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Search in the Newsroom: How Journalists Navigate Google's Dominance in a Hybrid Media System

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Abstract

As a significant algorithmic actor in a media system where humans and machines interact to produce and disseminate news information, Google acts as an external algorithmic editor to news media, shaping what information gets picked up for broader consumption. Journalists, in their attempt to inform and create a dialogue with the public, are constantly aware of Google's dominance and, for the last two decades, have experienced the shifting power dynamics in the digitized media system. Based on 18 interviews with US-based journalists across a range of newsroom types and regions, this interview study shows how reporters and editors deal with this new external algorithmic editor. The findings demonstrate that they do that through resistance, relinquishment, and renegotiation. Journalists first resist giving up on their editorial values, setting particular limits around framing and selecting which hard news stories to cover, even when facing algorithmic pressure towards provocative and eye-grabbing content. Second, they relinquish some editorial control and create segregated content ("search work") tailored to the algorithm and toward audience growth. Third, they renegotiate their values and roles to fit a new logic in which newsworthiness and commercial values overlap. These findings confirm and build upon previous work delineating how journalists navigate their 20th-century values with 21st-century digital curation in a hybrid media system shaped by both human and machine logics.

Keywords

digital platforms; news judgment; professional journalistic values; search engines

1. The Symbiotic Relationship Between News Media and Search Engines

Search engines rely on content made by publishers to deliver relevant results to their users, while news publishers rely on search engines to reach their audiences. This mutual dependence, therefore, is a strong representation of a media hybrid system in which newer media (search) are symbiotic to older media (news media; Chadwick, 2017; Hallin et al., 2023). As such, we can expect to see in this relationship the impacts of "boundary-drawing, boundary-blurring, and boundary-crossing" (Chadwick, 2017, p. 184) between both media regarding their practitioners. The values of news media have matured separately and earlier than those of search engines, and in their interaction, these values compete and coevolve (Chadwick, 2017). The evaluation of what is "newsworthy" (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017) can conflict and coincide with what is deemed "relevant" as search engine results (Sundin et al., 2022).

The symbiotic relationship between search engine platforms and the news media industry has profound potential implications for how news content is produced. On one hand, that new ecosystem creates very immediate and practical labor demands and activities, such as search engine optimization (SEO) of news content to make it appealing not only to audiences but to algorithms that help increase visibility and web traffic (Dick, 2011; Giomelakis et al., 2019; Vu, 2014). On the other hand, digital platforms rely on news content to maintain influence (News Media Alliance, 2019). These developments are particularly significant given that search engines and news aggregators are now identified as the most common gateways to online news globally, ahead of social media and direct access (Newman et al., 2024, p. 21).

Through their algorithmic curation, search engines have the power to shape deeper news media practices and influence the role of news organizations within society. In the 20th-century, when journalistic values and role recognitions were being developed in an environment of mass media, journalism research ascribed to journalists the roles of gatekeepers (Tandoc, 2014) and agenda-setters (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The 21st-century reality is that news media organizations must share those roles and power with algorithmic platforms, including search engines (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; Thorson & Wells, 2016). Hybrid media research has focused on the study of those roles and how they evolve (Chadwick, 2017; Hallin et al., 2023), with the understanding that the performance of journalistic roles can be fluid according to general and historical circumstances (Hallin et al., 2023). And the present circumstances are that search engines are significant referrers of web traffic to news publishers. In the US, for instance, 66% of adults access digital news through the intermediation of search platforms (Aubin & Liedke, 2024).

This new scenario inspires this study, which focuses on the relationship between news media and one of the most impactful algorithmic digital platforms: Google. This study explores journalists' understandings, attitudes, and perspectives regarding how Google curates news information and the impact of this curation not only on their work but also on society at large.

This work investigates how journalists who, by force of their daily routines in covering political topics, see the implications of search engine curation for the content they produce. If 20th-century journalists consider themselves agenda-setters, how do 21st-century journalists see the algorithmic intermediaries of search? How do journalists deal with their work being atomized into individual stories, collated, and distributed by automated curators in search engines?

During the interviews, US-based journalists who produce mostly text (content that is more impacted by Google's curation) explored these questions. These journalists, mostly based in local news organizations, describe Google's impact on their work and how they embrace or resist it. They express how they maintain their professional values (e.g., accuracy, independence, etc.) while facing the new economic pressures and search-driven news values (e.g., engagement and reach) and growth, and how they divide regular journalistic work from a type of content tailored specifically for the algorithm (which some journalists call "search work"). And they articulate their concerns as some public information functions, once concentrated in the news industry, are transferred to digital platforms.

2. Related Work

This section explores how previous work has investigated the substantial power that digital platforms, particularly search engines and social media, wield over journalism through algorithmic control and economic dependency. Understanding these dynamics is essential for examining the implications for journalistic independence, practices, and values, particularly how newsrooms navigate their complex relationship with dominant platform ecosystems.

2.1. Platform Power

Digital platforms such as social media and search engines are increasingly influential in journalism. Platforms have become deeply embedded in how news is produced, disseminated, and monetized, making publishers vulnerable to their constant algorithmic and policy changes (Chua, 2023; Poell et al., 2023). News publishers have become dependent on platforms for traffic and revenue (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021; Myllylahti, 2020; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; Papaevangelou, 2024; Trielli & Diakopoulos, 2019). This dependency has resulted in multiple asymmetries that largely favor platforms (Chua, 2023), raising significant concerns about whether news organizations can maintain independence, control over their content and data, and financial autonomy while serving civic needs (Chua, 2023). The implications are particularly concerning for smaller or local news outlets (Chua, 2023; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; Nielsen et al., 2020).

While existing research has detailed platform dominance, there is a crucial need for deeper scholarship that explores how news organizations and journalists actively conceptualize and strategically navigate their relationship with powerful digital intermediaries (Bonini & Treré, 2024; Chua, 2023; de Haan et al., 2022; Poell et al., 2023). This involves understanding their everyday tactics and long-term strategies for innovating practices, negotiating constraints, and asserting agency within the complex, relational dynamics of platform power, moving beyond simplistic understandings of dependency (Bonini & Treré, 2024; Chua, 2023; Poell et al., 2023).

The increasing entanglement of news media with digital platforms is deeply embedded within the concept of the hybrid media system, which characterizes a complex media environment where traditional media, new digital forms, and platforms coexist and interact (Bonini & Treré, 2024). The power dynamics between platforms and news organizations are a defining feature of this hybrid environment, as publishers must navigate platform logic and adapt practices to reach audiences and maintain relevance amidst ever-changing technical and governance structures (Chua, 2023; Lischka & Garz, 2023; Poell et al., 2023; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022).

Platform power is increasingly pervasive, deeply embedding itself in daily life and work, including within news organizations, which rely on platforms for various aspects of digital news operations (Chua, 2023). This power is also often described as opaque, particularly concerning the algorithmic infrastructures that platforms use to exercise their agency and mediate user behavior, such as recommendation algorithms (Bonini & Treré, 2024; de Haan et al., 2022). The relationship is marked by significant asymmetries that predominantly favor platforms, leading to concerns about the editorial independence and financial autonomy of news organizations (Chua, 2023). This power is highly concentrated among a small number of global technology companies like Alphabet/Google and Meta/Facebook, which function as powerful forces shaping the digital media environment for journalism (Caplan & boyd, 2018).

Platforms encourage journalistic practices that align with their specific ecosystem and economic interests. The focus of journalism, therefore, can shift towards metrics valued by platforms, such as maximizing reach and audience engagement, potentially framing news as a market-driven commodity rather than solely a public good. This aligns journalistic effort with the platforms' business models centered on data accumulation and advertising revenue (Hermida & Young, 2024; Lischka & Garz, 2023).

2.2. The Incentive of Metrics

The pressure of metrics is increasingly impacting journalistic labor, both in daily practices of content creation and in the structure of hiring and retention of professionals (Petre, 2021). Newsrooms currently operationalize metrics of audience preference and integrate them into editorial decisions (Kristensen, 2023). For instance, editors commonly adjust the placement of news stories based on metrics (Lee et al., 2014). Audience data provides journalists with a narrative of an "evidence-based method in choosing what to publish," which can substitute journalistic instinct (MacGregor, 2007, p. 280). Audience surveillance allows for a system that relies upon and reacts to audience quantification and rationalization (Anderson, 2011). Audience metrics have become embedded in newsroom operations, resulting in "expected reception" emerging as a new, digitally-driven news value encompassing anticipated audience experience, audience engagement behaviors, and algorithmic performance (Kristensen, 2023).

Metrics have established a new equilibrium in newsroom decision-making processes, where they coexist with traditional journalistic standards (Tenor, 2024). Functions that were once reserved for journalists, such as gatekeeping (Lee et al., 2014; Tandoc, 2014; Vos & Thomas, 2019), opinion power (Dodds et al., 2023), or agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Trielli & Diakopoulos, 2022), are now shifting towards an empowered audience and the algorithms that intermediate between the readers and the news. However, the usage of metrics remains largely under editorial oversight (Tenor, 2024).

Additionally, the incorporation of data-driven analysis of the audience can actually advance journalistic goals. For instance, journalists can strategically use audience analytics to identify and address misrepresentations and serve traditionally marginalized audiences (Schaetz, 2024), as long as the data is leveraged for equitable purposes (Schaetz, 2024).

Therefore, the usage of metrics impacts and is impacted by journalists' self-assigned roles. In the following section, we will explore how journalists perceive their roles and shift those perceptions according to new pressures.

2.3. Journalistic Roles and the Renegotiation of Values in an Algorithmic Context

Journalists must now consider—in conjunction with traditional news values (e.g., recency, conflict, etc.) and normative professional values (e.g., accuracy, independence, etc.)—algorithmic curation to effectively reach their audiences. This article distinguishes between technical-professional "news values" and broader normative "professional values" to clarify conceptual boundaries. These overlapping demands are reshaping journalistic roles in ways that increasingly align with digital platform logics (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020). Their behavior is deeply influenced by self-perceived roles, traditionally linked to political processes such as informing the public, serving as watchdogs, and aiding self-governance (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Standaert et al., 2021). Public expectations also influence these roles, emphasizing objectivity, transparency, and tolerance (Loosen et al., 2020). Recent scholarship argues for analyzing roles not merely as fixed belief systems, but as dynamic practices shaped by perception, positionality, interpretation, and motivation, sensitive to cultural and organizational contexts (Ryfe, 2024; Standaert et al., 2021).

Donsbach (2012) describes three dimensions of journalistic roles present in democratic societies: participant/observational (whether journalists influence the political process), advocacy/neutral (whether journalists express their values and beliefs), and commercial/educational (Donsbach, 2012). With the growing centrality of algorithmic platforms such as Google, the commercial/educational dimension is increasingly relevant: it is about whether journalists should strive to reach the widest possible audience by responding to their desires or if they should instead independently make their decisions based on ideas of public service (Donsbach, 2012). It represents what is traditionally known as a strong dividing line between pure journalistic values and the monetary value of journalism for news organizations. This distinction was also defined as "doing good" (i.e., conducting mission-oriented journalism) vs. "doing well" (i.e., reaching a big audience; Nelson & Tandoc, 2019). Platforms act as powerful gatekeepers, influencing editorial content through metrics that reflect audience engagement, potentially skewing perceptions of audience preferences and shaping journalistic roles in varied and sometimes contradictory ways (Blanchett et al., 2024; Coddington et al., 2021; Petre, 2021; Trielli & Diakopoulos, 2020).

In parallel, traditional news values, such as recency, conflict, relevance, proximity, and social impact, are increasingly renegotiated due to algorithmic mediation of news flows (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Kristensen, 2023; Parks, 2019). Algorithmic systems bring their own value sets into journalism, including user engagement, expressed preferences, and data-driven content connections, reshaping editorial decisions about what to include, highlight, or minimize (Bucher, 2012; DeVito, 2017; Weber & Kosterich, 2018). These algorithmic interventions have profound societal and political implications, notably impacting political visibility and public discourse (Diakopoulos et al., 2018; Helberger, 2019). Consequently, journalists increasingly adopt values that emphasize expected reception: both audience reactions (engagement and subscription) and algorithmic prioritization (Kristensen, 2023; Kristensen & Bro, 2023).

2.4. Theoretical Background

Building upon the preceding discussion of platform power and journalistic roles and values, this section introduces the primary theoretical frameworks used to understand the complex and changing landscape of contemporary journalism in relation to technology. We adopt an actor-network theory (ANT) perspective and a broader socio-technical emphasis to analyze the interplay between human actors, algorithms, and the shifting practices and values in news.

This study views the hybrid media ecosystem as networks of associated entities, treating both human and non-human elements symmetrically as actants (Latour, 2005). ANT's strength lies in tracing associations and observing how different actants influence networks and outcomes, moving analysis beyond technological determinism by highlighting human decisions, cultural values, and organizational factors embedded in technology use (Anderson & De Maeyer, 2015). While early ANT work in journalism often focused narrowly on technological innovation, a broader approach embraces historical and cultural dimensions and sees power not as a fixed attribute but as an effect produced and traced through the configuration of networks and associations (Anderson & De Maeyer, 2015).

Extending this, a sociotechnical emphasis, drawing on work such as that of Lewis and Westlund (2014), explicitly addresses the contemporary context of cross-media news work, considering the interplay between editorial, business, and technology within news organizations. Technological actants, especially external platforms, play a significant role in mediating relationships and influencing how news is circulated and consumed (Braun, 2015; Lewis & Westlund, 2014).

Within this socio-technical landscape, a crucial dynamic involves navigating competing professional and algorithmic values. As discussed, journalism is guided by professional roles, editorial/journalistic values (e.g., accuracy, independence, and civic mission), and news values (criteria for newsworthiness). However, technological actants, particularly platform algorithms, operate based on their own algorithmic values, often reflecting business models or optimization goals like engagement or personalization (Braun, 2015; Braun & Gillespie, 2011). These algorithms function as a form of "mechanical editor" with different criteria than human journalists, leading to tension and negotiation as algorithmic values embedded in platforms interact with traditional journalistic practices and values (Braun, 2015; Braun & Gillespie, 2011). The concept of "imagined affordances" further complicates this, suggesting that users' perceptions and expectations of technologies can influence how they interact with these actants, potentially masking the actual algorithmic values at play (Nagy & Neff, 2015). This framework helps illuminate the power dynamics and negotiations inherent in the relationship between news organizations and dominant platforms like search engines.

This study explores these evolving roles and values through the lens of a hybrid media system and two interconnected questions: What role do journalists see in search engines, and for themselves, in the current media ecosystem of the symbiotic relationship between news media and search media? And what strategies do journalists enact to counteract or embrace technologies that impact not only the practice of journalism but also its power balances?

3. Method

To answer those questions, this study interviewed professional journalists across a range of US news organizations, aiming to reflect a cross-section of roles, media types, and geographic contexts impacted by platform dynamics, specifically those who edit and report on political news stories published online. Participants could be reporters, editors, or engagement specialists.

To recruit participants, I compiled a list of journalists who have bylines in publicly available news articles and found publicly available Twitter lists of journalists. Each entry in this list was then analyzed to determine whether that person fit the criteria for the study, namely, if they were currently working in US newsrooms

and had their stories published online. Next, journalists who fit that criteria (a total of 361) were contacted via email or Twitter message. Of those, 29 responded with interest in participating in the study. Of those, 11 backed out of participating due to scheduling issues. Interviews were conducted with the other 18 over video calls, between January and May 2022.

Participants were based in 12 American states and the District of Columbia, with six from the Midwest and four each from the Northeast, the South, and the West. Most participants were reporters (13), but five were editors or producers. They worked for local newspapers and news websites (10), followed by radio and TV stations with websites (5), one national news website, one national news agency, and one issue-oriented news website (see Supplementary File, Appendix A). This sample was purposefully constructed to reflect diversity in geography, newsroom type, and editorial roles to capture varied platform experiences in the US and illustrate how a broad cross-section of journalistic institutions experience platform dynamics.

The study's protocol, including the recruitment, method of interviews, and compensation, was approved by the Northwestern University Institutional Review Board. Before each interview, each participant was sent a consent form describing the study protocol, and they verbally consented to the terms at the beginning of the interview. The conversations were recorded to facilitate transcription (via Trint, an automated transcription service) and analysis. Only the researcher had access to recordings and transcripts. Recordings were destroyed as soon as transcriptions were done. Transcriptions will be kept for three years for further analysis and clarification. Each participant received a $25 gift card for their time.

The interviews were semi-structured, with questions aimed at addressing journalists' issues, concerns, and perspectives as they deal with search engines and their audiences. The original structure of the questionnaire was intentionally designed around three analytical foci derived from the research questions. These foci served as a conceptual scaffold both for the interview design and for organizing inductive codes: (a) daily journalistic practices and audience interactions, (b) societal implications of Google's influence, and (c) reflections on algorithm audit findings (see Supplementary File, Appendix B).

On average, interviews lasted for around 45 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a qualitative coding approach grounded in the principles of grounded theory, including data-driven coding and iterative theme development (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While the coding process was primarily inductive, it was informed by a guiding framework used to design the interview protocol (see Supplementary File, Appendix B). This framework drew on insights from the author's previous studies and was directly used to inform interview design, question groupings, and to scaffold inductive coding around the three conceptual foci. These categories helped shape the initial structure of the interviews and informed the analysis itself, but did not constrain it.

The qualitative analysis was conducted entirely by the author. Full interview transcripts were coded in MAXQDA. Open coding was first used to identify recurring concepts, concerns, and narratives in participants' responses. These initial codes were then refined and grouped into broader themes through iterative review. Related codes were merged when they reflected conceptually similar ideas. For example, "Google's power," "Google market dominance," and "Google interacting with everything" were grouped under the theme "Power of Google." This process of theme development involved repeated rereading of the transcripts to confirm consistency and ensure that the resulting themes accurately reflected the diversity and depth of participants' perspectives.

4. Results

This study focused on two research questions: What role do journalists see in search engines, and for themselves, in the current media ecosystem of the symbiotic relationship between news media and search media? And what strategies do journalists enact to counteract or embrace technologies that impact not only the practice of journalism but also its power balances? To address these questions, the study developed three conceptual foci (journalistic routines, societal impacts, and audit responses), which served as an intermediate layer between the research questions and the data analysis. These foci shaped the interview protocol, guided the coding process, and provided the structure for presenting the results. While the foci are not explicitly reflected in Table 1, they informed the thematic grouping of responses summarized there. In this way, the results section proceeds directly from the research questions through the analytical foci to the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Table 1. Topics and subtopics present in the interviews.

Major topics	Subtopics
Roles and values of search and news	Power of Google over news
	Journalists' perception of Google's curation and power
	Failures and opacity
	Google's journalistic values and roles
Strategies towards new technologies	Divide between editorial and commercial
	SEO and editorial choices
	Dedicated teams and technologies

4.1. Roles and Values of Search and News

Participants explicitly expressed awareness of how important Google is for news. Journalists are constantly reminded of Google's power in distributing information and how Google can influence what people see online. The conceptual themes in this area relate to power—the power of Google in both society and journalists' daily work.

4.1.1. Power of Google Over News

Participants were unanimous in addressing the dominance of Google and how it intersects with much of the information—much of it made up of news—that is distributed online. They had a variety of impressions that scale the influence of Google and symbolize the complex relationship between the search engine, journalists' work, and readers, from highlighting that this is "a company that became a verb" (P1) to reminding us that even the web browser that readers tend to use belongs to Google (P2):

> Google has something [of] an outsized influence, right, on the way information is given and received in the world. And it's kind of just the default, right? So it's almost not even like there's a growing influence; it's like that corner of the market is owned by Google at this point. It's a verb, too, you know, at this point. (P14)

My perception of it is that, like any and all online interaction, it is kind of filtered through Google, or there's some interaction with Google there. And you know, obviously, their data collection efforts drive a lot of the news, trends, and advertising. And so I think it really just kind of permeates everything in my perception. (P2)

The immense power of Google is sometimes described as "nerve-wracking" (P4) by journalists who see the diminishing power of news organizations in determining how information flows. Participants specifically mentioned the lack of direct connection to the reader and frustration with the fact that there is now an intermediary outside the control of anyone except the tech company:

We used to have a direct interaction with our audience. We would put something in the newspaper, people would pick up the newspaper, and we would decide what's important by the design of our newspaper. We would decide what gets on the A1 at it, on the A3, all that stuff. And now Google has control over that. The front page of Google is the front page of our newspaper, and there is no way to kind of prioritize what information is the most important. (P2)

Journalists also expressed their thoughts that this dominance of Google on news is currently unavoidable, at least without any repercussions to news organizations themselves:

As much as I don't love the fact that this giant technology company has so much market share and its influence in the world, this is the world that we live in right now, and I think trying to say "well, we're not going to interact with this" would only be to the detriment of a certain news outlet. (P8)

We sort of accepted this as the way things work....I think that's why Google is immensely frustrating because I don't care how well-intentioned or bad-intentioned Google is; news organizations don't control it (P10)

The most prominent benefit journalists reported about search was how it generates views of their work. Part of this stems from the significant shift from print to digital news, which still permeates much of journalists' conceptual understanding of their position concerning audiences:

Google and social media companies have the keys to our audience. You know, and we kind of have to play their game in order to get those eyeballs on our content. Otherwise, we're kind of just throwing stories out into the digital sea, and they won't show up anywhere for people. (P2)

The major driver of traffic to our site is Google. So, how it determines how to rank our stories, how it pulls keywords from our headline to show to readers when they are searching for something, this has a huge impact on our bottom line. (P10)

Even as participants highlighted the importance of web traffic, the interviews revealed peculiarities between news organizations about what that traffic means and why they pursue it. While conglomerate-owned newspapers tend to focus on volume to increase ad revenue, others, such as non-profits or digital-first news organizations, tend to focus on web traffic to enable different revenue streams:

Our kind of newsroom really tries to promote articles that try to drive subscriptions, because that's where we get our revenue from, more so than just, like, clicks. (P5)

We're not making money based on how many people look at each individual page on our website, but they're not totally unrelated. When you talk to funders and donors, they want to know what traffic you have. What we're trying to do is develop a consistent, returning, engaged audience because those are the people who are going to sign up for our newsletter, which means they'll read more of our stories, which means they're more likely to give us a donation. (P4)

4.1.2. Journalists' Perception of Google's Curation and Power

Journalists said they interpret Google's impact on their work and information differently, shaped by daily newsroom experiences, specialized media coverage, and conversations with colleagues. However, they acknowledged their assumptions about Google may be incomplete or inaccurate, emphasizing a need for greater transparency. Certain aspects of Google's curation, such as favoring major national sources (reflecting concentration and mainstreaming), are already clear from their experiences.

Thinking about Google's power in shaping the economic outcomes of news organizations, participants also reflected on the business implications of favoring already economically well-positioned outlets:

The drawback, of course, is that it's like the rich get richer, and then only a few top news organizations are going to get that kind of exposure. It seems like there's got to be some way with these algorithms to include those, but also give deference and inclusion of local news outlets that are reliable, that have some that you can trust. (P7)

4.1.3. Failures and Opacity

About half a dozen of the participants reported frustration at the lack of transparency from Google, both as producers of content and searchers themselves. Part of that frustration stems from the fact that journalists are not precisely aware of how the algorithms that determine the curation of their news articles work. Google's internal mechanisms are described as "opaque" (P11), "a mystery" (P10), a "black box" (P13), and something to "decipher" (P10). Participants related that they did not know, for instance, how Google judges the quality of journalism:

I know that our people who track social media and how we can kind of stay on top of the algorithms have limitations to what they know about how it all works. There's a lot of frustration there about what Google and other online platforms share about how all that works. (P2)

Additionally, at least three participants reported that just as they begin to understand what Google favors, the elements they consider fruitful seem to change. Sometimes, this perception of change comes from their own experience; sometimes, it is related by other professionals, particularly those who work on audience engagement:

Just when you think you've mastered it and you understand what they're looking for, it can change, and you have to relearn it all. (P7)

> The full parameters are always shifting, you know, just as soon as you know "oh, this is what works for SEO. This is what's going to help you." Then it is something else. You know, that's not really true anymore. (P9)

Whether because of opacity, algorithm changes, or both, participants expressed frustration with the difficulty of predicting success in their stories. They related that they are frequently surprised—both positively and negatively—by the performance of the content that they publish, and some went as far as describing success as "random" (P2). Often, this frustration is associated with competitiveness and the feeling of being relegated below other, larger news organizations.

> I definitely get annoyed occasionally when I do a story and then search for a term related to the story and see six other news organizations' articles before mine. That's never a good feeling. (P5)

4.1.4. Google's Journalistic Values and Roles

When comparing Google and the news media, participants saw values and motivations as the main differences. While both the search engine and the news media companies work to provide relevant information to the public, participants saw different reasons and ways of doing so:

> Google's motivations are what will drive the most ads and traffic to them and through them. And so they're not like a newspaper editor. And to me, that's one of the big problems with the emergence of Google and Facebook as huge ad revenue generators and information disseminators. They're not a newspaper; they're not run by journalists. (P6)

Notably, this distinction is made even though news media are usually composed of for-profit companies. Participants said that profit is the main motivator for Google while avoiding ascribing their motivations to themselves:

> I can say definitively that I have never been pushed to do a story or make a choice for profit. I would fathom that that is not the same for executives at Google. (P1)

4.2. Strategies Towards New Technologies

Participants related different ways their professional orientation (shaped by normative values such as independence and civic mission) leads them to either embrace Google's role in shaping their audience or resist it based on their journalistic philosophy. This suggests an attempt to build a third way, i.e., incorporating search engine values into journalistic values by reframing web reach as a societal impact. They do not explicitly called this adaptation a new hybridization of journalism to a new logic, but saw it more as a reconceptualization of work they already do. This section's conceptual themes relate to traditional journalistic values and editorial choices.

4.2.1. Divide Between Editorial and Commercial

When discussing whether to embrace or resist Google's influence in shaping news information, most participants were mindful of the nuances around editorial and commercial values. They reflected on the news media's traditional division between those two areas, a division that historically served to protect the integrity of the reporting. Some journalists were more resistant to even thinking about the impact of their reporting on audience reach:

> Some of it is just a little distasteful for me to pay attention to. I try to do the best story I can, and whether people pay attention or not is kind of, you know, out of my hands, which is such an old-fashioned idea because I realize I'm supposed to be responsible for the success of the story. (P3)

Other participants offered a more nuanced view of that attention to metrics, indicating that the current news media industry requires journalists to be at least aware of how their stories are doing and what the metric of success for their own organization is:

> I think it is good for journalists to know the business model of their own news organization. It's deeply unhealthy to know the specifics of it, what advertisers are coming in, what and how much they're paying, etc. But I don't think it's bad at all for journalists, and it is quite healthy to understand what's funding them. (P7)

Metrics do not usually define what gets covered, but there are different types of news content, and some are created for the specific purpose of generating search traffic. This content, which can overlap with service-oriented pieces, is usually made by lower-earning or younger journalists. Participants indicated that there is typically a trade-off being considered among the different news content that is being produced; there is "search work," which might be lighter or at least tailored to be very favored by search engines, and "high-quality work," for which is acceptable to get less audience reach:

> Now I will tell you, in the past, we did things like "the 10 best fish fries in [city redacted for anonymity]." Now, that was a deliberate effort to get you to do search things, and I'm not opposed to that. I think that is a service. People want to know the 10 best fish fries. (P13)

> Sometimes, you could argue that, if people aren't looking for it, it might not even be worth searching for or working on. But it's definitely still an important thing, even if it's not going to get a lot of clicks, even if it's not going to get searched a lot. And so whenever I'm writing those stories, I try to do the best as I can, still, to have good SEO and things like that. But I don't, I worry about it less, because I know that that's not going to be something that people are really going to be searching for. (P16)

They noted that sometimes audience reach and quality journalism are not incompatible, since in order to inform the public, the public must be exposed to the news content produced by them.

> I do think it's perfectly legitimate for us to use Google or Facebook or whatever social media is out there to get our stuff more widely distributed and to figure out ways that work and actually reach people. Because if our stuff doesn't reach people, then it's just being thrown into a vacuum. (P6)

In fact, many times, the elements journalists are asked to include to make their content more search-friendly are also used in high-quality journalism:

> When I'm making decisions on what to cover or how to cover it or how to write it, I'm not thinking, "Gee, how can I get more hits for this thing?" But I am, I think in a broader sense, you know, we are thinking about ways to just enhance the digital product by making, you know, happen having more visual stuff rather than just like a story. So you have pictures, you may have video clips, you may have the TV story actually embed documents and stuff like that. (P6)

4.2.2. SEO and Editorial Choices

One of the ways the tension between editorial and commercial is operationalized is through the practices and discussions about SEO. This practice is encouraged in newsrooms to make journalistic content more recognizable by search engines. All participants reported that they recognize the value of SEO and that discussions about it are increasingly frequent. However, many journalists mentioned the limits to which they are willing to optimize their content, particularly due to concerns about the balance of traditional journalism values with the drive to reach a wider audience:

> I think we're all very cognizant of not being clickbait, though, and the definition of that is probably different depending on who you talk to. But we're not trying to, like, exploit someone's curiosity or overpromise what a story is. We're just trying to make something as relatable and shareable as possible. (P2)

Some participants associated SEO with good headline practices, such as clarity, directness, conciseness, and completeness of information. Some went as far as saying that SEO, per se, was secondary to crafting a good headline:

> When I'm writing a story in whatever format, I'm not thinking about the terms that will be best used for SEO. But I'm thinking about what the best way is to communicate this story and its importance to the audience. And so there can be, I think, overlap between those two things. (P11)

4.2.3. Dedicated Teams and Technologies

Whether from traditional local news organizations or digital-native outlets, participants were generally informed that their newsrooms usually had at least one person specifically in charge of audience growth in their editing teams. This person could have many titles, such as digital editor, engagement editor, and audience person. Sometimes, the journalist was not wholly aware of the title or what the person did, which indicated varying work proximity. However, even within that variation, participants were generally supportive of having a coworker whose job is to think about the digital presentation of news content:

> I don't think it's like a super close relationship, I think. I know who these people are, I think, very nice people. Never, you know, don't have any ill will towards them. But I don't know a ton about their work. I think it tends to be a situation where they come up with something that is a best practice, and then they work with whoever directly needs to be involved with implementing that as the best practice. (P5)

> Our colleagues' job is to get the biggest audience possible, so they will often do hour-long training every once in a while, with sort of the best practices and different things they have learned. (P10)

Some participants pointed to a key element in making sure their content is optimized: their content management systems (CMS), which is the software newsrooms use to enable the writing, editing, and publishing of news content. When tailored for news publishing, this type of software is increasingly nudging journalists to generate more elements and metadata that make the content they produce more visible on search and social media—elements such as SEO headlines, alternative headlines, and summaries for social media, photos, and video, and tags:

> A significant amount of energy is dedicated towards search. I mean, even on our engineering team, right in building our CMS, and how long our headlines can be in the metadata that we include, to our engagement team in crafting these headlines, and then figure out which pieces shop where and search. (P14)

5. Discussion

This study reveals how journalists actively navigate Google's dominance as an algorithmic intermediary in the contemporary news ecosystem. Drawing on qualitative interviews with US-based journalists, the findings show that journalists do not experience Google's influence monolithically, even within themselves. Rather than responding passively, journalists adopt situated strategies (resisting certain platform pressures, relinquishing control in targeted ways, and renegotiating values) to uphold their editorial integrity while adapting to the demands of search engine visibility. In doing so, they reshape traditional journalistic values, roles, and routines in ways that both confirm and complicate existing scholarship on the hybridization of journalism (Chadwick, 2017).

In the findings, some distinctions also emerge between organizational types. Journalists working in local newsrooms (the majority of our participants) often described a heightened dependence on Google for traffic and visibility, framing SEO as a "lifeline" for survival. Conversely, journalists from national or digital-native outlets expressed more ambivalence or autonomy, describing algorithmic adaptation as one of several editorial considerations.

The results reaffirm the relevance of the hybrid media system framework (Chadwick, 2017; Hallin et al., 2023), highlighting the evolving power dynamics between legacy journalism and new digital intermediaries. Google, in particular, emerges not only as a major infrastructural player but also as an external algorithmic editor that conditions visibility, traffic, and, by extension, journalistic reach. Braun (2015) described these algorithms as a form of "mechanical editor" with different criteria than human journalists, leading to tension and negotiation as algorithmic values embedded in platforms interact with traditional journalistic practices and values (Braun, 2015). However, "mechanical" implies a predictable, repeatable process; a more fitting descriptor might be "machine editor," since these algorithms and their influence are complex and opaque in both their functioning and their societal impact.

Most journalists did not distinguish among different Google services (Search, News, and Discover) when discussing platform influence. Instead, they referred to "Google" as a singular gatekeeping force.

The flattening of distinct services into a singular platform persona suggests a generalized experience of algorithmic power, one that underscores the perceived centrality and opacity of Google.

Google's opacity and indispensability make journalists reflect on the power asymmetry. These findings contribute to ongoing discussions about the reconfiguration of editorial authority in platformized media environments (Nechushtai, 2018; Poell et al., 2023). In line with Latour's (2005) ANT, this study foregrounds the relational nature of that redistribution. Journalists, algorithms, CMS interfaces, engagement editors, and metrics dashboards all operate as actants in a sociotechnical network that produces journalistic content and meaning. Power here is not a fixed possession but the result of these dynamic associations.

A key site of negotiation lies in values. Journalists consistently distinguished between professional values (e.g., accuracy, independence, etc.) and those they attributed to platforms (engagement, virality, and monetization). This distinction reflects a persistent boundary-drawing practice that protects journalistic identity while simultaneously acknowledging economic interdependence with platforms. Audience work is segregated into distinct practices (SEO and embedding different media in articles) or specific modes of "search work" (stories that are tailored to generate traffic). At the same time, some participants reframed SEO not as an intrusion but as compatible with their civic mission. This rearticulation aligns with recent scholarship on algorithmic news values (Kristensen & Bro, 2023), suggesting that values like algorithmic reach are selectively integrated rather than adopted wholesale. In reframing visibility as a public good, journalists actively navigate the tension between algorithmically incentivized news values and professional commitments to public service, redefining their commercial/educational role performance (Donsbach, 2012) in light of algorithmic constraints and affordances. This form of value negotiation supports previous findings that journalists do not passively absorb external pressures but selectively integrate them into their work (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020).

The strategies that journalists deploy in relation to Google can be understood as falling into three overlapping categories: resistance, relinquishment, and renegotiation. Resistance manifests in efforts to protect editorial judgments from traffic metrics, such as insisting that algorithmic incentives should not determine what is covered. Relinquishment appears in the segmentation of roles and tasks, such as assigning engagement or SEO responsibilities to specialized staff or creating separate categories of traffic-oriented content. Renegotiation, perhaps the most nuanced strategy, occurs when journalists reinterpret platform logics through the lens of public service—framing visibility not as a commercial aim but as civic outreach. This finding is aligned with previous research, which has found new and re-negotiated news values, such as algorithmic reach (Kristensen & Bro, 2023).

This model of strategic adaptation both confirms and refines existing theoretical claims. It aligns with ANT's emphasis on the distributed agency between human and non-human actors (Latour, 2005), while also showing how journalistic actors maintain professional reflexivity. For example, CMSs that nudge journalists toward more "search-friendly" content do not eliminate editorial agency but embed it in new sociotechnical routines (De Maeyer, 2019).

These patterns also speak to the hybridization of journalism, as traditional editorial norms are reshaped through interactions with platform logics. Journalists are not merely adapting to external demands; they are recalibrating values and routines from within, illustrating hybridization as a negotiated process (Chadwick, 2017).

This study has a few limitations that point to important directions for future research. First, one key limitation is its reliance on self-reported data from journalists without triangulation using documents or news coverage, which may affect the completeness of certain claims. Second, the interviews were conducted in early 2022, prior to the widespread deployment of generative AI tools such as large language models. Since then, the integration of AI into both journalistic workflows and search platforms may have significantly altered how journalists perceive and interact with algorithmic systems. Third, the sample is limited to journalists based in the US, most of whom work for local legacy news outlets. While their experiences offer valuable insights into platform-journalism dynamics in a US context, journalists working in other types of organizations or in different national media systems may encounter these dynamics differently. Considering that Google, a US-based company, leads the search engine market in most countries, interesting tensions might arise from a conflict of values based on different communities, aside from the differences between the tech and journalism industries.

Another avenue for future research is that while individual journalists demonstrate considerable agency, they report that their capacity to resist or adapt is conditioned by organizational structures. Many newsrooms now have dedicated engagement editors or digital specialists who mediate between editorial and platform demands. These institutional arrangements formalize what was once informal knowledge, embedding algorithmic values into journalistic workflows. The emergence of this type of segmentation of work introduces spaces of negotiation and tension into the newsroom, with implications for newsroom sociology that still warrant more research. Further exploration can illuminate the internal mechanisms within a newsroom that facilitate the digital pressures of adaptation and resistance to the algorithm, and how a newsroom incorporates digital values and replaces journalistic ones.

Further studies could also explore how the expected performance in the workplace can inform the training of the next generation of journalists; that is, how journalism schools respond to the demand for audience-minded and algorithm-aware journalists. Future studies should investigate how journalism education prepares students to inhabit this algorithmic ecosystem. As journalistic roles evolve, professional training must reconcile legacy values with emerging expectations of audience-minded, platform-aware reporting. This speaks not only to technical skills but to a broader understanding of journalism's civic role in a platform-driven information environment.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
Data will not be available to preserve participant anonymity.

LLMs Disclosure

No LLM tools were used in this work.

Supplementary Material

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

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