et al., 2021). Consequently, a “separation of news from journalism” (Steensen & Westlund, 2021, p. 103) is unfolding on social media. Regarding content features, research indicates that many people prefer entertainment news over other news topics in hybrid media systems (Vermeer et al., 2020). Furthermore, individuals tend to favor such issues, epistemic authorities, or perspectives that confirm their existing beliefs (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020).

However, it is not only user needs and expectations that influence the quality of reception. Platforms themselves exert power over news consumption and exposure and, thus, over opinion-forming processes (Seipp, 2023). For example, the platform architecture, with its standardized design of posts and lack of credibility cues, obscures the provenance of information (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020) and makes it difficult for users to develop cognitive heuristics for identifying and evaluating news (Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020; Ross Arguedas et al., 2023). As a result, users are limited in their ability to recognize and differentiate between the various hybrid offerings on the platforms (Cotter & Thorson, 2022). This can

overwhelm and confuse social media users and make them more susceptible to the adverse selection of dubious, pseudo-journalistic sources (Ehrlén et al., 2023). At the same time, the lack of awareness of news brands makes it less likely for news media to attract loyal users (Saulīte & Ščeulovs, 2023).

Not only the selection of, but also engagement with, news articles on social media tends to be ephemeral and fragmentary (Leonhard et al., 2020; Vergara et al., 2021). This superficial snacking behavior, characterized by short attention spans (Mark, 2023), is facilitated by the fact that social media is mostly used on mobile devices (Carlson, 2020). The specific platform architecture is decisive for the depth to which social media users inform themselves, too (Wieland & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2020). For example, the breadth and depth of reception also depend on whether the respective platform allows links that lead out of its ecosystem. Instagram users usually stay within the app because links to third-party websites are quite inconvenient to access, whereas on X, they are just one click away (Anter, 2023). If they stay on the platform, users are less active and loyal to the referred news websites than those who visit a news website directly (Wells & Thorson, 2017). The abbreviation and decontextualization of platformed news and the distraction by other content, therefore, make it difficult for users to gain background knowledge (Lee & Xenos, 2019). Accordingly, the contribution of social media use to the acquisition of political knowledge appears to be low overall (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2023). Furthermore, the use of social media as an information channel can increase knowledge gaps between those interested in politics and those deprived of news, and the (largely unintended) contact with snippets of information can contribute to people feeling more informed than they are (Leonhard et al., 2020).

To summarize: On social media, the reception of news is a by-product. Traditional quality criteria are not decisive in the selection and processing of news. As a result, the contribution to being informed is limited.

### 3. Epistemic Governance Measures to Ensure News Quality

The production, distribution, and reception of news on social media have deficits and potential dangers. Some of these, such as the softening of news or the disintermediation of journalistic gatekeepers on the supply side or short attention spans and disorientation on the user side, are not new but are exacerbated by social media platforms. Others, such as algorithmic-induced narrowing of diversity, are platform-specific. Because social media platforms are gaining importance as a news channel and the use of relevant, accurate, diverse, independently produced information is of democratic importance, governance measures seem appropriate (Council of Europe, 2022a; Lyubareva & Rochelandet, 2021; Tambini, 2021). These governance measures are based on a positive approach to protecting media freedom. This means that journalistic media “should support democratic discourse and should be privileged to do so” and that “freedom of expression includes a right not only to impart but also to receive ideas” (Tambini, 2021, p. 143). The epistemic governance measures can likewise be differentiated according to whether they aim at the production, distribution, or reception of quality. The focus of the analysis is on the EU and its member states, as the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the Digital Markets Act, globally recognized laws on the regulation of platforms, were passed there. However, the measures discussed are not limited to state regulation but also include ethical measures, as some, such as the promotion of professional values, “may fall outside the scope of law” (Seipp, Helberger, et al., 2023, p. 1559).

### **3.1. Production Quality: Direct Journalism Subsidies, Strengthening Standards, and Due Diligence Obligations**

The production of high-quality news is under considerable pressure due to platform-induced disruption of the advertising business and intensified competition for users' attention. Large online platforms have proven to be unreliable cooperation partners for news media (Flew & Stepnik, 2024). Furthermore, journalistic (quality) goods tend towards market failure as consumers' willingness to pay for news remains low (Newman, 2024a; Tambini, 2021).

Against this structural background, regional and national governments should consider direct public production subsidies (Flew & Stepnik, 2024; Picard & Pickard, 2017), as is already established practice in many countries, especially in Scandinavia (Puppis et al., 2020). News subsidies should aim to support the production and distribution of original and high-quality news content and the fulfillment of new journalistic tasks such as fact-checking. As news media can effectively reduce the appropriation of false truth claims (Altay, Nielsen, & Fletcher, 2024), production subsidies are seen as a more effective way than interventions to improve the overall quality of the information environment. Interventions aimed at reducing the acceptance or spread of misinformation show only a marginal contribution to improving the quality of the information environment (Acerbi et al., 2022).

However, precisely because quality is so difficult to define, measure, and address politically, political actors are reluctant to formulate it as an objective (Napoli & Royal, 2023). As part of the "News Initiative," the European Commission supports cross-border newsrooms and journalistic cooperations to help them develop new business models and formats but does not explicitly aim to ensure news quality (European Commission, 2024a). The Netherlands and Austria are among the few countries in Europe that explicitly use journalism funding programs (among other things) to ensure or improve quality (Cornils et al., 2021). As long as public funds are allocated in a non-governmental and opinion-neutral manner, journalism funding can and should be linked to journalistic qualification criteria (see also Giotis et al., 2023; Tambini, 2021). These criteria can only be indirectly related to the quality of the content because of the required neutrality of opinion on the part of the state. Possible award criteria could be, for example, a minimum proportion of self-produced editorial content and a commitment to professional standards. To avoid entrenching existing structures, funding could be limited to weaker market players (Puppis et al., 2020). Finally, such funding should be designed to be platform-neutral and not limited to established press and broadcasting companies.

In addition, news organizations, as well as new epistemic authorities, could be further educated about the values, principles, and impact of platform logics. At the same time, journalistic norms should be strengthened (Neuberger et al., 2023). These norms have proven to be a strong corrective against external influences in newsrooms (Lischka, 2021). One way to strengthen journalistic norms would be to provide (further) media policy support for the development and enforcement of journalistic education and training measures, standards, guidelines (such as those of the CDMSI [2023]), and self-regulatory institutions. Besides, responsible journalistic AI could assist journalists in discovering meaningful and underrepresented voices, issues, and viewpoints (Lin & Lewis, 2022; Mansell et al., 2025, p. 62), countering tendencies towards the homogenization and softening of news.

In addition, certain obligations and privileges should apply not only to news media but also to other information offerings that are relevant for opinion formation. In particular, due diligence obligations in the production and dissemination of news, as well as the protection of sources and access to official information, are important for the quality of public communication (Winseck, 2020). This also means that governance actors should no longer understand the concept of news as merely journalistic-institutionalized and “industry-based” (Swart et al., 2022, p. 13) and regard certain non-originally journalistic offerings not as a threat but as new epistemic authorities. There is no doubt that they succeed in generating and retaining audiences. Which information offerings are considered relevant for opinion formation and thus for regulation is the subject of current discussions (e.g., in connection with the proposal for an EMFA; Seipp, Fathaigh, et al., 2023) and requires further research.

### **3.2. Distribution Quality: Quality Labels, Findability Requirements, and Public Interest Platforms**

The algorithmic-personalizing recommender systems of social media platforms—as well as increasingly personal AI assistants (Lu, 2024)—have a significant influence on news media and other epistemic authorities’ digital strategies on the one hand and users’ information decisions on the other (A. X. Wu et al., 2021). In Germany, the Interstate Media Treaty stipulates that social media platforms must disclose the criteria for access and retention as well as the aggregation, selection, and presentation of content and their weighting. The treaty also requires social media platforms not to unjustly discriminate against journalistic-editorial offers (Liesem, 2022). At the EU level, the EMFA even provides for privileged treatment of editorially independent media service providers in the content moderation of very large online platforms (VLOPs). That is, in certain cases, unequal treatment of content is considered objectively justified. The DSA, in turn, introduces new transparency, moderation, and other due diligence rules, such as algorithm auditing. More concretely, platforms are obliged to conduct content moderation as soon as they become aware of illegal activity or content (e.g., illegal hate speech). Furthermore, VLOPs have to assess and mitigate systemic risks arising from the design, functioning, use, or misuse of their services. This also, and above all, concerns their algorithmic recommender system and moderation practices (Seipp et al., 2024). Not least, VLOPs have to provide their users with an optional recommender system that is not based on profiling. On top of this, there are co-regulatory codes of conduct integrated into the framework of the DSA, which contain more far-reaching voluntary commitments to reduce illegal hate speech and disinformation, categorized as systemic risks (Griffin, 2024; Ó Fathaigh et al., 2025). Measures in this context aim at platforms’ architecture by intending to inhibit the amplification of divisive content (Schirch, 2025) and the impulsive sharing of articles with low information quality (see also Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2020).

In addition to such mostly indirect negative media diversity protection measures, positive prioritization and (optional) highlighting of quality news in algorithmic recommendations and search results are worth considering (CNTI, 2024; Council of Europe, 2022a). One reason is that even if there is a high diversity of journalistic-editorial providers, transparency obligations and freedom from negative discrimination do not automatically lead to high content diversity and relevance due to journalistic-institutional and users’ selectivity. Another reason is that, as already discussed, social media users have problems recognizing news as such and distinguishing it from other content, especially in hybrid environments. It is, therefore, important to increase the recognizability and visibility of quality news. Here, too, the question arises as to which information offerings should benefit from such labeling. Tambini (2021) argues that media “should be defined functionally in relation to the public interest-oriented activity of journalism, in terms of size, and

through self-declaration, for example, through adopting ethical codes” (Tambini, 2021, p. 149; see also Bogdanić, 2022). In Germany, there is already such a “must-be-found” rule for TV platforms, according to which programs of public service media and private programs that contribute to plurality must be placed more prominently than other broadcasting programs. In the EU, to foster access to a diverse range of independent media on VLOPs, the EMFA requires the implementation of a structured dialogue between VLOPs, the media sector, and civil society. In any case, it is important that the offers and the content to be highlighted are selected according to a transparent and comprehensible procedure and that their qualification is regularly evaluated in a state-distant manner.

Not least, the idea of developing cooperative (public interest-oriented) counterpowers (Helberger, 2020; Winseck, 2020) to large digital platforms is worth considering. This is, among other reasons, relevant because there is a risk (already realized on several occasions) that the current large platform companies could decide to stop delivering news in order to avoid media regulatory obligations (Meese, 2021). Meta has already withdrawn from various funding and cooperation programs (Kahn, 2023) and recently reduced news and political content to a minimum in the newsfeeds of Instagram and Facebook (Instagram, 2024). A cross-provider platform could be funded by levies from major tech platforms (Flew & Stepnik, 2024) and should be characterized by (a) transparent, public interest-oriented audience metrics and criteria of access, aggregation, selection, and presentation of content; and by (b) sparing processing of personal data rather than by persuasive digital architectures and recommendation systems and extensive data extraction. Such audience metrics should—for example, by using sentiment analysis of news texts and comments—be based on more than just commercial values. As Lin and Lewis put it (2022, p. 1640):

AI could provide audience metrics not only based on clicks and likes, but also on more detailed emotional or psychological factors such as thought-provoking, moving, feels valuable, as well as afford different weights to different types of engagement and pleasure.

Public service media, in particular, could play a pioneering role in the development of such metrics (CDMSI, 2023). They could trigger quality-enhancing feedback effects on the production of news. In addition, news offerings should be given sufficient freedom in the design of their articles and the communication of their brand identity. In this way, a journalism platform could stimulate the visibility, reach, and differentiation of high-quality content and reduce dependence on social media platforms that are currently virtually impossible to substitute for most both old and new epistemic authorities.

### **3.3. Reception Quality: Boosting News Literacy, Nudging Consumption Diversity, and Activation Quality**

Ideally, people seek information from reliable media sources and process their content with care and openness to different perspectives (Neuberger et al., 2023). The extent to which people are informed about socially relevant events depends, in particular, on how politically interested they are and how suitable they consider journalistic sources to be for meeting their political information needs (Wunderlich & Hölzig, 2022). In order to promote the reception of quality, the audiences’ political interest and critical media literacy should, therefore, be further promoted in an institutionalized form. The “boosting” (Hertwig & Grüne-Yanoff, 2017) of news literacy is associated with the expectation that it will increase normative expectations towards news contributions, a sense of journalistic quality, and the consumption of journalism (Craft et al.,

2016; Mansell et al., 2025, pp. 100–108). News literacy primarily includes the ability to critically and reflectively differentiate and evaluate information in hybrid media environments—for example, with regard to the provenance and credibility of different formats. Also, knowledge of the normative principles of journalism, as well as about actors, production processes, content, and media effects, is relevant. Technological interventions can help to train this knowledge and make users more resistant to disinformation (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2020), i.e., to develop epistemic vigilance (Neuberger et al., 2023) or resilience (Strömbäck et al., 2022). Another option for improving the conditions for selecting news quality is to provide users with information about how social media contributions are embedded in existing knowledge and discourse. This can be done, for example, by disclosing the sources, editing the history and citation network of a news article, adding background information about the author and references to scientific studies, or automatically classifying and indicating the style and objectivity of language. Research has shown that such transparency cues assist news readers in judging, critically reflecting, and selecting news quality (Norambuena et al., 2023). In the EU, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive obliges member states to take measures to promote and develop media literacy skills. It also requires video-sharing platforms to provide effective media literacy measures and tools (European Commission, 2024b). Furthermore, the signatories of the Code of Conduct on Disinformation under the DSA, including Google, Meta, and TikTok, committed to implementing or continuing to maintain tools to improve media literacy and critical thinking, for example, by empowering users with context on the content visible on services or with guidance how to evaluate content (European Commission, 2025). Beyond this, the European Digital Media Observatory (2025) is increasingly positioning itself as a central actor within the media literacy community. Signatories of the Code of Conduct on Disinformation have committed to cooperating with expert organizations such as European Digital Media Observatory in the design, implementation, and impact measurement of tools to improve media literacy (European Commission, 2025).

Furthermore, a public interest platform should reward the consumption of diverse perspectives and a deeper engagement instead of triggering impulsive actions. Experiments show that users welcome diversity-oriented algorithmic recommendations (Heitz et al., 2022; Joris et al., 2024; Knudsen, 2023). Personalized diversity-oriented or bridging-based news recommender systems can “nudge” users to consume credible sources, overlooked and disregarded groups, issues, or opposing perspectives (Lin & Lewis, 2022; Mattis et al., 2024; Ovadya, 2022; Sax, 2022; Shin & Zhou, 2024). This is particularly relevant for users who seek very one-sided or misleading information or who strongly avoid news. By enhancing mutual visibility among citizens together with their issues and needs rather than focusing on differences (Schirch, 2025), such news recommender systems could help to create and maintain a “common meeting ground” (Katz, 1996) where all social groups are adequately represented (Schneiders et al., 2023). In this way, platforms could fulfill more extensive deliberative standards.

Additionally, growing news fatigue and avoidance across countries make the activation quality of news more urgent. Activation quality aims to reintroduce people who no longer regularly use news back to it. It should help to win over and inspire citizens for content relevant to democracy. Comprehensibility, representation of users’ daily lives, and dialog orientation are particularly important in this context (Eisenegger & Udris, 2021). AI in news production could help to tailor the comprehensibility of news to the needs of recipients (Lin & Lewis, 2022), thus improving the accessibility of quality news (Shulman et al., 2024).



Table 1 summarizes which quality dimensions have been differentiated, how they can be characterized, how they are endangered by social media platforms, to what extent they are already addressed by media regulation, and which additional regulatory measures are worth considering.

**Table 1.** Overview of news quality dimensions, threats, and governance measures.

	Production quality	Distribution quality	Reception quality
<b>Quality dimension</b>	Input: Production of news quality	Throughput: Dissemination of news quality	Output: Acquisition of news quality
<b>Quality indicators</b>	Accuracy, accessibility, diversity, relevance, timeliness, independent production, and focus on public affairs	Findability and visibility of accurate, diverse, currently relevant, and independently produced information	Selection and elaboration of accurate, diverse, independently produced information on current and socially relevant events and developments
<b>Quality threats</b>	Lack of editorial resources and dominance of economic paradigms; weak epistemic standards; adaption to values, requirements, and standards of commercial platforms	Distortion/suppression of relevant, diverse information and reliable sources through algorithmic personalization or content moderation	Self-confirmative, one-sided, superficial reception of (supposedly) relevant topics, epistemic authorities, and perspectives; e.g., through distraction by irrelevant or misleading contributions, lack of attractiveness of social news, or missing credibility cues
<b>Existing quality regulation</b>	Promotion of journalistic associations, education, and training	Platform accessibility and freedom from discrimination, transparency obligations, algorithm auditing, and profiling-free recommender systems	Boosting news literacy
<b>Quality regulation to be supplemented</b>	Due diligence obligations for certain new epistemic authorities and direct news subsidies coupled with the quality of output	Quality labels and must-be-found rules for quality offers and content on platforms, and public interest journalism platform	Transparency cues, nudging diversity, and enhancing news activation quality

Source: Adapted from Schneiders and Stark (2025).

## 4. Conclusion

In the age of platforms, ensuring news quality and citizens' realization of their epistemic rights are facing new challenges. Traditional news media are largely dependent on the data-driven infrastructures and funding of global tech companies such as Meta, Alphabet, and ByteDance for the production, distribution, analysis, and financing of news. Therefore, news media, particularly those with few resources, are under intense pressure to adapt to the logic of digital platforms. In addition, newly institutionalized epistemic authorities compete

for legitimacy and the audiences' attention on the platforms. As a result, news media's platformization calls into question the functions and established quality standards of professional journalistic information providers (Carlson, 2020).

While the canon of quality standards has changed again and again over time from different perspectives, the fundamental normative requirements for professional journalism have remained more or less the same in Western countries. The value and quality of information stand and fall with the quality of the production process. If independence, diversity, and relevance are not guaranteed, journalism loses its functions—and thus its epistemic value for the audience. However, more than ever, it is necessary to combine the supply side with the user side—in other words, to study and to govern quality with an integrative understanding. For even if sufficiently high-quality news is produced, algorithm-based personalization and user-side selection logics do not guarantee that every user will receive that news quality. Therefore, this article has dealt not only with the quality of news production but introduced the quality of news distribution and reception as equally important quality dimensions. It was then holistically analyzed how these three quality dimensions are threatened and can be promoted in the age of platforms. Existing rules, as formulated in the EU, particularly in the DSA, the Digital Markets Act, and EMFA, “fall short in addressing the power imbalance between platforms and news media, and they do not adequately protect local journalism” (Seipp et al., 2024, p. 18). Overall, the proposed measures aim to reduce information asymmetries and support alternatives and competences, thereby strengthening the autonomy of recipients and news providers.

At the production level, increasing economic pressures and the values, requirements, and standards of platforms are threatening the autonomy of news media and established news quality criteria. One governance approach is to strengthen journalistic norms and practices. Also, non-journalistic but opinion-relevant epistemic authorities should meet these normative requirements. This is because, in some cases, they are taking on functions that were previously reserved exclusively for journalism. In addition, direct public subsidies for journalism, if coupled with the quality of output, could be a solution. As they exacerbate the erosion of news media business models, platforms should contribute to such funding of news quality (Pickard, 2022). At the distribution level, due to the multiplication and the algorithmically personalized presentation of sources, it is important to ensure that trustworthy information sources are visible and recognizable. For example, content from reliable epistemic authorities could be highlighted and labeled in the newsfeed in order to distinguish it from harmful content such as disinformation. Given the political will and investment, a cooperative platform with public interest audience metrics and criteria of access, sorting, and presentation could act as a counterweight to the dominant platforms. A key challenge in this respect is to attract and retain a substantial user base. At the reception level, boosting news literacy and activating news interest can help to increase the diversity and depth of news consumption. These quality measures should be considered together. For example, those epistemic authorities who are considered qualified to produce news quality should also be more visible on platforms. A journalistic background is not seen here as a necessary condition for news quality. What is crucial is that news items are relatively accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, timely, and independently produce information about public affairs (Nielsen, 2017).

Moreover, careful scientific monitoring of the accuracy, effectiveness, and any unintended negative consequences of any epistemic governance measures is important (see also Mansell et al., 2025, pp. 180–186). Communication science has already developed suitable theoretical frameworks for studying content on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or X (Hase et al., 2023; Hermida & Mellado,

2020; Lamot, 2022; Steiner, 2020). Access to platform data granted by the DSA to “vetted researchers” could be used to systematically and comparatively study changes in the distribution and reception quality across different platforms (Jaursch et al., 2024). For example, with regard to reception quality, studies could analyze which news is consumed on which topics and perspectives and which groups are particularly vulnerable to false, misleading, or extremely biased information. Media regulation, ultimately, faces the challenge of creating favorable conditions for the production, dissemination, reception, and scientific monitoring of news quality in an increasingly complex, hybrid, and dynamic environment. The key to this is a holistic approach that strengthens the autonomy and competences of news providers, other epistemic authorities, and audiences to inform and be informed.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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