

Diffusion, Logics, and Boundaries: How Journalists in Marginalized Media Markets Negotiate AI in Newsrooms

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Abstract

Literature on artificial intelligence (AI) and its role in journalism is expanding rapidly. Yet it remains disproportionately focused on Western contexts, ignoring how AI is perceived and negotiated in marginalized or semi-peripheral markets. This article focuses on how journalists in Albania, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, and Turkey perceive, apply, and challenge AI technologies. Drawing on theories of diffusion of innovations, institutional logics, and boundary work, this study analyzes the presentation of AI as both a technological innovation and a symbolic threat to professional identity. We conducted 10 focus-group sessions with 68 journalists and editors from diverse media outlets in seven different countries. Sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. Transcripts were independently coded by two researchers using AI-assisted coding in ATLAS.ti, alongside standard manual coding, with consensus-building to refine the process. The results show skewed and uneven AI implementation, motivated by efficiency requirements and not institutional strategy. Journalists present AI as a helping hand, noting concerns about fact-checking, editorial control, and professional autonomy. These strains indicate conflicting institutional logics, especially between technological efficiency and professional norms, and produce particular kinds of boundary work. Whereas defensive strategies underline the unreliability of human judgment, adaptive strategies also incorporate AI under editorial oversight. The article

is relevant to the literature because it emphasizes ways in which structural limitations, institutional stresses, and professional ideals influence AI adoption outside of Western media systems.

Keywords

artificial intelligence; boundary work; journalism; marginalized media markets; newsroom cultures; professional identity

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has moved from being a speculative topic in journalism to an increasingly concrete element of newsroom practice. What only a few years ago was discussed mainly in relation to automation or experimental uses in data journalism is now present in a much broader range of editorial routines. This transformation has generated intense scholarly and professional debate. Much of the recent literature has focused on AI's practical potential to improve speed, efficiency, and productivity in journalism, as well as on the ethical and epistemological risks it introduces (Deuze & Beckett, 2022; Opdahl et al., 2023). Recent syntheses show that AI-in-journalism research increasingly examines how automation and human-machine collaboration are reshaping newsroom workflows (Schjøtt, 2026).

Existing research has substantially advanced our understanding of AI adoption in journalism, particularly in Western media systems. Less attention, however, is paid to contexts where AI adoption unfolds under structural constraints, institutional fragility, and uneven technological development. As a result, little is known about how journalists working under conditions of economic constraint and political pressure perceive, negotiate, and integrate AI into their daily practices. This imbalance matters because technological adoption is never purely technical; it is shaped by organizational cultures, professional histories, institutional pressures, and local understandings of what journalism is and should do. This study focuses on Albania, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, and Turkey, which provide a valuable set of underrepresented contexts for examining how these factors shape the adoption and negotiation of AI beyond the media systems that have so far dominated the literature. In this study, marginalized media markets are understood not simply as geographically peripheral settings, but as media systems shaped by structural constraints, institutional trajectories, and uneven technological capacities that influence how journalistic innovation is interpreted and adopted (Curran & Park, 2005; Voltmer, 2008). Following Hallin and Mancini's (2004) comparative framework, we use it to denote a position relative to the polarized-pluralist and hybrid media systems that predominate in this region, characterized by weaker professionalization, greater political parallelism, and less consolidated market autonomy than the liberal and democratic-corporatist systems from which most AI-newsroom studies to date have drawn their evidence (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

This article addresses that gap by examining how journalists and editors in seven Southeastern and Mediterranean media markets (Albania, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, and Turkey) make sense of AI as both a technological innovation and a symbolic challenge to journalistic professionalism. To analyze these dynamics, the article integrates diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003), institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012), and boundary work (Gieryn, 1983) into a multilevel analytical framework. Rather than treating these perspectives as separate explanations, we use them to examine how technological

diffusion is mediated by competing institutional logics and negotiated through journalists' professional boundary work. Diffusion of innovations explains uneven spread, institutional logics accounts for organizational mediation and tensions, and boundary work captures journalists' agentic negotiations and feedback into future adoption. Beyond its geographical focus, the study aims to contribute to AI-in-journalism research by showing that AI adoption is not simply a technological process, but one that is also shaped by the structural conditions within which journalism is practiced.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Diffusion of Innovations and AI Adoption

Researchers have examined the process of adopting innovations for decades, and Everett Rogers' *Diffusion of Innovations* (Rogers, 2003) remains a foundational framework. Rogers defines innovation as an idea, practice, or object that is considered novel and which offers individuals or organizations new ways to address and solve problems, and technology "a design for instrumental action that reduces the uncertainty in the cause-effect relationships" (Rogers, 2003, p. 17).

2.1.1. The Macro–Meso Distinction in Diffusion

This article adopts a multilevel approach linking AI adoption to macro-level global trends and micro-level journalistic identity. Diffusion refers to the spread of an innovation across organizations, while adoption is the process of integrating an externally developed innovation into an organization (Frambach & Schillewaert, 2002; Orlando et al., 2013). At the macro level, the spread of AI tends to be uneven: Media markets worldwide enjoy early access and rapid technology diffusion, whereas marginalized media markets are affected by so-called digital divides stemming from language support, infrastructure, and resource constraints.

2.1.2. Meso Level: Perceptions and Institutional Logics

How innovation is perceived is a major determinant of its adoption rate. Rogers (2003) identifies five key attributes that explain most variation in adoption: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Within newsrooms, these perceptions are filtered through organizational cultures, resource constraints, and competing priorities that influence whether AI is viewed as a useful tool or a disruptive force. Diffusion is a complex process, and during innovation adoption, several key stages can be identified. Different perspectives describe the process in varying ways. Some researchers (Frambach & Schillewaert, 2002) talk about two stages, initiation and implementation; others (Orlando et al., 2013) add adoption (decision) to the process. These phases can be disrupted in marginalized markets by economic instability or by an organization's inability to manage the situation, fostering conservative or hostile attitudes toward AI (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006). Such dynamics lead to a disparate distribution of technologies across organizations and work environments, with some actors pursuing innovation first and others being conservative or hostile. Such processes are particularly evident in journalism, which has undergone considerable technological change over the last few decades.

2.1.3. Micro Level: Journalistic Boundary Work

Digital technologies have disrupted prevailing newsroom practices, transforming the modes of production and dissemination of news (Pavlik, 2022). In recent years, the evolution of AI has accelerated, opening new opportunities for automation, including transcription, translation, data analysis, and text generation (Deuze & Beckett, 2022; Furtáková et al., 2025; Sánchez-García et al., 2023). Journalists do not passively accept these tools; they actively negotiate their professional identity through boundary work. Some news outlets are keen to test the applications, whereas others are hesitant due to concerns about editorial control, transparency, and the possible loss of human power (Andok et al., 2025). In light of this, defensive, adaptive, or integrative boundaries will dictate the cultural impacts of AI in the newsroom and whether AI becomes a useful support or a threatening substitute.

Based on this multilevel understanding of AI diffusion, the following research question has been raised:

RQ1: How do journalists in marginalized media markets perceive the diffusion of AI technologies in relation to their professional values and newsroom routines?

2.2. Institutional Logics as a Meso-Level Framework for AI

While diffusion theory explains how technologies spread across organizations, it does not fully explain how journalists interpret AI within professional contexts. Institutional logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012) provide the meso-level lens and help explain how newsrooms respond to AI. In this study, the meso level refers to the organizational context of news production, where institutional logics shape how AI is interpreted, implemented, and integrated into newsroom practices. Institutional logics are socially constructed systems of values, assumptions, and practices upon which organizations understand their activities and organize time and space (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012). In newsrooms, multiple logics coexist and can conflict, providing the interpretive frameworks through which AI is evaluated and integrated into editorial processes. In this sense, meso-level logics establish the organizational conditions within which journalists negotiate AI at the micro level. This study examines how these logics—professional, market, technological, and organizational—shape AI adoption in newsrooms, as reflected in journalists' accounts and practices discussed in the empirical analysis.

Professional logic emphasizes verification, editorial responsibility, and journalistic authority as the “fourth estate” (Carlson, 2017), such that AI is often seen as a threat to authorship and control, positioning journalists as overseers rather than primary creators (Fincham, 2023; Opdahl et al., 2023). This logic, anchored in core journalistic values, is undergoing reconfiguration. In this context, the implementation of AI within journalistic practice is perceived as a significant or serious challenge (Peña-Alonso et al., 2025), framed as a potential threat to editorial control and professional authority. While professional logic operates as a set of shared norms and expectations, professional identity refers to how these norms are enacted, negotiated, and contested by individual journalists in everyday practice, linking meso-level structures to micro-level boundary work. Professional identity is therefore dynamic and may be reshaped by changing working conditions and technological transformations (Anton et al., 2026).

Technological logic refers to the orientation toward systematizing and optimizing news production through automation, analytics, and AI-driven tools, prioritizing efficiency and the reduction of routine tasks (Sirén-Heikel et al., 2023). These developments often come into tension with professional logic, particularly where speed and automation challenge norms of verification, authorship, and editorial control. Market logic focuses on profitability, audience engagement, and cost reduction, viewing AI as a tool for productivity amid declining revenues (Beckett, 2019; Landerer, 2013). This efficiency-based motivation in marginalized media markets frequently leads to direct opposition to professional norms of depth and editorial quality, thereby compelling a trade-off between financial survival and news integrity. Organizational logic refers to the structuring of newsroom workflows, roles, and routines through which competing logics are translated into concrete editorial processes, often creating intra-organizational constraints that influence the implementation of journalistic practices (Asp, 2014). Organizational logic may also be critical to the form in which AI is integrated into newsroom design. These logics generate tensions, especially between professional norms of accuracy and technological/market demands for speed that journalists experience as everyday dilemmas. Guided by this meso-level analysis, we propose the following research question:

RQ2: How do competing institutional logics (technological, organizational, professional, market) shape journalists' interpretations and application of AI in newsroom workflows?

2.3. Micro-Level Negotiations: Journalistic Boundary Work and Professional Identity

Boundary work (Gieryn, 1983) explains how professions define and defend expertise when boundaries become unstable. For Gieryn, boundaries are not fixed divisions between “science” and “non-science,” but constructed, negotiated, and strategically invoked. Professionals engage in boundary work to protect credibility and legitimacy, especially when autonomy is under threat. While diffusion of innovations explains the uneven spread of AI and institutional logics account for the organizational tensions surrounding its adoption, boundary work focuses on how journalists themselves interpret, negotiate, and defend their expertise and authority in response to those pressures at the level of professional identity.

Applied to journalism, this perspective clarifies how journalists define legitimate news production. As Davis (2010) notes, journalism's professional standing depends less on formal credentials than on shared commitments such as verification, independence, accountability, and service to the public. These values distinguish journalism from public relations, activism, and user-generated content. In this sense, professional identity is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing accomplishment shaped by the interaction between institutional ideology, organizational settings, and individual self-understandings (Raemy, 2020).

Carlson (2017) conceptualizes journalistic authority as an achievement stabilized through norms, routines, and public claims about expertise and responsibility. From this perspective, AI challenges established authority by introducing algorithmic actors into domains historically associated with human judgment, including news selection, framing, drafting, summarizing, and verification. As Carlson (2015) suggests, journalists' responses can be understood as efforts to reassert authority where epistemic and normative control is partially transferred to technological systems. Recent work further shows that journalists respond to generative AI by seeking to preserve their epistemic authority through supervised forms of human-machine co-creation, retaining editorial control over inputs, verification, and final judgment (Ashuri et al., 2026).

2.3.1. Boundary Work in Journalism: Maintaining Credibility and Autonomy

Journalism has repeatedly faced challenges to its authority. Lewis (2012) shows that the rise of participatory media forced journalists to renegotiate the balance between professional control and open contribution. Rather than rejecting user participation or surrendering editorial authority, news organizations recalibrated boundaries, allowing new forms of input while retaining control over standards, judgment, and final decisions.

Carlson's (2015) analysis of automated journalism reveals a similar pattern. As algorithmic systems began producing news stories, debates emerged around whether machine-written content could be considered journalism. Journalists responded by emphasizing interpretation, responsibility, and editorial judgment, effectively redefining the professional core around those elements least open to automation. Boundary work becomes visible here, as distinctions between human and machine production are drawn and defended.

As Lewis (2012) suggests, new technological practices do not necessarily erode professional control; they reshape how it is exercised. Journalists may defend interpretive labor while integrating automated systems into routine production. AI thus prompts both protection and expansion. What matters, then, is not only that AI generates professional tension, but how journalists themselves translate that tension into claims about what remains properly journalistic, who should retain control, and which forms of AI use are compatible with their role. This dynamic helps frame RQ3:

RQ3: How do journalists perform boundary work to reconcile the perceived opportunities and risks of AI with their professional identity?

2.3.2. Adaptive and Defensive Boundary Work in Response to AI

Gieryn (1983) distinguishes between protective and expansionary forms of boundary work. This distinction clarifies journalists' possible responses to AI. At the micro level, these forms of boundary work can be understood as strategies through which journalists respond to AI's challenge to their expertise and authority. Protective, or defensive, boundary work emphasizes non-substitutable aspects of practice, such as ethical judgment, contextual interpretation, and accountability. Expansionary, or adaptive, boundary work instead incorporates new tools or competencies into the profession while preserving control over standards and outcomes (Carlson, 2015, 2017).

In practice, these strategies often overlap. Carlson (2015) shows that journalists can defend interpretive labor while integrating automated systems into routine production. Accordingly, competing professional, technological, and market pressures do not only operate at the organizational level; they function as individual negotiations over expertise, autonomy, and responsibility. Recent studies reflect that journalists respond to AI by evaluating its usefulness and by renegotiating editorial autonomy, oversight, and responsibility in everyday practice (Ashuri et al., 2026; Cools & de Vreese, 2025). These dynamics are essential for understanding how AI becomes institutionalized in newsroom culture. When AI is framed as a subordinate tool under editorial supervision, its adoption is likely to remain constrained by professional standards. When technological fluency is framed as a marker of professional excellence, however, AI competence may itself become a new boundary marker. In this way, boundary negotiations do not merely reflect present responses to AI; they also shape expectations about its future role and the conditions under which it becomes normalized, constrained, or resisted in newsroom culture. This perspective informs RQ4:

RQ4: How do forms of boundary negotiation (defensive vs. adaptive) shape journalists' expectations about the future and diffusion of AI in newsroom culture?

2.3.3. Boundary Work and the Redefinition of Journalistic Professionalism in Hybrid Human–Machine Contexts

The integration of AI signals a shift toward hybrid human–machine configurations in news production. In these settings, professional identity is neither simply preserved nor fully transformed, but recalibrated. Davis (2010) highlights the normative foundations of journalism, which become especially relevant here. If professional distinction can no longer rely solely on technical control over production, it must depend more heavily on judgment, accountability, and commitment to the public interest.

From a boundary work perspective, hybridization requires constant clarification of responsibility. Where does machine assistance end and human accountability begin? Which tasks can be delegated without undermining professional ideals? These questions shape newsroom norms, influence public perceptions of legitimacy, and condition the adoption of AI tools.

In marginalized media markets, where resources are limited and labor conditions are often precarious, these negotiations may be especially significant. AI may appear as a practical response to structural constraints by promising efficiency and lower costs, but it can also intensify concerns about deskilling, homogenization, and loss of autonomy. Seen through the lens of boundary work, AI adoption becomes more than a technological choice: It is a site of professional self-definition through which journalists help normalize, constrain, or redirect how AI becomes embedded in newsroom practice over time.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design and Sampling

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design with focus groups. The sessions were conducted in person or remotely in June–July 2025 and in July 2026. The purposive sample consisted of 68 media professionals across seven media markets: Albania ($n = 14$), Croatia ($n = 9$), Kosovo ($n = 10$), North Macedonia ($n = 10$), Romania ($n = 9$), Slovenia ($n = 8$), and Turkey ($n = 8$). An overview of participants' characteristics is provided in Appendix C (Table C2) in the Supplementary File. Participants were recruited using a non-probabilistic strategy that combined purposive and snowball sampling through three channels: (a) direct contact with known newsrooms (e.g., emailing editors via publicly available addresses), (b) dissemination via professional networks (e.g., national journalist associations and informal professional mailing lists), and (c) snowballing via participant forwarding within their professional circles. Inclusion criteria were current employment as a journalist or editor, and no minimum years of experience were required. All individuals provided informed consent before participation.

3.2. Data Collection

The focus-group sessions were facilitated by local moderators using a shared semi-structured guide to ensure conceptual equivalence across contexts. The sessions were conducted in person or remotely, and

in the participants' native language. Contextual information on each session is provided in Appendix A (Table A1) in the Supplementary File, and the full guide is reproduced in Appendix B, also in the Supplementary File.

All sessions were audio recorded and transcribed using automated transcription followed by human review to correct errors and improve accuracy. Transcription was verbatim and preserved the conversational structure of the discussions: Each contribution was attributed an anonymized speaker identifier. Direct exchanges between participants remained visible in the transcripts and could be considered during coding. Because discussions took place in multiple languages, transcripts were translated into English prior to analysis by local moderators. Both the AI-assisted and the human coder therefore worked with the same set of transcripts.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and participation was voluntary. The transcripts were anonymized and any potentially identifying details about individuals and confidential newsroom systems were removed or generalized prior to analysis. An overview of all participants is provided in Appendix C (Table C1) in the Supplementary File.

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis followed recent methodological guidance on AI-assisted qualitative analysis and collaborative coding (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Gao et al., 2024; Williamson et al., 2025), combining ATLAS.ti's AI-assisted coding with manual coding in MAXQDA Analytics Pro. The first coder generated an initial codebook in ATLAS.ti and manually reviewed every suggestion, refining codes and quotation links where needed; the full procedure is reported in Appendix D in the Supplementary File.

In parallel, a second coder conducted a fully manual coding process using MaxQDA Analytics Pro as a data management and coding platform. MaxQDA was used solely to organize, store, and apply codes to the data; all codes, code definitions, and coding decisions were developed manually by the researcher without AI assistance or AI-generated codebooks. The coding process went through several iterative rounds, starting with a smaller set of initial codes that were progressively refined, expanded, and differentiated as new patterns emerged across the transcripts (Saldaña, 2021). After both coding processes were complete, the coders compared their exported codebooks, discussed areas of convergence and divergence, merged overlapping categories, and iteratively revised the coding framework until consensus was reached. The agreed framework comprises 10 higher-order categories and is presented in full in Appendix E (Table E1) in the Supplementary File. Frequency markers reported in the findings represent code frequencies (i.e., the total number of coded mentions across the dataset), rather than the number of unique participants.

4. Findings

4.1. Uneven Diffusion of AI in Marginalized Newsrooms (RQ1)

Consistent with the macro level of our conceptual model, this section addresses RQ1 through the lens of diffusion of innovations, asking how far and how evenly AI has travelled into the routines of newsrooms in marginalized media markets. Most participants reported broad awareness of AI tools used for numerous newsroom tasks, from transcription services and multimodal generators to research assistants. At the same

time, several journalists emphasized limited, minimal, or non-use of AI in their journalistic work. Despite this general awareness, there is a clear disparity in how these tools are implemented in newsroom workflows. Numerous participants noted that AI tools were not completely integrated into editorial production but were used selectively for specific tasks, like transcription or drafting support. Such an imbalanced trend indicates that the spread of AI in marginalized media markets is characterized less by systematic, institutional adoption than by individual experimentation and ad hoc usage.

Diffusion was not a one-way process, as several participants described trial followed by rejection. One Romanian journalist abandoned ChatGPT entirely because “the sources aren’t reliable....I asked it to make summaries, but I just threw them away because half the info was wrong” (RO4), migrating instead to newer tools he perceived as more accurate. Adoption decisions in these markets are thus continuously revised, based on first-hand accuracy assessments rather than organizational mandates. In Croatia, discontinuance also operated at the level of individual tasks: One journalist described abandoning ChatGPT for headline writing because “if anything, it slows us down” (HR8), and web headlines demand a style the model does not grasp.

The most frequently mentioned AI tool was ChatGPT, followed by specialized transcription applications such as VATIS, Turboscribe, Otter.ai, Sonix AI, EBU Transcriber, Minutes AI, and the language-specific system Shqip.ai, as well as customized tools, internal software, proprietary tools, and conversational assistants. Journalists also mentioned tools that support newsroom workflows, such as the Vera workflow coordination tool.

The main perceived advantages of AI tools were increased speed and efficiency, particularly in transcription, support and assistance, content generation, technical or routine tasks, translation, information retrieval or access, workload management, and task automation. Journalists stressed that automatic transcription tools make the job easier for long interviews and that time producing music packages or jingles can be reduced from weeks to hours. As one Slovenian journalist noted, “AI has a lot to contribute, especially in helping us from drafting texts to fact-checking, ultimately proofreading” (SI3). A Croatian participant similarly emphasized its assistant role, observing that its strength lies in cost-effectiveness: “It’s a useful assistant....It helps reorganize tasks and challenge the traditional boundaries of our work” (HR5). Nevertheless, as another Croatian journalist summarized, the greatest benefit is speed, as it can double the speed of production, which is essential for large newsrooms that need a high output.

This unevenness was visible not only across newsrooms but within single focus groups. In the Slovenian session, one participant noted that “everything we use is more by personal initiative” (SI4), a second said that, beyond an internal transcriber that is “extremely bad,” “there are no systemic solutions, it’s mostly everybody finding what works for them” (SI3), while a third described routine, extensive use, from “Suno AI to create music, jingles, arrangements”—so that “what used to take weeks, we now do in two hours”—to ChatGPT for “bureaucratic stuff: tenders, project reports, mission statements” (SI5). Unevenness in our data thus has two concrete dimensions: variation in the scope of tasks delegated to AI, and variation in the locus of adoption, from individual initiative in the absence of house rules to emerging organizational integration.

These accounts indicate that AI’s introduction into marginalized newsrooms is driven by the pragmatic argument of efficiency and workload control, yet remains uneven in both senses identified above.

In diffusion terms, AI has entered these newsrooms as an addition to journalistic work, while its institutionalization is only beginning to take shape.

4.2. Institutional Logics Shaping AI Adoption in Newsrooms (RQ2)

Turning to the meso level of the model, this section addresses RQ2 by tracing how competing institutional logics—technological and organizational logics of efficiency on the one hand, professional norms of verification and responsibility on the other—shape whether, and on whose terms, AI is taken up. These opposing interpretations determine the uptake, restriction, or opposition of AI tools in daily newsroom practice.

The competing logics did not remain abstract and surfaced as open disagreement within the focus groups. In the Croatian session, an editor's account of organizationally driven experimentation—testing custom AI models through which “AI does participate in the creation of certain articles,” while the journalist “remains fully in control” (HR1)—was immediately contested by colleagues from other newsrooms. One reported catastrophic results from letting AI write independently: Unsupervised output turns out “worse 99 times out of 100” and “always adds something that has nothing to do with reality,” which is why journalists in that newsroom work from training and written guidelines so that “AI never creates articles independently” (HR3). Another added that even short tests exposed hallucinations that “increase the workload because everything has to be verified multiple times” (HR5). Pressed on the apparent discrepancy, the first editor clarified that the tested system was “a specific program developed especially for us,” insisting he “would never let ChatGPT alone write a text by itself” (HR1). The exchange condenses the meso-level conflict: The efficiency logic collides with the professional logic of verification, and is resolved organizationally through training and written guidelines.

Journalists described using AI for fact-checking and verification, including verifying images or videos and cross-referencing information. A Turkish reporter stressed that AI outputs must be checked against independent sources and a Slovenian journalist noted that such tools benefit “serious journalism” (SI3) only when combined with human oversight and professional judgement.

The dominance of professional journalistic logics is reflected in how AI was widely framed as assistive rather than as a substitute for journalism, with support and assistance frequently mentioned. Journalists reported using AI to prepare interview questions, generate ideas, draft, and speed up routine technical tasks. This also stresses tensions between technological efficiency logics and professional norms of authorship and responsibility. For example, a Turkish participant described using ChatGPT and Gemini to shorten news and improve language, while emphasizing that AI mainly “speeds up my work and functions as a kind of personal assistant” (TR4). In Albania, journalists framed AI as useful for processing information and drafting texts but stressed that it cannot replace field reporting.

Market logic entered these negotiations less as an enthusiasm for efficiency than as anxiety about revenue and labor. A Croatian participant warned that “if users start replacing Google with AI tools, we’ll see a significant decline in traffic. That shift is already happening” (HR2). Romanian participants extended the same logic to wages, predicting that “our salaries will be capped...they become marginalized. Like shoemakers once did” (RO6). Croatian participants located the same pressure regarding production: “The faster you can produce content, the more content you’re expected to produce,” while “quality inevitably

suffers” (HR7). Market pressures thus cut both ways: motivating adoption for productivity while devaluing the labor it is meant to protect.

Participants mentioned newsroom-specific systems that embed AI within workflows, including customized tools, software, proprietary systems, newsroom conversational assistants, and Public Space. One Croatian journalist described a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) proprietary system based on generative models adapted for editorial needs that can collect, process, and input data directly into the content management system (CMS), with only a few people operating workflows that previously required a larger team. Another Croatian newsroom uses a customized Telegram bot that automatically pulls police press releases, illustrating how simple automations are integrated into daily routines. However, limited information was provided about these systems due to confidentiality, indicating that some commercially or organizationally driven implementations are not fully transparent even to the journalists using them.

The proprietary systems described above represent adoption at the institutional level, and participants’ reactions to them reveal how the individual and institutional levels interact. In most newsrooms, however, individual adoption outpaced organizational support. A Kosovar journalist described using ChatGPT covertly precisely because her newsroom had taken no stance: “I secretly used it, the editors don’t use it...they haven’t even told us to use it or not to use it” (XK6). A colleague in the same session located her newsroom at the threshold of formalization:

We had training with the editorial team on how to use it maybe a year ago...but this is more about individuality...there’s no decision exactly as the editorial team has said please use it faster, [but] it hasn’t happened yet. Maybe very soon we’ll have a decision from the editorial team...[but for now] there’s no push either for or against. (XK4)

Where institutions did react, they did so to safeguard professional logic rather than to accelerate adoption: Croatian editors, as shown above, converted professional norms into training and written guidelines. Regulatory actors sent similar signals: A Turkish participant reconsidered how transformative AI would be for journalism after a meeting with the director of the Press Advertisement Institution—who told him the institution had already warned two newspaper columnists for using AI and was preparing legal regulation to address it (TR8). Individual experimentation thus precedes institutional codification, while emergent institutional responses—guidelines, training, proprietary systems, and regulatory signals—channel that experimentation back within the boundaries of professional logic.

At the same time, journalists remained conflicted about AI’s role in verification itself, citing insufficient protection against misuse: Fact-checking “simply isn’t done at the level required for professional journalism” (AL2); at least one reporter still needs to do fact-checking (RO1); and AI outputs were seen as easily manipulated and potentially biased (MK2, MK5).

4.3. Boundary Negotiation: Defensive and Adaptive Responses (RQ3)

4.3.1. Defensive Boundary Work

At the micro level of the model, this section addresses RQ3, examining the boundary work through which journalists reconcile the perceived opportunities and risks of AI with their professional identity. When

reflecting on future roles, several journalists insisted that AI cannot replace field journalism, highlighting tasks such as being physically present on site, reading context, and building trust with sources as inherently human. One Slovenian journalist stressed that “AI will not go outside Parliament to film protests. That still has to be done by humans” (SI5). Another Slovenian participant similarly highlighted that, especially in local news, the personal touch and being on the ground are paramount, especially in local stories. They also strongly reaffirmed the importance of human authorship and stressed that responsibility, originality, and interpretive work should remain with journalists even when AI participates in drafting or writing content. In this view, AI may support journalistic work, but it should not become an author or a substitute for human judgement.

This defensive stance was evident when Slovenian journalists resisted the idea that AI could fully replicate a reporter’s voice. One participant insisted that “human footprints remain in the text,” adding that “I want it to be clear that someone has sat down, thought about it, chosen the words. For me, that’s the point of journalism” (SI7). The participant noted that tools like ChatGPT could lead to uniformity of texts and risk eroding “individual writing style, drama, feeling—all the things that AI doesn’t have” (SI7). Moreover, by 2030 people will still want to read articles written by “people with names and surnames, people who’ve made mistakes, and seen something with their own eyes” (HR5).

Defensive boundaries were drawn through trial, disappointment, and withdrawal. A Croatian editor recounted asking AI for advice on structuring a daily show: “The result was quite awkward, clumsy, and strange, so I simply gave up on that idea,” concluding that “editorial work is personal and requires a human touch” (HR4). The boundary is thus redrawn after direct contact with the underperforming technology.

Defensive boundary work also surfaced in concerns that critical thinking and interpretive labor could be hollowed out if AI is allowed to take over core cognitive tasks. Journalists worried that students simulate critical thinking through ChatGPT and skip the learning phase, warning that if AI becomes a substitute for a thought process, then it harms journalism, which could lose its core (Slovenia). Others cautioned that if journalists become too dependent on AI, they risk becoming “content managers, not content creators,” and that “if there is no more doubt, there is no more journalism” (SI4).

4.3.2. Adaptive Boundary Work

Journalists most frequently described AI’s future role as an assistive and supportive infrastructure, depicting it as a technical helper rather than an autonomous actor in the newsroom. They anticipated that, if used well, AI could improve speed and quality of content, increase accessibility of outputs, and free up more time for deeper reporting, while still operating under human editorial control. Many emphasized that AI will not end journalism and that journalists who use AI best will stand out, “as it saves significant time and supports my creativity when I am stuck” (TR3). Nevertheless, AI tools are used with clear boundaries. As one Croatian journalist explained, their newsroom uses them as a writing assistant only: “You have to provide it with the full input....Using AI as a search engine is dangerous...unverified information ends up in articles” (HR3). Albanian participants pushed the assistant frame furthest, recording AI use itself as a marker of professionalism: Asking AI for similar past stories with sources “actually helps you become a better journalist—it doesn’t harm you or make you lazy,” because “you’re still working under your own name, but at the same time, someone—or something—is supporting you in verifying and enriching your information” (AL5). Adaptive boundary work here does not merely tolerate the technology; it enlists it in the performance of professional virtue.

Journalists linked this assistant role to a reallocation of time from routine work to what they defined as real journalism. Use of AI tools for “technical tasks” such as subtitling, graphics, and background removal means journalists “have more time for content. When I no longer have technical barriers, I can think about what I want to say, not how to say it” (SI8). This allows them to put more emphasis on the content. Another journalist similarly argued that AI reduces routine workload, enabling journalists to focus on more creative, investigative, and analytical tasks, but only within ethical frameworks that preserve transparency and accountability (Turkey).

4.3.3. Boundary Redefinition

Participants also pointed to growing demands for skill diversification and the need for AI competencies that allow journalists to work critically with AI tools while preserving professional standards. One participant highlighted the large difference between general AI and AI tools, arguing that the former has long been part of journalistic workflows, whereas the latter still has a lot of room for development. This redefinition of expertise entailed an explicit division of labor between thinking and tool operation, with many journalists insisting that the former remain on the human side. Since AI can quickly collect and structure a larger amount of data, it is very useful for preliminary research. However, its effectiveness depends on the users’ level of knowledge and experience (Slovenia). Consequently, Albanian journalists believe journalists will be replaced not by AI, but by colleagues who know how to work with it.

This response reflects a shift in professional expertise towards managing technological risks. Common concerns, such as shortcut risks, fact-checking gaps, and the tendency of chatbots to “hallucinate and just make up statements that are non-existent” (MK2), serve as boundary markers. By identifying these vulnerabilities, journalists position verification, deliberation, and accountability as distinctly human competencies.

4.4. Cultural Consequences: Redefining Journalistic Expertise (RQ4)

Finally, addressing RQ4, this section examines how defensive and adaptive boundary negotiation feeds back into journalists’ expectations about AI’s future place in newsroom culture, and into the redefinition of journalistic expertise itself. In regard to the future place of AI in journalism, some emphasized increasing automation and efficiency. For instance, one participant predicted that by 2030, AI could replace at least 50% of their work and noted that for “technically exhausted understaffed newsrooms, where one person works for three, I think it’s the only way to survive” (SI8). Albanian journalists similarly anticipated extensive automation. One envisioned that within a few years, AI platforms will be capable of doing everything, “capable of simultaneously writing the text, editing it, and handling everything else,” eventually producing all online content, “just like the image of the snake that manages to bite its own tail” (AL5).

By contrast, respondents engaging in defensive boundary work foresaw more incremental change, maintaining that core journalism cannot be automated. A Turkish journalist stated, “I don’t think AI will replace journalists in the next five years. Rather, it will serve as an assistant and supportive tool” (TR4). Reinforcing this view, Croatian participants asserted that “AI might help with data processing, but I don’t see it taking over writing entirely” (HR2), and that “there’s no tool out there that can uncover a story for you....AI can’t develop a nose for news” (HR4).

4.4.1. Expertise Shifts from Production to Supervision

As journalists reconcile these expectations, a profound cultural consequence emerges. Journalism itself is being redefined from a role of content production to one of content supervision. Instead of primarily drafting texts, journalists are increasingly becoming AI supervisors in hybrid human–AI workflows. This shift reflects adaptive boundary work, where journalists willingly delegate routine technical and drafting tasks to machines, but fiercely protect their jurisdiction over final editorial judgment.

In the Croatian session, participants moved within a few turns between the journalist's creative claim to the text and the editor's gatekeeping responsibility for it. One grounded accountability in the byline: "Every article in our newsroom is signed by a journalist, whether AI tools were used or not" (HR3). A second located the journalist's irreducible contribution in editorial labor—"Even when we use AI, the journalist still selects the sources, checks facts, and shapes the narrative"—and claimed the detection of AI-inflected drafting as an editorial task: "I can usually tell when someone leaned heavily on ChatGPT....That's my job as an editor—to spot that and address it with the reporter" (HR1). A third moved the resolution to the institutional level, insisting that every article "should have a human author—no website writes content on its own" (HR5).

4.4.2. AI Literacy as Professional Capital

AI literacy is emerging as a critical new form of professional expertise and capital. The ability to effectively interact with AI, from prompting to verifying and structuring queries, is becoming increasingly important for journalists. A Turkish participant articulated this competence precisely: "AI gives answers based on what we feed it, so it is the journalist's job to ask the right questions and guide it properly" (TR4). Expertise migrates from producing the answer to formulating the question—a shift that keeps epistemic authority on the human side while conceding execution to the machine. Journalists predict advanced use of AI tools will no longer be viewed as separate IT skills, but as core journalistic competencies. Due to this, journalists in the future will "have to know how to do everything—film, edit, publish on multiple channels," noting that this will bring more workload, but also more flexibility (SI8).

4.4.3. Verification as the Core Identity

This transformation of expertise also changes the role of fact-checking. Journalists are modifying their professional identity around verification, establishing it as the central skill of the AI era. Journalists emphasized that AI systems frequently hallucinate, fabricate details, or create non-existent sources. Consequently, journalists must act as the safeguard with an internal "red light to go on, to check whether what the AI has done is real" (SI1).

Journalists warned that in the "rush to get the news" for clicks, using AI unchecked could lead to a "flood of identical, superficial, and incorrect information" (SI1). Viewed through a boundary negotiation lens, these vulnerabilities are the reason why journalists position themselves as indispensable. They argued that while AI can easily generate fake research or seemingly credible content, credibility quickly collapses "if you don't have a living human with a historical memory and an irrepressible doubt" (SI4). Because AI generates content so rapidly and unpredictably, this human capacity to question and verify becomes the core justification for the profession's continued existence. As one participant noted, if the journalist is not there to check, then "we will be in a very dangerous media landscape" (SI4).

To define the new core identity as a verifier, journalists expect normative and organizational responses. Some insisted that labeling AI-generated content is essential for maintaining transparency, accountability, and journalistic standards (TR2, TR6), and similar calls for newsroom ethical rules were voiced in North Macedonia and Slovenia (MK1, SI2, SI3). Asked whether the label should appear even when a journalist has “just consulted AI for something small,” one Kosovar journalist held that disclosure applies even where the human contribution predominates—“If you do most of the work, absolutely yes” (XK1)—while another extended it to any use at all: “It’s the most appropriate way for the public to know that you’ve used AI, regardless of the amount, because at least if you’re looking for an idea, it’s not yours” (XK9).

One Slovenian participants extended this credibility demand beyond journalism: “If I, as a journalist, cannot use ChatGPT without being held accountable, then anyone who uses it should also make it clear who did what” (SI8). Another participant imagined AI content “automatically tagged, perhaps even encoded with metadata” (SI6). Disclosure, in these accounts, is less a settled norm than the newest front of boundary work: Participants agreed on the principle while disputing the threshold at which assistance becomes authorship.

Croatian participants pushed this negotiation further. One journalist, previously a proponent of blanket disclosure, now reserves disclosure for cases where AI “has effectively written the article,” persuaded by an analogy: “When I shoot a video, I don’t tell people which camera I used” (HR6). Another drew a categorical line at authorship: “If we reach the point where AI is credited as the author, I think we’ve gone too far” (HR9). A third added an audience-side rationale: Because readers “don’t see the editorial process behind the scenes,” they “may assume that AI is producing content on its own,” eroding trust “even when AI is actually being used responsibly” (HR9).

Boundary negotiations might also create shifts in journalistic values. While AI literacy becomes standard, human effort may become a premium commodity. One journalist imagined a potential future where “there will be a medium that prides itself on not using any artificial intelligence,” suggesting that “slow, in-depth content” and “an article that someone really wrote themselves” could become new markers of ultimate quality (SI8). Turkish participants reached the same conclusion from the supply side: Because agency news produced with AI “often lacks originality,” journalists “will need to emphasize their identity, originality, and responsibilities more. In other words, the value of journalism will increase in the future” (TR2). A Croatian participant grounded the same expectation in platform economics: Because articles with a named author perform better on distribution platforms such as Google Discover, publishers were expected to keep emphasizing identifiable human authorship rather than replacing bylines with AI labels. Scarcity of the recognizably human, in this projection, becomes journalism’s competitive asset (HR7).

Ultimately, these reactions show how journalists renegotiate the boundaries of their profession in the face of technological disruption. By employing defensive boundary work, they fortify their jurisdiction over distinctly human competencies, such as field reporting, contextual judgment, and authentic authorship. At the same time, through adaptive boundary work, they strategically reposition AI as a subordinate infrastructure that augments, rather than supplants, their core professional expertise.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Unlike existing AI-in-journalism literature, which focuses on media in a Western context, this study explores AI adoption in marginalized media markets, where structural constraints, competing institutional logics, and professional boundary negotiations shape the process differently. The discussion analyzes AI diffusion into marginalized media systems through three interconnected levels, which include a macro-level diffusion environment, meso-level institutional logics that influence newsroom practices, and micro-level boundary work through which journalists practice AI diffusion. Together they can be used to explain the process of technological change as negotiated in certain media ecosystems and not just taken up as a linear process. The interplay between the levels creates the effects of feedback that influence future expectations regarding how AI will integrate into the newsroom culture.

In the macro level, findings indicate that AI diffusion in such media systems is markedly uneven. Unlike the approach to technological development followed in Western media systems (Pavlik, 2000; Rogers, 2003), AI is used selectively, more ad hoc, and experimented with individually, rather than as part of a formal, institutionalized process. Such non-uniform distribution reflects structural constraints in these media systems, including limited technological access, unpredictable regulatory frameworks, and organizational fragmentation. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that AI adoption in journalism is shaped not only by the characteristics of the technology itself but also by the institutional and organizational contexts within which news organizations operate (Deuze & Beckett, 2022; Opdahl et al., 2023).

At the meso level, a notable tension emerges between professional logic and technological and market logics, which increasingly shape contemporary media organizations (Thornton et al., 2012). The findings highlight organizational culture and logic as pivotal factors for the adoption of AI in professional practice. While there are still no comprehensive and clear professional orientations within organizational structures, our evidence indicates that journalists navigate a hybrid tension between their creative role and their gatekeeping role regarding AI-generated content. This tension was most visible in the authorship negotiations reported in Section 4.4.1, where byline responsibility, editorial detection of AI-assisted drafting, and calls for house standards were articulated within a single focus-group exchange. Such findings suggest that technological developments alone are not sufficient for their seamless integration into editorial workflows. This interpretation echoes earlier work suggesting that technological innovation in journalism is negotiated through competing institutional priorities rather than adopted as a purely technical process (Carlson, 2015; Thornton et al., 2012).

At the micro level, a marked divergence from Western media systems is observed (Pavlik, 2000; Rogers, 2003), as journalists exhibit greater skepticism about the use of AI. They often set clear boundaries for their use (Gieryn, 1983) and tend to safeguard their professional authority in relation to the encroachment of such technologies. When ethical judgment is needed, journalists engage in “defensive boundary work”; conversely, for routine tasks, they employ “adaptive boundary work.” By defining what constitutes journalism in relation to the use of AI (Lewis, 2012), they assert professional jurisdictional claims. Typically, this process is articulated through meta-journalistic discourse (Carlson, 2015), which can strengthen professional legitimacy amid technological disruption.

Such boundary negotiations have broader implications for future diffusion of AI across newsroom cultures. The uncertainty of verification, hallucinations, and the risk of misinformation, as well as the conflict between the speed and the accuracy of the results, are the issues that journalists are worried about—they define the selectivity of AI tools' acceptance and regulation in daily practice (Sonni, 2025; Zhaxylykbayeva et al., 2025). Instead of fighting technological change, journalists form informal codes that establish acceptable applications of AI without compromising professional responsibility. The concept of such a defensive strategy is supplemented by boundary work as the mechanism that predetermines future adoption patterns. Gaining institutional prominence in the culture of newsrooms, such norms determine how AI technologies will be assessed, restricted, or adopted at later phases of technological diffusion.

This study contributes to existing literature in at least three ways. Primarily, the data reveal that the diffusion of AI in marginalized or semi-peripheral markets is influenced not only by technological drivers, but also by institutional and professional actors. Furthermore, the study elucidates the friction created by the integration of AI in these countries, which results in competing institutional logics, namely professional, technological, market, and organizational. Lastly, our analysis emphasizes that journalists in these newsrooms maintain a cautious approach toward adopting AI and engage in boundary work to reassert their professional jurisdictional authority in a rapidly evolving human–AI environment. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that AI adoption in journalism is shaped not only by technological capabilities, but also by professional norms and organizational contexts (Carlson, 2015; Deuze & Beckett, 2022). However, our findings further show that, in marginalized media markets, these dynamics are intensified by structural constraints that shape how AI is interpreted and integrated into newsroom practice.

Unlike narratives predicated on the logic of linear progression towards automation, or on Western journalists' approaches to technology (Carlson, 2015; Lewis, 2012; Pavlik, 2000; Rogers, 2003; Tushman & O'Reilly, 2002), our evidence suggests that, in marginalized or semi-peripheral markets, metajournalistic discourse is shaped by the idiosyncratic characteristics of these countries' media industries. These features are shaped by regulatory uncertainty, organizational culture, and media outlets' strategies for integrating new technologies into journalistic practice.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, while focus groups provide rich qualitative insights, the findings may be influenced by the performative dynamics that can arise during group discussions. The availability of peers may foster consensus or self-censorship, which can influence how journalists express their views on the adoption of AI tools. Future research might further elaborate on focus groups by using individual interviews to examine how journalists bargain on such matters at the individual level. Second, the regional scope circumscribes the generalizability of the findings. Although the study sample is relatively large for qualitative research ($N = 68$), these journalists operate within context-specific media systems shaped by ownership patterns, professional cultures, regulatory contexts, and technological advancements. This means that the results can be considered analytically transferable and not statistically generalized. Third, the ephemeral nature of AI, characterized by rapid evolution and regulatory uncertainty, renders the findings inherently temporal. Consequently, the results represent a certain point in the continuous process of technological integration. Longitudinal studies will therefore be relevant for investigating how newsroom practices, professional norms, and AI adoption evolve as these technologies become more integrated into journalistic work.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

During data analysis, one of the two coders used ATLAS.ti's built-in AI-assisted coding feature to help generate an initial codebook; every AI-suggested code and quotation link was manually reviewed, refined, and validated by the coder before use (see Section 3.3). The second coder completed a fully independent, manual coding process in MAXQDA Analytics Pro without any AI assistance. No generative AI tool was used to collect data, analyze findings, or write any part of this article beyond the coding-support use described here.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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