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Media Hybridization and the Strategic Value of Political Incivility: Insights From Italian Journalists

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Abstract

This study investigates political incivility in journalism through a discursive approach, conceptualizing journalism as continuously constituted through interpretative processes. Building on theories of hybrid journalism as an everyday condition embedded in journalistic practices rather than merely a technological phenomenon, the research examines how journalists discursively construct, interpret, and utilize political incivility. Through interviews with 32 political journalists, the study identifies three interconnected dimensions of hybridization that facilitate the spread of uncivil content in the Italian media landscape: media platforms and production processes, journalistic roles and practices, and content genres. Findings reveal that the cross-platform circulation of uncivil content amplifies its visibility, while economic pressures incentivize its use as a monetization strategy. Journalists experience tension between professional ideals and market demands, leading to role hybridization that combines traditional practices with entertainment-oriented ones. Five approaches to political incivility emerge: providing interpretive frames, spreading uncivil content, contextualizing it, fueling it, and avoiding it. The Italian context, characterized by strong political parallelism and polarization, offers a compelling case for understanding how incivility functions as a structural feature rather than a side effect of hybrid media systems. This study contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating how multiple levels of hybridization mutually reinforce the proliferation of incivility, potentially undermining public trust in journalism and its democratic function.

Keywords

hybridity; hybrid media; incivility in journalism; journalism; non-partisan media; outrage media; partisan media; political incivility; political parallelism; professional roles

1. Introduction

The lack of respect for norms governing personal interaction and democratic functioning, commonly known as political incivility, is playing an increasingly pivotal role in contemporary journalism. This phenomenon goes hand in hand with profound changes redefining media ecology and the profession of journalism, including hybridization of platforms, the redefinition of professional roles, and the blending of genres and styles of communication. In this rapidly-evolving context, uncivil speech in journalistic contexts has become a tactical means of capturing the attention of a fragmented, polarized audience. But questions are being raised as to whether such journalism can effectively facilitate real understanding of political issues.

While the scientific community is steadily focusing on political incivility and its implications for public discourse (Mutz, 2015; Van't Riet & Van Stekelenburg, 2022), such an approach has captured only part of this complex phenomenon. Researchers have extensively documented uncivil content and its effects on audience polarization, engagement, and democratic attitudes (Borah, 2014; Coe et al., 2014; Gervais, 2015), alongside comparative analyses between digital and legacy media environments (Chen, 2017; Rossini, 2020; Santana, 2014). Notably absent from this growing body of work, however, is substantive investigation into journalists as active agents in the production and circulation of incivility, despite their central role in information ecosystems.

This study aims to address the gap by examining how political incivility is managed within contemporary journalism, focusing on journalists' perceptions, interpretations, and instrumental employment of uncivil discourse. Conceptualizing journalism as continuously constructed through interpretations and re-interpretations (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017), the analysis of journalists' discourses demonstrates that media hybridization is a crucial structural and interpretive context for uncivil content. In their accounts, journalists demonstrate full awareness of how the convergence of different media platforms, the combining of professional roles, and the mixing of content genres create conditions that systematically promote the circulation of uncivil discourse while increasing its visibility and value as a strategic resource.

This approach aligns with Carlson et al.'s (2021) concept of "contested authority" in journalism. As conventional boundaries become blurred in hybrid media environments, journalists' exclusive authority to determine what constitutes legitimate news and how it should be interpreted is progressively challenged. The strategic use of incivility by journalists can be understood as both a response to this contested authority and a means of navigating an environment where traditional professional norms are in flux. Notably, journalists rationalize this approach by treating audience metrics as compelling evidence of reader preference for and engagement with uncivil content—though this interpretation erroneously conflates quantitative indicators (clicks and views) with qualitative responses (genuine appreciation or endorsement). While Carlson et al. (2021) focus on the American post-Trump context, this research identifies similar dynamics but with notable differences in the Italian media landscape, where journalists more or less consciously exploit various levels of media hybridization, transforming incivility from a mere side effect into a structural feature of political coverage.

The longstanding ties between media and political parties in Italy offer fertile ground for examining uncivil discourse. In the Italian media landscape, algorithmic data and engagement metrics now wield unprecedented authority (Splendore & Iannelli, 2022). These digital indicators become, for journalists,

reliable guides for editorial decisions, creating a system where political incivility gains strategic value because it often generates high engagement. Under these conditions, audience preferences and platform metrics drive editorial choices, fostering an environment where incivility gains visibility and value. The intersection of political-media entanglement and algorithmic-driven evaluation creates an environment in which uncivil discourse is not simply a consequence of digital transformation but is strategically deployed by politicians and journalists as a core component of contemporary news reporting.

2. Political Incivility in the Hybrid Media Context: A Theoretical Framework

Political incivility has emerged as a multidimensional phenomenon (Muddiman, 2017; Stryker et al., 2016) which is defined as disrespect for social and cultural norms that govern both personal interactions and the functioning of democratic systems (Bentivegna & Rega, 2022). Specifically, incivility can be operationalized through three interrelated dimensions: disrespect for others (rude behavior, interruptions, use of profanity), disrespect for democratic values (demonizing opponents, spreading falsehoods, using discriminatory language), and disrespect for democratic institutions (inappropriate behavior in places symbolic for democracy, disrespect for symbols of national history; Bentivegna & Rega, 2024b).

These dimensions are expressed through observable communicative practices such as personal attacks, derogatory language, inflammatory rhetoric, and deliberate misrepresentation (Chen, 2017; Rossini, 2020). Such uncivil discourse functions by violating established social norms and triggering emotional responses (Gervais, 2015). Examining incivility through this conceptual lens allows a nuanced analysis of its strategic deployment in journalistic contexts and its varying impacts across different media environments.

To understand how incivility operates within contemporary journalism, it is important to examine the fundamental transformations that shape media environments through the concept of hybridity, focusing on three key dimensions: technological platforms, professional roles, and journalistic genres.

2.1. From Print to Pixels: Platform Hybridization in Contemporary Media

Platform hybridization, while already present in established journalism, took on unprecedented dimensions with digitalization. This technological transformation has produced an information ecosystem in which traditional and digital media are highly interdependent, and a variety of time frames, professional practices, genres, and technologies coexist (Chadwick, 2013). This technological hybridity has a particularly notable impact on political journalism, shifting the established news cycle to more complex "political information cycles," i.e., "assemblages in which the personnel, practices, genres, technologies, and temporalities" of new media hybridize with those of "old" television, radio, and print media (Chadwick, 2011, p. 7). This shapes the content and flow of political news and influences power relationships between politicians, journalists, activists, and citizens. The process of news generation has thus become more fluid, open, and iterative than in previous models.

This definition of hybridity focuses on the rise of new media—with its attendant multiplication of actors and blurring of boundaries—the interaction between old and new media, and the shift from news being produced within professional journalistic organizations to its generation within heterogeneous networks. But other interpretations highlight the ubiquitous nature of the phenomenon, noting that hybridity is rooted

in the basic news production practices and structural contexts journalists operate in (Hallin et al., 2023). In other words, it is considered a constant of journalism as a situational practice subject to multiple influences in various organizational and social contexts.

2.2. Beyond Professional Boundaries: The Hybridization of Journalistic Roles

The literature on role performance in journalism (Hallin & Mellado, 2018; Mellado et al., 2017) conceptualizes journalistic practices as fluid manifestations shaped by editorial policy, market pressures, audience metrics, and relationships with sources. Journalists increasingly operate across multiple professional identities, functioning simultaneously as objective reporters, interpretive analysts, and audience-oriented entertainers (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). This multiplicity of roles creates tension between long-standing normative ideals (impartiality, accuracy, public service) and market-driven imperatives (audience engagement, click-through rates, social media metrics).

The emergence of new professional figures such as search engine optimization experts, social media managers, and audience engagement specialists further illustrates this hybridization, introducing new logics that reshape journalistic decision-making (Splendore, 2017). Such changes reflect a broader shift in what audiences find compelling. As prominent radio journalist Ira Glass observed (as cited in Meltzer, 2015, p. 94), "Opinion in all its forms is kicking the ass of journalism," noting that opinion-based content succeeds precisely because it offers a "casual, approachable style" that resonates more deeply with contemporary audiences than standard reportorial formats.

This audience-driven transformation of journalistic practice exemplifies what Mellado et al. (2017) describe as "patterns of multilayered hybridization." In this framework, professional roles in journalism appear as flexible, situational, and independent sets of functions that can be combined in various ways across different contexts. Journalists activate different professional roles in different circumstances rather than adhering to a singular professional identity. Within this context of role flexibility and audience-driven decision-making, the blurring of boundaries between reporting and commentary creates spaces where incivility can function as a strategic professional resource rather than a violation of journalistic norms.

This flexibility in role performance reflects what boundary work theory describes as the ongoing process through which professional groups negotiate the boundaries of legitimate practice (Lewis, 2012; Splendore, 2017). In hybrid media environments, journalists engage in continuous boundary work as they determine how to handle uncivil political content while maintaining professional credibility.

2.3. Blending Forms and Formats: The Hybridization of Journalistic Genres

Building on the hybridization of platforms and professional roles, the blending of journalistic genres represents another critical dimension of media hybridity. Not strictly linked to technological innovations, hybrid tendencies have been intrinsic to journalism throughout its development. Historical examples like the tabloidization of news content demonstrate how journalism has continuously negotiated boundaries between information and entertainment, since well before the digital revolution. Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 249) argue that media commercialization produces, among various consequences, a change in journalism's function: it is no longer aimed at spreading ideas and creating social consensus, but at producing entertainment and information that can be successfully sold to consumers.

This process has driven journalism to popularize its offerings across multiple dimensions: prioritizing soft content over hard topics, shifting from societal to personal frames, emphasizing timeliness over depth, and adopting more interpretative and emotional styles (Boczkowski, 2010; Hamilton, 2004; Patterson, 2000; Rega, 2017). Otto et al. (2017) demonstrate how these hybridizing tendencies operate simultaneously across topic selection, presentation style, and narrative framing, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that has progressively altered journalism's relationship with its audience.

Within this broader context of genre hybridization and emotional appeal, extreme forms of journalistic expression have emerged, particularly in the realm of political commentary. Berry and Sobieraj's (2014) concept of "outrage discourse"—an extreme form of incivility—exemplifies how genre hybridization operates. Although its contemporary form emerged in satellite channels and political blogs of the early 2000s, it reflects an evolution of journalistic sensationalism and echoes the partisan press of the 19th century (Schudson, 1978; Ward, 2004). Rather than creating extreme uncivil journalistic discourse, digital technologies accelerated, amplified, and normalized existing practices. Modern outrage journalism systematically employs aggressive language, mockery, character assassination, and ideologically extremizing rhetoric while hybridizing traditional journalistic elements with entertainment techniques. This historical perspective shows how the contemporary hybrid environment has activated tendencies once constrained by professional norms of objectivity.

2.4. Uncivil Discourse in the Hybrid Media Ecosystem: Connections and Consequences

The theoretical intersection of media hybridization and political incivility constitutes a significant gap in current literature. Contemporary media environments have undergone a profound structural transformation, converging professional and amateur content, merging entertainment with information, and collapsing distinctions between private and public communication. While incivility in political discourse has received considerable scholarly attention (Mutz, 2015; Van't Riet & Van Stekelenburg, 2022), systematic investigation into how hybrid media characteristics specifically enable and normalize uncivil communication remains limited. Some researchers have provided relevant insights: Meltzer (2015) demonstrates how changing media environments foster conditions where incivility proliferates, while Herbst (2010) argues that technological and social changes, including platform convergence and collapsing gatekeeping roles, have contributed to growing uncivil political discourse. However, these studies do not directly examine the structural mechanisms through which media hybridization systematically promotes incivility, leaving unresolved whether incivility is merely individual behavior or an inherent feature of these media configurations.

These hybridizing tendencies significantly impact how audiences process political information. The merging of journalistic and entertainment elements makes it increasingly difficult for citizens to distinguish between factual reporting and opinion-driven content (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020). When political reporting employs conventional journalistic signifiers (data, expert sources, balanced structure) within biased interpretative frameworks dominated by emotion and conflict, audiences struggle to apply appropriate evaluative criteria.

The media landscape includes outlets with varying degrees of political alignment and neutrality claims. Research by Arceneaux and Johnson (2013) illustrates how partisan media specifically frame political discourse in ways that emphasize discord between opposing sides, reinforcing existing partisan identities and group-based divisions. However, the research presented here highlights how divisive political discourse, with its biased framing and uncivil characterizations of opposing viewpoints, is progressively permeating the

entire mediascape rather than remaining confined to explicitly partisan outlets. This competitive pressure creates what Poljak (2024) identifies as a "negativity spiral," in which successful uncivil content becomes a template for future coverage.

While Poljak focused on traditional broadcast media, this dynamic is likely to be intensified in today's digital landscape, where newsworthiness construction and content monetization have been fundamentally transformed. Conventional news values—including timeliness, prominence, impact, proximity, conflict, unexpectedness, reference to prominent individuals, personalization, and negativity itself (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017)—now interact with platform-specific metrics, creating hybrid systems of valuation that privilege content likely to generate clicks, shares, and comments. Distinct characteristics make uncivil political discourse particularly appealing to editors: it violates established norms, thereby creating novelty; it frequently involves conflict between high-profile figures; and it triggers emotional responses from audiences. This aligns with the "man bites dog" principle—the violation of a norm is inherently interesting, regardless of whether that norm concerns personal, public, or institutional behavior (Gitlin, 2013). Thus, news outlets focus on broadcasting moments in which public figures use vulgar language or make discriminatory statements, thereby magnifying "moments of incivility" (Coe et al., 2014) and providing additional visibility for political actors who rely on uncivil speech or behavior.

The inherent news value of norm violations translates into measurable audience engagement, which media organizations gradually recognize as a reliable source of revenue generation. Content monetization operates through interconnected channels: direct advertising revenue linked to audience metrics, development strategies using ideologically appealing content, and platform interconnection promotion that leverages uncivil content's viral potential to increase brand visibility. As news organizations face declining revenues from traditional sources, these monetization mechanisms create powerful economic incentives for incorporating sensationalistic and provocative elements into coverage, even among outlets that otherwise adhere to long-standing journalistic standards (Tandoc, 2014). This economic logic creates a market for incivility that, as Poljak (2024) demonstrates, political actors quickly learn to exploit, gaining media visibility through negative and uncivil communication and, encouraged by this success, repeating the strategy in a cycle that progressively amplifies incivility in public discourse.

This reinforcing dynamic between political actors and media outlets fundamentally disrupts traditional journalistic gatekeeping functions. When uncivil material proves both accessible and engaging, economic constraints that prioritize audience metrics steadily undermine gatekeeping authority.

These market dynamics intersect with broader transformations in journalistic authority and identity. Carlson (2017) demonstrates how established gatekeeping has been disrupted by digital technologies and by emerging actors contesting conventional norms. In this context, the economic incentives for incivility create a specific dilemma: Journalists face choices about how to position themselves in relation to uncivil discourse, whether as neutral observers, critical analysts, or active participants. Though legacy media initially maintain editorial standards, this economic pressure creates a progressive weakening of professional boundaries. Tandoc's (2014) research documents how these financial priorities steadily wear down editorial resistance, compelling even established news outlets to integrate more clickbait and viral content (e.g., sensationalistic headlines, provocative content, uncivil discourse, etc.) into their coverage as they chase web traffic and advertising revenue.

This process of professional destabilization is further accelerated by emerging media actors who deliberately employ adversarial and confrontational discourse to challenge journalism's institutional authority. Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2019) demonstrate how these actors use provocative rhetorical strategies not merely as stylistic choices, but as deliberate challenges to mainstream journalism's claims to professional legitimacy and exclusive authority to define what constitutes legitimate news discourse. By operating outside conventional professional norms while claiming journalistic functions, these actors blur the boundaries between professional and amateur journalism, creating competitive pressure that forces traditional outlets to reconsider their own standards in response to this institutional challenge. Although Figenschou and Ihlebæk's work does not specifically focus on incivility, it provides crucial context for understanding how evolving professional dynamics, combined with the economic incentives referred to earlier, create conditions in which inflammatory and provocative discourse can proliferate.

2.5. Political Parallelism and Digital Transformation: The Italian Case Study

The Italian media system represents a particularly relevant case study for analyzing the relationship between media hybridization and political incivility. Historically framed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as a Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model, this system is characterized by significant political parallelism and a journalistic tradition in which opinion and comments occupy a more central role than factual reporting.

In this context, the epistemological tradition of Italian journalism has historically been marked by a tendency toward subjectivism—interpreting reality through elite perspectives—and analytical approaches that prioritize persuasive reasoning over empirical verification (Splendore & Iannelli, 2022). This epistemological predisposition has contributed to creating an environment in which the boundaries between information, commentary, and entertainment are particularly permeable.

Digital evolution has further transformed this scenario through a process of "media polarization" in which news outlets differentiate themselves not only by political orientation but also through distinctive approaches to political reporting (Splendore & Piacentini, 2024). This process unfolds in a landscape characterized by high levels of partisan perception of sources and by information consumption oriented toward confirming pre-existing positions (Newman et al., 2020).

This dynamic environment enhances the "strategic value" of political incivility, which provides both economic benefits through increased engagement and political utility through the reinforcement of partisan identities (Bentivegna & Rega, 2024a).

2.6. Hybridity as a Key to Understanding Contemporary Journalism

This brief summary highlights how various theoretical facets of the concept of hybridity can offer useful keys to interpreting and analyzing contemporary journalism, a field that hovers between stability and change. Whether considered as digital media impact or as an everyday phenomenon, hybridity underscores the fluid, multidimensional nature of journalistic practices. Relationships between components of the media system are continuously redefined, and professional roles are constantly rearranged. Journalists' concrete practices emerge from negotiation between external expectations (normative roles), personal values (cognitive roles), everyday constraints (practiced roles), and professional self-perception (narrated roles; Hanitzsch, 2017).

Within this complex media ecosystem, political incivility emerges as an integral component of the journalistic field's adaptation to hybrid media logics, with journalists playing an active role in shaping how this incivility takes form in professional practice.

3. Research Objectives and Design

This study analyzes the structural and discursive mechanisms through which uncivil political communication is incorporated into journalistic practices. By examining the intersection of traditional journalistic norms with emerging digital logics, I investigate how various principles, practices, and languages of journalism in the hybrid media age (Hallin et al., 2023) influence the selection, framing, and amplification of political incivility as "newsworthy" content. The analysis focuses on three main dimensions:

- Hybridity of media platforms and production strategies as an amplifier of political incivility in journalistic discourse, focusing on cross-platform dynamics, algorithmic logics, content fragmentation practices, and monetization mechanisms.
- Hybridity of journalists' roles and professional practices, the mismatch between professional ideals and digital market pressures, the rise of new professional figures, and the fluidity of journalistic roles in adapting to an increasingly complex media environment.
- Hybridity of genres and journalistic content, with a focus on the blending of information and entertainment formats in political journalism, and on the various ways journalists employ incivility in their daily work.

To explore these aspects, I followed critical discourse analysis principles (Wodak & Meyer, 2015), examining how journalistic discourse both reflects and constructs professional identities and power relations. The analytical process progressed through interconnected phases, first identifying discursive formations linked to the three dimensions of hybridity, then analyzing how power relations emerge in journalists' positioning toward political incivility. Throughout, special attention was paid to metaphors, narrative strategies, and explanatory frameworks journalists used to make sense of their changing professional environment and their relationship to uncivil discourse. This approach reveals not just journalists' stated opinions about incivility, but the underlying discursive structures through which they negotiate their professional identities and exercise agency in the context of media hybridization.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty-two Italian political journalists through purposive sampling designed to capture the stratification of the Italian media landscape. The selection systematically represented varied professional roles (editors-in-chief, correspondents, political reporters), media types (print, web, television), and political alignments of outlets (partisan/non-partisan according to Giglietto et al., 2020). This comprehensive selection of respondents across multiple variables also ensured gender balance (18 men, 14 women) and professional diversity across generations (age range of 30–70), enabling examination of how organizational contexts, professional positions, platform characteristics, and demographic factors shape journalists' approaches to incivility across different segments of the Italian journalistic field.

The selection specifically included professionals from some historically politically-aligned outlets (e.g., *Libero*, *La Verità*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*) and others with less pronounced political positioning (e.g., *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*), facilitating analysis of how political parallelism dynamics influence approaches to incivility.

The use of 32 participants was guided by two main factors. First, stratified representation: This number allowed adequate representation of all identified demographic and professional strata, ensuring at least 2–3 participants for each main combination of variables (e.g., women aged 41–50 in non-partisan web outlets). Second, theoretical saturation: The data collection process was accompanied by continuous preliminary analysis. After approximately 25 interviews, significant redundancy was observed in emerging analytical categories. Specifically, discursive patterns related to the legitimization of incivility and framing strategies showed clear signs of convergence around recurring schemes. The final seven interviews confirmed this trend, producing no significant new conceptual categories but enriching and consolidating those already identified.

The interviews, conducted March-July 2024 via Google Meet, averaged 75 minutes and were based on broad thematic cues concerning perceptions of incivility, involved actors, and consequences. All interviews were conducted in Italian and subsequently translated by a professional translator for analysis and reporting purposes. To maintain confidentiality, the interviews were anonymized (the excerpts below are identified by the letter attributed to each interviewee; see Table 1). To stimulate reflections on professional practices, interviewees were asked to comment on examples of news coverage of political incivility episodes and explain their approach to handling such occurrences.

Table 1. List of journalists.

Code	Gender	Age	Role	Media type	Partisanship	Interview date
A	F	50+	Editor in chief	Paper print	Non partisan	11/03/2024
B	M	35–50	Deputy editor in chief	Web	Non partisan	15/03/2024
C	M	35–50	Reporter	Web	Non partisan	20/03/2024
D	M	<35	Content creator	Web	Non partisan	21/03/2024
E	M	<35	Editor	Paper print	Non partisan	26/03/2024
F	M	35–50	Editor	Paper print	Non partisan	27/03/2024
G	M	35–50	Editor	Paper print	Non partisan	29/03/2024
H	M	50+	Editor	Paper print	Partisan	04/04/2024
I	F	50+	Editor	Paper print	Non partisan	04/04/2024
J	F	<35	Assignment editor	Web	Non partisan	05/04/2024
K	M	50+	News presenter	TV	Non partisan	08/04/2024
L	F	35–50	Managing editor	Web	Non partisan	10/04/2024
M	F	50+	Managing editor	Paper print	Non partisan	10/04/2024
N	M	35–50	Editor in chief	Paper print	Partisan	15/04/2024
O	M	35–50	Correspondent	Paper print	Non partisan	16/04/2024
P	M	35–50	News presenter	TV	Non partisan	16/04/2024
Q	M	50+	Talk show presenter	TV	Non partisan	17/04/2024
R	M	35–50	Editor in chief	Web	Partisan	18/04/2024
S	F	50+	Editor	Paper print	Partisan	22/04/2024
T	F	50+	Reporter	Paper print	Partisan	23/04/2024
U	M	35–50	Reporter	Paper print	Non partisan	25/04/2024
V	F	35–50	News presenter	TV	Non partisan	02/05/2024

Table 1. (Cont.) List of journalists.

Code	Gender	Age	Role	Media type	Partisanship	Interview date
W	M	35–50	Reporter	Paper print	Non partisan	11/05/2024
X	M	35–50	Editor	Web	Non partisan	13/05/2024
Y	M	50+	Editor	Paper print	Partisan	16/05/2024
Z	F	35–50	Assignment editor	Paper print	Partisan	18/05/2024
AA	F	50+	Reporter	Paper print	Partisan	30/05/2024
BB	F	50+	Editor	TV	Non partisan	12/06/2024
CC	M	50+	Editor	Web	Partisan	14/06/2024
DD	F	50+	Deputy editor	Paper print	Non partisan	15/06/2024
EE	M	35–50	Deputy editor	Paper print	Partisan	02/07/2024
FF	M	35–50	Deputy editor	Paper print	Partisan	03/07/2024

Notes: The newspapers *Libero*, *La Verità*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Il Manifesto*, and *Il Giornale* were the most politically-aligned news outlets from which journalists were interviewed; the newspapers *La Stampa*, *La Repubblica*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Post*, *Il Foglio*, *Il Domani*, *The Post Internazionale*, and *FanPage*, the social media news *Will Media*, the TV newscasts Rai News 24 and TgLa7, and the TV talk show *In Onda* were the least politically-aligned outlets used in the study. Source: Adapted from Splendore and Piacentini (2024).

4. Results

4.1. Hybridity of Media Platforms and Production

Analysis of the interviews indicates that hybridity in contemporary media emerges primarily through the interconnection and permeable boundaries between traditional and digital media environments, creating conditions that systematically facilitate the spread of uncivil content in political journalism. As theorized by Chadwick (2013) and Hallin et al. (2023), this interconnection fundamentally shifts how information circulates across the mediascape. The findings identify four interconnected dimensions through which platform hybridization shapes the strategic use of political incivility: cross-platform amplification, algorithmic prioritization, content fragmentation, and monetization.

The cross-platform amplification of uncivil discourse has become a central feature of contemporary news production. Inflammatory political rhetoric gains exceptional visibility as it circulates across interconnected media environments, creating what Bentivegna and Rega (2024a) describe as a "hall of mirrors" effect: "There's this ricocheting that happens between talk shows, television, newspapers, social media, that creates an echo chamber....Basically, it all becomes an indistinguishable sludge that just serves to boost audience numbers" (AA).

This circulation disrupts standard news hierarchies, eroding the organized structure of information: "The presentation format of news carries inherent value. On the internet there's no hierarchy. You open Twitter or Facebook, you find a piece of news, but you don't understand where it fits into the big picture" (C).

All interviewees acknowledged that violations of civil norms carry intrinsic news value that influences editorial decisions through multiple dimensions: novelty (norm violations attract attention), conflict (antagonistic interactions generate drama), and emotionality (uncivil behavior triggers audience responses).

These characteristics make incivility inherently attractive to journalists despite concerns about societal impact, confirming Mutz's (2007) findings about audience preferences for conflict over civility.

Driving these amplification effects, algorithmic prioritization systems on social media platforms and search engines systematically favor engaging content. Approximately two-thirds of interviewees (20 of 32) identified these digital platform algorithms as key factors in promoting polarizing and aggressive political discourse.

These systems create what several journalists described as a "virality imperative" that has reshaped editorial decision-making: "But there's the virality mechanism, which causes newspapers to sort of lose the function of putting some reasoning behind a news story, and that has to do with the logics of the platforms: the algorithm sets the priorities" (B).

Such technological influences establish structural constraints that permeate the entire media landscape, compromising the profession's overall commitment to rigorous journalism. These digital pressures consistently reward sensational material and clickable content at the expense of informational depth, a phenomenon acknowledged by most participants (27 of 32):

> Publishers are not thriving, and that has consequences. Since we need to fill our pages, and others have to fill television space, very often we make do with what's there. And the level clearly declines. (EE)

> I have to say that often, especially on the daily newspapers' websites, the need to be fast and beat the competition to a story, to follow a trend, makes you say "well, let's do that too, because the internet is talking about it"; let's say the profession's immune system defenses are dropping frequently. (G)

These algorithmic pressures also reshape how content is produced and distributed. Journalists increasingly adapt their work to maximize engagement across multiple platforms, leading to systematic fragmentation and recontextualization of political content to optimize cross-platform performance, transforming how incivility is presented:

> When you do a long interview, which can last half an hour…you need to provide smaller bits of content because a half-hour is too long and won't fit in a reel, and then you have to extrapolate a little part to use the stuff on all your outlets. (L)

This repackaging practice privileges provocative elements divorced from their original context, sacrificing nuance while uncivil components are lent disproportionate prominence, often boosting elements of incivility that quickly gain traction online.

Complementing these fragmentation dynamics, the monetization of political incivility proved to be a powerful economic factor driving editorial decisions. Numerous interviewees (B, CC, D, E, EE, G, L, O, and V) explicitly recognized this dynamic, with one television presenter noting:

> This has to do with the hybrid nature of journalism, which is on one hand a public service, and on the other part of a pure market environment. So, a video like that [explicitly racist], which has no political importance but goes viral after two minutes, I'll put it all over our website immediately, because unfortunately, I have to make money. (V)

In the Italian context, these hybridization processes interact with the tradition of political parallelism in distinctive ways. The historical interdependence between media and politics creates conditions where uncivil discourse can grow:

> Italy's specific historical nature is to have journalism complicit with politics—almost an accomplice of politicians. (U)

> To get votes, politicians tend to keep content at the shallowest possible depth. The media act as a megaphone, contributing in turn to this flattening. (EE)

This pattern varies depending on outlet type, with partisan media more consistently engaging in practices that spread incivility directed at perceived opponents, systematically deploying various forms of uncivil discourse against perceived enemies, and reinforcing narratives that conform to audience expectations (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013).

Social media were specifically identified by many interviewees (21 of 32) as the primary sources of these algorithmic pressures, i.e., as significant catalysts for increased toxicity in public debate through algorithmic amplification, reduced gatekeeping, and ease of content manipulation. Notably, journalists' accounts revealed a somewhat techno-deterministic perspective, positioning these platforms as key drivers of political incivility rather than merely amplifying existing tendencies.

These dimensions interconnect to create a self-reinforcing cycle: Data-driven content ranking encourages fragmentation practices, which enhance the cross-platform circulation of uncivil content, thereby increasing its monetization potential. While individual journalists express varying degrees of comfort with these practices, the structural conditions of contemporary journalism create powerful incentives for incorporating incivility into political reporting.

4.2. The Hybridization of Journalistic Roles and Practice

Journalistic roles are adapting to digital technologies and being profoundly transformed, creating conditions that facilitate the strategic deployment of political incivility. Such change aligns with Hanitzsch and Vos's (2017) concept of continuous discursive reconstruction of journalistic identity. The study identifies three key dimensions of role hybridization within contemporary political journalism: the blending of entertainment and information functions, the emergence of community-building roles, and the professional role conflict between journalistic ideals and market demands. Each of these hybridized dimensions creates specific pathways through which uncivil discourse shapes political coverage.

The adoption of entertainment functions represents a fundamental shift in how journalists conceptualize their professional identity, with journalists increasingly required to perform entertainment-oriented tasks alongside usual reporting duties. This shift reflects what Mellado et al. (2017) describe as hybrid role performance, where different professional orientations—watchdog, interventionist, service, and infotainment—are activated simultaneously in response to changing media demands, without necessarily entailing a radical transformation of journalists' identity: "There's also complaisance in showing a clown, because in this case journalism can easily slip towards infotainment" (U).

The adoption of entertainment functions reshapes journalists' professional approach to political coverage, requiring them to privilege conflict, personalize political issues, and amplify emotionally charged content. This evolution constitutes a fundamental reconfiguration of role expectations that systematically compels journalists to engage with uncivil discourse as part of their everyday work: "We try to go a little news, a little entertainment…so trying to have both popular content and news, which is useful to people in some way even if they don't want [to be informed about politics]" (M).

These changes are further reinforced through organizational restructuring within newsrooms themselves. The digital transformation of media has compelled news organizations to integrate specialized roles that can navigate the complex demands of multi-platform publishing and audience engagement. The proliferation of specialized digital roles within newsrooms—search engine optimization specialists, engagement editors, social media strategists—introduces algorithmic rationality into editorial decision-making, creating institutional incentives that prioritize engagement metrics over traditional news values. These developments mirror broader industry shifts toward optimization strategies that quantify audience behavior and shape content accordingly.

Beyond these organizational changes that blur traditional professional boundaries, the hybridization of journalistic roles manifests in how individual journalists relate to their audiences. Interview evidence revealed a significant shift toward what can be termed community-building practices. As one journalist observed:

> There are a number of journalists in Italy who actually have a community. In reality, each of us in our own small way has a sort of community, because unfortunately, in some cases, journalism has become similar to being an influencer: Just like Fedez has his community…journalists and news outlets have their community, too. (C)

As established institutional authority diminishes, journalists progressively function as identity entrepreneurs in fragmented media environments, cultivating audience loyalty through three distinct but interconnected mechanisms: strategic ideological positioning that validates audience worldviews; performative authenticity that simulates interpersonal connection; and identity-reinforcing content that strengthens in-group boundaries. This transformation exemplifies what, drawing on Carlson's (2020) analysis of digital journalism, can be seen as a relational shift in journalism, where audience affiliation becomes central to professional practice.

The professional-ethical strain dimension emerges as a theoretically significant framework for understanding the structural contradictions embedded in contemporary journalistic practice. Journalists experience this tension at multiple levels: as individual ethical dilemmas and as systemic conflicts between competing institutional logics—professional, market, and technological—that cannot be fully reconciled. This creates role ambiguity (Tandoc et al., 2013) with journalists forced to navigate between conflicting imperatives.

The analysis documented this phenomenon across 19 interviewees who highlighted specific mechanisms through which these tensions manifest: cognitive dissonance between ideals and practices; economic pressure overriding ethical considerations; and organizational cultures normalizing compromised standards. Responses to these pressures varied from open frustration with deteriorating standards to critical complicity

(acknowledging personal involvement while maintaining psychological distance) to a sense of entrapment within structural constraints that limit professional autonomy. As one journalist resignedly admitted:

> We [journalists] just go along with it….We've accepted the simplification of the message, we've accepted that the tweet of the moment from the politician of the moment, the Facebook post, or the video on social media is enough for a news story. (P)

The friction thus generated translates into a divergence between journalists' normative approaches and effective role performance (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017); provocation and conflict are incorporated into reporting on everyday politics even when they contradict professional ideals. The data revealed a pattern of journalists describing their participation in a "vicious circle" where economic necessity forces amplification of uncivil speech despite recognition of its harmful effects:

> Unfortunately, it's a vicious circle, meaning that politicians are, without a doubt, increasingly more ignorant and uncouth. They can afford to be, because the media, having to stay in business, put up with this shouting. (V)

> Unfortunately, the information system has really changed, and we've changed too….Honestly, I don't want to play along with this. Today, unfortunately, as politics has lowered its standards, news has lowered its standards too. (BB)

These professional tensions have significant implications for democracy and public discourse. Interviewees consistently linked deteriorating journalistic standards to broader patterns of audience disengagement and institutional distrust, suggesting that the spread of incivility may contribute to a cycle of declining media credibility and democratic participation: "Newspapers in Italy [are selling] 10% less every year. And that's also tied to people's loss of trust in newspapers….So that's the first result of newspapers' loss of credibility and authoritativeness" (G).

Overall, the hybridization of journalistic roles both enables political incivility and creates professional tensions affecting journalists' work, audience relationships, and democratic function.

4.3. Hybridization of Genres and Journalistic Content in Political Coverage

The gradual blurring of boundaries between journalistic genres systematically reshapes how political incivility is presented and interpreted. In a scenario where "the texts, genres, institutions, and discourses of public communication are in flux" (Baym, 2017, p. 12), once distinct genres are now merging together. This hybridization exemplifies what Otto et al. (2017) identify as the "softening" of political communication, a process where conventional informative functions progressively merge with entertainment-oriented approaches across multiple dimensions—from topic selection to framing strategies and presentation styles.

This genre hybridization has fundamentally altered the function of entertainment in political coverage. Once considered an "extra" in the news media sphere, entertainment is becoming an essential ingredient of political journalism, often built around instrumental conflict. Contemporary political coverage frequently leverages conflicts and polemics between politicians, with formats designed to amplify them to make the content more

appealing and provocative. This shift embodies what Berry and Sobieraj (2014) identified as the increasing prominence of uncivil discourse that combines traditional journalistic elements with entertainment techniques designed to trigger emotional responses. The economic logic behind this approach was succinctly expressed by two editors:

> I don't have to send three reporters to Sicily to do an investigative report to get a big headline, I can get commentators very well-known for colorful, often aggressive, and violent outbursts to say three curse words and I've got it. It cost me less, and it was quicker. (Y)

> To pay for investigative reporting, I have to show this other stuff to the public—insults, slurs, vulgarity. That's what they want and what we have to do to survive....So yes, I publish videos with insults, and I'm not ashamed of it. (CC)

This market-driven approach is closely intertwined with reader engagement patterns. Audience preferences strongly influence editorial decisions regarding incivility, especially in politically-aligned outlets targeting specific segments. This process seems to hinge on what Edgerly and Vraga (2020) term "news-ness"—the extent to which audiences perceive content as legitimate news—with journalists strategically managing audience perceptions.

In this hybrid environment, news outlets' capacity to attract and maintain audiences has become paramount. One journalist directly addressed this performative aspect: "You're putting on a show here, which is a part of political journalism. Let's tell it like it is: Right now, some political journalism has become show business" (T).

While stickiness (Stroud, 2017) has usually relied on conflict as a key news-value (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), today's media amplifies this approach, emphasizing incivility at the expense of substantive information.

To go deeper into the analysis, it is useful to define the different ways journalists use political incivility and how they intertwine with current media hybridization processes. As news/information and pure amusement/entertainment become less distinct from one another, there seem to be five approaches journalists take with regard to political incivility: providing interpretive frames, spreading uncivil content, contextualizing it, fueling it, and avoiding it. These practices often overlap within individual journalistic works, reflecting the complex interplay between informational objectives, commercial pressures, and audience appetite for sensationalism. Journalists might amplify provocative political statements to drive web traffic while simultaneously providing broader political context.

The largest number of interviewees (23 of 32) said they used a frame-of-interpretation approach, which is in keeping with the active role journalists play in constructing meaning and guiding audience understanding. This approach operates through the active construction of meaning around such discourse, enabling journalists to acknowledge its newsworthiness while maintaining critical distance. This practice reflects what Entman (1993) describes as journalism's role in not simply reporting events but providing interpretive frameworks through which audiences comprehend political reality. When political actors use racist or discriminatory language, journalists adopting this approach explicitly identify and frame it as such, providing readers with an evaluative lens rather than merely repeating the content. Particularly clear on this point are the words of one journalist:

> When a phrase is racist, we say it's a racist phrase; when a phrase is homophobic, we say it's homophobic...our way of presenting the issue is to take a position about it. To give an account of what politicians say without any interpretive filters could be a tragic error. (X)

The spreading approach (22 of 32 interviewees) amplifies uncivil political discourse without substantial critical framing, presenting ethical dilemmas between newsworthiness and the risk of normalizing incivility. This strategy treats provocative statements and inflammatory rhetoric as inherently newsworthy, privileging them in headlines and prominent positions. The deliberate nature of these editorial choices emerges clearly from this statement made in reference to a problematic content posted by a politician: "Nobody forces you to post it—it's a choice, but it gets clicks. That's the big problem" (G).

The contextualizing approach (16 interviewees, primarily from less politically-aligned outlets) operates through the strategic provision of background information that allows audiences to critically interpret uncivil discourse. Beyond merely labeling uncivil content, this approach situates it within broader political, historical, or social contexts, helping the public understand both the tactical nature of political incivility and its implications. By offering this deeper perspective, journalists actively resist the superficiality and polarization that characterize much political coverage. As one interviewee points out:

> Providing the reader with a context should be the minimum in our job. I realize that sensationalism has to do with us too, the pursuit of clicks, but it's clear that that's the minimum, because otherwise this profession is dying. (W)

The prevalence of this approach at non-partisan outlets suggests that political alignment influences editorial decisions, with non-partisan media, not needing to satisfy partisan audience expectations, having greater flexibility.

The fueling approach (nine interviewees, more prevalent among politically-aligned outlets) distinguishes itself by actively producing and amplifying uncivil discourse rather than simply responding to it. Unlike previous approaches, in these cases, journalists deliberately employ delegitimizing stereotypes, alarmist tones, and misleading information, justifying these practices as necessary to align with readers' expectations. This strategy goes beyond merely covering incivility: Complex political issues are transformed into binary oppositions that reinforce audience loyalty through shared outrage. As one interviewee explained:

> You decide you've got to stroke the reader, using language that's direct, below-the-belt, not necessarily tidy or cleaned up. Because "we tell it like it is," ok? "The other guys will trick you with their big words and convoluted sentences," and so on. (P)

Some interviewees even acknowledged that these practices can cross the line from journalism to propaganda through deliberate distortion of facts. This pattern confirms Arceneaux and Johnson's (2013) analysis of how partisan media adopt strategies specifically designed to reinforce existing partisan identities.

Finally, the avoiding approach (seven interviewees) represents professional resistance to the amplification of uncivil discourse and testifies to the fact that some professional autonomy and resistance to prevailing rationales continues to hold out. But as one interviewee noted, "This choice is becoming increasingly difficult,

especially for those who work in the online sphere, because the need for clicks and engagement pushes you in the opposite direction" (FF).

The approach is not only relatively rare but is also described as more of an aspiration than an actual practice, highlighting a misalignment between journalists' practiced roles and the roles they would ideally like to play (Hanitzsch, 2017). This tension is exemplified by one journalist's reflection:

> I wouldn't have published this piece of news because it seemed like a stunt intended to get attention, to spice things up and get clicks. I wouldn't consider it news, but it is. There are all these guys writing about this "social media storm" and so you repeat it. It's a spiral and nobody wants to get left behind. There's a mechanism of emulation. (M)

This discrepancy between the duty to inform and the risk of heightening incivility is indicative of the difficulties journalists face in seeking to balance the various demands of their work in the current hybrid environment. On one hand, they have a deontological duty to inform citizens, and an awareness that this responsibility calls for more prudent handling of uncivil political discourse. On the other hand, the need to attract and retain an audience in a hyper-competitive landscape, and the admittedly inherent news value of uncivil discourse as well, make it difficult to resist the temptation to spread it.

The various uses of political incivility by journalists reflect the challenges and contradictions of this profession in the hybrid era. While individual journalists adopt different approaches, market pressures more and more privilege reporting incorporating uncivil elements, illustrating how hybrid environments reshape not just professional practices but the nature of political discourse itself.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study advances theoretical understanding of contemporary journalism by demonstrating how the hybridity of the media system serves as a key framework for analyzing the systematic proliferation of uncivil journalistic discourse. Building on theoretical perspectives that conceptualize hybridity as an everyday condition embedded in journalistic practices (Hallin et al., 2023) rather than merely a technological phenomenon, the research has examined how journalists discursively construct, interpret, and utilize political incivility. Through interviews with political journalists, the findings demonstrate how professional identities are negotiated and reshaped within this hybrid environment.

Results indicate how this hybridity is evidenced across three interconnected dimensions. First, regarding media platforms and production, the cross-platform circulation of uncivil content creates a "snowball effect" that amplifies its visibility and resonance as it bounces between interconnected digital and traditional media channels. This dynamic process of content rebounding across platforms generates cumulative momentum, with each transition expanding its reach and impact. This structural transformation has embedded incivility within the new newsworthiness criteria of the hybrid media ecosystem, making it not merely a byproduct but an integral component of digital journalistic practice.

Second, hybridity impacts professional journalistic roles and practices. The analysis documents an increasing fluidity of roles that combine elements of various models (watchdog, interventionist, service, infotainment,

etc.), consistent with Mellado et al. (2017). Newsrooms are experiencing a dual transformation: New digital-sphere professionals are orienting editorial strategies toward maximizing traffic and engagement—sometimes through incivility—while traditional journalists find themselves adapting in various ways to the logic of the digital landscape, often at the expense of quality and professional ethics. This hybridization of roles creates systemic conditions in which incivility can flourish. Professionals experience deep tensions between adhering to internalized normative roles and adapting to new economic demands.

Third, regarding hybridity of genres and content, this research attests to an increasing amalgamation of information, entertainment, and punditry that blurs the boundaries between different forms of political journalism. This hybridity is transforming formats, but also ways of constructing journalistic meaning. Five particular ways of using (or avoiding) incivility were highlighted in interviews (providing interpretive frames, spreading, contextualizing, fueling, and avoiding) demonstrating that journalists' approach to incivility is not uniform but varies significantly based on different priorities, sensibilities, editorial demands and, last but not least, the political orientation of the news outlet they work for.

These findings contribute to the literature on the evolution of journalistic genres in the digital age (Baym, 2017; Edgerly & Vraga, 2020), showing how incivility has become structurally embedded in new hybrid forms of political journalism. The distinct patterns in how media organizations handle uncivil content are particularly significant in the Italian media landscape. While Berry and Sobieraj (2014) have documented how incivility functions as an editorial strategy across various media systems, the Italian case illustrates its intensified role in an environment where numerous news outlets maintain explicit political alignments that both reflect and amplify societal divisions. In this environment marked by strong political parallelism and high media polarization, uncivil discourse becomes embedded in the system, reinforced at multiple levels of hybridization. This dynamic is most evident in partisan outlets, which strategically deploy incivility to discredit perceived enemies (Europe, political and economic "élites," immigrants, sexual minorities) while simultaneously strengthening audience identification by capitalizing on pre-existing biases.

The process accelerates as algorithms and digital metrics gain authoritative status in Italian newsrooms (Splendore & Iannelli, 2022), fostering an environment where incivility's strong performance in audience metrics lends it a veneer of professional legitimacy. The Italian case reveals how incivility thrives at the intersection of longstanding political parallelism and digital transformation. The normalization of uncivil discourse stems from the interplay of professional norms, market forces, and audience demands, reflecting how journalistic practices incorporate technological innovations while maintaining core characteristics of the polarized pluralist model.

However, the specificity of the Italian context notwithstanding, there are also meaningful parallels in other national contexts. Meltzer's research (2015) on American journalists indicates that there, too, punditry has gained the upper hand over traditional news, and incivility has become a natural evolution of political journalism in response to public preference. The observable demand for more direct, confrontational approaches to political coverage creates similar pressures across otherwise distinct media systems. Similar dynamics have been documented in other European contexts, where increasing commercial pressures and digital competition have led to a softening of political communication even in systems historically defined by strong public service orientations (Otto et al., 2017). Though incivility takes different forms across cultural and media system settings, the structural relationship between media hybridization and political discourse reflects broader transformations unfolding in journalism globally.

Beyond these cross-national comparisons, the study offers several substantial contributions to our understanding of contemporary journalism. On a theoretical level, this research advances the interpretive model of journalism by illustrating through journalists' accounts how hybridity operates as a structural condition that fundamentally reshapes the profession. The study identifies recurring patterns through which algorithmic logics have permeated long-standing news values, transforming how incivility is evaluated and processed across the information ecosystem. The findings expand on Hanitzsch and Vos' (2017) discursive approach by revealing the complex emotional experiences of journalists as they navigate competing demands for professional legitimacy.

These tensions align with Carlson's (2017) relational model of journalistic authority, which conceptualizes authority as emerging from dynamic relationships rather than fixed professional attributes. In this context, journalists must continuously renegotiate these relationships as they balance established professional norms with industry dynamics that reward incivility, creating ongoing struggles over their own legitimacy and credibility. This study demonstrates how these struggles manifest in Italian journalists' varied responses to uncivil political content, uncovering a significant contradiction: Despite journalists' expressed ethical concerns about incivility, economic pressures consistently lead them to incorporate it into their professional practice.

Furthermore, the identification of five distinct approaches to incivility contributes to boundary work theories by revealing how professionals tend to delimit professional jurisdiction within their field. While Carlson's framework explains how journalists maintain authority through relational dynamics, boundary work theory illustrates the mechanisms through which they define professional boundaries and set the criteria for inclusion/exclusion, even with regard to uncivil political content. Rather than following fixed professional codes, journalists actively negotiate what constitutes professional standards through their daily editorial choices. However, this boundary negotiation reveals a fundamental tension: While journalists may attempt to resist incivility, their everyday editorial choices frequently reproduce it, illustrating the gap between professional aspirations and practical constraints in boundary negotiation.

Some limitations of this research must be acknowledged. Its qualitative approach and emphasis on journalists' perceptions preclude statistical generalizations and a comprehensive understanding of audience perceptions of incivility. The focus on the current Italian context limits possibilities for tracking the evolution of the situation or making international comparisons. While the study captures journalists' varying approaches to political incivility, it cannot definitively establish the relative prevalence of each approach across the broader media landscape, which would require complementary content analysis. Future research might aim to fill these gaps by integrating qualitative data with quantitative content analysis and audience surveys. Areas of inquiry could include: strategies developed by news outlets for resisting pressure to use incivility while maintaining high standards of quality; long-term implications of the normalization of incivility on media credibility and the quality of democratic debate; how different aspects of national media systems (e.g., degree of polarization, pluralism, regulation) mediate the impact of hybridity on the spread of incivility; the role professional and organizational cultures play in promoting or curbing the strategic use of incivility.

Finally, this study demonstrates that media hybridization and journalistic incivility are linked by a reciprocal relationship that operates at multiple levels. Specific aspects of hybridization (competitive pressures, algorithmic logics, monetization) create systemic conditions favorable for the normalization of incivility,

while uncivil content actively reshapes hybrid journalistic practices, influencing newsworthiness criteria and editorial strategies. However, this dynamic is not deterministic. Rather than merely responding to technological and market forces, journalists exercise professional agency by actively participating in the reconfiguration of norms for their field, strategically deploying political incivility, and assigning interpretive meaning to these practices based on their professional judgment. This professional agency operates within the broader context of cultural-political factors—political polarization, economic precarity in journalism, and cultural shifts—that shape the conditions within which journalists make these choices.

By conceptualizing incivility as deeply rooted within journalism's evolving professional field, rather than as a mere consequence of digital transformations, this study highlights why developing effective interventions to combat the impoverishment of political news and preserve the democratic function of journalism requires attention to both broader hybrid media system dynamics and the active role of professionals in negotiating field boundaries.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The interview data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality considerations. Anonymized excerpts are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approval.

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